James David Miller in *South by Southwest* attempts to understand the relationship between the geographic mobility of the elite planter class and the development of a “distinctive world view” while maintaining certain conservative cultural traditions with origins in the American Southeast. The focus of this work is the emigration of elite planters from South Carolina and Georgia into Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas during the antebellum years between the 1820s and 1850s. Miller explores numerous and rich sources of information from newspapers and scientific journals along with private letters written by both men and women to explore private and public thoughts among the planter elite. Miller’s central thesis revolves around the planter elite’s ideology of conservatism. “Conservatism was, and is, itself an effort to come to terms with the modern world,” Miller argues. “Indeed just as the rise of southern slavery itself has to be understood in relation to the development of the modern capitalist world, so too the planters’ developing and distinctive world view cannot be understood apart from that world’s cultural as well as economic life” (p. 16).

South Carolinians and Georgians had longingly looked to neighboring southwestern territories for expansion initially as a part of “a manifest national destiny” in an effort to spread American civilization westward (p. 15). Even so, the mass exodus from the two states into the southwestern frontier evoked mixed emotions. Secretary of the Treasury William H. Crawford of Georgia was one who held mixed feelings on emigration. However, his “personal sorrow counted for little when set against public pride” (p. 27). Nonetheless, the new southwestern lands offered vast wealth especially among speculators. As Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge point out in their classic *Westward Expansion*, Crawford persuaded President James Monroe to appoint his land speculator friends to oversee sale of public land while serving in his cabinet.[1]

One such area that attracted the attention of speculators and emigrants alike was known as the Yazoo Strip, stretching from Georgia to the Mississippi River. This was the so-called Black Belt of Mississippi and Alabama containing rich soil. Billington and Ridge point out, however, that there were barriers to expansion into the Southwest. The Native Americans, in particular the Creeks, offered the primary resistance to American expansion along with the Spaniards who occupied Florida and Louisiana. The Creek-Georgia War in 1785 followed by the Treaty of San Lorenzo in 1795 between Spain and the United States (known to Americans as Pinckney’s Treaty) resulted in the relinquishing of claims to the Yazoo Strip to the Americans. Nonetheless, Americans found it difficult to emigrate into the Southwest as long as the Red Stick faction of Creeks remained opposed to it. Their resistance ceased following the outbreak of the War of 1812 between the United States and Great Britain. In 1814, General Andrew Jackson from Tennessee defeated the Red Sticks at the Battle of Horse Shoe Bend in Alabama thus removing Native American resistance in the Southwest. Following Jackson’s defeat of a British force at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 and the temporary suppression of Seminole threats from Spanish Florida in 1816, the Southwest became open for settlement. Moreover, the federal government began the “voluntary” and forced removal of Native Americans from the region between 1816 and 1838, often called “The Trail of Tears,” relieving the last obstacles to westward expansion into the
Southwest. Thus began the most intensive movement of people in American history to date.

Most historians of this era agree that “emigration was a central fact of life in the southern states” between the 1820s and 1850s (p. 20). Both Miller and historian James Oakes agree that over half of South Carolinians and about 25 percent of Georgians left between 1820 and 1850 heading for the Old Southwest. Miller departs, however, from Oakes and other historians in his explanation as to why so many left their native states. Miller asks a series of questions in his attempt to explain the nature of emigration and the newly emerging planter ideology and culture. “What kind of relations should exist between people? What kind of relations should exist between people and place? What is the relation of the past to the present to the future?” (p. 21). Emigrants and their families who remained in South Carolina and Georgia asked these questions with great and “unusual urgency” according to Miller as they struggled with the dynamic change swirling around them. Miller also addresses “questions of gender, generation, and geography—of people and place—and their relations to one another” (p. 22). These, he points out, “frequently proved to be inseparable from questions of the present’s relation to both past and future” (p. 22).

Historical scholarship has pointed to push factors including worn-out soil in the Southeast and unscientific farming methods as contributing factors in explaining the massive emigration into the Southwest. Combined with the pull factor of cheap and available land for cotton planting and the development of better transportation in the Southwest, South Carolinians and Georgians chose to emigrate en masse with families and enslaved African Americans in tow. James Oakes explains that slaveholders “were imbued with a materialistic ethos that ruled their lives, pushing them from their homes in search of prosperity.”[2] The formula for prosperity included land and slaves. Oakes goes on to explain, “Massive demographic dislocation was inevitable in a slaveholding culture that glorified movement, viewed westward migration as inextricably linked to upward mobility, and made material success the nearly universal pursuit.”[3] Joseph Ingraham observed that Mississippi slaveholders were obsessed with cotton production and slave buying. Oakes includes Ingraham’s observations in The Ruling Race. Ingraham wrote, “To sell cotton in order to buy negroes—to make more cotton to buy more negroes, ‘ad infinitum,’ is the aim and direct tendency of all operations of the thorough-going cotton planter: his whole soul is wrapped up in the pursuit.”[4] This also drove slaveholders further west in search of new fertile land to grow more cotton to buy more slaves to grow more cotton and so on. Eventually, this quest led them into Texas in larger numbers following the Texas Revolution.

Both Miller and Oakes agree that slavery and intense mobility “diminished attachment to place but disagree regarding community” (p. 180). Miller argues that the planter elite, unlike their families in South Carolina and Georgia, were less attached to the land and more interested in acquiring more slaves to work the land. Oakes and others see the quest for new land worked by enslaved labor as essential to the continuation of the planter slaveholding class in the South, but it came at the cost of establishing community. Thus, this led to an ideology of individualism very much a part of modernism and liberalism that was detached from any sense of community stemming from the constant geographic mobility searching for land to produce cotton for the emerging manufacturing system. In short, according to Oakes, the southwestern planter elite were very much a part of modern capitalism and northern textile manufacturing.

Miller disagrees, arguing that the southeastern planter elite did not develop an ideology of individualism or an atomistic worldview because of high geographic mobility. On the contrary, he maintains. The planter elite extended southeastern community into the Southwest, which historians like Oakes fail to recognize. Miller argues some of this failure stems from over reliance upon contemporary critical accounts of emigration.

Contemporary critics of emigration, according to Miller, saw the emergence of a new culture based on the notion of geographical movement as a sign of decline. “Movement for movement’s sake was a sign of historic failure. A society lost in space was, necessarily, a society lost in time,” as Miller sums the critics’ observations of the emerging western ethos. William Crawford explained, “For the savage, indifference to place wandered alongside ignorance of time. For the civilized, attachment to place marched in step with an understanding of history” (p. 94). Miller points to the contemporary conflict between notions of “local loyalty to place versus liberty—fear was that emigration threatened both” (p. 28). Nonetheless, Miller argues that community as it was emerging in the dynamics of the American South did not depend on place. He shows that family and community remained intact even in this highly mobile society. In some respects, South Carolinians and Georgians replicated their native communities in the Southwest and extended them further west as they moved into Texas.
What changed was the nature of westward expansion, once seen as "manifest national destiny," which affected the newly emerging southwestern culture and ideology.

Slowly, southern planter elites began to question nationalism within the context of western expansion. This shift began following the Missouri debates over slavery ending with the Economic Depression of 1819, the Missouri Compromise of 1820, and the Nullification Crisis protesting the Tariff Act of 1828. Miller concludes, "In some respects northern opposition to the expansion of slavery strengthened slaveholders' belief in the political necessity of westward movement, but as a prerequisite of preserving slaveholding power rather than advancing national unity and glory" (p. 31). Contemporaries, however, feared that western emigration into the Southwest meant economic and social instability in South Carolina and Georgia. Emigration into the Southeast might increase the wealth and political power of the slaveholding class within the region, but it would also lead to the reduction of the same within the national government, in particular within the House of Representatives, and especially in South Carolina with its population loss. Miller recognizes this, but fails to show the significance of western expansion with the subsequent addition of new slave states and political power within the Senate essential to the maintenance of slavery and the planter elite as a class.

Miller points to the Nullification Crisis as the primary factor in dividing South Carolinians between nullifiers and Unionists thus leading to the emigration of the latter. He argues that the Tariff led to "depression to departure" (p. 34). Many unionists began to leave fearing the growing repressive political environment of South Carolina. Following economic recovery and the end of the Nullification Crisis, emigration did not recede. Rather, it intensified to its highest levels in the 1830s. Thomas Spalding feared severing "the ties of kin and culture that bound local communities together" (p. 41). Spalding, like many other South Carolinians, saw the loss of connection and loyalty of place produced by emigration as explanations for the large swath of barren and abandoned land throughout the Southeast. They also saw a diminishing way of life as agriculturalists were replaced by a nomadic lifestyle ever searching for new lands to the west. Scientific agriculturalists like William Harper and Thomas Spalding believed that if they could persuade planters to adopt new farming methods of crop rotation, plowing, and manure fertilization along with the abandonment of cotton planting in exchange for other crops, then they could restore the Southeastern lands and reduce the emigration of the planter elite to the Southwest.

Miller argues that scientific agriculturalists held "unbounded faith in the power of land" (p. 46). Reformers equated a "healthy society" with "an almost mystical connection between people and place" (p. 46). Thus, "agricultural health" meant "social order" to the agricultural reformers. Furthermore, reformers like William Gilmore Simms offered an explanation why so many planters rejected education and the intellectual exchange of new ideas in scientific agriculture. He attributed it to "paternal acres" where planters lived in "prideful isolation" stubbornly bound to past-antiquated ideas that had become habitual (pp. 49-50). Because of their ignorance, planters exhausted the soil forcing them to abandon their plantations in the Southeast and emigrate into the Southwest. Southeasters believed that disloyal, ignorant, and greedy emigrants despoiled the fertile lands of South Carolina and Georgia. Rarely did reformers recognize the relationships of people-to-people such as slaves to slaveholders and planter to plantation mistress. Rather they, myopically according to Miller, only saw the relationships of people to land. Thus, emigration only meant a decline of both.

According to Miller, others, like C. C. Pinckney of South Carolina, attributed lust for wealth to explain the massive exodus to the Southwest. Planters had no concern as to where they grew cotton as long as they grew wealthy in doing it (p. 51). Miller apparently believes that historians have relied on accounts like this to conclude erroneously that the planter elite pursued wealth over all else leading to an individualistic society interested only in material gain.

Miller then explores the personal motives of emigrants for making the choice to move into the Southwest. John Horry Dent moved to Alabama from South Carolina along with his wife and slaves in 1837. He explained that he "tired of the dependent life I was living" as a "Superintendent" on his mother's plantation. James Tait, like Dent, sought independence too. Independence, however, according to Miller, did not mean abandoning their ties to families that they left behind. On the contrary, they essentially extended those into Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas.

Emigration and marriage were inseparable according to Miller. Before moving west, many men married for the sole purpose of having wives to help them in their new planting ventures. Miller points out that women saw moving west and separation from friends and families in the East as less frightening than becoming a "spinster" that was equal to social death. Miller does not discuss
male inheritance, birth orders, and marriage. This section of the book would benefit from identifying the birth order of the emigrants. Historian Joan Cashin provides an important historical study in southern families that would assist in this analysis. For example, were these second, third, and fourth sons who had limited opportunities in the East? Thus, the West offered opportunities to own land that were not available in the east. Additionally, what was the birth order of the women? Land ownership meant wealth providing the ability to break from social customs of primogeniture and parental authority. The willingness to emigrate to the West provided the same independence for younger daughters who could marry out of the birth order.

After moving to the West, women faced hardship living in airy cabins until they built residences that were more substantial. Miller paints a bleak life for women in the southwestern frontier when they first arrived. Women often wrote about their isolated lives bound by the extent of their cotton fields. For some, the increasing numbers of family and friends from the east moving to nearby plantations often relieved these feelings of isolation and desolation.

Miller describes emigration and the emerging southwestern culture in strikingly familiar terms. Frederick Jackson Turner described waves of eastern pioneers sweeping into the wild frontier bringing with them civilization in increments particularly dependent upon women as the primary civilizing factor. Miller, however, departs from Turner in many respects by pointing out the hardships faced by women. He also contends that men were often the ones pushing for the replication of southeastern social institutions in the Southwest. Miller also points out that the emigrants chose to move west rather than north. He explains that this showed their will to continue to pursue the same type of life that they left in South Carolina and Georgia rather than creating something new, contradicting Turner who saw the frontier experience as the primary reason for the emergence of new Americans. Instead, they chose to continue slaveholding and planting rather than entrepreneurial pursuits in commerce and manufacturing promised in the North. Unlike Turner, Miller discusses African Americans and Native Americans in his work.

Alexander Meek observed firsthand the removal of Native Americans from the Southwest. Miller reprinted his observation in this work. Meek wrote, "The dynasty of the Red Man is over! Slowly, and sadly the Enigma of the western world ... bent his footsteps to the sinking sun! ... driven before the progress of the white man, like a storm shattered barque, before an ocean wave!” (p. 85). He saw this as the inevitability of progress. It was unfortunate, but necessary. Miller offers little more than this anecdote, missing an opportunity to probe deeply into the minds of the planter elite regarding Native American removal. This may lead the reader to conclude that Meek reflects a general attitude among the planter elite that removal was inevitable in the face of the westward march of progress.

Similarly, Miller fails to explore beyond a cursory level the relationships between the planter elite and the enslaved African Americans. Miller concludes that slaves were far more important to the planter elite than land, because slaves knew how to farm. Therefore, the elite planter ideology developing in the Southwest was intertwined with this reality. In essence, slavery imbued the ideology of the planter elite, which postulated the necessity to own slaves and the continuation of the elite planter class.

In the same respect as the planter elite, how did migration into the Southwest affect slaves? Miller uses Frederick Douglass to describe slave attitudes toward place and family. Douglass believed that slaveholders were not as attached to the land as slaves were. So the threat of being "sold down the river" as a punishment or from economic necessity invoked "pain of separation not only from people but also from place” (p. 140). Here Miller steps dangerously close to concluding that African Americans cared less for family connections than they did for connections to place. Throughout the Chesapeake region, slave traders bought surplus slaves and sold them to planters in the Southwest. The Chesapeake provided the bulk of slaves for these emerging markets. In many cases, enslaved African Americans responded by running away. Stanley Harrold in Subversion depicts the largest attempt by slaves to run away, the Pearl Incident in 1848. The escape failed leading to the sale of many to southwestern planters. Harrold describes heart-wrenching scenes of separation with family members never to be seen again.[5] Kate Larson in Bound for the Promised Land describes Harriet Tubman and her monumental decision to run away from slavery, fearing that her mistress would sell her to a planter in Alabama. She decided to run away so that she could return to Dorchester County in Maryland not to live, but to rescue her family.[6] Many runaways found new homes in the North or in Canada and never longed to return to their former slave homes. The power of family and maintaining those ties was as strong among enslaved African
Americans as it was among the elite slaveholding classes. How did the forced separation of members of enslaved families influence the ideology and culture of the planter elite in the Southwest? Miller misses an opportunity to explore this.

Miller also pays little attention to the failures, with the exception of Samuel and Joanna Townes who returned to South Carolina. Samuel’s brother Henry Townes helped them return after their failure in Alabama. During this period, there were high failure rates in cotton planting ventures. Miller does not discuss the collapse of the “cotton” banks in New Orleans in part leading to the Panic of 1837 and the subsequent worldwide economic depression in the 1840s. His work would benefit from a discussion of the failures among the planter elite in the Southwest.

In addition, Miller does not discuss the relationships between the planter elite and the non-slaveholders and the non-elite among the slaveholding classes. How did these relationships contribute to the planter elite ideology and culture in the Southwest? Furthermore, how did the southeastern planter elite interact with the northerners moving along with them into the Southwest? How did these interactions influence the culture and ideology of the southwestern planter elite?

In all, Miller’s brief work explores the relationship between geographic mobility and elite planter culture and ideology in the Southwest. He succeeds in varying degrees. But because of his brevity, Miller was unable to explore other contributing factors such as economic downturns and other interpersonal relations with enslaved African Americans, Native Americans, non-elite slaveholders, and non-slaveholders. Other historians have explored these providing more comprehensive historical works on the elite slaveholding class.

Notes
[4]. Ibid., p. 72.