

Family Stories: Kinship and Migration after the Civil War

Field, Kendra Taira. *Growing Up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018. xxv + 225pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-18052-7.

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The exodus of African American people from the South to the North in the twentieth century—the Great Migration—may be well known and studied. But in this absorbing new book, Kendra Taira Field encourages readers to remember that “tens of thousands” of people previously left the South after the Civil War and headed west, as well as to Canada, Mexico, and West Africa, in a “series of unbound migrations” (5). Building on previous scholarship such as Nell Painter’s landmark 1976 study of the Exodusters, Field convincingly argues that more work on this postwar movement is essential for “deepening and widening the roots of the Great Migration” (2).¹

Field’s contribution is unique in scope: she focuses her lens on three interconnected families and follows their movements from the South into Indian Territory (later Oklahoma) over five decades. This microhistorical approach enables Field to explore the nuances of their choices and experiences, or the “full range of humanity,” rather than fall back analytically on the “now threadbare, if not ‘long dead,’ binaries of agency versus domination, slavery versus freedom, heroism and the usual reification of race” (14–15). But this approach is also deeply personal: Fields descends from each of these families, and in an especially poignant section of this moving book, she describes traveling with her grandmother through the West and the South, re-examining and documenting the family stories that had been passed down to them. Her research is exhaustive—the photographs alone are a reason to pick up this book—and the conclusions Field draws from it go beyond the immediate circumstances of her ancestors’ lives. Always mindful of the larger social, political, and economic contexts in which they moved, Field pieces together a much larger story about race, migration, and kinship in American history. In this respect, it is a model of what family history can and should accomplish.

Growing Up with the Country sets out to uncover the “multiracial, multinational past” of the post-emancipation generation, while simultaneously exposing the process by which that history became erased with the rise of biracialism in the Jim Crow era (3). The book begins with the experience of Thomas Jefferson Brown, who migrated into Indian Territory from Arkansas in the 1870s. Brown first entered the territory as an American, and then married across national boundaries, first to a Creek woman and then to a Seminole woman, both of African descent. Through these

transnational marriages, Brown gained access to land—and his children, born into the Indian Nations, later received allotments when the Dawes Act divided up collectively held Indian lands in 1887. Nation, and national citizenship, mattered in the acquisition of land by Brown's family, but, as Fields compellingly narrates, it was race that eventually overwhelmed their prospects for the future. The rise of oil speculation, and especially the emerging regime of Jim Crow laws ushered in by Oklahoma statehood in 1907, eventually forced the family off their land. “[R]ace’ ultimately eclipsed ‘nation,’” Field sums up, “as a guarantor of rights and resources in the Territory” (25).

The story of James Monroe Coleman and his family next turns attention to the “racial complexity” of these western settlers. Coleman, most likely the son of a white man who had enslaved his mother, grew up working in the white Coleman household and gained an education in the process (61). He lived with all the ambiguities of being part of a mixed-race family, until racial violence intensified toward the end of the century and he, too, set out for Indian Territory in 1904. His departure was a more “racially self-conscious movement” than Brown's had been, Field notes, and after purchasing land from one of Brown's sons, he and his family established a new settlement called Mantee—one of at least fifty black settlements and towns to take root in Oklahoma by the early twentieth century (60). In Coleman's migration, Field encourages readers to see an important dimension of the process by which a rigid racial binary emerged in the United States, as families like the Colemans became absorbed into black communities and traces of “openly multiracial families began to disappear” (80). An “erasure of kinship” thus accompanied the migration of families to the West, Field persuasively writes, implicating family in the rise of American biracialism (103).

Finally, through the story of Alexander “Elic” and Della Davis, Field argues that the impulses behind the emergence of black towns in Oklahoma had more in common with emigration movements than historians have previously acknowledged. Elic was the older cousin of James Monroe Coleman but had fewer resources from the beginning: he scraped by to educate himself, and his mother died young. Eventually, in response to racial violence, he and his wife fled Mississippi in a migration that bore a great deal of resemblance to the circumstances propelling many other black people out of the United States altogether. As Field writes, the Davis's story reveals “the remarkably consistent solution—emigration—at which so many arrived” by the early twentieth century (133). But Elic Davis did not remain in Oklahoma long, and neither did Coleman: both eventually left for West Africa as part of the Chief Sam Movement, yet another element of this postwar past that has been eclipsed (in this case, overshadowed by Marcus Garvey's larger-scale emigration movement).

It is this kind of attention to historical erasures and silences that gives this book its power. Field weaves throughout its pages an extended meditation on historical knowledge and storytelling—how history is created and passed down and sometimes erased—and the role that families play in that process. Well-written, original, and deeply researched, *Growing Up With the Country* is thus highly recommended as much for its methodology as for its compelling account of black migrations to the West.

NOTE

1 Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976).