We usually think of the nineteenth century as an era of emancipation—the time of slavery’s closing. In the U.S. the first six decades of the century were shaped above all else by slavery’s expansion. From the late eighteenth century until the Civil War, in fact, over one million enslaved Africans and African Americans were moved by slave traders and planters from the older South to the new states of what was called the Southwest. By 1860 more than half of the four million slaves in the United States lived on slavery’s frontiers. In only two generations they had built an empire that stretched from Georgia to Texas, and from the Ohio River south to the Caribbean. Some enslavers were even trying to add Cuba, Mexico, and Nicaragua to slavery’s realm. The labor camps of this region, an area of 1.6 million square km, annually made two billion pounds of cotton, one thousand times more than the U.S. had produced in 1800. Each year this cotton accounted for half of the export earnings of an export-led economy that was becoming the paradigm of rapid industrial modernization. Although often ignored in accounts of the “anti-modern” South, this alternate process of modernization and migration is the story of a region, a people, and a nation.

This paper will focus on three concepts: the pushing system, boom-and-bust, and ghosts. Each offers key elements of the story of slavery’s expansion and links with changes in the wider world. The first is a phrase used by those who had escaped to describe the brutal speed-up of work on slavery’s frontier. Expansion was not just an extensive but an intensive metastasis. As a way to force laborers to figure out themselves how to make their bodies move continually faster and pick continually higher amounts, the pushing system dominated the everyday lives of enslaved migrants.

The effects of the fact that the individual enslaved person picked eight to ten times as much cotton in 1860 as their forebears had in 1810 went far beyond the fields. The pushing system created a boom-and-bust process, in which the American gulag grew in a sort of explosive respiration: contracting in a series of crashes, and then spurtling outward. Boom phases were characterized by the entry of new land seized from Native Americans and sold by the federal government; a rise in world cotton demand (and hence prices); and new supplies of credit (ultimately from outside of the South, particularly Britain). Bust followed from the boom. The rapid expansion of slavery led to overproduction of cotton; the oversupply of credit led to financial crashes; the puncturing of the boom psychology led to anger, disillusionment, and political turmoil.

The final concept is that of ghosts, which borrows from Kenneth Pomeranz’s argument that “ghost acres” of forest (in the form of coal) and fiber (new world cotton) permitted Europe and in particular Britain to escape the environmental cul-de-sac in which other societies on
the verge of industrial takeoff like China had found themselves. I examine the specific contribution of the process of forced migration in the Southern U.S. to the supply of ghost acres, but I also ask if perhaps we should not enlarge the concept of “ghosts”—the displacement of intensive resource extraction to faraway places where the various kinds of degradation they create is not so visible or costly to metropoles.