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Book Review - Abandonment in Dixie: Underdevelopment in the Black Belt

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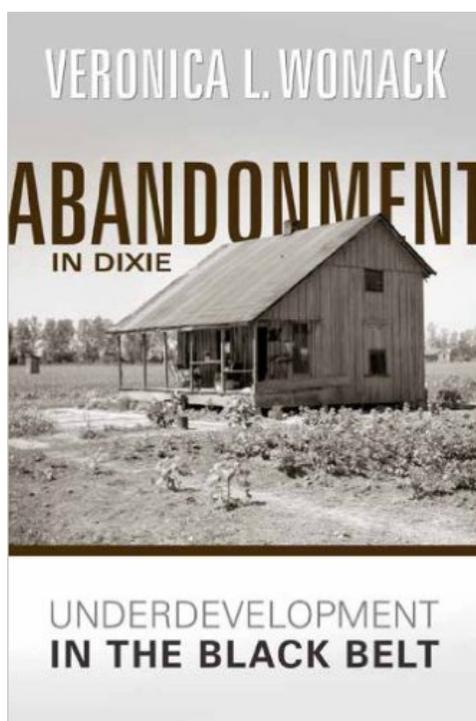
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Off the SHELF

Abandonment in Dixie: Underdevelopment in the Black Belt by Veronica L. Womack (Mercer University Press, 2013: ISBN 978-0-88146-440-5, \$35.00)

Abandonment in Dixie is not only an historical account of race relations in the rural American South, it also offers a road map for moving forward in the region. Veronica L. Womack defines the Black Belt as “a crescent-shaped region that extends from eastern Texas to the eastern shore of Virginia and encompasses the bulk of the old plantation South.” Aside from defining the geographical region, Womack also defines the region culturally, linking it with the Old South and the mythology that developed over the years. From there, Womack offers a detailed description of the history of the region beginning with slavery and the founding of the nation through the Civil War and culminating with a description of recent trends in the region. While the initial description of the region is broad and covers most of the American South, the work focuses on the most rural of counties that meet specific demographic requirements. Womack lists the counties that she defines as the Black Belt region in chapter five. Her demographic requirements are a “30% African American population, non-Metro and 35% rurality.”

The bulk of the book describes, with statistical support, the underdevelopment that can be seen throughout history in the Black Belt.



Education, poverty, infrastructure, and civil rights are the four areas covered by Womack, though the political system is the connecting theme throughout *Abandonment in Dixie*. One of the most interesting aspects of the discussion is her explanation of federal development policies and how they were administered in the region. Womack illuminates the downfalls of many of the federal development programs for farmers in the rural South. Womack associates the pitfalls of the federal development

programs with the patriarchal political system that is typically blatant in the region. Her assessment of the Black Belt’s political system and its ramifications is fascinating.

Another thought-provoking topic the author discusses is the shift in local governmental structures, mostly the shift from mayor-council structure to council-manager style government in local government. Womack argues that while this change is becoming more popular among local governments, the shift becomes perplexing when one looks at the timing of the change. The shift to council-manager form of

governing in some cities is coming as the first African American is elected/serving as mayor. Womack describes the difference between the two forms of governance as being based on the power of the mayor, with the mayor having less power in the council-manager form.

While the book gives readers an eye-opening look at a somewhat forgotten region, the work’s strength comes from Womack’s

conclusions. After an examination of other regional development activities in the United States and more recent activities in the Black Belt region, Womack offers suggestions for moving forward. This section offers a spark of hope at the end of disheartening look at the current state of the region. While the prescriptions offered are attainable, one has to wonder if they will come to fruition.

Overall, the book is a fascinating yet dispiriting look at a region of the United States that time has seemingly forgotten.

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