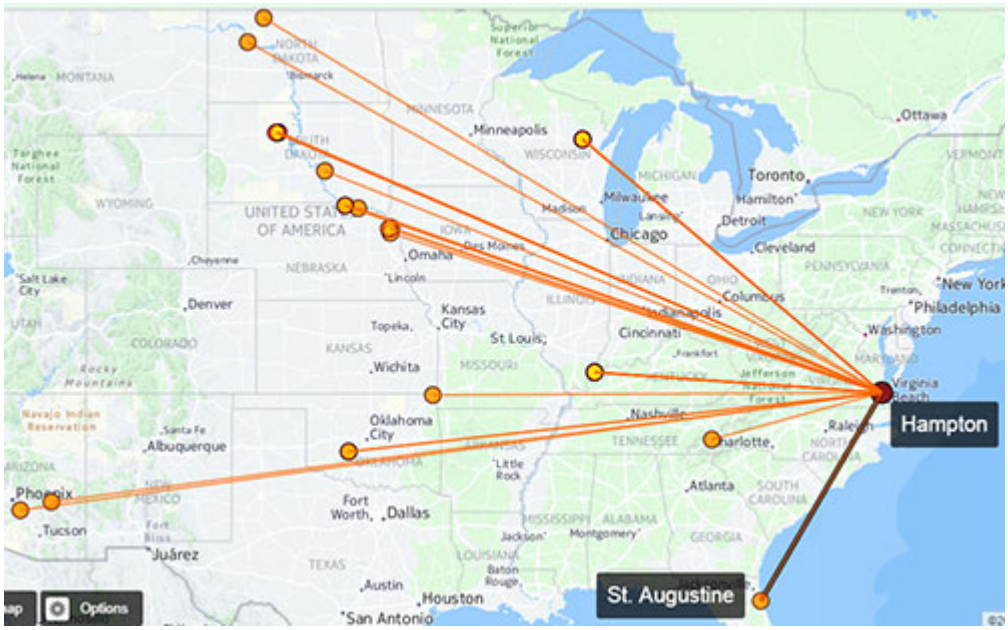
Indigenous and Black Geographies in Letters to the Editor



Newspapers have included a letter to the editor section as a public forum for debate for as long as they have circulated, yet we remain divided on how to read them. Media history tends to take up letters to the editor as a press form through which editors construct and shape perceptions of their publications. Journalism scholars tend to understand letters to the editor as a vital public sphere institution where reader debate provides a forum for democracy in action. These rather different understandings of letters to the editor together emphasize the individual—whether as controlling editor or empowered reader—and the capital each asserts, both economic and cultural. The African American and Indigenous students' letters I have read in Hampton Institute's *Southern Workman* between 1873 and 1884, the inaugural decade of what would become a sixty-seven-year run, raise the question of how we might read letters to the editor differently. Taking letters as indices of ordering and controlling space and movement through it means we read less for content or for how they are constructed and managed by editors, and more for what I'd call, after Henri Lefebvre, contestatory practices of taking space. Reading letters to the editor in this way also shifts us from a focus on the individual to one on the collective, a shift of particular importance when we study letters written by people whose histories often denied them both the choice to move and the ability to remain in place.

To take space in print is an act of taking public space and, by extension, contesting who can move and where, and how space is claimed. Even though letters to the editor appear to register movement in a limited way—by originating in one location when addressed to another—they mark larger material and historical geographies and pass through the space or pages of a periodical

without being wholly underwritten or determined by its economics, its ideologies, or its politics. Hampton's students wrote letters to the paper that in content attested to the racialization of space. They also traced a politics of space through their very movement. I suggest that data visualizations of that movement can help us see things we might otherwise miss, or question established ways of understanding what we do see.

Hampton Industrial and Normal School, which published the *Southern Workman,* was founded by General Samuel Armstrong in 1868 to address the perceived needs of newly free African Americans by combining discipline with what it called "productive labor" in order to train both teachers and industrial leaders for "the race." Hampton graduates were seen as ideal representatives of the school, who would take its ethos, ideology, and training back to their communities, particularly the institution's emphasis upon education, the moral value of hard work, self-sufficiency, property ownership, and respectability. The first African American graduating class left Hampton in 1871, and roughly 90 percent became teachers. By 1878 Hampton admitted its first Indigenous students, who had been warriors taken prisoner and held at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida, where Richard Henry Pratt developed the educational philosophy and practices he would use at Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania a year later. Booker T. Washington, Hampton's most famous graduate, modeled Tuskegee Normal School for Colored Teachers, established in 1881, after Hampton. Armstrong referred to Hampton's program as a "tender violence," and by the turn into the twentieth century, its "civilizing" ideology and "pacifying" pedagogy were critiqued by Black intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, who indicted Hampton for perpetuating the idea of African Americans as a "docile" servant class.

These letters are complex and at times contradictory mixes of nods to Hampton's ideology and indictments of its limitations.

While at Hampton, students were not only exposed to periodicals and newspapers as essential reading and teaching material, but African American and Indigenous male students were trained in all aspects of print production and produced Hampton's print jobs, including the publication of the *Southern Workman*. The training and experience in print production that Indigenous students received at Hampton meant that some, like Harry Hand (Crow Creek Sioux), established their own papers upon leaving the school. The monthly *Workman* (1872-1939) presented itself to readers as "furnish[ing] a variety of choice reading" with news of "what is going on in the world," all in a package that promised to "please and profit both young and old alike." Described in scholarship as produced for Hampton's white philanthropists and government supporters, the paper certainly courted that audience. Yet reading the *Southern Workman* in its early decades reveals that it also sought and addressed an African American audience as well as its former students both Black and Indigenous. Its agents listed in May 1872 included African American activist, poet, and novelist Frances E.W. Harper, and letters from its graduates indicate that they were actively promoting the paper in the communities where they taught and lived.

The *Workman* also circulated through and was clearly cognizant of distinctive African American reading practices, such as collective rather than isolated reading and the communal sharing of reading materials. In a letter published in May 1872, a reader tells of receiving the paper from his son—"I liked it so much that I had it read, by a better scholar then myself in Sunday school, and then I loaned it until it was worn out."

In addition to a complex address, circulation, and conditions of production, the *Workman*'s pages were also sites for student and graduate expression that could run counter to Hampton's public image. Even though the *Workman* has been characterized as a Hampton propaganda machine, students' letters made its pages a counterspace where the promise of the school's pedagogy was tested. The paper's deliberate circulation in and through racialized spaces also reveals that its address, authorship, and readership were far more complex than we've acknowledged. Attempts to control space are always contested and, at times, by using the very means through which that control is asserted. Lefebvre's point that the use of space can itself be a powerful form of contest can be translated to the space of a periodical, be that how the space of its pages and the press forms that comprise it are used, or how the periodical itself moves through space and is used by its readers.

Letters in the *Southern Workman* were cued by Hampton's practice of having teachers write their graduates "a Christmas letter along with an inquiry sheet asking for current positions and activities." But the letters themselves make clear that students also wrote the paper because they were inspired by letters from their peers that they read monthly in its pages. What may have begun as a controlled cuing seems to have turned into something students took beyond a yearly report, given that they wrote throughout the year. Students addressed their letters to Armstrong, the *Workman*'s managing editor, or to their "Dear Teacher," and it is clear that they understood these letters might be published. It is also clear that such a dynamic—writing to an authority figure and this possibility of publication in the school's paper—means that we would be mistaken to read these letters' content at face value. The power dynamics of Hampton itself as well as the editorial power that established the "Letters from Hampton Graduates" section highlight the limitations of reading letters to the editor straightforwardly as readerly opinion or democratic debate.

These letters are complex and at times contradictory mixes of nods to Hampton's ideology and indictments of its limitations, marking the fraught conditions of their solicitation that students, nonetheless, were managing in order that their voices be heard. The letters offer an important record of education in Black communities through Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina predominantly, including the value those communities placed on education for both children and adults, in spite of racialized pay inequity among teachers, and the poor material conditions of racially segregated schools in the South and on Indian Agency lands. They also mark the ways in which Hampton sought to ameliorate those conditions, rather than challenge them politically, as the letters often noted that the philanthropic Northern investment that the school facilitated

paid for educational materials lacking in these segregated schools. Even as these letters at times contest Hampton's approach to structural racism, they also reflect back Hampton's ideology, remarking upon the importance of land and home ownership, work as a central value, and temperance.

Yet however mixed these letters are, the scholarly and Black activist conception of Hampton as "pacifying" sits in sharp contrast to what they actually detail. Graduates' letters in the *Workman* record both their interest in politics and the school's request for reports that detail political conditions on the ground. Of particular concern to graduates and the school were the November 1879 elections in Virginia, in which state debt readjustment was at issue. Student letters published in the December 1879 and January 1880 issues report that African Americans unanimously agreed that they should not be taxed to enable the repayment of debt incurred while slavery was in force. As one student put it, African American men and women insisted that "they had no right to take a part in paying a debt incurred by the State of Va. when they were chattels and property, and of which they have received no benefit." Letters in these issues also record that many Black voters were so concerned that they would be manipulated or might misunderstand the ballot that they did not vote at all. Black Virginians took suffrage rights and their responsible exercise seriously, as did Hampton graduates and the school itself.

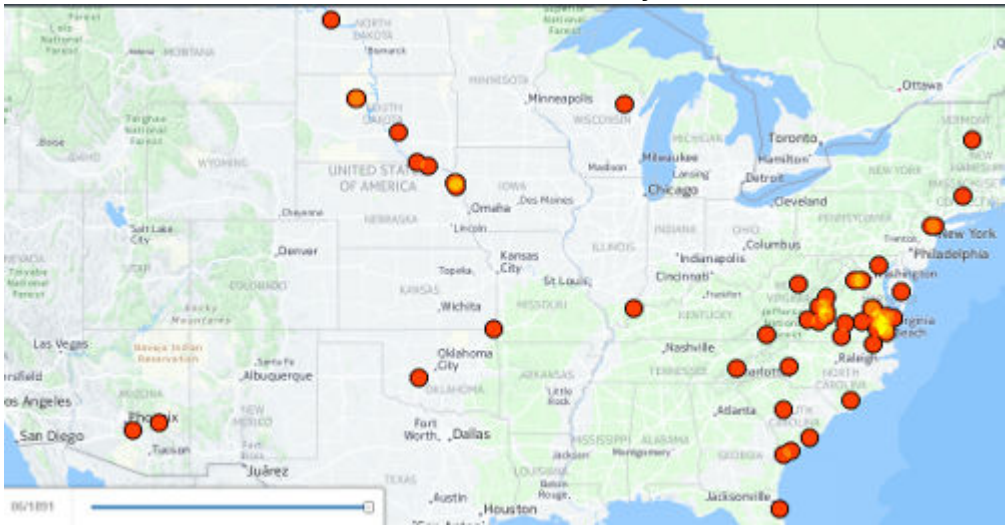
Many letters also offer a politicized critique of limited labor opportunities for African Americans created by an over-reliance on agriculture and labor exploitation under tenant farming and sharecropping. Here the letters contradict Hampton's pedagogical script. Hampton was assiduously training its students for agricultural labor, but largely failed to prepare them for the industrializing of that sector. In other words, these letters were directly critical of conditions on the ground and implicitly critical of Hampton's focus on agriculture as the predominant form of industrial training it offered. For example, a graduate signing himself "P." wrote from Norfolk Co., Virginia, on November 16, 1878, saying that most African Americans where he was teaching did not work in the agricultural sector, but rather were poorly paid for work in the swamps and ditch-digging at "forty-five cents per day and board, or rations." Those who did farm were caught up in the exploitative sharecropping system: "If the tenant furnishes team [of oxen to plow], he is to have two thirds of the crop … If the landlord furnishes the team he is to have half. This year they say the crop is very poor on account of the drought." He stressed that "the majority of the colored people are *very, very* poor, few of them own the land they live on." Hampton's ethic of land and home ownership through agricultural labor was belied by realities of which it was unaware or deliberately ignorant. Some of these letters also contest racialized space as constructed through employment segregation and the separation of families resulting from migration for better work. An "ex-Hampton singer," who had to both teach and farm in order to support himself, wrote in November 1887 that, pushed by poor crops, "the men had to leave their wives and children and go off to other States to find work to do to support their families."

These implicitly critical letters, together with those that provided information Hampton had solicited in 1884 on poor-houses and prisons, paint a dire picture of African American unfreedom in the decades following the Civil War. In May 1884, the paper published letters focused on counties in Virginia that detailed, time and again, higher rates of incarceration for African Americans who had committed petty offenses, and enforced convict labor to work off fines. A letter from Staunton, Virginia, describing the conditions of the local poor-house documents that it was "occupied exclusively by colored *women* and *children*." This graduate also connects the rates of African American incarceration for petty theft and prostitution to limited agricultural employment and the whites' perception that African Americans "have come up in *large numbers* from east Virginia and now *swarm* the cities and towns of … the 'Garden Spot of Virginia.'" The result is a racialization of crime, sentencing, and the prison as space. His interview with "the jailor" confirms that "the whites commit the worse crimes, the colored a greater number of small ones." The figures he provides in his letter document that in 1883 fully 36 percent of Staunton's African American population was incarcerated; 81 percent of these people had been jailed for "petty larceny" with the remainder "abandoned women" imprisoned for prostitution.

Similar to the letters from African American graduates, letters from Indigenous graduates depict restricted labor opportunities as a tool to create and maintain racialized space. These letters document what employment Indian Agents were willing to open to Hampton grads upon their return to the reservation. Students also highlighted the extent of individual land ownership in their communities and resistance to severalty, and discussed the political struggles between Nations forced to occupy the same agency lands. Early generations of Hampton graduates encountered agents who cited the graduates' youth as a barrier to hiring them as teachers in reservation schools and offered them poorly paid manual labor instead. These students, along with their chiefs, exerted pressure on agencies that eventually resulted in more favorable hiring practices, including preferential hiring for positions on agency lands. Like their African American peers, Indigenous students did not leave Hampton as "docile" graduates.

Since graduates' letters challenge at least as much as they reassert Hampton ideology, what we think we know of Hampton's pedagogy and its results is, in turn, challenged by reading letters in the paper. We learn a lot, then, from reading these letters for content and for how their selection has the periodical's, and the school's, public image in mind. Yet at times these two established protocols of reading this press form—for the content of readerly opinion or as a way to construct and consolidate a periodical's self-presentation—are at odds in *Workman* letters. Those moments of contradiction in turn raise the question of why we continue to read this press form in these ways. Or rather, is there another way to read letters to the editor?

1. CartoDB data visualization of Indigenous American students' letters to the Southern Workman, 1880-1891. Courtesy Nicholas van Orden.



2. CartoDB data visualization of African American students' letters to the Southern Workman, 1873-1891. Courtesy Nicholas van Orden.

By creating data visualizations of place and movement from these letters through CartoDB, we see further reading opportunities that a focus on mobility, race, and space can create. Such a focus can help us see what reading only for content will miss. This visualization of Indigenous students' letters from 1880-1891 (fig. 1) includes St. Augustine, Florida, registering the imprisonment of Hampton's first Indigenous students and the wars entailed in "Indian Removal." It also records a highly circumscribed movement from reservation to boarding school, whether Hampton alone or a combination of Hampton and Carlisle, and back to reservation. Together, these register what spaces Indigenous Americans could occupy, when, and why, as well as what trajectories they were permitted to move through in the highly racialized space

captured by the visualization. Yet students write of these spatial aggressions only obliquely through passing mention of severalty and allotment, which are cast as reflecting the school's emphasis upon land and home ownership and so appear to be much more benign than they, in fact, were. In other words, putting movement and space in the foreground with a data visualization helps us to read what the letters don't seem to mention at all. Seeing how Hampton's Indigenous students moved marks quite clearly the school's work within a multifaceted racialization of space that removed Indigenous Americans to agency lands in the territories, incarcerated them if they resisted, and furthered the removal project by shuttling Indigenous children between residential school and reservation in a national "experiment" to "civilize the Indian." What we might call Indigenous geographies, as recorded in letters to the *Workman* through signature and elaborated with research on students in sources such as *Twenty-Two Years' Work of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute* (1893), mark what is otherwise silent in the letters' content: removal as part of an ongoing racialization of space and movement that entails not only constructing agency lands as racialized "Indian," but also conscripting highly controlled Indigenous movement through space outside those lands racialized as "white." Hampton's Indigenous students were never expected to do anything but return to the reservation after their education, preserving precisely this racialization of space.

In other cases, data visualizations can help us to see that our scholarly assumptions about movement and mobility need to be questioned. The visualization of African American students' letters from 1873-1891 (fig. 2) appears to depict greater mobility and spatiality that increases over time, something we see more clearly when we animate the visualization (fig. 3). The visualization's intensity represents at least three things to consider: 1) more graduates write from Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas than anywhere else; 2) movement beyond these states appears to open up in the 1880s; 3) this movement farther afield still remains in the minority. The tendency would be to read that increased mobility and spatiality as indicative of an increased freedom of choice and ability to move. Yet pausing to consider what movement might tell us in light of how I have just read the visualization of Indigenous students' letters is crucial. Movement does not always or clearly indicate freedom.

Data visualizations are very useful for the questions they can prompt us to ask when we see differently or for the first time. And so I want to frame what are common critical readings of African American mobility as questions in order to highlight that we need to remain curious. For a population whose movements, historically, were forced or highly constrained, does this visualization show us that mobility was a resistant act to white racial supremacy and a pervasive one by the 1880s? And, so, given that movement beyond Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas is limited even as African American mobility appears to increase, is it depicting constrained resistance in a decade during which we know racialized violence is on the rise? The most established way to read mobility is through a resistance-constraint dichotomy that hinges on autonomy. Yet these

visualizations of letters to the *Workman* are also indexing movement into the public sphere —taking space in print—as collective, which requires us to think critically about whether a lack of or limited movement indicates constrained autonomy and whether movement itself indicates resistance or the exercise of freedom. The contexts of Indian Removal, Reconstruction, and African American migration as well as the geographical histories that precede them, all affect collectives and their ability to move or occupy certain spaces, as do commitments and obligations to family and community. The decision not to move can be an assertion of choice rather than evidence of constraint; movement can be coerced or forced rather than resistant; and both movement and staying in place can be ways in which a collective is dominated in and through racialized space rather than how autonomy is exercised. If we base our readings of movement largely upon notions of mobility as resistant or exercised autonomy, we risk missing the politics—spatial, collective, and public—underlying what appears to be apolitical.

While letters in the *Southern Workman* are produced under a power dynamic of white authority, they are also far more complex than we might initially expect. These letters and the movements they trace confirm that people are more than simply subject to the powers exercised over them. By identifying the racialization of space that, because it is repetitive, appears to naturalize identity and/in place, Hampton students' letters contest the spatial project of domination. Here Katherine McKittrick's work on Black geographies proves helpful to understanding the letters written by both African American and Indigenous students as documents that expose the naming and organizing of space and movement as manifesting and consolidating dominant notions of social difference. Both African American and Indigenous students' letters document a complex mobility and spatiality in their content and in their writers' movement that together index a mix of collective mobility and relative stasis forced, coerced, and circumscribed through the racialization of space and the social order it enforces. As a result, the letters challenge us to read them for the spatial politics they register and contest and, in turn, require us to press on how we read space and movement.

The spatial complexity of letters to the *Workman* also includes the affective and imaginative, which is an important part of the movement they track and the spaces their publication creates and sustains. Teaching in isolated small communities or returned to reservations, graduates wrote repeatedly that these letters and the paper itself offered them a sense of affective connection and the validation of common experiences. Attending to the spaces and movement these letters register also means reading them for the imagined spaces of connection and affinity they were actively creating. McKittrick offers the insight that Black geographies are far more than physical, but include imagined, material, represented, and philosophical spaces and trajectories of movement that, I would add, can facilitate aspirational notions of space and mobility even when they are limited materially. Reading beyond movement and space as material and transparent facts to include imagination and feeling extend what we conceive mobility, movement, and space to entail. This is

especially acute, I think, when we are studying the work of collectives for whom movement and space, historically understood as American values and rights of citizenship, have been wielded as forms of domination.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZVUoGe9xko

Samuel Sewall, attr. Nathaniel Emmons, monochrome oil on panel with inscribed paper label (ca. 1728). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

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