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YANKEE GO HOME:
TALES OF A NORTHERNER EDUCATED IN THE SOUTH

William G. Moseley

I was once told that Yankees are northerners that come to the South, stay a few years, and then leave. In contrast, damn Yankees are northerners who just come and stay. Whether my fours years as a Northern Ph.D. student at a Southern university qualified me as a damn Yankee, I will never know. While I occasionally felt like an outsider in Athens, Georgia, I must confess that my brushes with damn Yankeedum were few and far between. Yes, there was the time when, as a teaching assistant, I had a student complain to the course instructor that I simply did not understand Southern culture and thereby was ill-equipped to appropriately assess this individual's work. While the course instructor, a Southerner himself, apparently told the student to realign his thinking, this comment is instructive because it provides insight into a university community in the "Deep South" that was undergoing significant change while I was a graduate student there from 1998 to 2001. This chapter offers thoughts related to my experiences as a graduate student in geography at the University of Georgia. I reflect on the demographic changes that were occurring at the university—and in the region in general—while I was a student there, on my own biases toward the South as a Northerner, and on the research terrain that the U.S. Southeast has to offer for human-environment geographers.

ON FINDING THE NORTH IN THE SOUTH: ECONOMIC AND POLICY CHANGE REFLECTED IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY. The University of Georgia had been a bastion of the Old South. It was an all-White school until the early 1960s when it was integrated. Furthermore, the school was the top destination of the state's White, old monied, upper class. From the 1960s onward, however, the demographics of the school's faculty and student body slowly began to change, and alter even more rapidly beginning in the early 1990s with the initiation in 1993 of a new state policy, the HOPE scholarship program.

As a course instructor at the University of Georgia, it was my habit to have my students pair up and interview one another on the first day of class. Students would then present each other to the class. Through these presentations, I often found that the vast majority of my students were from Atlanta or its suburbs. Furthermore, many of my students would indicate that they originally were from another part of the country. It was not unusual, for example, for a student to mention that they had lived in New York until the age of five when his or her family moved to an Atlanta

Dr. Moseley is Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Macalester College, Saint Paul, MN 55105. E-mail: Moseley@macaester.edu.

suburb. In asking follow-up questions during these presentations, I often learned that few of my students actually had parents who were raised in Georgia. The preponderance of this type of student demographic is in part related to economics.

The Atlanta metropolitan area rose dramatically in the U.S. urban hierarchy during the 1980s and 1990s, while strengthening its role as a regional economic hub (e.g., Wheeler and Mitchelson, 1989; Hartshorn, 1997; Walcott, 2000). These economic changes meant that many non-Southern households were moving to the Atlanta metropolitan area during this time period in response to Atlanta's rapidly expanding service economy. This partially explains why I often was not interacting with truly "Southern" students. Rather, I was teaching students who, while having grown up in part or wholly in the South, were raised by Northern parents in neighborhoods of similar "transplant" families. The reason students from these particular households increasingly attended the University of Georgia is best understood in light of the new state HOPE program initiated in 1993.

Up until the early 1990s, many of the children of transplanted Northerners might have chosen to go to college at an institution other than the University of Georgia. Unlike those born and raised in the state, the Northern transplants did not have any particular affinity for the University of Georgia, the school was not exceptionally well ranked at the national level, and, while less expensive, parents still might think it worthwhile to pay more for a better education outside of the state. All of this began to change in 1993 when then-Governor Zell Miller pushed through the HOPE scholarship program that earmarked a large proportion of funds generated by the state lottery for higher education. For students earning a B average of better in high school (and were able to maintain this average in college), the program covered tuition, room and board for four years for any public school within the state to which they were admitted. Since the program's inception, over $1.4 billion has been distributed to over 600,000 students, making it the largest state-financed, merit-based aid program in the U.S.

The impact of this program on the university community has been no less than dramatic. By 2002, U.S. News & World Report ranked the University of Georgia 18th on the list of the top 50 public universities, bypassing such powerhouses as Purdue, the University of Minnesota, Ohio State University and Indiana University (Toney, 2002). What the HOPE scholarship program had done was convince many of the state's brightest students to remain in-state for their higher education by making it financially too good of an opportunity to pass up. As the quality of the students improved, so did the school's reputation, convincing even more good students to attend. As many of the state's best students came from the relatively well-funded school districts in the Atlanta suburbs, especially the suburbs in north Atlanta (areas where the northern transplants had settled), this was the demographic from which the university increasingly drew its students. The improving student body also enhanced the university's ability to attract better faculty and graduate students from across the country. These changes have not gone unnoticed by Georgia alumni in

that many of their children are finding it difficult to achieve acceptance to the school given an increasingly competitive admissions process (Ghezzi, 2003). The end result of these economic changes, and the HOPE scholarship program, was that I was interacting with a large number of students from the Atlanta suburbs who, very often, had been raised by Northern transplants. In sum, I had left the North for the South, only to find the North.

CONFRONTING NORTHERN BIAS. In a textbook I use for teaching Introductory Human Geography (Knox and Marston, 2003), there is a map of the coterminous United States depicting where university students would prefer to live and work. Were I to have developed a similar preference map for myself prior to attending the University of Georgia as a graduate student, the Southeast easily would have been my least preferred region to live, work or study. As a died-in-the-wool Northerner (born and raised near Chicago), the American South (and particularly the Southeast) was viewed as a backward place characterized by ignorance, racist attitudes, slow-moving shop clerks, antiquated formality, good-old-boy networks, conservative politics, oppressively hot and humid weather, and a lingering obsession with the Civil War. Given my personal litany of stereotypes regarding the South, it goes without saying that I did not freely choose to attend the University of Georgia (deep in the heart of my least favorite region); rather it chose me.

Perhaps like some other couples, my wife and I had worked out an informal system wherein the person given the career priority rotated back and forth between us. In 1997, we were finishing up an overseas contract in Zimbabwe, and it was my wife's turn to have the first choice on the job front. To our delight, my wife interviewed for and was offered that ever-evasive "dream job." The only problem was that the position was located in Georgia. My wife's prospective employer, the international nonprofit CARE, had relocated to Atlanta from New York a few years previously—just one more sign of an economic realignment within the U.S. Now my wife was no great supporter of the South either, but this position seemingly was everything she had ever hoped for professionally. We had, after all, lived in the remotest corners of Africa she reasoned. Could Georgia really be that bad? I hemmed and I hawed, but to no avail. Surely this was divine justice, bad Karma, or simply a test of my marital devotion. So in late 1997, we moved to Georgia.

After a brief and unsuccessful job search, I concluded that returning to graduate school was the most reasonable course of action for a Northerner marooned in the South. I had long thought of returning to school for my Ph.D., and this seemed a good opportunity given that my spouse was making a reasonable wage. While the University of Georgia (with the only geography Ph.D. program in the state) ended up being my only option in the state, it was actually a fairly good match for my needs (and I ended up being able to study with a wonderful advisor—Dr. B. Ikubolajeh Logan).

What occurred during my four years in graduate school was a gradual transformation of my attitudes toward the South. As discussed previously, the South was rapidly changing and actually more cosmopolitan than I had imagined. Furthermore, I believe that I began to think of the South in different terms. A number of geographers have discussed the process of "othering" (e.g., Neumann, 1997) wherein we contrast ourselves with other peoples and places in order to emphasize our own goodness. In such instances, the comparison is often that our way is "good" and the other's is "bad" or "uncivilized." I had encountered this process firsthand in Africa where the colonizers had often characterized everything African as "primitive" or "backward." Having come to recognize the European bias against Africa, it dawned on me that I (and many of my fellow Northerners) had done much of the same vis à vis the American South.

This is not to say that the South is problem free, but many of these troublesome situations also exist in the North. Racism is probably the best example. From the time I was a child, I was not only taught that racism was bad, but that it existed elsewhere. Despite the fact that I rarely saw African Americans growing up in the suburbs of Chicago, I was led to believe (often not directly) that racism was not a problem in the Upper Midwest, but an issue that lingered in the South (a perception frequently reinforced by the media). Of course, racism does exist in the Upper Midwest (and every other part of the country) and we are only fooling ourselves if we think this is an issue confined to the South.

In other instances, Southern habits viewed negatively by Northerners are simply different (rather than being problematic in some manner). The stereotypical slow-moving, friendliness of Southerners is a classic example of this. While admitting that this behavior is less and less the norm, most Southerners would view it as a way of life that gives priority to human relationships. Northerners who fail to make proper introductions, eschew chit chat and place a priority on time often are viewed by Southerners as impolite, if not rude.

THE AMERICAN SOUTH AS A RESEARCH FIELD FOR HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT GEOGRAPHERS. As a human-environment geographer with a regional specialty in Africa, one might not think of the Southeast as a region rich in "cross-over" research opportunities. Quite to the contrary, I dabbled in some research endeavors while living and studying in Georgia and I believe the region offers many other possibilities should I chose to return.

First, as someone interested in the environmental aspects of tropical agriculture, Georgia offered a subtropical environment with tropical soils (mainly ultisols in the Piedmont Region of Georgia) that is quite similar to many of the areas I studied abroad. These similarities, for example, added to the international relevance of crop experiments conducted in my agro-ecology course, one of which I eventually wrote up as an article in the Southeastern Geographer (Moseley and Jordan, 2001). Furthermore, the South's history of cash crop production, particularly that of cotton

and tobacco, also means that it has experienced soil degradation issues with which many developing nations have and continue to cope.

Second, as a scholar interested in the political economy of human-environment interactions (or political ecology), the Southeast offered wonderful opportunities given the history of less privileged groups (particularly African Americans) being marginalized onto less desirable lands in the post-Civil War period. Along these lines, I published some reflections regarding the "Black Belt" in the Southeast (Moseley, 2001), a somewhat unusual region in the U.S. because it is a largely rural zone that has a predominately African American population. The Southeastern Back Belt seems particularly amenable to analysis using the political ecology framework given the circumstances I described in my 2001 article (p. 292).

> The Black Belt is known for its poverty, low levels of education, and high rates of environmental degradation . . . , circumstances that are largely explained by the region's social and environmental history. Much of the Black Belt was characterized by high levels of cotton production and slave holdership before the Civil War. Unlike other parts of the South where migration to urban areas was common, many African Americans from this region stayed on as share croppers. The exploitative nature of share cropping arrangements, and the declining productivity of farming systems, augmented the poverty of the zone. Falk et al. (1993, p. 55) note that "[n]owhere else was there a group of people who were "freed" but remained, quite literally, as peasants."

Finally, Judith Carney (2001) has exposed a whole new arena of research that highlights the connections between West Africa agricultural practices and those utilized on plantations in the American Southeast. In the specific case of Carney's study (2001), her central thesis is that the knowledge and skills of the slaves from West Africa were crucial in establishing the foundations of the Carolina rice export industry.

I now look back on my days at Georgia fondly. Not only did I receive a doctoral-level education, but I had an opportunity to learn about another region of the county first hand. Furthermore, I was placed, somewhat by chance, in a location where my stereotypes about the Southeast and my home region, the Upper Midwest, were challenged. These experiences have informed, and continue to inform, my research and scholarship today.

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