From the earliest years of the tobacco industry in colonial Virginia through most of the 20th century, African Americans played a crucial role in the development and expansion of the plantation system in the American South. Operating in a global marketplace, they cultivated tobacco, rice, and cotton, but as slaves they worked without compensation and suffered horrifying conditions. By the 18th century, their labor in the cotton fields provided the crucial commodity that underwrote England’s industrial revolution. Even after the 13th amendment abolished slavery, they continued to play the crucial role in cultivating cotton as planters adopted the sharecropping system and kept freed people bound to them through extra-legal means. Although tied to the land by burdensome debt and legal practices that limited their occupational alternatives, many black sharecroppers and small land-owning black farmers were devoted to the agricultural enterprise and sought escape not from the farm but from the domination of white landowners. When New Deal programs inadvertently rendered many of them superfluous, some of them fought to remain on the land and continue the farming enterprise. However, when “scientific agriculture” took hold in the post-World War II period, their place in the modernizing plantation system further eroded. By the end of the 1950s the sharecropper category in the agricultural census had vanished, reflecting the virtual disappearance of the black sharecropper from the plantation enterprise. This paper will focus on the role of African Americans in the changing plantation system in the 20th century American South. With the rise of mechanized cotton pickers and the use of a variety
of new chemicals, blacks found themselves “tractored” off the farms and plantations. This demographic revolution removed hundreds of thousands of Blacks – and an equal number of landless whites – from the countryside and reshaped the environment in countless ways. Gone are the tenant shacks, the rural schools, and the black churches that dotted the landscape. Along with them went many small towns and cross-roads communities. Twenty-first century portfolio planters are the latest iteration of the post-sharecropping system, and their pursuit of profits demands ever more concentrated forms of land exploitation. They remove the last stands of trees in order to plant more crops, and they engage in land-levelling practices that obliterate archeological sites that once provided the evidence of black farming activities.