

Walter Johnson

RIVER *of*
DARK
DREAMS

*Slavery and Empire in the
Cotton Kingdom*

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SLAVERY AND EMPIRE
IN THE COTTON KINGDOM

Walter Johnson

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*For Alison,
my morning star*

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He was wounded for our transgressions; he was bruised for our iniquities;
the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

—Isaiah 53:5

INTRODUCTION

Boom

The slave barons looked behind them and saw to their dismay that there could be no backward step. The slavery of the new Cotton Kingdom in the nineteenth century must either die or conquer a nation—it could not hesitate or pause.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *John Brown*

ON DECEMBER 14, 1850, the *Anglo-Norman* backed from the levee at New Orleans and headed up the Mississippi River on what was supposed to be a short, celebratory maiden voyage. Having “satisfied all on board that she was a first rate sailor, and giving the promise of a brilliant career in the future,” the steamboat started back down the river. Among those aboard was H. A. Kidd, the editor of the New Orleans *Crescent*, who described what happened next in an essay entitled “The Experience of a Blown-Up Man”: “A jet of hot water, accompanied with steam was forced out of the main pipe, just aft of the chimney.” He had just enough time to wonder aloud what was happening when, he reported, “I was suddenly lifted high in the air how high it is impossible for me to say . . . passing rather irregularly through the air, enveloped as it seemed to me in a dense cloud.” He remembered thinking that he would “inevitably be lost,” but had no recollection of falling back into the river. “When I arose to the surface,” he continued, “I wiped the water from my face, and attempted to obtain a view of things around me, but this I was prevented from doing by the vapor of steam, which enveloped everything as a cloud.” As the steam cleared, Kidd wrote, “I found myself in possession of my senses, and my limbs in good working order.” He became aware that he was surrounded by twenty or thirty of his fellow passengers. He noticed that many of those in the water were des-

perately trying to find pieces of the shattered *Anglo-Norman* to help them stay afloat, and he, too, looked around for something to which he could cling. He was freezing cold, and could feel the energy draining from his body as he tried to swim. Low in the water, preparing to die, the editor saw another steamboat bearing down upon him. “Stop the boat! Stop the boat!” he heard the others crying out.¹

Later, after he had been dragged, “nearly lifeless,” from the river by a sailor aboard that boat, the editor was able to reconstruct some of the details of the disaster. As the *Anglo-Norman* rounded for home, the steam pressure used to drive the paddle wheel had overwhelmed the engine’s safety valve, causing the boat’s massive iron boilers to explode. “Not a scrap as large as a man’s hand remained,” Kidd recounted.² Given that he had been seated on a veranda directly above the boat’s engine, Kidd was lucky to have survived. It was later estimated that more than half of those aboard had been killed: scalded by the escaping steam, struck by the projectile fragments of the splintered boat, or drowned in the frigid river. But there was no way to know for sure how many had died. “Very few of the names of those who were killed could be ascertained,” wrote another, “but the general opinion was that the number of victims could not be less than one hundred.”³

If he had dared open his eyes at the top of his arc, Kidd would have seen the Mississippi Valley laid out before him. Downriver was the great city of New Orleans: the commercial emporium of the Midwest, the principal channel through which Southern cotton flowed to the global economy and foreign capital came into the United States, the largest slave market in North America, and the central artery of the continent’s white overseers’ flirtation with the perverse attractions of global racial domination. Upriver lay hundreds of millions of acres of land. Land that had been forcibly incorporated into the United States through diplomacy (with the great powers of Europe) and violence (against Native Americans, Africans, African Americans, and Creole whites); land that had been promised to white yeoman farmers but was being worked by black slaves; land that had been stripped bare and turned to the cultivation of cotton; land in the United States of America that was materially subservient to the caprice of speculators in distant markets; land (and cotton and slaves) for which, in a few short years, young men would fight and die. He might have seen a flash-pan image of the catastrophe—at once imperial, ecological, eco-

conomic, moral—that haunted the visions of progress and plenty by which the Valley’s masters had charted the course of its history.⁴

THAT HISTORY—the history of slavery, capitalism, and imperialism in the nineteenth-century Mississippi Valley—began with a dream. Specifically, a dream in the mind of Thomas Jefferson—the philosopher, visionary, slaveholder president of the United States in 1803. Jefferson’s hope for the Mississippi Valley was that the abundance of land would produce a harvest of self-sufficient, noncommercial white households headed by the yeomen patriarchs whom he associated with republican virtue, a flowering of white equality and political independence: an “empire for liberty.”⁵ The notion of an “empire for liberty” had embedded within it a theory of space. Given enough land, migrants from the East would naturally be transformed into a freeholding, republican yeomanry. Spread out across the landscape, white farmers would have to provide for themselves: they would be too removed from cities to be reliant upon them for their basic needs (or to develop other needs they could not meet themselves); too distant from credit networks to find themselves ensnared in the sort of debtor-creditor relationships that could compromise their political independence; and too far from factories to become dependent upon wages paid by others for their daily sustenance. These yeoman farmers would be self-sufficient, equal, and independent—masters of their own destiny. Necessity would be more than the mother of invention: it would give birth to independence, maturity, freedom.

Jefferson’s vision of social order through expansion had at its heart a household-based notion of political economy. Rather than cities sprawling across the American landscape, bound together by invisible financial networks and all-too-visible factories, white households were to be the serially reproduced units by which progress was measured. “Go to the West, and visit one of our log cabins, and number its inmates,” enthused one latter-day Jeffersonian. “There you will find a strong, stout youth of eighteen, with his better half, just commencing the first struggles of independent life. Thirty years from that time, visit them again; and instead of two, you will find in the same family twenty-two. That is what I call the American multiplication table.”⁶ The spatial aspect of the “empire for liberty” was defined more by reproduction than production: the vast lands of the Louisiana Purchase would allow the

United States to freeze economic history at a given moment, and develop through expansion rather than diversification—through the proliferation of the gendered hierarchies of household social order rather than through the intensification of class hierarchies of Eastern, urban, industrial development.

The liberties promised by Jefferson's vision depended upon racial conquest. Through a series of military and diplomatic actions—most notably the Louisiana Purchase, the defeat of the Creek nation at Horseshoe Bend in 1814 and of the British at New Orleans in 1815, the Spanish cession of the Florida Parishes, and the Choctaw land cessions at Doak's Stand in 1820 and Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830—the United States government had by the 1830s established a distinction between lands that were “inside” and those that were “outside” the Southwest. This was a distinction that they admittedly were prepared to abandon quickly in the event of an opportunity to expand into Texas, Mexico, Cuba, or even Nicaragua, but it was simultaneously one used to fortify an emerging continentalist understanding of what constituted the United States.⁷

For the politicians and military men who brought the vast spaces of the Territories of Louisiana and Mississippi under the dominion of the United States, a set of problems persisted after the battles had been won, the treaties signed, and the territories transferred. The United States of America entered the second quarter of the nineteenth century with a vast public domain in the Mississippi Valley; the question was finding the best mechanism to turn that land into a reservoir for the cultivation of whiteness of the proper kind. While Jefferson was initially motivated by his fear of an overly concentrated population in the East, he also worried that a too sparsely settled population, concentrated along the Mississippi River and separated from the East, might form a breakaway republic. The General Land Office, chartered during the War of 1812 to distribute Mississippi Valley lands conquered from the Creek, was the settled-upon solution to this dilemma of racial-imperial governance. Through the Land Office, the public domain of the United States could be divided into small, private parcels and distributed to its citizens. The formal sovereignty of the United States over the Mississippi Valley would be fulfilled in the shape of a republic of independent, smallholding farmers.

In the event, the course so carefully plotted was not the one followed. The General Land Office settled on a market mechanism for distributing the public domain of the United States to its citizens. In spite of various efforts to stem

the tide of speculative investment that flowed into the land market, the Mississippi Valley was soon awash in the very capital Jefferson had so feared. The mechanisms put in place by the government to protect the abilities of first-time purchasers to secure land that was also desired by big-time speculators (an inherently difficult task when the land auction was already the agreed-upon solution to the problem of allocation) were often undermined by moneyed interests. Wealthy individuals could hire or purchase other people to stake their claims and improve their land for them. The flow of capital into the Mississippi Valley transferred title of the “empire for liberty” to the emergent overlords of the “Cotton Kingdom,” and the yeoman’s republic soon came under the dominion of what came to be called the “slaveocracy.”

The “flush times”—the concomitant booms in the land market, the cotton market, and the slave market—reshaped the Mississippi Valley in the 1830s. African-American slaves were brought in to cultivate the land expropriated from Native Americans. Between 1820 and 1860 as many as a million people were sold “down the river” through an internal slave trade, which, in addition to the downriver trade, involved a coastal trade (Norfolk to New Orleans, for instance) and an overland trade (Fayetteville, North Carolina, to Florence, Alabama, for instance). Their relocation and reassignment to the cultivation of cotton—the leading sector of the emergent global economy of the first half of the nineteenth century—gave new life to slavery in the United States. An institution that had been in decline throughout the eighteenth century in the Upper South was revived in the Lower South at terrible cost; by 1860, there were more millionaires per capita in the Mississippi Valley than anywhere else in the United States. White privilege on an unprecedented scale was wrung from the lands of the Choctaw, the Creek, and the Chickasaw and from the bodies of the enslaved people brought in to replace them. The bright-white tide of slavery-as-progress, however, was shadowed by a host of boomtime terrors. Slaveholders feared that the slaves upon whom the Cotton Kingdom depended, as well as the nonslaveholding whites whom it shunted to the margins of a history they had thought to be their own, might rise up and even unite in support of its overthrow.

As the Mississippi Valley expanded, thousands of investors rushed to launch their boats on the river. “No property pays so great an interest as that of steamboats upon these rivers. A trip of a few weeks yields one-hundred per-cent

upon the capital employed,” wrote one early observer.⁸ Apart from land and slaves, steamboats were the leading investment sector in the Mississippi Valley economy after the 1820s. Seventeen steamboats plied the waters of the Western rivers in 1817, the year of the first significant upriver steamboat journey. Three decades later there were well over 700, each of these representing something close to a 200 percent increase in carrying capacity over the earlier boats. In 1820 it was still possible to publish a detailed list of the nearly 200 steamboats arriving at the levee in New Orleans in the space of three pages, whereas in 1860 there were more than 3,500 such arrivals. Taken together, those boats represented some 160,000 tons of shipping and \$17 million of capital investment, annually carrying something like \$220 million worth of goods (mostly cotton) to market.⁹

The standard-issue milestones of nineteenth-century U.S. economic history locate the story of leading-sector development in the mills of Massachusetts rather than along the Mississippi. But if one sets aside the threadbare story of “industrialization” for a moment, and thinks instead in the technological terms more familiar to the time, the radical break represented by the steamboats comes into clearer focus. The mills in Lowell used energy according to a formula that was thousands of years old: they used the force of gravity to channel water through the downward flow of miles of canals to power their works. Steamboats turned wood and water against gravity: they took the materials from which the mills were built, remixed and combusted them, and produced enough added force to drive a 500-ton steamboat *upriver*. A mere handful of the steamboats docked along the levee in New Orleans on any given day could have run the entire factory complex at Lowell, which was spread over forty square miles and employed 10,000 people.¹⁰ Of course, steamboats also exploded with a frequency and ferocity unprecedented in human history. That, too, was characteristic of the era. Like the fears of slave revolt or class conflict among whites, however, the knowledge that the technologies of dominion and extraction concealed within them mechanisms that could produce disorder and destruction was often pushed to the margins of the account of the Mississippi Valley given by its boosters.

“The Great West,” wrote one of the latter, “has now a commerce within its limits as valuable as that which floats on the ocean between the United States and Europe.”¹¹ And the effect on upriver commerce was an order of magni-

tude greater than even the exponential growth of the downriver trade: “Previous to the year 1817, the whole commerce from New Orleans to the upper country was carried in about twenty barges, averaging one-hundred tons each, and making but one trip a year, so that the importations from New Orleans in one year could not have much exceeded the freight brought up by one of our largest steamboats in the course of a season.”¹²

In 1810, the population of New Orleans was around 17,000; by 1860, it was close to ten times that number. Writing in 1842, the Northern traveler Joseph Buckingham estimated the population of the city at “upwards of 100,000; of which it is considered that there are about 50,000 whites, 40,000 Negro slaves, and 10,000 free blacks and people of color.”¹³ Irish, Germans, upriver immigrants, and black slaves, men and women, dug the muddy canals (one of them to this day known as the “Irish Canal”), shored up the eroding levees, built the banks, painted the parlors, hauled the cotton, drove the carriages, delivered the messages, swept the verandas, baked the bread, emptied the chamber pots, and raised the children. Buyers and sellers packed the city’s hotels and rooming houses from October to March, creating the market which turned cotton into slaves and slaves into cotton.

The touch points of the river world—the levees where bags and bales were loaded onto the boats; the kitchens and dining rooms where stewards supervised cooks, waiters, and chambermaids; the wood yards and engine rooms where slaves cut wood and stoked the engines—mapped a set of shadow connections between enslaved people and free people of color that we might term the “counterculture” of the Cotton Kingdom.¹⁴ As they did the work on which the steamboat economy so obviously—so visibly—depended, enslaved people and free people of color daily reproduced the networks of affiliation and solidarity that made it possible for them to escape slavery in numbers that dismayed their masters. The owner of one escaped slave declared that slaves in the Mississippi Valley were “held by the most uncertain tenure by reason of the facilities held out” for escape by steamboats.¹⁵

In the mid-1840s, the steamboat economy discovered its outer limit: every inland backwater that had just enough water in the spring to carry a steamboat was being serviced.¹⁶ There were no more new routes to establish, no more hinterlands to draw into trade; the geographic limit of the frontier of accumulation had been reached. This did not mean that entrepreneurs stopped in-

vesting in steamboats; it meant only that their investments were less likely to be successful. By 1848, steamboat owners were trying to protect their own market share by advising others to get out of the business: "Let those who can with convenience withdraw from this fascinating business of steamboating. Let all who are not involved in it stand aloof until the tonnage on the rivers be reduced to the wants of the country; until remunerating prices can be obtained."¹⁷ As capital continued to flow into the river trade and as more and more boats competed for a given number of routes, steamboat owners faced a falling rate of profit. Because they could not expand their routes, they turned their attention to deepening their share of those they already serviced. Henceforth, steamboats competed by trying to offer better, faster, more responsive, or more predictable service than their competitors. As the steamboat economy reached its spatial limit, new entrants tried to make their money back by controlling time.¹⁸ Increasingly, they tried to wring profits from the river trade by running their boats in a way that put both their passengers and cargo in mortal danger. When time is of the essence, safety, almost inevitably, is not.

As well as an economic transformation, the rise of the Cotton Kingdom represented a substantial ecological transformation of the Mississippi Valley. Cotton plantations were tools for controlling labor and organizing production, but, although this has seldom been noted, they were also ways of attempting to control and organize nature. Most of the cotton picked by Valley slaves was Petit Gulf (*Gossypium barbadense*), a hybrid strain developed in Rodney, Mississippi, patented in 1820, and prized for its "pickability." The hegemony of this single plant over the landscape of the Cotton Kingdom produced both a radical simplification of nature and a radical simplification of human being: the reduction of landscape to cotton plantation and of human being to "hand." Cotton mono-cropping stripped the land of vegetation, leached out its fertility, and rendered one of the richest agricultural regions of the earth dependent on upriver trade for food. It was within these material parameters that enslaved people in the Mississippi Valley lived, labored, resisted, and reproduced. And it was in response to these material limitations—and in response to enslaved people's response to these limitations—that Valley slaveholders sought to project their power outward in the shape of pro-slavery imperialism in the 1850s.

The history of the enslaved people who toiled in those fields has gener-

ally been approached through durable abstractions: “the master-slave relationship,” “white supremacy,” “resistance,” “accommodation,” “agency.” Each category has been indispensable to understanding slavery; together they have made it possible to see things that otherwise would have been missed. Increasingly, however, these categories have become unmoored from the historical experience they were intended to represent. The question of “agency” has often been framed quite abstractly—counterpoised against “power” as if both terms were arrayed at the ends of some sort of sliding scale, an increase in one meaning a corresponding decrease in the other.¹⁹ But “agency,” like “power,” is historically conditioned: it takes specific forms at specific times and places; it is thick with the material givenness of a moment in time. “Agency” is less a simple opposite of “power” than its unfinished relief—a dynamic three-dimensional reflection. The history of *Gossypium barbadense* suggests that beneath the abstractions lies a history of bare-life processes and material exchanges so basic that they have escaped the attention of countless historians of slavery.²⁰ The Cotton Kingdom was built out of sun, water, and soil; animal energy, human labor, and mother wit; grain, flesh, and cotton; pain, hunger, and fatigue; blood, milk, semen, and shit.²¹

While it is easy to lose sight of the elementally human character of labor—even that of forced labor—in light of the salutary political effect of labeling slavery “inhuman,” it is important to recognize that slaves’ humanity was not restricted to a zone of “agency” or “culture” outside their work. When slaves went into the field, they took with them social connections and affective ties. The labor process flowed through them, encompassed them, was interrupted and redefined by them. Slaves worked alongside people they knew, people they had raised, and people they would bury. They talked, they sang, they laughed, they suffered, they remembered their ancestors and their God, the rhythms of their lives working through and over those of their work. We cannot any more separate slaves’ labor from their humanity than we can separate the ability of a human hand to pick cotton from its ability to caress the cheek of a crying child, the aching of a stooped back in the field from the arc of a body bent in supplication, the voice that called time for the hoes from that which told a story that was centuries old.

A similar focus on the interlinking of material process and cognitive experience can help us to understand the character of *slaveholding* “agency,” particu-

larly the long-standing question of the relationship of slavery and capitalism. Cotton planters' work in the world—their “agency”—was shaped at the juncture of ecology, agriculture, mastery, and economy: weather patterns, crop cycles, work routines, market cycles, financial obligations. The “cotton market” about which they so frequently spoke, and to which they attributed an almost determinative power over their own lives and fortunes, was in actual fact a network of material connections that stretched from Mississippi and Louisiana to Manhattan and Lowell to Manchester and Liverpool. The economic space of the cotton market was defined by a set of standard measures—hands, pounds, lashes, bales, grades—that translated aspects of the process of production and sale into one another. Those tools for measuring and enforcing quantity, quality, and value produced commercial fluidity over space, across time, and between modes of production. Yet they also indexed the frictions resulting from the movement of cotton from field to factory: shifts between quantitative and qualitative valuation of the crop, between the physical processes of producing the cotton and those of grading it, between the labor of slaves and the demands of purchasers. These measures served both as the imperatives by which the commercial standards of the wider economy might be translated into the disciplinary standards that prevailed on its bloody margin, and as markers of the nonstandard, human, resistant character of the labor that produced the value that was ultimately being measured and extracted. They marked both the extent to which the metrics of the exchange in Liverpool penetrated the labor practices of Louisiana *and* the extent to which the labor practices of Louisiana pushed outward to shape the practice of the global market. Rather than a pure form—“capitalism” or “slavery”—they united, formatted, and measured the actually existing capitalism and slavery of the nineteenth century.

Along the levee in New Orleans, the Mississippi Valley met the Atlantic. Between 85 and 90 percent of the American crop was annually sent to Liverpool for sale. For most of the period before the Civil War, the United States was the source of close to 80 percent of the cotton imported by British manufacturers. The fortunes of cotton planters in Louisiana and cotton brokers in Liverpool, of the plantations of the Mississippi Valley and the textile mills of Manchester, were tied together through the cotton trade—the largest single sector of the global economy in the first half of the nineteenth century. As one

English observer put it, describing the commercial symbiosis of slavery and industry, “Manchester is no less needful to New Orleans than New Orleans is to Manchester.”²²

Much of the history of the political economy of slavery in the Mississippi Valley was framed by the tension between “the South” as a region of the global economy and “the South” as a region of the United States of America—by the tension between the promiscuity of capital and the limits prescribed by the territorial sovereignty of the United States. As Adam Smith wrote, merchant capital was by nature mobile: it “seems to have no fixed residence anywhere, but may wander from place to place, according as it may either buy cheap or sell dear.”²³ Rather than inhabiting space, merchant capital made it, fabricating connections and annihilating distances according to rates of interest and freight, the “laws” of supply and demand. The laws of the United States, however, sought to channel and limit the accumulation of capital in ways that many in the Mississippi Valley increasingly came to believe divested them of their birthright—as slaveholders, as Americans, as whites, as men.

To imagine and represent the global span of this economy, pro-slavery political economists (especially after the Depression of 1837) seized upon another metric: the fact that “the South” provided two-thirds of the nation’s exports, but consumed only one-tenth of its imports. Rather than as a measure of the degraded condition of Southern slaves—Southern demand for goods was low, it could be argued, because slaveholders continually pushed downward upon the subsistence levels of their slaves (which is to say one-half of the population of the states of Mississippi and Louisiana)—or even of the comparative underdevelopment of Southern manufacturing, the defenders of slavery interpreted this imbalance as evidence of the degraded condition of slaveholders. Two issues were of particular (not to say obsessive) concern. The first was slaveholders’ vulnerability to tariffs, which, defenders of slavery argued, transformed Southern agricultural wealth into a subsidy to Northern manufacturers. Second were unscrupulous financiers and merchants, who sold slaveholders’ cotton short and siphoned their profits. Increasingly, pro-slavery political economists looked to free trade—to a relation with the global economy unmediated by the territorial sovereignty of the United States—as the solution to Southern economic disadvantage.

All of this leaves us with two sets of questions. First, how did the global

reach of the cotton economy—in which millions of pounds of cotton and billions of dollars were annually traded, in which credit chased cotton from the metropolitan banks of Europe to every plantation outpost of the Mississippi Valley and then back again, in which the rate of exploitation of slaves in a field in Mississippi, measured in pounds per day, was keyed to the standards of the Exchange in Liverpool and the labor of the mill-hands in Manchester—how did this global economic formation result in one of the most powerfully sectional accounts of political economy in the nineteenth century: the Confederate States of America? And second, perhaps even more perplexing, how did this regionalist account of political economy come to seek its resolution in globalism? How did those who saw merchants as bloodsuckers and interlopers come to see more trade rather than less as the solution to their problems? How did Valley cotton planters who were daily exposed to the risks of transactions that occurred thousands of miles away, whose year’s “work” would be consumed in a matter of minutes due to a decision made in an unknown warehouse by an unknown merchant (covering his own unknown obligations), come to seek an even more direct exposure to the global economy? How did the defenders of the Mississippi Valley’s Cotton Kingdom become free traders—and then imperialists?

It is easy to see in retrospect that overinvestment in slaves, overproduction of cotton, and overreliance on credit made Valley planters vulnerable to precisely the sort of crisis they experienced during the Depression of 1837. Cotton planting was extraordinarily capital intensive, and most of planters’ money was tied up in land and slaves. For the money they needed to get through the year—for liquidity—they relied on credit. And to get credit, they had to plant cotton. Their situation—the fact that they were “overaccumulated” in a single sector of the economy—was expressed in the antebellum commonplace repeated to the Northern traveler Edward Russell as he made his way up the Red River in 1854. Planters, a man told Russell, “care for nothing but to buy Negroes to plant cotton & raise cotton to buy Negroes.”²⁴

The commonplace made no mention of the fact that because the planters’ capital was human, their economy was particularly vulnerable to the sort of structural shock represented by the Panic of 1837. In most capitalist economies, capital chases the leading sector. Over time, as more and more is invested in a single sector, returns diminish. Often there is a crisis, a crash. Value in one

sector is destroyed—acres go untilled, factories are left to rot, workers are laid off—and investment moves on. Thus, in our own time, overinvestment in information technology, software development, and web-based marketing gave way to overinvestment in real estate, mortgage-backed securities, “security” technology, and defense contracting. Much of that capital has now been destroyed, leaving the world strewn with the husks of prior cycles of boom-and-bust, of speculation, overinvestment, and crisis. But in the nineteenth-century South, capital could not so easily shift its shape, at least not when it came to slavery. While individual slaveholders might liquidate their holdings in response to bad times, slaveholders *as a class* could not simply transfer their investment from one form of capital to another, cutting their losses and channeling their money into the Next Big Thing. Their capital would not simply rust or lie fallow. It would starve. It would steal. It would revolt. Beneath the commitment of the exegetes of slavery to their cause lay fearful visions of any future without it. In 1852 in Jackson, Mississippi, at the Southern Commercial Convention, J. D. B. DeBow warned of disastrous consequences from the declining productivity of human capital: “Does it not encourage dark forebodings of the future that slaves are becoming consumers in a larger degree than they are producers?” And in cases where population growth outstripped productivity, warned the *American Cotton Planter*, “the race which is stronger will eat out the weaker.” The South “cannot recede,” wrote another commentator, arguing that the preservation of slavery was fundamental to the economic future of the South. “She must fight *for* her slaves or *against* them. Even cowardice would not save her.”²⁵

Even as cotton prices fell and returns on *human* capital declined, the production of cotton continued to be determined by the size of the slave population in rough arithmetical proportion: bales per hand per acre. Planters whose capital was tied up in land and slaves depended upon advances against cotton for liquidity—and only cotton would do for factors and bankers who had to be certain of the salability of the staple promised in consideration of the capital they had advanced. Planters in need of credit could not afford to assign their slaves to other labor. And planters who feared their starving slaves could not lay them off, at least not in aggregate. What they so often framed as a moral obligation to provide a bare minimum subsistence for “their people” was shadowed by their fear of what would happen if they could no longer do even that.

They were caught between unsustainable expansion and unspeakable fear: the fear of the fire next time—of Toussaint L’Ouverture, of Charles Deslondes, of Denmark Vesey, of Nat Turner, of Madison Washington. Thus were the science of political economy, the practicalities of the cotton market, and the exigencies of racial domination entangled with one another—aspects of a single problem, call it “slave racial capitalism”—as planters and merchants set about trying, first, to reform themselves and, failing that, to remap the course of world history. In order to survive, slaveholders had to expand. Like DeBow, they displaced their fear of their slaves into aggression on a global scale.²⁶

In the 1850s, pro-slavery globalism increasingly took the form of imperialist military action. Our histories of “the coming of the Civil War” have generally been framed around the question of sectionalism, of the line that divided “the South” from “the North.” Taking the global and imperial aspirations of the defenders of slavery seriously, however, transforms the question of sectionalism. The economic boom of the 1850s brought several underlying tensions in the political economy of slavery to the point of crisis. High prices for cotton translated into high prices for slaves, and a dramatic increase in the number of slaves traded from Upper-South slave states like Virginia and Maryland to Deep-South cotton-producing states like Mississippi and Louisiana. High prices, however, made it more difficult for the South’s non-slaveholding whites (about 40 percent of the region’s total population) to buy slaves and thus become members in full standing of the master class. Concomitantly, the geographic redistribution of the enslaved population—which caused unfathomable suffering among the enslaved (50 percent of slave sales during the antebellum period involved the breakup of a family)—spurred fears among defenders of slavery that the Upper South was being “drained” of slaves and would be abandoned to “free labor” through the workings of the slave trade.

Increasingly, Mississippi Valley slaveholders (and others) sought fixes for these contradictions outside the confines of the United States. Cuba was the first target. In the 1850s several attempts were made to overthrow the island’s Spanish colonial government by force of arms; the most spectacularly unsuccessful of these efforts was launched from New Orleans in the summer of 1851.²⁷ For many Valley slaveholders, Cuba represented the mouth of the Mis-

Mississippi River, the place where the political economy of slavery joined the global economy, and thus it was a natural, indeed essential, addition to “the South.” Nicaragua played a similar role in the global aspirations of Mississippi Valley slaveholders. The filibuster government of William Walker (who invaded Nicaragua with an army of fifty-seven mercenaries in 1855 and became its more or less self-appointed president in 1856) drew much of its monetary and military support from Valley slaveholders. For these supporters, control of Nicaragua represented a way to connect the Mississippi Valley economy with the emerging economies of the Pacific—a truly global vision of pro-slavery empire. Nicaragua, moreover, represented a convenient receptacle for nonslaveholding whites, whose loyalty to the institution of slavery was thought to be increasingly suspect. Finally, in the late 1850s, Valley slaveholders turned their eyes to Africa and the effort to reopen the Atlantic slave trade, which had been outlawed in 1808 by an act of Congress. A solution for both the problem of nonslaveholding whites and that of the “slave drain,” the effort to reopen the trade found its most consistent support in the Mississippi Valley, where the New Orleans-based *DeBow’s Review* supported the project with malign intensity. The state legislatures of Mississippi and Louisiana each considered reopening the trade in 1858.

It takes no great insight (only a taste for heresy) to say that the story of “the coming of the Civil War” has been framed according to a set of anachronistic spatial frames and teleological narratives. It is resolutely nationalist in its spatial framing, foregrounding conflict over slavery within the boundaries of today’s United States to the exclusion of almost every other definition of the conflict over slavery. Because of the territorial condition of the regions under debate and the character of federal recordkeeping, the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act produced tremendous archives that American historians have used to terrific effect. Yet for many in the Mississippi Valley (and for the president of the United States, who in 1852 devoted the first third of his State of the Union address to the topic), the most important issue in the early 1850s was Cuba, an issue that was related to but certainly not reducible to the question of territory gained through the Mexican War and the Compromise of 1850. Similarly, for many pro-slavery Southerners, especially in the Mississippi Valley, the issues of Nicaragua and the Atlantic slave trade were more important than the question of Kansas (dismissed by

many as a fight over a place where no real slaveholder would ever want to live anyway) and more important than what was happening in Congress, from which they, in any case, expected very little. The standard narrative, that is to say, projects a definition of spaces which *resulted* from the Civil War—no Cuba, no Nicaragua, no Atlantic slave trade—backward onto its narrative of the description of the conflict over slavery before the war.

Much of this work has been done through the category of “the South,” which serves in its dominant usage as a spatial euphemism for what is in fact a conceptual anachronism: *those states which eventually became part of the Confederacy*.²⁸ But what the “Southern position” was on any given issue—the role of nonslaveholders in a slaveholders’ society; Nicaragua; the slave trade; whether Virginia should be considered a slaveholding, a slave-breeding, or (even) a free-labor state; the importance of building a railroad connection to the Pacific (not to mention what that route would be); the expediency of establishing direct trade with Belgium; the best recipe for chicken and biscuits; and so on—was subject to fierce debate at pro-slavery commercial conventions of the late 1850s, which are generally seen as hotbeds of secessionism. About the only things upon which those conventions could agree was that there was something called “the South” that was worth fighting for and that the election of a Republican president in 1860 would be grounds for secession.²⁹ The ultimate grounds for secession represented a sort of lowest common denominator, a platform defined by what everyone involved agreed “the South” could not be.³⁰

It was a politics of negation—of seceding *from*—which initially held the Confederacy together in 1860.³¹ And its story has been told by projecting the histories of the territorial units secession created—the Union in the North and the Confederacy in the South—backward in time as the history of sectionalism: as the history of the emergence of the differences between the two.³² What has been of much less concern has been the history of alternative visions of what “the South” might look like if instead of focusing on the sectional divide, one were to turn around and look in the other direction: if instead of looking at what “the South” was leaving and thereby defining “the South” wholly in reference to the politics of secession, one asked where Southerners (and slaveholders in particular) thought they were going and how they thought they could pull it off in the first place. In the invasion of Nicaragua

and the reopening of the Atlantic slave trade, Valley extremists (read: a very large proportion of Valley slaveholders) were pursuing goals that had something to do with but were not reducible to secession. Indeed, at the time, many made the argument that pressing Congress to reopen the Atlantic slave trade was the best way to ensure that “the South” would remain *in* the Union. In the Mississippi Valley in the 1850s, many of those who would later become Confederates were busily imagining and promoting a vision of a pro-slavery future—of pro-slavery time and space—which is nonetheless revealing for the merciful fact that it never came to pass.³³

I

Jeffersonian Visions and Nightmares in Louisiana

Waist-deep they fought beneath the tall trees, until the war-cry was hushed and the Indians glided back into the west. Small wonder the wood is red. Then came the black slaves. Day after day of chained feet marching from Virginia and Carolina . . . was heard in these rich swamp lands. Day after day the songs of the callous, the wail of the motherless, and the muted curses of the wretched.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of the Black Belt”

THE INSURGENTS rose on the night of January 8, 1811. They marched in the rain along the muddy river road—hundreds of them, armed with shovels and axes, their leaders on horseback. At their head was later said to be a “mulatto” named Charles Deslondes, a Creole slave from Louisiana.¹ Among their number were men named Charles, Cupidon, Telemacque, Janvier, Harry, Joseph, Kooche, Quamana, Mingo, Diaca, Omar, Al-Hassan. They were African- and American-born, French- and English-speaking, Christian and Muslim, Creole, Akan, and Congo, organized in companies that reflected their various origins. They represented all of the diversity of New World slavery dedicated to the single purpose of its overthrow.

For months before the uprising, there had been rumors of runaways in the swamps behind the plantations that lined the river along the German Coast (so called because of the origins of its eighteenth-century white settlers). Like plantations elsewhere along the Mississippi, those on the German Coast were rectangular in shape, their narrow sides parallel to the river in order to ensure

that as many planters as possible could own a piece of the riverbank, their longer edges stretching away from the river in order to maximize their area. Along the back edge of these plantations, the slaves of various owners worked near one another, but far away from the concentrated supervision of the riverbank. There, where their owners' property abutted, they had planned their revolt in the interstices of their labor.

The conversations—the debates, the inducements, the promises, the threats—that occurred at the back of those plantations are lost to history, but we must imagine them as extraordinary conversations. People who had little in common but their slavery—people of varied origins, different faiths, several languages—trusted one another enough to say words that could cost them their lives. Words such as “We are thinking of revolting. If we do, will you join us?” Or, finally, “We are going to New Orleans to kill all whites. Tonight is the night. We will meet on the river road.”

The revolt had begun on the plantation of Manuel Andry, which served the territorial militia as an arms depot. For an insurgent army that was armed only with the tools of their labor—machetes, axes, hoes, pitchforks—taking the armory was critical. The insurgents quickly overwhelmed Andry's plantation, supplied themselves, and left it in flames. As they marched down the river road, they left Manuel Andry and his son for dead in the ruins of their plantation. The rebels' numbers grew as they pressed downriver. Slaves from neighboring plantations joined (or were conscripted), and maroons (escaped slaves) who had been hiding out and living in the swamps that backed the fields came out to fight. They marched with drums beating and banners flying.² As word of their march spread down the river, another group took to the road—a caravan of whites and their loyalist slaves, a column of frightened refugees later estimated to have been nine miles long, fleeing the advancing insurgents: “carriages and carts full of people making their escape from the ravages of the banditti—Negroes, half naked, up to their knees in mud with large packages on their head driving along towards the city.”³ Behind them, the rebel army burned the abandoned plantations and outbuildings along the river road as it marched, killing the lone slaveholder foolish enough to remain behind in his house. The insurgents marched through the night and the following day, stopping finally to rest on the plantation of Cadet Fortier; they had traveled roughly fifteen

miles, about half of the distance between Andry's plantation and the city of New Orleans.⁴ But if the insurgents had the element of surprise when they first marched, that advantage was lost by the time the sun rose the next day.

Word of the rebellion reached New Orleans on the morning of January 9. There was "no regular militia" in the city, and the governor put the defense of the city in the hands of General Wade Hampton, who had arrived in New Orleans two days earlier with a small detachment of regular army soldiers.⁵ Hampton's purpose in Louisiana had been to defend the territory from pro-Spanish rebels who resented the closing of the slave trade and feared that their colonial land titles would be invalidated under U.S. rule. But on the morning of January 9, he found himself at the head of a small army of regular soldiers and volunteer militia mustering to march up the river road against an insurgent army they had heard was 500 strong, and from which they no doubt feared the remorselessness they had come to associate with the Haitian Revolution. As he left the city, Hampton sent word to Major Homer Milton, who was in command of a company of United States dragoons (light cavalry) marching westward from Baton Rouge to aid in the "pacification" of Spanish-aligned insurgents in West Florida. With Hampton marching upriver along the muddy river road and Milton turning his force southward toward the German Coast, for the first time in its history the U.S. Army was deployed against a slave revolt.

By early morning on January 10, Hampton's army had reached the Fortier plantation. They found that Deslondes's insurgents had established a perimeter and taken up defensive positions in a couple of brick buildings attached to Fortier's sugar works. Although the sources make it hard to determine if the rebels knew about the movements of their enemy at any given time (this is much easier to establish for Hampton and Milton), Deslondes and his soldiers seem to have known that a force was coming up from New Orleans to confront them. And by the time Hampton's soldiers were ready to deploy for attack, their opponents had unaccountably disappeared. The soldiers from New Orleans stormed Fortier's plantation, to find only the refuse of an "army" (their word) that had slipped away in the night, tracking its way northwestward across the fields behind the plantation houses, outflanking Hampton's army before turning eastward again and going "on to New Orleans!"⁶

Meanwhile, the grievously wounded Manuel Andry, left for dead by the in-

surgents, had not died, but managed to cross the Mississippi to the west bank and raise the alarm there. Andry had taken refuge in the household of a planter named Charles Perret, who began on the night of January 8 to warn the slaveholders on the river's west bank about the rebellion that was occurring on its eastern shores. By the morning of the tenth, he had raised an army of his own, eighty or so men—planters, whites, free people of color—and crossed the river above Fortier's plantation, surprising Deslonde's army. "We saw the enemy at a very short distance, number about 200 men, as many mounted as on foot," Perret later wrote. Deslonde's force was caught in the cleared fields of the sugar plantation belonging to Bernard Bernoudi. It was surrounded by three small armies: Hampton's regular army troops and volunteers behind, Perret's volunteers to the left, and Milton's dragoons from the north.⁷

Andry referred to what followed as "une grande carnage"—a great slaughter. Deslonde's army splintered.⁸ Those who survived the initial encounter fled into the swamp at the back of Bernoudi's fields. The wounded were murdered where they fell; their bodies, mutilated. The survivors were hunted down over the next few days. Charles Deslonde was executed on the battlefield: first his arms were amputated; then his thighs were shattered one after the other with a musket; finally he was burned alive.⁹ Twenty-one were conveyed to the Destrehan plantation, where they were tried on the lawn by a jury composed of leading planters, and sentenced to death. Twenty-nine more were taken to New Orleans, where they were tried before a judge.¹⁰ Two of those tried in New Orleans were acquitted; two others were ordered beaten and returned to their owners; the remaining twenty-five were condemned to death.¹¹

In death, the German Coast rebels were converted into insignia of the regime.¹² The heads of those executed at Destrehan were put up on pikes along the levee between New Orleans and the German Coast. The judge in New Orleans (himself a refugee from the revolution in Haiti) appended specific instructions to his execution orders: Caesar was to be hung "at the usual place of execution"; Jessamin was to be hung at the plantation of Barthelémé McCarty, where his body was to remain on the gallows; Hector would be hung "between the plantations of Mr. Villeraï and Robert Bourdique," and likewise left to slowly and publicly rot; Lindor was to be hung at the plantation of his master "in the presence of the whole gang where his body shall remain exposed"; Louis was to be hung and left "on the levee in front of the Powder Magazine";

Daniel Garret was to be “hung in the usual place in the city of New Orleans . . . his head severed from his body and exposed at one of the lower gates of the city”; Gilbert’s body was to be delivered to his family after he was shot by a firing squad.¹³ And so on. The rotten heads of the dead served to remind those who passed beneath them of the inexorability of the emergent order. If the revolt was, according to one of the city’s white residents, “a miniature representation of the horrors of Santo Domingo,” the mutilated bodies of the insurgents were meant to mark the boundary between the island’s revolutionary history and that of the Mississippi Valley.¹⁴

The history of the Mississippi Valley’s Cotton Kingdom that has come to emblemize the word “slavery” was, from the beginning, twinned with the history of the most successful slave revolt in the modern era: the Haitian Revolution. In 1793, Haiti (then known by its French imperial designation, Saint-Domingue, or St. Domingue) was the richest colony in the world. As the historian C. L. R. James put it, “On no portion of the surface of the globe did its surface in proportion to dimension yield so much wealth as the colony of St. Domingue.”¹⁵ And nowhere, according to James, were the inequalities and barbarities of New World slavery more pronounced. Half a million people lived in St. Domingue: 450,000 slaves, 40,000 whites, and 28,000 free people of color. Year after year, St. Domingue produced more sugar than all of the islands of the British West Indies combined. Upon the labor of those half-million slaves depended the livelihoods of more than six million Frenchmen. And the future of the Mississippi Valley as well.

In the settlement following the Seven Years War (1756–1763), France had been forced to cede to Spain the territory of Louisiana—828,000 square miles stretching from the west bank of the Mississippi River to the Continental Divide and including the city of New Orleans. By the end of the eighteenth century, Spanish control of the Mississippi Valley, and particularly of New Orleans, posed a problem for the emerging economy of the United States. “There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy,” Jefferson wrote: “New Orleans, through which three-eighths of our territory must pass to market.”¹⁶ In the Treaty of San Lorenzo, finalized in 1795, the United States secured right of passage through the Port of New Orleans, thus assuring for the moment that American produce from the interior of the continent could be shipped down the Mississippi to East-Coast and

Atlantic markets without being taxed by Spanish customs officials in New Orleans. It was not long, however, before rumors reached Washington that Spain had signed a secret treaty that returned Louisiana to France.

In Napoleon's global vision of the French Empire, the Mississippi Valley would be a service colony for St. Domingue. Because every arable acre on the island was given over to commercial cultivation, the population of St. Domingue depended on imported food for its survival. The vast valley at the center of the North American continent would provide the food that would support Haitian slaves as they cultivated sugar for European markets. St. Domingue lay in the middle of a nutrient chain that would convert North American grain—via sugar and slavery—into European wealth. Napoleon's global vision, however, was spoiled by the unexpected staying power of the revolution in Haiti. In 1791, tensions between free people of color and whites over political rights provided an opening in the structure of rule that was soon breached by the colony's slaves, who took up arms under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture. In 1794, L'Ouverture proclaimed the abolition of slavery, and in 1804 Haiti achieved independence.¹⁷

The most successful slave revolt in the history of the world and the most democratic of the Atlantic world's anti-colonial uprisings, the Haitian Revolution drastically diminished the value of the Mississippi Valley to Napoleon. Following W. E. B. Du Bois, the historian Henry Adams, in 1899, noted the decisive importance of that revolution to the subsequent history of the United States: "The colonial system of France centered on St. Domingo. Without that island the system had hands, feet, and even a head, but no body. Of what use was Louisiana, when France had lost the main colony which Louisiana was meant to feed and fortify?"¹⁸ In 1803, a delegation sent by Thomas Jefferson to France in order to negotiate a purchase of the city of New Orleans, and thus a safe passage to market for American agricultural goods produced *east* of the Mississippi, was dumbfounded to be presented instead with an offer of the entire territory of Louisiana *west* of the Mississippi, an area equal in size to the existing United States. The eventual purchase price was \$15 million.

The Louisiana Purchase has gone down in U.S. history as the bargain of the century—but twenty years earlier, the purchase of the vast Territory of Louisiana might not have made sense to Jefferson at any price. The appeal of the Louisiana Purchase to both sides depended not only on a political revolution

within the French Empire, but also on a revolution in the history of political thought. In *Federalist 10* (1787), James Madison had departed from the conventional view that Greece and Rome had become corrupt and authoritarian because they had overexpanded, and instead had argued that spatial expansion was the guarantor rather than the antagonist of political liberty. In a large polity, Madison suggested, only men of quality—public-spirited men capable of governing in the general interest—would be well-known enough to be elected to office.¹⁹ In an 1814 letter to Madison, Thomas Jefferson expressed the connection between United States imperialism and American liberty: “We should have such an Empire for Liberty as [none] has ever surveyed since the creation. . . . No Constitution was ever before so well calculated as ours for extensive empire and self-government.”²⁰ When he spoke of liberty, Jefferson had in mind a liberty of a very particular sort; when he spoke of empire, he had in mind the Mississippi Valley.

In keeping with their origins in the American Revolution rather than the Haitian, Madison’s intellectual evolution and Jefferson’s embrace of empire evolved around notions about the liberties of white men, rather than of human beings in general.²¹ Historians have termed the sort of liberty that Jefferson imagined “yeomen’s republicanism,” referring to a polity of independent householders who owned the land they lived on, commanded the labor of their wives and children, and produced the necessities of their own subsistence. They were patriarchal, noncommercial, self-sufficient white men. Jefferson, in a passage characteristically eliding the labor of women, children, and slaves (many of whom were also women and children), put it this way: “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, in whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”²² In Jefferson’s view, because these yeomen owned their own land and provided their own subsistence, they could not be bought or bossed: they did not need to work for a wage or enter into entangling relationships of debt that would make them economically vulnerable to those who might seek to control their votes. Empire—the expansion of the United States and the distribution of its population over space—was, thought Jefferson, essential to producing the specific form of agricultural economic development that he associated so strongly with liberty. By spreading westward, the United States could leave what Jefferson termed the “depravity of moral dependence and corruption” incident to the

emergent manufacturing economies of Europe.²³ Jefferson imagined a global division of labor, with manufacturing (and its ills) confined to Europe and separated from the agricultural heartland of the United States by a narrow band of mercantile institutions along the East Coast.

Even as Jefferson's vision of liberty, like Madison's, came to depend on the prospect of territorial expansion, both men continued to harbor some anxiety about the dangers of overextension. Most notably, Jefferson feared that some inhabitants of the "empire for liberty" might be so distant from the government in Washington, D.C., that they would fall out of its orbit entirely, "separating from our confederacy and becoming its enemies," as he put it. Future societies "on the waters of the Mississippi," Madison wrote in 1785, "might be viewed in the same relation to the Atlantic States as exists between the hostile and heterogeneous societies of Europe."²⁴ Even after the Louisiana Purchase formally incorporated the territory west of the Mississippi into the United States, the problem of establishing real American sovereignty—the problem signaled by Jefferson's fear of breakaway Western republics—remained a pressing one. At the moment of the Louisiana Purchase, the Mississippi Valley was anything but a natural extension of Jefferson's "empire for liberty." It was inhabited by a population of Indians thought to be sympathetic to Great Britain and hostile to the United States, Creole whites identified with French and Spanish rule, and potentially insurgent African and African-American slaves. It was historically French, bounded on both sides by Spain—Florida to the east and Texas to the west—and coveted by Great Britain, the greatest military and commercial power in the world. It could have been French; it could have been Spanish; it could have been British. It could have been Creek or Choctaw or Chickasaw. It could have been Bambara or Congolese or Coramantee. It could have been Haitian. Jefferson's "empire for liberty" would have to be sealed to the United States with blood.

In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the United States pacified the Mississippi Valley through a multiform war against "disloyal" whites, Native Americans, Africans, and African Americans. The strategic goal was to prevent alliances linking invading armies from Europe (particularly the British, but also the Spanish) with the indigenous and enslaved populations of the Mississippi Valley. As Andrew Jackson put it, the best British strategy in the event of an invasion would be to "excite the Indians to War, the Negroes to insurrec-

tion, and then proceed to the Mississippi.”²⁵ For Jackson, the problem of asserting United States sovereignty in the Mississippi Valley and that of subjugating the population contained within the nation’s supposed borders were indissoluble aspects of each other. Not for the last time in the history of the United States, national security and white supremacy were synthesized into state policy and military violence.

In the event, however, the first real threat to United States sovereignty in the Mississippi Valley came from the white population—indeed, from the military and political leadership of the United States itself. In 1806, two years after he had killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel, Aaron Burr set out for the Mississippi Valley in search of an empire of his own. Though the details remain sketchy, Burr apparently hoped to divide the territory west of the river—the Louisiana Purchase territory, the territory that Jefferson and Madison had feared might become the ground of a breakaway republic—from the United States. Behind him was a small private army, heavily dependent on the service of men who held land titles from the period of Spanish rule in the Valley; men, that is, who had fortunes to gain by ensuring that their speculative titles would be recognized above all others. And in the shadows of the story lurked General James Wilkinson, the U.S. Army general in command of the Mississippi Valley, who, as it turned out, was also a paid agent of the government of Spain (Special Agent No. 13). The Burr conspiracy represented a threat that was both inside and outside the formal territorial boundaries of the United States. Indeed, the possible alliance of the Mississippi Valley’s restive white population with Spain’s imperial interests rendered incoherent the distinction between “inside” and “outside” the United States. In the end, the conspiracy was uncovered; Burr was tried for treason and Wilkinson court-martialed (both men were acquitted). Even in exposure, however, the Burr conspiracy signaled the vulnerability—the hollowness, really—of the U.S. claim to dominion in the Louisiana Territory.²⁶

The next step in the Americanization of the Mississippi Valley took place in West Florida. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Spanish Florida included a narrow strip of territory that stretched along the Gulf and into the interior of Louisiana all the way to the Mississippi, creating an elongated “pan-handle” stretching from Pensacola to Baton Rouge. In 1810, the U.S. Congress passed a secret law providing for the annexation of any territory in

North America, and began the covert funding of an American-aligned uprising against Spanish rule in Florida (covert because an overt American military action against the Spanish presence in North America would likely have drawn the British into the conflict). The so-called Patriot War of 1810 brought the area around Baton Rouge (as well as the area around St. Augustine) under the control of the U.S.-aligned rebels, although the territory they inhabited was still officially claimed by Spain. Among the white inhabitants of the Florida Parishes of Louisiana, many of those who remained loyal to Spain viewed themselves as “a *conquered people*.”²⁷

The federal regulation of foreign trade was a primary source of Creole dissatisfaction. The Embargo Act of 1807, the Non-Intercourse Act of 1808, and various customs duties all defined a legal line between the “internal” economy of the United States and the global economy of the late nineteenth century, dividing the Valley from the global economy by inscribing across the mouth of the Mississippi a line between the inside and the outside. They were ways of making the U.S. national sovereignty represented by the Louisiana Purchase material, in the form of economic practice. These laws were bitterly resented by a population whose livelihood depended upon exports and exchange, none more so than the 1808 law closing the Atlantic slave trade to the United States. By seeking to draw a line between the henceforth “domestic” economy of American slavery and the global economy in human beings, the act attempted to balance the emerging concern that the importation of African slaves was rendering the United States insecure in the event of invasion with the imperatives of the ongoing dependence of a large section of the new nation on human property. By instituting an always-already-broken-down distinction between “slaveholding” and “slave trading,” the act (along with the Embargo Act of 1807) represented the efforts of a new nation to align the limits of its economy with its polity. It forwarded an emergent idea of the “nation” as the container of its own economy, over and against the insatiable logic of an economy that could commodify anything—even a tiny child.

The legal separation of slavery in the United States from slavery in the rest of the world aimed to provide a new sort of solidity to American rule in the Mississippi Valley. Thenceforth, the political economy of slavery and the territorial limit of the United States ran along the same line—at least in theory. Driving slaves across that line provided a terrific opportunity for pirates like

Jean Lafitte. Lafitte maintained a base in the tangle of inlets at Barataria Bay on the Gulf Coast, from which he attacked Spanish ships on their way to Cuba, where the slave trade was still legal. He seized their cargo, including slaves, and smuggled it into New Orleans, where illegal sale brought even higher profits. Lafitte's trick was to make money by pursuing old patterns of trade across the legal boundaries that now sought to outlaw them. In 1813, the governor of Louisiana, William C. C. Claiborne, offered a reward for Lafitte; shortly afterward, posters appeared throughout the city of New Orleans, offering a reward for the capture of the governor and signed by Jean Lafitte. Whether or not Lafitte was actually responsible for the handbills, the point was clear: the United States' claim to sovereignty over the Louisiana Purchase territory was disputed in practice long after it was codified in law. The Mississippi Valley remained connected to the Atlantic world by the currents of global commerce that could be channeled, but never fully contained by the boundaries of the United States.

Meanwhile, the global racial apocalypse feared by Andrew Jackson never materialized. The closest it came was perhaps the Battle of New Orleans in 1815, when the British, drawing on the support of allies among the Gulf Coast Indians, were bolstered by the flight of hundreds, perhaps thousands of Louisiana and Mississippi slaves during their invasion of the Mississippi Valley. Both the British and the Americans sent diplomatic missions to the pirate princeling Jean Lafitte, trying to persuade him to join his band of extranational freebooters to their respective military forces. Lafitte cast his lot with the Americans; even more important, the British naval captain responsible for landing the imperial artillery on the battlefield disembarked on the wrong side of the river. Although the Battle of New Orleans came after the Treaty of Ghent had officially closed hostilities (but before news of that treaty had crossed the Atlantic), it represented a landmark victory in the Americanization of the Mississippi Valley.²⁸

Jackson spent the next fifteen years—first as a general in the U.S. Army, then as the military governor of Florida, and finally as the president of the United States—supervising the ethnic cleansing and racial pacification of the southeastern United States. His first target was the Seminole nation in Florida, a hybrid group composed of various Native, African, African American, and European refugees, whom Jackson began to root out in 1817. The general's

orders from the War Department signaled the strategic intertwining of defending the borders, pacifying the Native population, and shoring up the foundation of racial slavery. He sought to make Florida safe for white settlers, for slavery, and for the United States of America. He was to move the Seminole away from the Gulf Coast, where they might provide a beachhead for an invading army, and, through the cantonment of the Seminole, reduce the lure that their nation provided to escaping slaves. But Jackson quickly exceeded his mandate. He hired a private army of Tennesseans and used them to fight an illegal war against the Spanish in Florida (a low point of which was the capture of two British subjects in Spanish Territory and their execution by a firing squad composed of U.S. soldiers operating outside the legal authority of the United States). Violations of federal, international, and natural law notwithstanding, the results that Jackson achieved on the ground were formalized in the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, in which Spain ceded Florida to the United States.²⁹

After the Seminole, Jackson turned his attention to the Chickasaw. In 1818, Jackson presented the Chickasaw with a treaty promising them “equal land” for their territory (mostly in present-day Tennessee and Alabama).³⁰ When the Chickasaw responded that “they would lose every drop of blood in their veins before they would yield to the United States another acre of land,” Jackson employed a strategy he would use again and again in the Southeast. First, he threatened that the Chickasaw would simply be deprived of their land by force and offered nothing in return; then, he bribed a portion of the tribal leadership with secret payments and land grants; finally, having bought off a portion of the Chickasaw, he signed a treaty that he claimed represented the wishes of the people as a whole.³¹ All the while, he portrayed himself as the defender of the tribe. Without a treaty, he told the Chickasaw, “the white people would certainly move on their lands by the thousands, and all the evils which their father the president was trying to avert would ensue.” Jackson represented the expansion of the white population and the dispossession of the Chickasaw as a sort of racial inevitability, a foregone conclusion predicated upon their relocation west of the Mississippi to a portion of land that was insistently represented as “equal,” although it was not at all equivalent apart from the bare measurement of square acreage—not historically, not economically, not ecologically, not spiritually. In 1830, by-then President Jackson warned the Chickasaw

that they “must disappear and be forgotten.”³² The final removal of the Chickasaw to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma occurred in the fall of 1837; of the 5,600 who started west (including a thousand or so slaves), 500 died along the way.³³

It was the same story with the Choctaw. At Doak’s Stand in 1820, General Jackson hectored the tribal leaders with the threat that “without a change in your situation, you must dwindle to nothing,” before bribing them into signing away their people’s lands in exchange for land grants that allowed the signatories to stay behind in Mississippi.³⁴ Jackson’s metaphysics of expansion and removal were echoed by his frequent political antagonist Henry Clay in an 1825 exchange with John Quincy Adams: “They [are] destined to extinction. . . . Their disappearance from the human family would be no great loss to the world.”³⁵ Of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, which presaged the final removal of the Choctaw from Mississippi, General Edmund Gaines wrote: “[It] acted as a bomb thrown among them. It filled them with surprise, astonishment, excitement, grief, and resentment. Not a single Choctaw favored the sale and cession of the lands of the tribe. It had not a solitary advocate among them.”³⁶ Of the 8,000 or so Choctaw who left Mississippi bound for Oklahoma in the 1830s, more than a quarter died along the way. “Yet it is said,” wrote the Choctaw chief, George Harkins, “that our present movements are our own voluntary acts—such is not the case. We found ourselves like a benighted stranger, following false guides, until he was surrounded on every side, with fire and water. The fire was certain destruction, and a feeble hope was left him of escaping by water. A distant view of the opposite shore encourages the hope; to remain would be inevitable annihilation. Who would hesitate, or who would say that his plunging into the water was his own voluntary act?”³⁷

And so it went: final removal treaties were signed with the Choctaw in 1831, and with the Creek, the Seminole, and the Chickasaw in 1837. The Cherokee were forcibly removed along the “Trail of Tears” in 1838. By the time he was done, Andrew Jackson had added over 100 million acres to the public domain of the United States. The Native civilizations of the Southeast had been destroyed, resettled in “Indian Territory,” the very name of which bespoke the forcible transformation of sovereign nations into racial subjects. All but a handful of tribal “leaders” who cooperated with the government (or, to put it more charitably, saw the writing on the wall and cut the best deal they could)

experienced the cognitive dislocation and physical suffering generally associated with the term “ethnic cleansing”; tens of thousands died in the process. By 1840, the homelands of the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, the Creek, the Seminole, and the Cherokee had, through the military power and legal authority of the United States of America, been converted into a vast reserve for the cultivation of whiteness.

AS IT turned out, however, white social reproduction in the Mississippi Valley came very quickly to depend on the expansion of black slavery: the racial privilege of the “empire for liberty” contained within it the seeds of the Cotton Kingdom. Whether slavery would be allowed in the Louisiana Territory was in one way a foregone conclusion: there were already thousands of slaves in the Mississippi Valley by the time it became a part of the United States, and there were very few advocates for their emancipation. But the extent to which the material incorporation of the region into the economy of the United States and the world would be accomplished through slave labor was a subject of great debate in the early years of the nineteenth century.³⁸ Opponents of slavery argued that the institution should not be allowed to establish deeper roots in a new region of the United States. With slavery, they argued, spread the threat of a rebellion that could destabilize not only the region, but the whole nation. “’Tis our duty,” declared one opponent of the legalization of further slavery in the Louisiana Territory, “to prevent . . . the horrible evil of slavery—and thereby avoid the fate of St. Domingo.”³⁹ Supporters of the spread of slavery argued that only Africans and African Americans could withstand the withering conditions of agricultural labor in the lower Mississippi Valley; without them, the Louisiana Territory would be of “little more value . . . than an equal quantity of waste land.”⁴⁰ This pro-slavery, pro-expansion position began from the axiom that African-descended people were uniquely and biologically suited to do just the sort of work that slaveholders needed them to do, and it proceeded to the postulate that, in the absence of slave labor, the economic development of the Mississippi Valley would cease: time would begin to run in the opposite direction.

The debate was eventually settled near Jefferson’s own position, which tried to balance a fear of the volatility of slavery in the era of the Haitian Revolution and recognition of the dependence of American economic development

upon the labor of the enslaved. Not for the last time in the nineteenth-century history of the United States, fear of revolt among the enslaved was used to justify a spatial expansion of the institution of slavery. Jeffersonians, such as John Breckinridge of Kentucky, argued that allowing slavery to spread into the Mississippi Valley would not only aid in the incorporation of that region into the United States, but also “disperse and weaken that [African] race—& free the Southern states from part of its black population, & of its danger.”⁴¹ The black population would, in the term of the day, be “diffused” across the continent, spread so widely that slavery might eventually be abolished without the fear of revolt associated with a concentrated population of blacks. Allowing slavery to spread into the Mississippi Valley—an entirely new region of the continent—was (paradoxically, mistakenly, disingenuously) represented by Jefferson and his supporters as a prelude to the abolition of the institution as a whole. Congress ultimately accepted this position, passing a law that allowed “*bona fide*” owners to transport their slaves to the Mississippi Valley. “Diffusion” turned out to be a chimera. The extension of slavery into the Mississippi Valley gave an institution that was in decline at the end of the eighteenth century new life in the nineteenth.⁴² In 1800, there were around 100,000 slaves living within the boundaries of the present-day states of Mississippi and Louisiana; in 1840, there were more than 250,000; in 1860, more than 750,000.⁴³

The role of the U.S. government in relation to slavery in the Mississippi Valley turned out to be not presiding over its gradual disappearance, but forcibly ensuring its furtherance. If the Haitian Revolution provided the condition of possibility for the expansion of the United States of America into the Mississippi Valley, it also provided a sort of counterhistory to the Jeffersonian vision. “The first chapter of this history, which has begun in St. Domingo . . . will recount how all the whites were driven from all the other islands,” wrote Thomas Jefferson. “If something is not done and not done soon, we will be the murderers of our own children. . . . The revolutionary storm now sweeping the globe will be upon us.”⁴⁴ The specter of Haiti haunted the Mississippi Valley throughout the antebellum period.⁴⁵ As John Breckinridge bluntly put it, “I hope the time is not far distant when not a slave will exist in this Union. I fear our slaves in the south will produce another St. Domingo.”⁴⁶

Indeed, in the years immediately following the Louisiana Purchase, the

Haitian Revolution was anything but distant from daily life in Louisiana. In 1809, 10,000 Haitians arrived in New Orleans, roughly a third of them white, a third of them free people of color, and a third of them claimed as slaves by someone in one of the former groups.⁴⁷ Whether whites, free people of color, or reenslaved slaves, the Haitians made Louisiana's American governor nervous. The whites, though pro-slavery, pro-order, and anti-revolution, still represented a potentially insurgent foreign presence at a time when the sovereignty of the United States over the Creole inhabitants of the Mississippi Valley was anything but certain. The free people of color represented an embodied contradiction of the identification of race and slavery—an equivalence on which the institution of slavery in the United States was coming increasingly to depend. And the slaves represented a history in which "Haiti" had become a byword for "race war." "At some future point, this quarter of the union must (I fear) experience in some degree the misfortunes of St. Domingo," William Claiborne had written of the Mississippi Valley in 1804. In January 1811, along the river road to New Orleans, his fears were realized in the shape of the army led by Charles Deslondes.⁴⁸

In the aftermath of the revolt, those who supported federal governance in the Mississippi Valley emphasized the incompetence of the territorial militia and the indispensable role of the federal forces in their accounts of the way the rebellion had been suppressed. Those less supportive of the United States emphasized the heroism of the territory's Creole elite who mustered on the west bank and flanked the slaves on Bernoudi's plantation. Most important, the once-restive citizens of the city of New Orleans requested that the U.S. Army establish a permanent garrison at New Orleans.⁴⁹ Thenceforth the privilege of slaveholders (and other whites) in the Mississippi Valley was backed by the power of the U.S. Army. The role of federal troops in putting down the 1811 revolt represented the extension of the emerging national order to the Mississippi Valley, and the emergence of white-supremacist and pro-slavery solidarity out of the residual divisions of the imperial world.

The wars fought by the U.S. Army in the Mississippi Valley—against Creole elites aligned with European powers, against Native Americans fighting for their land, against Africans and African Americans resisting slavery—forcibly established U.S. sovereignty in the region. Andrew Jackson's one-time fear that an invading European army might "excite the Indians to War, the

Negroes to insurrection, and then proceed to the Mississippi” was expunged with the bloody federal conquest of all of the above.⁵⁰ Imperial governments were rooted out and the interests of Creole elites brought into alignment with those of the U.S. government through the dispossession and redistribution of Indian lands and the federal protection of the property (and lives) of the slaveholding elite.

The Americanization and commercialization of the Mississippi Valley were concomitant with its racial pacification. In the years that followed, the military conquest of the Mississippi Valley was “fulfilled” in the shape of the Cotton Kingdom. Jefferson’s “empire for liberty” was transformed into the credit-importing, cotton-exporting leading edge of the global economy of the nineteenth century.⁵¹ When the surveyors hired by the General Land Office began their work in Mississippi in 1831, they used the “Old Choctaw Line” as the “base meridian” of their efforts to transform the landscape from a landscape of imperial violence to a field of national development.⁵² “The achievements of the surveys and surveyors . . . varied with the strength of American arms,” wrote the historian Malcolm Rohrbough, noting the direct relationship between the primary technologies of imperial expansion and commercial rationalization in Jacksonian America. It was through the Land Office that expropriated Indian land would be sown with white settlers; that conquest would yield citizenship. As Andrew Jackson put it in the aftermath of his conquest of the Creek: “The wealth and strength of a country are its population, and the best part of the population are cultivators of the soil. Independent farmers are everywhere the basis of society, and the true friends of liberty.” The “true policy” of the United States, he continued, was to sell the lands of the Creek (and of other conquered peoples) “in limited packages at a price barely sufficient to reimburse to the United States the expense of the present system.”⁵³ The market would turn Indian lands into white farms and conquest into cultivation: empire into equality.

“So wise, so beautiful, so perfect a system was never adopted by any government or nation on earth,” wrote one of the overseers of the Land Office of the process by which the landscape of the Mississippi Valley was surveyed, mapped, and offered for sale.⁵⁴ Administering this vast domain for the cultivation of independent and equal white men was the central business of federal governance in the 1830s. From the vantage point of Washington, D.C., the

problem of the administration of federal lands was a problem of legibility—of creating a system that made it possible to read the landscape and make decisions about it at a distance of hundreds, even thousands, of miles. The tools used to accomplish this task were those of the surveyor: the theodolites they used to project perpendicular corners and straight lines onto the uneven surface of the earth; the chains they used to measure the land into sections; the scaled rulers and protractors they used to draw their maps; the perforated templates they used to draw the outlines of imaginary towns onto maps of land that had not yet been sold.⁵⁵ The surveyors tracked their way across all of the hundreds of millions of acres in the lower Mississippi in the first half of the nineteenth century, laying them out in rectangular grids (still visible from the sky today) of 640-acre sections and then subdividing them into the 160-acre quarter-sections which were the standard unit of sale in Land Office auctions.

Surveyors were paid by the mile, and their task was difficult. They worked their way across the landscape, marking boundary lines and making detailed notes about the land those boundaries contained: “Each surveyor shall note in his field book the true situation of all mines, salt licks, salt springs, and mill seats which shall come to his knowledge; all water courses over which the line he runs shall pass, and also the quality of the lands,” read the legal guidelines defining their work.⁵⁶ The surveyors hired small parties of men to help them blaze trails through the woods, cut pathways to project their lines and run their measuring chains, and to forage and hunt for food. Sometimes they faced attack from “banditti,” or squatters fearful that the Land Office would turn them off their holdings.⁵⁷ “None but men as hard as a Savage who is always at home in Woods and Swamps can live upon what they afford . . . can travel for Days up to the knees in mud & mire, can drink any fluids he finds while he is drenched with water also . . . can make anything by surveying the type of Country we have to Survey,” wrote one Land Office supervisor in a sentence which both suggested the proximity of surveying to racial conquest and emphasized the labor involved in turning the landscape into a map—the materiality of the process of abstraction.⁵⁸

The surveyors’ field notes were transcribed at the district office, where they also served as the basis for maps that were sent on to the General Land Office in Washington, D.C. There, the maps were coordinated into huge offerings of land—tens, even hundreds of millions of acres at a time authorized for sale

through auctions held at the district office. The work of the Land Office was to make the concrete landscape abstract: to turn *this* salt lick into *a* salt lick; to turn a trail blazed through the woods into field notes in a field book; to turn the surveyors' recorded experience into maps to be sent to Washington; to turn those maps into an "offering," which could be represented in the space of several printed pages, and then circulated to potential buyers, wherever they were. The business of the land office was to translate the practical knowledge of the surveyor into the abstract knowledge of the investor, to refashion the particularity of the landscape into terms susceptible of generalization and comparison, to make the land legible—and salable—at a distance.

The process generated an enormous amount of clerical labor. If surveyors represented the advance guard of capitalist transformation, they preceded an army of clerks producing maps, registering claims, overseeing the payments, and engaging in countless other tasks while struggling to keep pace with mounting responsibilities. Despite their labors, the boom years of 1831–1835 brought a sort of bureaucratic apocalypse to the district land offices of the Mississippi Valley. In Mississippi, a few beleaguered clerks were dwarfed by towering stacks of field notes, and planned sales were repeatedly postponed; in Arkansas, an overwhelmed and dismissed Surveyor General left behind him more than 5,000 miles' worth of unprocessed reports, more than twice the length of the Mississippi River itself. Despite spending much of December 1832 personally signing land patents, President Andrew Jackson soon fell so far behind that he convinced Congress to appropriate money to pay a full-time clerk with the sole responsibility of signing the president's name to land patents.⁵⁹

The rectangular grid expressed the sovereignty of the United States of America over the landscape of the Mississippi Valley.⁶⁰ It made the Mississippi Valley measurable, governable, and salable. It transformed territory into property. And it touched off the greatest economic boom in the history of the United States to that point. In the aftermath of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, capital flowed into the Lower Mississippi Valley. Global capital investment translated into easy money in the Mississippi Valley. Mushroom banks—quickly chartered, lightly capitalized, virtually unregulated—flourished in the state of Mississippi during what came to be known as "the flush times." Because banks in Mississippi were not re-

strained by any effectual laws requiring them to maintain a reasonable ratio of specie (gold and silver coinage) to banknotes, the Valley of the 1830s was awash in paper money: banks provided credit by printing money. "The State banks were issuing their bills by the sheet," wrote Joseph Baldwin, "like a patent steam printing-press; and no other showing was asked of the applicant for the loan than an authentication of his great distress for money."⁶¹ Where money was cheap, everything else was expensive. Baldwin continued: "Under this stimulating process prices rose like smoke. Lots in obscure villages were held at city prices; lands, bought at the minimum cost of government, were sold at from thirty to forty dollars per acre, and considered dirt cheap at that."⁶² Carried along by a floodtide of money, the "empire for liberty" was transformed into a frontier of accumulation.

Despite the tidy order of the gridded maps on display at the General Land Office in Washington, D.C., the lived landscape of the Mississippi Valley was a palimpsest of prior, conflicting claims. Spanish, French, and British land titles were interspersed and overlaid amid military land bounties of as-yet-unsurveyed land provided by various states to their soldiers. Exclusive title rights, traded to those among the Choctaw who were willing to sign away the common claims of their people in the "Treaty" of Dancing Rabbit Creek, gave these unscrupulous few the right to allotment claims, which were to be located before the land was put on sale. Lively markets soon developed in both sorts of prior claims. The history of the military conquest of the Mississippi Valley was thus converted into speculative property.

The laws governing the Land Office had built into them a set of mechanisms that were supposed to insulate the sort of smallholding yeomen farmers at the heart of the Jeffersonian vision from the upward pressure on the price of land caused by the flow of capital into the Mississippi Valley. Termed "preemption" laws, and passed by the United States Congress in 1828, 1830, and 1832, these laws allowed people who were living on land they had "improved" to buy land at the prescribed minimum prices (\$1.25 an acre) in advance of the public sale. Settlers making preemption claims were given one year to pay off their purchase; otherwise the government foreclosed on their land, benefiting from their improvements in the process. Squatting, improving, and preempting was undoubtedly the best way for poor white men to fulfill their own Jeffersonian aspirations. But it also provided several loopholes, which allowed

the value of land to skyrocket yet did not provide any corresponding increase in the value of white labor. Capital, it turned out, could increase the value of land more quickly than that of labor.

The existing unevenness of the land confounded the orderly logic of the rectilinear survey. To begin with, the material improvement made by the first generation of white squatters almost necessarily overlapped the rectangular grid laid down by the surveyors. Further, the administrative lag between the time at which the land was surveyed and the time it was offered for sale provided settlers with a chance to establish themselves on land, begin improving it, and file adventitious claims for preemptive registration. In order to adjust the pattern of settling to the pattern of surveying, the Land Office bought squatters out of their improvements by providing them with “floating” land grants, which could be used to claim any surveyed quarter-section in the district before it went on sale. A brisk market sprang up in preempted quarter-sections. Depending on how many claimants had made prior improvements to a given piece of land, one surveyed quarter-section might produce up to four compensatory quarter-section grants. Termed “floats,” these grants could be located anywhere in the district before the land was put up for auction. For poor farmers who faced the prospect of losing everything if they could not pay off their claim at the end of the year, selling out their claim made sense, and a lively market in preemption claims immediately developed in Mississippi. Speculators bought up “floats” and located them according to the contours of predicted development—along rivers and existing roads, on the outskirts of growing towns, in a checkerboard pattern that hedged in other development on rich land. Though the law was intended “to favor the poor people,” surveyor Gideon Fitz wrote, “it is a fact that the rich are the persons benefited in the end, because the poor cannot pay for their land, and all they can do is sell their claims and remove to some other place.”⁶³ Preemption law, intended to establish an equilibrium between the purposes of the “empire for liberty” and the processes of the land market, instead became a frontier of accumulation—all before the land was actually put up for sale. As the British traveler Arthur Cunynghame put it, “The laws perhaps ensue, rather than operate against, the very system they are meant to check.”⁶⁴

The simplest way to game the preemption process was to use capital to command labor. With just a little bit of collusion in the Land Office, a given specu-

lator could use any number of names to register any number of preemption claims. "It is represented," wrote the secretary of the treasury to the commissioner of the General Land Office about rumors originating in the Mississippi Valley, "that associations of men are engaged in speculating in the purchase of floating rights under the late pre-emption law and . . . much valuable land in Louisiana is thus engrossed & that these rights are multiplied by the recognition of separate pre-emption rights in the parents children & hired men of each family & fictitious persons."⁶⁵ In order to be patented, the land represented in these fraudulent claims had to be improved within a year's time of registration, materially transformed before its ownership could be finally recorded on the map in the District Office. Here, again, privilege presided over preemption. "It is a fact," wrote the chief surveyor in the Mississippi District, "that many of the very wealthy inhabitants send overseers & slaves or hire men to make improvements on the most choice places for the purpose of getting pre-emption."⁶⁶ The standard measures that were built into the law—one year's labor, 160 acres of land, \$1.25 an acre—were deranged by the ability of capital to command labor. Preemption law assumed that labor could be used as the limiting condition of the land market: no (white) man would be allowed to purchase more land than he could improve. But the ability of some (white) men to purchase the labor of others, and, still more, to purchase black slaves to improve the land for them, made a mockery of the equivalence of land and labor upon which the law was based.

Preemption law was intended to rationalize the privatization of public lands, temporally, spatially, and racially; it was intended to bring past settlement up to date with present sale, to provide a new Year Zero for property holding in the Mississippi Valley and beyond by allowing squatters to buy their own land; it was intended to mesh the existing condition of the unevenly settled land with the rectilinear survey by providing floating grants that could be located only within the emergent grid of settlement; it was intended to protect the value of white labor by providing a mechanism by which it could be converted into land ownership at fixed rate of exchange. In the end, it did none of these things. Preemption, intended as the mechanism that would finalize the conversion of conquered lands into a yeoman's republic, was diluted into meaninglessness by the flood of capital into the Mississippi Valley.

If preemption was intended to smooth the historical and sociological un-

evenness of the landscape into the emergent zero point of the land market, the land auction was supposed to do the same for geographic and ecological unevenness. The 160-acre sections of the Land Office were the containers by which the landscape was transformed into a commodity—containers that could be used to make a comparison between the loamy fertile soil of the Mississippi Delta and the barren sandy soil of the piney woods, or between open prairie land and uninhabitable swamp; between land with ready access to roads, rivers, and markets and land likely to remain isolated even amid the flood tide of economic development; between a sure thing, a calculated risk, and a shot in the dark. The land auction was a mechanism by which aspiration, information, and speculation were given a value (the per-acre price a bidder was willing to pay for a given quarter-section) that could be used to distribute slices of the public domain of the United States to its most deserving, or at least most desirous, citizens. Well, at least in theory that's what it was.

In the early years of the boom, auctions generated a great deal of fanfare. Advertised months in advance, they drew huge crowds to the administrative outposts of the Land Office. Even so, they proved insufficient to meet the apparently insatiable appetite for land. In the event, most of the business in the land market ended up being conducted outside its premises. Speculators organized syndicates and sent advance men known as “land hunters” to follow the surveyors through the woods and gather inside information about the land. In the early years, squatters and smallholders stood some chance against speculators. “It is very evident to me that no gentleman would be safe in that District who would bid for, or purchase, any of those squatters’ settlements,” wrote the commissioner of the Land Office about Mississippi’s Pearl River District in 1815.⁶⁷ But by the boomtime, speculators had begun to organize themselves into companies, hire their own thugs to suppress competing claims, and agree in advance upon limits to the prices to be offered at the government sales. Often land was purchased at the legal minimum from the government and then immediately resold within sight of the district Land Office at a substantial markup.⁶⁸ The flow of capital into the Mississippi Valley transferred title of the “empire for liberty” to the speculators.

But it was the labor of black slaves that made the dream of the speculators into the material reality of the Cotton Kingdom. By and large, the slaves who remade the Valley were brought there from the East, perhaps as many as a mil-

lion of them in the years 1820–1860, about a third of whom were brought west with their masters as parts of intact plantation relocations, the other two-thirds of whom were traded through a set of speculations that was quickly formalized into the “domestic slave trade.” The “slave trade” had its roots in the ventures of dozens of independent speculators who bought lots of ten or so slaves, generally on credit, in Upper-South states like Virginia and Maryland. They then walked them southward, after binding them wrist to wrist in a “coffle,” to the emerging regions of the Lower South—first Georgia and later Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama—selling slaves as they went. As it became clear that there was a great deal of money to be made in buying, transporting, and reselling slaves, a set of highly organized firms emerged to compete with the foot-loose speculators. These firms maintained offices, complete with high-walled jails that could house as many as a hundred slaves at a time, large yards where the human property could be exercised, and showrooms where interested buyers could question and examine the people they hoped to purchase, at both ends of the trade. The large firms employed salaried agents who haunted estate sales and county jails at the north end of the trade, hoping to pick up slaves on the cheap who could later be sold for premium prices in the urban markets of the Lower South.⁶⁹

In order to make sure that they could count on a price differential sufficient to justify the effort and expense of dragging as many as a hundred unwilling and potentially rebellious slaves on a weeks-long journey across the backcountry or on a lonely sea journey around the Atlantic coast, the larger firms and even simpler two-person partnerships mailed one another frequent reports on the condition of the slave market at either end of the trade. These reports formalized a system of grading slaves—“Extra Men, No. 1 Men, Second Rate or Ordinary Men, Extra Girls, No. 1 Girls, Second Rate or Ordinary Girls,” and so on—which allowed them to abstract the physical differences between all kinds of human bodies into a single scale of comparison based on the price they thought a given person would bring in a given market. By 1820, the daily practice of slave traders—gathering information about the economy by inquiring into the price of cotton in New Orleans, New York, and Liverpool and the price of slaves in the Upper and Lower South, comparing them, and making a bet about whether the “market” would rise or fall—was sufficiently developed to ensure that slave prices in Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans

would track both one another and the price of cotton (and to a lesser degree that of sugar) with a remarkable degree of precision. The daily practice of the slave trade, shipping slaves from one region of the South to another and sending information back and forth about how much they cost, knit a territory that stretched from Louisiana to Maryland into a single slave economy. It was held together not by its devotion to a certain crop (for the crop culture of Virginia was, as slaves traded southward were the first to note, radically different from that of Louisiana), or by a shared mode of production (for slave prices in Richmond tracked only those in New Orleans, ignoring those in Havana or Rio), but by the territorially bounded slave market that Congress had established in 1808.⁷⁰

The “domestic” slave trade, however, was never just that, for the price of Southern cotton that the price of slaves so surely tracked was, as every planter was repeatedly told by every factor, set by the prices that cotton buyers in markets as distant as New York and Liverpool were willing to pay. The value of the ground beneath the feet of the new white inhabitants of the Mississippi Valley, as well as that of the slaves whom they drove westward and then out into the fields every morning, pitched and rolled in response to the rhythm of distant exchanges.

WHAT HELD these regional, national, and international economies together over space and across time was money. The abstract scale of dollar values allowed business to take place in a space not strictly delimited by the physical properties of the thing being traded. The value of a barrel of salt pork, which would go bad if it sat on the levee waiting for the crop to come in, could be noted and paid off in sugar when it finally did; the value of a young woman in Virginia in May might be compared to that of an old man in Louisiana in September, although their bodies were distant in time and space, and distinct in physical proportion and capacity; the value of either might be compared to a bale of cotton in Liverpool in January, a barrel of sugar in New York in June, or a plot of land that was for sale down the road two days hence. Yet money sometimes moved while things stood still: the ownership of a bale of cotton in a warehouse in New Orleans or a descendant’s claim to a particular slave in a share of an estate on the Red River, for example, might be transferred several

times, although the actual bale of cotton or the actual slave was never carried away. Nothing in this economy moved without money.⁷¹ The real problem, it sometimes turned out, was moving the money.

Because the dimensions of their economy outstripped the available technologies for gathering and sharing information, those who bought or sold cotton or sugar or slaves could not simply have funds transferred by depositing them in one bank and having them readily available for withdrawal at another bank miles away.⁷² They had to find ways to move money in its physical form—metal or paper—from where it was to where it needed to be. In terms of commercial complexity, the easiest form in which to move money was specie, which ensured negotiability at par in every corner of the transoceanic economy. Specie, of course, presented its own problems. It was everywhere scarce, nowhere more so than in the Mississippi Valley. And even when specie could be had, the very physical properties which made it so attractive to antebellum political economists—its luster, its density, and its malleability—made it a liability to those who would carry much of it very far.⁷³ The physical substance that most often linked Valley slaveholders to regional, national, and international networks of trade, profit, and purchasing was paper.

No one in the antebellum economy, of course, thought that pieces of paper were inherently valuable—they were representations of value, or, more specifically, of debt. Most simply, there were banknotes: printed markers of an amount of money that was notionally deposited in the bank whose name was on their face—the Merchant's Bank of Philadelphia, the Farmer's Bank of Tennessee, the Citizen's Bank of Louisiana. These banknotes circulated far and wide in the antebellum economy, usually trading at a discount of between 1 and 10 percent, based on how much information about their bank of origin existed at the point where they were being exchanged. These discounts were a shorthand way of answering a set of questions about the representational value of a piece of paper with a printed picture on the front: Did the Farmer's Bank of Tennessee really exist? Could its unknown managers be counted on to maintain a sufficient reserve of deposits in order to redeem the notes they had issued? How much trouble would it be to get someone to accept a note that carried with it these uncertainties, or, alternatively, to turn up on the bank's doorstep and demand the value in specie represented on the face of its notes?

In the settled commercial cultures of the Northeast, many of these were questions that had long been settled; but in the land of the “wildcat” bankers of the Southwest, they pressed in upon every transaction.⁷⁴

Even more difficult to exchange were promissory notes. These were simple promises to pay scripted out by the parties to a transaction on a scrap of paper—what you or I would call an IOU. In a specie-scarce economy, these promises to pay frequently circulated as a form of money, passed from buyer to seller in a series of transactions that can be followed by the successive signatures scrawled on the back of the original note. Unlike banknotes, these notes were termed “obligations,” due at a point in the future stipulated on the front of the note (usually three to twelve months), and generally carried interest based on the term of the note (a note payable “at 6 percent in twelve months’ time” would pay \$1.06 on the loaned dollar when it came due). In many cases, sympathetic creditors would renew the notes they were holding at the end of the term for another three to twelve months, allowing debtors another chance to raise the money to pay the note.

As they migrated further and further from the original exchange of goods or services represented on the front of the sheet, these notes, too, traded at a discount. In the case of promissory notes, that discount reflected questions about both the parties to the note and its ultimate legal standing as a negotiable instrument. Could the third party (or fourth or fifth) to a distant transaction be sure that the original debtor was still alive, still at the same address, and still good for the debt? Indeed, could parties along the line even be sure that the people whose names headed the succession of debts really existed in the first place? And even assuming all of those things were true, could the person who ended up with the note be sure that the parties to the original transaction had understood that the note was negotiable and would honor it when it made its way backward along the chain of debt that linked them to one another? What if, for example, Poor Farmer A had assumed that the note he was signing in exchange for the cotton seeds he got from Rich Planter B was, like all the notes he had received from his good friend down the road in the past, going to be rolled over to the following year if the crop failed and he had no money to pay the note when, legally speaking, it came due? And what if, when Big-City Note Broker C (or his local agent, D) turned up on his doorstep, claiming that Rich Planter B had sold the note to him and demanding Poor Farmer A’s mule

and his plow in lieu of the cash he knew that the farmer did not have, Poor Farmer A was instead able to present him with a decision from a sympathetic judge who had ruled in an earlier case that notes like the one he had given to Rich Planter B were not negotiable in the first place?⁷⁵

These recombinant spirals of exchange, credit, and speculation had their material correlate in the physical transformation of the Mississippi Valley. What had been, at the end of the eighteenth century, a woodland characterized by a decentralized frontier exchange economy—Indian venison and deerskins for European metal goods, alcohol, and firearms—was, by the second quarter of the nineteenth century, emerging as one of the greatest staple-crop exporting regions in the world.⁷⁶

From the perspective of Thomas Jefferson, life along the cotton frontier must have seemed to possess a certain clarity. There was first the idea of national sovereignty—the idea that this was an American space and would thus be governed by the culturally dominant norms of the American nation-space, most notably by the laws and practices governing slavery, the land market, and the money market. Those laws and practices were reflected in another set of abstractions: the division of the land into forty-acre plots, which abstracted it from its own physical properties by turning it into a set of fungible commodities. Then there was the compression of the infinite variety of human types into a handy set of categories by which the slave traders did their business. Lastly, there was the imaginative transformation of metal and paper into the physical vehicles of a scale of values which could be used to compare the plats of land and the bodies of slaves to all manner of other goods. If you took them at face value, this nested set of abstractions provided a pretty good guide to getting along in the Mississippi Valley. But if you looked more closely, you would see that each abstraction stood at odds with the physical properties of the object it sought to represent. Fissioning the fictions that held them together could be explosive.

2

The Panic of 1835

It was the heyday of the *nouveau riche*, and a life of careless extravagance reigned among the masters. . . . And yet with all this there was something sordid, something forced—a certain feverish unrest and recklessness; for was not all this show and tinsel built upon a groan?

—W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of the Black Belt”

Amid the trees in the dim morning twilight he watched their shadows dancing and heard their horses thundering towards him, until at last they came sweeping like a storm, and he saw in front that haggard white haired man, whose eyes flashed red with fury. Oh how he pitied him—pitied him—and wondered if he had coiled the twisting rope. Then, as the storm burst round him, he rose slowly to his feet and turned his closed eyes toward the Sea. And the world whistled in his ears.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of the Coming of John”

THE LITTLE TOWN in central Mississippi where the killing started no longer exists. It's been overrun by the strip malls and suburban developments that make today's Mississippi, in spite of its dark history, look like so much of the rest of the United States. Yet there are reminders of the time—the first time, though not the last—when the lawless brutality of Mississippi's ruling class transfixed the nation: the moss-shrouded trees lining the sluggish, muddy streams; the vast shimmering fields that in 1835 were the most valuable land on earth; the antebellum houses that were lighted all night that summer, fortified against the very slaves who had built and maintained them; and the hard white heat of the Gulf South sun. By the time it finally happened, there had been weeks of rumors about a planned slave revolt—fear hanging in the fish-bellied

sky that finally burst with the cathartic violence of a summer storm. But what happened in the end was less a revolt than a pogrom, a preemptive strike against a conspiracy that may never have existed and that left at least sixteen slaves and seven whites dead, their backs scored by torture before their necks were snapped and their legs left quivering at the end of the gallows' arc.

What happened in Mississippi that summer was not the sort of history that Thomas Jefferson had imagined when he had secured the nation's Western frontier with the purchase of the vast Territory of Louisiana in 1803. In his moments of brightest optimism, Jefferson had hoped to turn the Mississippi River Valley into a republican Arcadia populated by self-sufficient yeomen—a vast domain of patriarchal household order and noncommercial white-male equality. And in his moments of darkest pragmatism, Jefferson had imagined the Valley as a destination for the surplus population of black slaves whom he had increasingly come to see as an insurrectionary threat to American liberty—a vast dumping ground over which a dangerous slave population might be spread so thinly that it would eventually disappear into the fruitful harvest of republican liberty. But a future such as this—with slaveholders patrolling the night against an army of slaves they thought outnumbered them fifty to one, lynch mobs closing the courts and arrogating their authority, broken bodies, black and white, swinging side by side from the gallows in the summer sun—was not what Jefferson had imagined.

THE COMPRESSED energy of the contradictions between the vision of social order promised by Jefferson's "empire for liberty" and that represented by the emergent shape of the Cotton Kingdom exploded into large-scale violence in Madison County, Mississippi, in the summer of 1835. Madison County had been carved out of the Choctaw land cessions of 1820 and 1830, sitting on the eastern side of the Big Black River, a tributary connecting the county to the Mississippi system. By 1835, the county was in the midst of a furious transformation from a frontier exchange economy to a boomtime cotton economy. In the five years leading up to the violence in the summer of 1835, the number of slaves in the county had more than doubled, vastly outstripping the growth of the white population.¹ It is perhaps not too much to say that when things started to go wrong that summer, the county was sitting on the leading edge of the international cotton market.

By the time anyone in Madison County wrote anything down, at least twenty-three people were already dead. And because they had been executed not by the State of Mississippi, but by a committee of citizens “unclothed with the forms of law,” those who had taken the law into their own hands felt compelled to justify themselves in a pamphlet addressed to “their fellow citizens.” We must, then, read carefully, for the only account of the event we have was an effort to reweave dozens of interrogations and executions unrestrained by law into a story of the orderly unfolding of justice—or, as the pamphlet itself put it, “due deliberation and an earnest desire to find out the truth.”² Given that their actions had been described and questioned in newspaper dispatches that were read and recirculated nationwide and because they were themselves conceivably facing murder charges in the cases of at least the seven whites they had put to death, we can only assume that they tried to tell a good story—one that would make the rest of the world see things the way they saw them.

What they said they saw and heard was this. From the middle of June, people in Madison had been hearing rumors that an insurrection was being planned among their slaves. After about two weeks, it seemed clear to “a group of gentlemen” in the town of Livingston that the rumor had begun with a white “lady” who lived at Beatie’s Bluff, a small settlement about nine miles up the Big Black. A group of men from Livingston went up to hear her story, and she told them that at some point that summer the behavior of her “house servants” had begun to change. They had become insolent and disobedient; they talked about her within her hearing; and she “saw them engaged in secret conversation when they ought to have been engaged at their business.” So she decided to spy on them—“scrutinize their conduct more closely” was the way the pamphlet put it—and her fears were confirmed. She heard one of them say that “she wished to God it was all over and done with; that she was tired of waiting on the *white folks*, and wanted to be her own mistress the balance of her days, and clean up her own house.” Soon afterward, the lady heard another secret conversation, this time carried on between one of her female slaves and a man who belonged to one of her neighbors. They spoke in a tone so hushed that the words barely registered in her straining ear. “Is it not a pity to kill such . . . ,” the slave began, and after that the lady could hear no more. The man’s reply was clear enough. He said, “It was, but it must be done.” That night, the lady told her son about what she had overheard. He went and told

the enslaved woman that he knew something about what she had been saying and “that she *must* tell it.” “Without hesitation or punishment,” she told him that what she had said was, “‘Is it not a pity to kill such a pretty little creature as this?’ having reference to a child she then held in her arms.” She went on to say that the man with whom she had been caught in conversation had been telling her that there was going to be a “rising of the black people soon and they intended killing all the whites.”³ That was enough information for the group of white men who had traveled up from Livingston. On June 27, “at a large and respectable meeting of citizens” held in Livingston, the assembled white men agreed to set up a system of patrols and committees of investigation that would reconvene in three days’ time to report if anything new had been discovered.

Once the committees of investigation took to the roads, evidence of a conspiracy among the slaves in Madison quickly began to mount. A slaveholder named William Johnson enlisted his driver to investigate the slaves on his plantation and soon returned to the citizens’ meeting with the news that an old man on his plantation had heard there would be an uprising and knew that a slave named Peter, who belonged to Ruel Blake, had plans to break into a store to get gunpowder and shot. It was later determined by the committee that Peter had recently “assisted in unloading wagons at the store, and that he had asked what was in the kegs when he was carrying them in.” The old man who had implicated Peter was then brought into town and interrogated by the assembled committee. After at first denying that he had ever said anything about Peter or gunpowder or shot, and then receiving “a most severe chastisement,” the old man “confirmed in every particular the statement” and implicated another slave, a man belonging to Thomas Hudnold whose name was never recorded by the committee. When they went to fetch Hudnold’s slave in the field where he was working, he ran off, and though he was “run by *track-dogs* some two hours,” he escaped by “taking to water.” It was agreed by “the citizens” that he was “a desperate villain” who had “been a terror to the neighborhood for some years,” and when several weeks later he was “decoyed into Livingston,” he was taken directly to the gallows and hanged after confessing his guilt and saying that it had been Ruel Blake himself who had told him of the insurrection “when Blake and he were in a swamp getting out gin-timber.” Blake, he said, had given him five dollars and told him he would be “one of the

captains of the Negroes, &c.” if he promised he would join.⁴ But as the unnamed slaves standing on the steps of the gallows surely knew, it was too late for Blake to be held responsible for whatever he had done in the swamp that day. By that time, Ruel Blake was already dead.

The bloody strand of confessions, accusations, and executions that began with a conversation between slaves half-overheard by a worried old woman at Beatie’s Bluff, and that brought to light a hidden proposal made by a white man in the woods, traces out the process by which the presumptions of social and spatial order upon which the Cotton Kingdom was founded were undermined by the fear of racial insurrection that shadowed its development at every step. Once it was suspected that slaves might conspire with white men, scenes that had once seemed to reflect a sense of order—a slave unloading a wagon at the center of town, a black woman lulling a white baby to sleep—suddenly became images of horrible disorder. Once that happened, all bets were off. The duration of the violence in Madison County would be determined solely by the length of time that the county’s “citizens” were willing to keep torturing out confessions and murdering those they implicated.

The line of investigation being pursued by the committee in Livingston was abruptly cut short by the actions of a mob. On the night of July 2, the two slaves who had thus far been implicated were seized from the jail and lynched. But by that time, things had begun to heat up at nearby Beatie’s Bluff. The leader of the citizens’ committee there, Jesse Mabry, heard that James Lee (“a very close observer of men, both black and white”) had been spying on an enslaved blacksmith named Joe and a “preacher” (also a slave) named Weaver, and had heard them say things which “confirmed his suspicions.” Mabry shared with the committee his suspicion that one of his own slaves—“a great scoundrel”—must have been in on the plot; and knowing that the slave had been in Joe’s shop recently, the committee members conceived a plan for making certain of what they thought they already knew. They sought out Joe in his shop, where Mabry, upon entering, addressed him in the following terms: “Do you know who we are?” When the slave responded that he knew the two other men, but not Mabry, the slaveholder contradicted him. “I immediately insisted that he did know me and continued to look him full in the face for some minutes, until he began to tremble. When I saw this I asked him if he knew Sam.” Joe admitted that he did know the fellow named Sam and had

spoken with him recently, yet insisted that nothing had passed between them other than “what was usual when fellow-servants meet.” “We then,” Mabry continued—and remember, this is in a document meant to show that the slaveholders proceeded with care and deliberation—“called for a rope, and tied his hands and told him we were in possession of some of their conversation and he should tell the whole of it.”⁵

Joe began to talk. He said that there were several white men “actively engaged in the business”; he named Ruel Blake, Joshua Cotton, and William Saunders, which might have seemed like a remarkable revelation to the white men in Beatie’s Bluff, but wouldn’t have surprised anyone in Livingston, where Blake had been implicated the day before, Cotton had been arrested that morning, and William Saunders had disappeared. He also—in answer to what type of question, we will never know—said that Weaver was involved, as well as another preacher named Russell, and Sam. And he said that the plan was to begin with the conspirators massacring their owners with axes and hoes. They would proceed to Beatie’s Bluff, break into a storehouse that held arms and ammunition, then march on Livingston, and then Vernon, and then Clinton, sacking and recruiting all the way to Natchez, where they would kill everybody and rob the banks, before retiring to “a place called *The Devil’s Punch Bowl*.” Weaver, brought in as Joe talked, said that Joe was lying. When he refused to say anything more than that, he was beaten and “put in confinement,” while Joe was allowed, for the moment, to go free (and presumably to tell everyone he knew what had happened between him and the committee). Russell, brought before the committee sometime after Joe had been freed, also denied knowing anything. “Mr. Lee at this time struck him twice,” and Russell made a statement that was, “in all particulars, precisely like the one made by Joe.”

The next morning an enslaved man named Jim was brought before the committee, and, Mabry reported, “at length he agreed that if I would not punish him any more he would make a full confession.” Jim’s story was very much like the one told the previous day by Joe, although he implicated several more slaves, as well as a white man named Angus Donovan and another named Moss, both of whom were standing nearby as he was interrogated. Jim also added a detail that seemingly expressed the worst fears (and most lurid fantasies) of the men who were standing over him with a lash. He told them that the slaves had planned to kill all the whites “except some of the most beautiful

women whom they had intended to keep as their wives.” He went on to say—someone must have pressured him to say—“that he had already picked one for himself.”⁶ Jim, like all of the others who were brought before the committee at Beatie’s Bluff (five in all), was hung on the afternoon of July 2.

On and on the interrogators went, in an endless feedback loop of their own suspicions: asking the slaves questions based upon information that everyone involved knew might just as well have been produced by the investigation as discovered by it; acting as if the slaves’ information network—which they claimed had been so effective in spreading the news of a massive plot—had ceased functioning the moment that the people they brought before their committee started making statements; torturing anybody who failed to go along with the game. Upon finding that (*mirabile dictu!*) the same questions kept producing the same answers, the committee in Livingston passed a set of resolutions, appointed a thirteen-man jury, and began hanging people on the morning of July 4. The pamphlet later published by the Livingston slaveholders contains no record of the trials of the dozen or so slaves they hung during the next several days, but it contains a detailed account of the evidence against each of the seven white men they put to death. The trials of the slaves were noteworthy for these “citizens” only insofar as they led to the trials of a group of white men—a group of men whom, it appears, they had been watching for quite some time.

THE COMMITTEE began with Joshua Cotton. A native of New England who had lived in western Tennessee before settling near the Land Office in neighboring Hinds County, Cotton had recently arrived in Livingston, where he set up shop as a Thompsonian “steam doctor,” an entrepreneurial healer using steam and herb baths to treat everything from gout to consumption (the system had been founded by Samuel Thompson of New Hampshire). There was a lot of evidence taken against Cotton, all of which circled back to a peculiar pastime. Cotton, it seemed, was always “hunting horses,” following them as they tracked a path across the surveyed property lines, wooden fences, and plowed fields that marked out the emergent pattern of land tenure in Mississippi. Cotton, that is, moved through the landscape in a way that accorded more with the customs of the frontier exchange economy than with those of the cotton boom. There were reports of seeing him “skulking around the plan-

tations” near Livingston, near Vernon, and near Beatie’s Bluff. At another moment he might have just looked like a poor man trying to gain a stake by raising a set of animals for whom he did not have any land.⁷

But in the summer of 1835, he looked sinister. His erstwhile partner in steam doctoring, William Saunders, thought he knew the reason that Cotton would suddenly materialize in the middle of another man’s farm and then melt away into the forest at its edge. Cotton, Saunders said, had been trying to steal slaves in partnership with a man named Boyd. To provide himself with a cover, he had purchased a number of “Spanish horses,” which he intentionally turned loose so that he might have a chance to talk to the slaves and “instill rebellious notions among them” in a way that “he could not do by being a steam-doctor” (like, say, Saunders himself). A slave seized after the executions at Beatie’s Bluff confirmed Saunders’s account, saying he had been hunting horses at the end of May when he ran into Cotton, who claimed to be doing the same. Cotton had started asking him questions: Was his master a bad man? Were the slaves whipped too much? Would they like to be free? And then he had done something no white person in Mississippi would ever do: he had offered the slave a swig of whisky “and made him *drink first*.” Cotton had then “told him his plan for liberating the Negroes &c.” Brought into a room where six or seven white men were chained and surrounded by a crowd, the slave from Beatie’s Bluff pointed at Cotton and exclaimed, “That is the man who talked with me in the prairie.” “Cotton,” the committee’s pamphlet reported, “looked thunderstruck and came near fainting on hearing the annunciation of the boy.” And then he began to talk.⁸

The first man he named was William Saunders. Saunders, the committee recalled, had recently relocated from Madison to neighboring Hinds County, and in the months since had moved through the landscape in a way that had caught the attention of his new landlord. “He would often be out all night and never could give satisfactory explanations for so doing,” the landlord apparently testified. And not only that: “The gentleman afterwards ascertained that while at his house and without any reasons therefor, he was often seen not only in remote parts of Hinds, but also in Madison and Yazoo counties.” In addition to having been seen out late and away from home—that is, moving differently from the way prosperous white people moved—Saunders was doubly suspect because he knew Cotton. He had, the committee cannily noted, apparently

known something of the plot, since he had known enough to try to pin it on Cotton. As they accused each other, Saunders and Cotton were sitting in the same room, each hearing what the other said and apparently repeating it in a hopelessly played version of the Prisoner's Dilemma.⁹ Saunders was executed on the fourth of July.

And so on. Each of the men named by Cotton seemed to have a fragmentary record of mysterious behavior, which folded out into a complete story once an accusation of conspiracy was placed at its end. For example, Albe Dean "was known to associate with Negroes, and would often come to the owners of runaways and intercede with their masters to save them from a whipping"; "he was seen prowling about the plantations . . . ostensibly for the purpose of inquiring for runaway horses, which he did with great particularity—sometimes inquiring for a black, bay, gray, or other color that suggested itself at the time"; "he acknowledged that he was in the swamp near Livingston when the notorious Boyd was *started* by the dogs." Dean was condemned to death on the morning of July 6, and was executed two days later.¹⁰

Also accused was Angus L. Donovan. "His deportment, some weeks previous to his arrest, was very suspicious, from his intimacy with the Negroes in the neighborhood, being suspected of trading with them"; his "conduct was so very extraordinary and suspicious . . . as to induce the citizens of the neighborhood to watch his movements"; "he was repeatedly found in the Negro cabins, enjoying himself in Negro society"; after the whippings at Beatie's Bluff had begun, "he was caught at the house where the discovery of the conspiracy was made, engaged in earnest conversation with the girls who divulged the plot"; "when he found he could not be present at the examination of the Negroes, he evinced considerable uneasiness, and kept walking to and fro." Donovan—alone among the suspected conspirators in Madison—was accused of being an "abolitionist." He was condemned to death on the morning of July 7 and died with Albe Dean.¹¹

Ruel Blake was the only slaveholder among those who were put to death. "He was of a cold, phlegmatic temperament, with a forbidding countenance; kept himself almost aloof from white society, but was often seen among Negroes"; as "he worked at his trade of gin-wright . . . he had opportunities of becoming acquainted with the Negroes on most of the large plantations in Madison"; when he was asked to whip the implicated Peter, he did so "in such

a manner as to convince everyone present that he did not wish to hurt him”; when someone else took over the lash, he “kept walking to and fro, each turn getting closer to his boy, until the boy commenced talking, when he could stand it no longer, and rushed through the crowd to where his Negro was, and swore if he was touched another lick, they would have to whip him first.” He was chased out of town, then tracked down in Vicksburg. As he walked to the gallows on the morning of July 10, “he protested his innocence to the last and said that his life was sworn away.”¹²

As Blake reminded the “immense concourse of people” who came to see him swung off into infinity, there was no way of knowing whether anything at all had really been happening in Madison County before the “committee of safety” started torturing slaves. The confessions were all coerced; the witnesses were all made aware of what had been sworn against them; the fury of the mob was so out of control that anyone who expressed doubts about the process might soon find himself its victim; and the pressure on a committee that had put at least sixteen slaves and seven white men to death without any pretense of a trial was so great, that the committee members might have said anything to make it seem as if they had done the right thing. So we will never know if Joshua Cotton was plotting a full-scale assault on Southern slavery, just trying to steal a few slaves, or simply tracking a bunch of horses that had a knack for repeatedly escaping. Nor will we ever know what was behind the appearances that the committee took as evidence of guilt: why William Saunders stayed out all night and kept popping up all over Mississippi, whether Angus Donovan really “enjoyed himself in Negro society,” or what Ruel Blake actually was worried about when he tried to keep his blacksmith—elsewhere described as “an old man”—from being beaten to death.

What we *can* tell from the pamphlet version of the *Proceedings at Livingston* is what made these white men seem so suspicious that they had all apparently been questioned about their activities, warned about their behavior, and subjected to further scrutiny long before the “proceedings” ever began. They have been described as “marginal” men “outside of social networks,” poor men who were not well known by their slaveholding neighbors.¹³ But the marginality and poverty of these men had a spatial correlate, one that both their slaveholding neighbors and the surrounding slaves seem to have noticed.¹⁴ Their “class position” was literally that—a position—and these men were al-

ways out of place. They were far from home in the dead of night; they were on other men's property without being in their company; they were out on the prairie chasing horses, in the swamp being flushed by dogs, or in the woods doing something they could quite never explain to the satisfaction of their slaveholding neighbors; they were in the slave quarters before the "proceedings" started, and in the way once they began. They were men who violated the emergent code of behavior that was written in straight-line fences, plowed fields, and open roads all across the Mississippi Valley—landless white men in a landscape being remade by black slavery and private property. As the "empire for liberty" became the Cotton Kingdom, they were woefully out of place.

This is not to say that they were primitive rebels fighting for safety-first agriculture, yeoman-style republicanism, and a way back to a time before capitalism, if such a time could even be imagined by a white man in the Mississippi Valley. Just as the residual landscape they—so obviously, so balefully, and so fatally—inhabited was itself a product of the uneven pattern of speculation and settlement on the cotton frontier, their own presence in that landscape was a reflection of the transformation under way in the Mississippi Valley. Their aspirations—whether they were ultimately about steam doctoring, horse trading, slave stealing, arming the slaves, or robbing banks—were a mirror image of the bubbles of hope that floated the cotton boom.

The stories told about the men's territorial trespasses were also stories about racial transgression. They were accused of being men who talked with and traded with slaves; just as they repeatedly violated the cotton-boom landscape's spatial etiquette, these men violated its code of proper racial behavior. But talking and trading were really the least of it. Just as arresting as the image of Joshua Cotton out on the prairie when he should have been minding the store was the image of Cotton offering his bottle to a black man and then drinking from it himself. And the picture of Angus Donovan trying to insert himself into the interrogations of the slaves at Beatie's Bluff was clearly linked in the minds of his accusers to the sight of him mooning around the slave quarters, enjoying himself and talking with "the girls." A white man who would speak of "liberating the Negroes" with a slave's saliva still wet on his lips, another who preferred the company of black women to that of the wife he had left behind in Kentucky—the actions of these men called into question

their racial integrity.¹⁵ As Henry Foote, a future governor of Mississippi, reported saying to Donovan at the time: “Were you to witness a bloody conflict between the slaves of this country and the white people, on which side would you be?”¹⁶

THE EXECUTION of a number of white men in the first several days of July concluded what had begun at the end of June as a fear of a slave revolt. The *Proceedings*, which spent pages detailing the evidence against the white conspirators, did not bother to tally the deaths of the numerous slaves who were murdered in the same days. In that way, what happened in Madison County was not so different from what happened countless other times in the history of American slavery. Slaveholders almost always framed their inquiries as investigations of the immediate circumstances of a revolt, rather than as considerations of the system of slavery itself. Instead of thinking that as long as there was slavery there would probably be slave revolts, or trying to fathom the aspirations and political imaginations of their slaves, they reframed revolts—and revolt scares—as evidence of a set of problems that could be solved within existing parameters. And they set about making a series of reforms, most of which focused on their own behavior and that of their fellow whites: they could control how much preaching or trading or hiring or traveling or steam doctoring their slaves were exposed to and thus make sure that this never happened again.¹⁷ But the path by which understanding of what had happened in Madison migrated away from any consideration of black self-activity and toward a panic about white men who acted black was a particularly overdetermined one. For, as he went to his death, Joshua Cotton had provided Madison slaveholders with a way to link their own anxieties about space, race, and slavery in Madison County to a wider network of boomtime terrors. In the confession he signed just before the noose snapped his neck, Cotton claimed he had been a member of a far-flung “clan” that was “trying to carry into effect the plan of Murrell as laid down in Stewart’s pamphlet.” Those bookish last words sent a tremor of fear up and down the Mississippi Valley.

If there was a white man who embodied the uncertainties and fears that lurked behind the bright-white tide of cotton and profit that flowed down the Mississippi River in the boom years of the 1830s, his name was John Murrell. Murrell was the leader of a “clan” of frontier bandits who swarmed over the

Mississippi Valley in the early 1830s, stealing horses and slaves, passing counterfeit bills, robbing travelers, and organizing a massive slave revolt that would stretch all the way to Maryland. Or at least that's what Virgil Stewart said.

What we know about Murrell comes mostly from a pamphlet published by Stewart in 1835 under the pseudonym Augustus Q. Walton.¹⁸ By that time Murrell was in jail, hauled in by Virgil Stewart, and convicted wholly on the basis of Stewart's testimony. But Murrell did not simply sit slack-jawed as Stewart called him out; he was, he admitted, guilty of some of the crimes of which he was accused, but said that Stewart had been his partner. This accusation was hard for Stewart to shake, because he was the only witness to the crimes of which he was accusing Murrell: the slaves he had accused Murrell of stealing, he said, had been transferred through a secret network and sold off somewhere near Yazoo, Mississippi. In order to cleanse his good name of the bad odor of its association with Murrell's crimes, Stewart published a pamphlet explaining how he had captured Murrell, lost sight of the stolen slaves, and, above all, saved the nation from "the horror that had engulfed Santo Domingo."¹⁹

That was the pamphlet that was apparently on Joshua Cotton's mind as he prepared to die. There is no way to tell whether anyone else in Madison County had read Stewart's pamphlet (still less whether anyone else had taken it seriously, for many of its initial readers thought it was a joke) before Cotton's confession.²⁰ No way to tell, that is, whether the pamphlet provided the Madison County Committee of Safety with a road map at the beginning of their investigation or simply a way to rationalize their actions after the fact. What is clear is that the "citizens" of Madison County and Virgil Stewart came to need one another. Today, the easiest way to obtain a copy of either the committee's report or Stewart's history of his own good deeds (both of which were published in relatively small runs as unbound pamphlets) is in a bound compilation of documents relating to the events in Madison County that was issued in a large run by a New York publisher in 1836.²¹ There, Stewart's otherwise unproven assertion that Murrell was planning a huge slave uprising as he traveled the Mississippi Valley, and the committee's otherwise implausible suggestion that Madison County had been the site where that rebellion was set to begin, are matched like a set of bogus confessions to a crime that never occurred or like a pair of wise-guy endorsements kiting value out of an unbacked bill. And

so, in the end, it does not really matter when the citizens of Madison County first heard of Murrell or first came to believe that it was his dark purpose that was behind the suspicious movement of their neighbors and the sinister murmuring of their slaves. The history that was made *after* Cotton's confession was a history in which the meaning many attributed to the murders in Madison County was shaped out of the purposes they attributed to John Murrell, purposes that retraced the pattern of the cotton economy in shadowy negative outline.

When Virgil Stewart started to play John Murrell for information, Murrell was a social oddity, if not a theoretical impossibility—a white man who was being legally treated as a slave. In 1833 Murrell had been convicted in Madison County, Tennessee, for “harboring” three slaves who belonged to a man named William Long. The slaves had disappeared and had been found in Murrell's possession, but he claimed to have captured them and not yet (in spite of his best efforts) been able to return them to their owner. That much made Murrell a rogue and an outlaw, but the sentence in the case made him something more. Because Murrell had neither the money nor the property to cover his fine, the judge sentenced him to “serve” Long for a term of five years. Murrell appealed the sentence, but while he waited for a decision he was again accused of stealing slaves, this time by a man named John Henning, and he apparently decided to leave Tennessee. Henning, by all accounts, hired Virgil Stewart to track Murrell and find the slaves that he was sure the latter man had stolen and had stashed somewhere along the road he would soon be traveling. After that, everything we know comes from Stewart. When Murrell headed out of town, Stewart followed him for several hours and then decided to make his acquaintance. He drew up beside him and introduced himself as a fellow traveler. He was, he claimed, a visitor from the Choctaw nation and he was on that road hunting a horse.²² He used, that is, the guise generally favored by those who stole slaves in order to track a slave stealer who was in actuality a runaway slave.

On down the road went this oddly inverted couple; and as they traveled, the con man got conned. Stewart later explained that he had been able to stay by Murrell's side all the way across Tennessee and into Arkansas by claiming that, in addition to looking for a horse, he was looking for land. “The land east of the Mississippi River,” he confided to his companion, “is all entered and it is

very dear.” Their journey quickly veered off the turnpike and into the woods, heading toward Randolph, Tennessee, where Murrell planned to cross the river.²³ After several days of thrashing around in the woods at the river’s edge, looking for a crossing and waiting for the water to subside, the pair made it across the river into “the morass,” a swampy canebrake uninhabited except for a few “huts occupied by men and sometimes by Negroes.” Farther and farther off the grid of orderly settlement they traveled, deep into an almost impenetrable wilderness, searching for the meeting place of Murrell’s “clan.” Murrell, Stewart recorded, referred to himself and his men as “speculators,” and when he traveled he identified himself as an agent in the transformation of the Southwest, sometimes posing as a slave dealer out collecting debts, other times as an itinerant minister of the Methodist Church. He had traveled, he claimed, from Virginia to Louisiana, conning, robbing, kidnapping, and murdering along the way, and to Stewart, at least, he seemed eager to talk about it. According to Stewart’s account of his experience of riding into the woods with Murrell, “his mind was filled with strange phantoms” and he “began to feel as though he were on enchanted ground.”²⁴

Stewart later said that he had used a needle and a secret system of “stenography” to scratch notes into his “boot legs, fingernails, saddle skirts, and portmanteau” as they rode and talked. These he transcribed on tiny pieces of paper stashed in the lining of his hat.²⁵ Murrell—Stewart’s Murrell—spoke of his past crimes at great length, and by the end of their journey he had provided Stewart with something like a highwayman’s map to the vulnerabilities of the antebellum economy. Start with hijacking. Stewart’s Murrell had spent time on the Natchez Trace, the pathway through the woods and swamps north of New Orleans that river traders used to walk home after they had sold their goods. According to Stewart, Murrell bragged that in the early days of his career he would select his marks along the road by the way they looked, make their acquaintance, and then rob and murder them. “A tall and good looking young man,” for instance, “riding an elegant horse which was splendidly rigged off,” caught his eye. When the man said “he had been to the lower country with a drove of Negroes” and was on his way back to Kentucky with cash in his pocket, Murrell offered to ride with him along the dangerous road through “the Choctaw Nation.” For the trader, that road ended when Murrell pulled him off the road and pointed a gun at his head. When he pleaded to be allowed

to pray before he died, Murrell told him, “I had no time to hear him pray,” and shot him dead. The man, it turned out, had been a bit of a “puff,” a phony—the wallet he had told Murrell was full of cash turned out to be stuffed with love letters.²⁶

Then there was counterfeiting. As he traveled south, at least by Stewart’s telling, Murrell would always pick up the tab, paying with a counterfeit note, often while passing himself off as a preacher. The members of the devout Nobs family, who ran an inn along the banks of the Mississippi, Stewart remembered, were so besotted by the presence of a minister at their dinner table that they tried to refuse payment for the meal. Murrell insisted, apologizing that he had only a large-denomination bill for which they would have to make change—in coin. On the way out the door, he mentioned in passing that he was hoping to start up a small business breeding mules to pay for his ministry. The Nobs were only too happy to accept Murrell’s note as payment for a mule (although their money was at that moment heavy in his pocket).²⁷ The object for Murrell was less to get *things* for free—the only load that Murrell planned to make his new mule carry was the weight of a tag noting its price (in cash)—than it was to use the cash nexus to turn worthless paper into good money. Indeed, Murrell’s method made the economy of capitalist accumulation run backward: the transfer of a thing served as the mechanism by which the seller’s money ended up in the buyer’s pocket.²⁸ Virgil Stewart was so impressed with the trick that he gushingly termed Murrell “a great man, possessed of unrivalled mental powers,” as he recalled the dumb grins that had graced the Nob family faces when Murrell had bestowed upon them a final, bogus benediction.

But Murrell’s real game was stealing slaves. Like Murrell himself, slave stealing haunted the margins of the cotton economy. For a white man like Murrell—slaveless, ambitious, unscrupulous even by the standard of Mississippi Valley slaveholders—an escaped slave could look like a walking income stream. One white man accused of helping to steal a twelve-year-old slave girl named Rachel recalled encountering her along the banks of the Mississippi, explaining that he had only reluctantly acceded to her request for a ride and brought her to his house after “observing that she had one of her feet cut.” There she remained for two days, whereupon “he took her to the defendant and left her with him.” Where she stayed for a year, until her owner heard

where she was and drove out from New Orleans to repossess her.²⁹ Although she was treated as a slave in the household of the man with whom she was left (he had her work in his kitchen and tracked her down on the two or three occasions on which she disappeared), she continued to claim that she was free right up until her legal owner came to get her. Faced with returning to his service, she suddenly admitted she was a slave and begged the family of the man with whom she had been living to buy her.

While she was not the free person she claimed to be, Rachel was quite clearly something other than a victim of circumstance. Traveling a landscape populated by white men apparently eager to take advantage of her vulnerability, she searched for the best situation she could find. And what of the man in whose house she was discovered? Had he knowingly harbored a fugitive, trading her board for her labor and the hope of her eventual reproduction, as her legal owner came to suspect? Had he bought her from the man who found her on the road? Or had he simply taken her in because both men agreed that he stood a better chance of finding her rightful owner and returning her than the first man? Had he really tried to spread the news to neighbors that she was working in his kitchen, even as he somehow missed the published notices in the *Louisiana Advertiser* that was delivered monthly to his home?³⁰ Although the precise details of the story are unknown—they remained contested during the court case that followed, which concluded with the ambiguous finding that the man in whose house Rachel had been found had behaved in a way that was “negligent” and “remiss,” but not “criminal”—the moral of the story remained clear enough. At least on the margins, the social privileges of whiteness—of being able to command the labor of an out-of-place black child found along a country road—could compromise the property rights of slaveholders, as well as the aspirations of their escaping slaves.³¹

Similar stories are threaded through the court records of the antebellum Mississippi Valley. Three slaves named Tom, Brunswick, and John disappeared from the plantation of Shupley Owen in Carroll Parish, Louisiana, on the night of January 18, 1854, taking with them a boat and a “coat, rain pantallon, rain boots, and a vest” belonging to their overseer. The coat, the overseer added, “was a black frock or sack coat bound around with some kind of tape, there was cord on it in the shape of a barrel for fancy buttons.” About five days later, it was later alleged, the escaped slaves were drifting down the Mississippi

opposite Island No. 95 when a nonslaveholding white man named Gersham Brown, “who lives on said island[,] caught them and took them by force to said Island and there kept them secretly and fraudulently and put them to work cutting cord wood,” which he sold to passing steamboats. Several months later, having somehow heard that his slaves were on Island No. 95, Owen went down to fetch them. Rowing out to the island, Owen later testified, he spotted Gersham Brown on shore about two miles above the usual landing, whereupon Brown and his sons jumped into their own boat and “rowing at the utmost speed, passed petitioner and his friends underway and got to the said landing first.” When Owen finally caught up, there were no slaves in evidence at Brown’s wood yard and an awkward conversation ensued in which Owen and his friends gave Brown false names, and pretended they had rowed out to the island to go hunting, thus gaining a pretext to keep looking around. Brown insisted (when finally asked) that there had not been any “Negroes . . . runaways or others” on the island for several months. Brunswick and John were forced ashore in Vicksburg two days later, where they apparently told the whole story (although their testimony is lost to history because it could not legally be used in a case against a white man like Gersham Brown). Tom, wearing “a cloth overcoat with loops and buttons . . . fine pants, casimere, a pair of boots, a black silk hat . . . a white linen bosom shirt and a cravat, the overcoat trimmed with braid,” rowed out to a passing steamboat. He claimed that he was a free man from Pittsburgh named Bill Steele who had been employed as a cook aboard the steamboat *Sultana*, but had been put off on the island after having “some difficulty” with the boat’s steward. Some of the hands on board, including one to whom he had apparently given his memorable coat as he came on board, vouched for him, and he was enlisted as a fireman for the rest of the boat’s journey upriver. In November 1854, one of Shuplee Owen’s sons saw the overcoat on the back of a white man in Louisville, Kentucky; he bought it from the man—who turned out to be the very man to whom Tom had traded it (for his safe passage?)—and had it sent home to his father. It was later exhibited in court and identified by Owen’s overseer as the very same coat that had disappeared on the night Tom had absconded. Tom himself was last seen in Cairo, Illinois, in the summer of 1854, and was never heard from again, at least not by Shuplee Owen.³² Tom had apparently made his way out of slavery along a fault line in the structure of Southern rule: the discrepant interests of

men like Gersham Brown (and perhaps the man who vouched for Tom in return for a fancy coat), who could attain some of the privileges promised them by virtue of their race by betraying the loyalty to the slaveholding social order that their whiteness supposedly demanded of them.

There were others like Gersham Brown—nonslaveholding white men eager to command, for a time, the services of a slave not legally their own. They included Amos Hall, who enjoyed Granville's service aboard the steamboat *Chieftan* all the way from New Orleans to Louisville, where they parted ways; the mysterious "particular friend," who sent word to Walker Reynolds that he knew where Reynolds's slaves George, Ned, and Dick were hiding and would return them for \$1,000; the elusive "Doctor Clark" who paid his way from Mississippi to Louisville aboard the *Hercules* by hiring out Peter and Samuel (who, it was discovered, belonged to someone else) to the unwitting ship's captain; Manuel St. Germain, who hired out Jacko to the captain of the steamer *A. M. Wright*, who when confronted by Jacko's legal owner said that Jacko was not Jacko but William Henry and that William had been hired to him by a Dr. Mercer—or was it Mercier?³³ There is no way to know exactly how many slaves were stolen, the practice being an inherently shadowy and indeterminate one (at what point did passively failing to find a runaway slave's erstwhile master become actively stealing a slave?), but it was frequent enough to be a matter of grave public concern. The penalties prescribed by law were severe: up to twenty years at hard labor for those convicted of stealing a slave. "We believe there are worthless scamps prowling about in this community who make a business of stealing Negroes and who exist on the fruits of their infamous labor," wrote an editor of the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* in 1839.³⁴ And among the slave stealers, there was none more notorious than John Murrell.

Murrell needed, he bragged to Stewart, only fifteen minutes "to decoy the best of Negroes from the best of masters." The conversations between stealer and slave generally went something like this. Coming upon a slave walking on the road on a cold winter's day, Murrell would begin by taking the slave's side: "Well, old man, you must have a d—d hard master, or he would not send you to mill this cold day." The slave, perhaps sensing a chance for some illicit interplay (why else would a white man start a conversation like that?), would reply, "Yes, maser, all on um hard in dis country." Murrell: "Would you like to

be free and have plenty of money to buy land and houses, and everything you want?" Well, who wouldn't? And then Murrell would make his proposal: if the slave would come away with him and consent to be sold several times, escaping each time only to be sold again, then Murrell would eventually set him up for freedom in Texas (outside the jurisdiction of the United States). In Stewart's telling, the game always had a trick ending. In order to protect himself, after a few sales Murrell would murder his silent partners. One man, he told Stewart, he had cut open, filled with rocks, and sunk in a creek.³⁵

John Brown almost ended up that way—but, as he told it, Murrell's 1834 arrest (by Virgil Stewart) saved his life. Brown claimed that when he had belonged to a "cruel-hearted" man in Georgia, he was decoyed away by a member of Murrell's gang named Buck Hurd. Brown described the operation this way: "They had stations in various parts of the country, at convenient distances, and when a member of the club succeeded in stealing away a Negro or a pony, he would pass him on as quickly as he could to the nearest station from which point he would be forwarded to another and so on." Brown estimated that it was no problem for Murrell's gang to move a slave 300 miles without stopping. He had heard stories that Murrell had murdered one of the slaves he had stolen, ambushing him in the woods after telling him to go to fetch some water; but Brown was desperate enough that he took up Hurd's proposal. They spent their nights on the road, "hiding in the woods and swamps" by day, until Hurd got word that Murrell was in prison in Tennessee. Hurd got frightened and told Brown that he wanted to take him back, which he planned to do by pretending that he was a slave catcher who ran across Brown in the woods. Brown agreed to the plan, as long as Hurd promised that he would "get my master to promise not to flog me."³⁶ We cannot, of course, rule out that Brown had read Stewart's pamphlet and constructed his own tale around the coordinates of a well-known frontier legend. Yet neither can we forget what Brown's account represents: a trace of the complicated give-and-take between stealer and slave that was suppressed in Stewart's rendering with the same typographic ease with which he dashed out the middle letters of the word "damned."

About the stakes in these traveling skin games, Murrell was quite clear when he told the story of a slave called Sam, whom his brother had stolen from a Tennessee man named William Eason. Sam had been "sold out of his neigh-

borhood” to Eason, and so he was easily persuaded to go away with the slave stealer. He was quickly moved to—get this—Madison County, Mississippi, where he was sold for “fourteen hundred dollars in cash, seven hundred dollars in ready-made clothing, and a draft on Thomas Hudnold . . . for seven hundred dollars, which is as good as gold dust. Though he has to sue for the draft [i.e., go to court to get the portion of the price that was unpaid at the time of sale], the recovery is sure-fire. They can never get the Negro and without him they can never prove he was Eason’s Negro.” In other words, after Sam escaped from Hudnold, there was no way anyone could prove that the man identified on the bill of sale as, say, a prime Negro man named Jack, medium height, dark complexion, was the same Sam who had recently disappeared from Eason’s farm in Tennessee. His brother, Murrell confided to Stewart, had made only two mistakes: he had not cashed Hudnold’s note quickly enough, thus giving the planter time to cancel it when the slave ran off; and he had not killed Sam.³⁷

Slave stealing twisted the contradiction of human property—the governing fiction of the slaveholding South—into subversion. It was the human capacities of enslaved people that made them valuable: the fact that they could think and act and create. Indeed—and this was the heart of the contradiction—the human capacities of enslaved people made them uniquely valuable repositories of capital. Unlike real estate, they could be moved from place to place as the economy demanded; unlike other forms of personal property, they could be repurposed to meet novel challenges. But along with the labor and the capital that made them so valuable to their owners, enslaved people were inhabited by their own slippery, sometimes subversive will. They possessed the ability to conspire with a man like Murrell, to play the part of property, cloaking their own aspirations in a series of sham sales, until, like Sam, they had a chance to slip out from under it entirely.

John Murrell haunted the uneasy frontier between value and its physical form. In order to be moved over time and space, capital had to be made material in one form or another. And whether it was by overtaking travelers along the Natchez Trace and stealing the metal and paper in which they were carrying home the value they had extracted from their sold slaves, by passing fake paper for good metal at a roadside inn, or by selling a slave who could never be proven not to be the man he was represented to be on the bill of sale, Murrell

hijacked the capital's material hosts. He pried his way into the mechanics of an economy that had (long since) grown beyond its ability to accomplish the lightning-quick transfer of value that characterized the on-the-books economy of the country store, where a slab of bacon might be reduced to a twenty-five-cent credit with the flick of a wrist. As value migrated from the real physical things that Murrell's victims bought and sold every day into the pure ether of unencumbered dollar values that they dreamed about every night, it had to pass through his territory: a territory in which things could be measured and compared by a price, but in which that price always had to be paid in a physical—movable, fakeable, and boostable—form.

But Murrell was more than a trickster freelancing along the frontier of exchange value. He had a network.³⁸ "Every fellow that would speculate that lived on the Mississippi River and many of its tributary streams, from New Orleans up to all the large western cities," was a part of his "clan," reported Stewart. Barely visible—in a midnight encounter along a country road, at the wooded edge of a planter's field, in the fantastic tale with which Virgil Stewart returned from "the morass" on the unsettled side of the Mississippi—was the ghostly underside of the cotton economy, stretching throughout its length and breadth, reversing its flows, switching its codes. Indeed, in Stewart's telling, it was Murrell and his men, not the slave traders, cotton planters, and commission merchants they preyed upon, who were the masters of this economy. It was they who understood the physics of the uneven movement of money and information through that network of streams, rivers, and roads, and could move fast enough and think fast enough to remain the master of each.

Murrell's ultimate speculation was to use his shadowy network "to excite a rebellion among the Negroes, throughout the slaveholding states," and "to manage it so as to have it commence everywhere at the same hour" on Christmas Day, 1835—the terrifying simultaneity of the event making it seem to the slaveholders as if they were facing an all-seeing invisible enemy. In the midst of the "confusion and disarray" all over the South, Murrell and his men would slip into the cities and rob the banks—the nodal concentrations of the wealth produced in the region. As Murrell and Stewart rode through "the morass," the plan was already under way, unfolding in a series of secret conversations between the agents of Murrell's "clan" and their contacts among the "most vicious and wicked" among the slaves. We "poison their minds," Murrell con-

fided, “by telling them how they are mistreated, and they are entitled to their freedom as much as their masters, and that all the wealth of the country is the proceeds of the black people’s labor. . . . We tell them that all Europe has abandoned slavery, and that the West Indies are all free, and that they got their freedom by rebelling a few times and slaughtering the whites . . . and that they can marry white women when they are all put on the level.” But, Stewart asked, what if their courage falters? “They will be forced to engage,” Murrell replied, “under the belief that the Negroes have rebelled everywhere else,” and would be encouraged by the “promise to conduct them to Texas should we be defeated.” Indeed, he had plans to disguise himself as a quack doctor and travel to South America, “to get some friends in that country to aid me in my designs relative to a Negro rebellion.”³⁹ From the underworld of the cotton economy, Virgil Stewart claimed, he had, like his namesake, returned to warn the world of the vision of the future he had seen from the other side: “whole cities wrapped in smoke and flames, and houses and human beings together swallowed up by sheets of fire.”⁴⁰

STEWART’S PROPHECY of the apocalypse of John Murrell remapped the territory of the Mississippi Valley (and the rest of the South) and rewrote the history that had begun with the Louisiana Purchase. The sovereign boundary drawn around the slave South at the beginning of the nineteenth century was exposed in Murrell’s plan as a comforting illusion of territorial and historical isolation. The history being made in the South was not the history that the slaveholders and cotton factors told themselves they were making, but another sort of history entirely. It was a history being made by their black slaves. And though that real history was evident every day in the physical labor with which those slaves created “the country,” it was yet hidden from view by the forced conversion of their labor into wealth credited to the substance of their masters and by a stage-prop sovereignty designed to convince them they were alone in the world. Murrell’s plan was to rupture the illusion. He would tell the slaves that the boundaries of their world were not defined by farm fences or state lines or international borders, or even by the global reach of the cotton economy. He would pry the history of the South away from that of the United States and reattach it to the history being made in what we would today call the Black Atlantic: in Haiti, where blacks had been ruling themselves for forty

years; in the West Indies, where the slaves had gained their full freedom in 1834 (an event widely reported in Southern newspapers); and in South America, where, he would assure them, there were many thousands ready to join them in arms.⁴¹ In the end, Murrell's apocalypse was to be a speculation structured much as were those on the topside of the cotton boom. Those who were reluctant to go along with his plan would be told that slaves everywhere else were already engaged, until each individual decision to join was prefigured by an image of a realized collective that was actually yet in the making—until all of the marginal players in the business imagined themselves to be riding a surge of events greater than themselves. Murrell, Stewart said, planned to rupture the history of American slavery with a speculative bubble of belief in the possibility of black revolt. When Stewart finally brought him in, Murrell was walked through the streets of Nashville chained to a slave.

It is hard to say what Virgil Stewart thought people would see in this apocalyptic fantasy—why he thought they would buy his pamphlet. Perhaps he thought that a vision of the end of their world would allow slaveholders to imagine themselves *in extremis*, to measure their mastery against a fantasy of its greatest test. Perhaps he thought he could draw back the curtain which shielded slaveholders from so many of their sins, to provide them with a negative image of the sum total of their own work in the world: their achievements credited to their slaves, their homes destroyed and their wives traded away, their nation under attack by an outside that was suddenly everywhere, their history suddenly made by someone else. Or perhaps he thought he had really uncovered a conspiracy that stretched the length and breadth of the South and that threatened to explode at any moment.

Whatever the ultimate source of its attraction to its adherents, in the aftermath of the hangings in Madison, County, Stewart's vision burst over the Mississippi Valley like a primordial thunderclap. On July 6, 1835, a fight that had begun between two men at an Independence Day celebration in Vicksburg turned into a riot when "the citizens" of Vicksburg gathered to drive the "gamblers and sowers of sedition among Negroes" from their midst. The panic soon spread to Natchez and Little Rock and New Orleans and Norfolk and Cincinnati, all of which experienced mob action against gamblers in the month of July. Those who were gamblers, or who looked that way, were forced to the river and packed onto steamboats or flatboats, which traveled from town

to town looking for one that would allow their haggard passengers to come ashore. In the end, it was reported, many of them made their way to Texas. The mobbings were accompanied by a series of insurrection scares all over the South. In Maryland, Virginia, Washington, D.C., Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky, insurrection plots were “uncovered” and slaves were tortured and hung. In Mississippi, there were three separate scares in the months leading up to Christmas Day, 1835; in Louisiana, four more.⁴² For months, it was said to be dangerous for anyone—any white person—to travel the roads in Mississippi. In succession, steam doctors, gamblers, slave dealers, clock peddlers, and finally missionaries were warned off the roads and driven out of communities up and down the Mississippi River Valley, as slaveholders tried to choke out the enemy within themselves.⁴³

And then, as suddenly as it had gathered, the panic dispersed. Newspapers that had carried seemingly daily reports from Mississippi began instead to fill their pages with extended discussions of the origins of the phrase “Lynch’s Law” and its first usage in North America. Doubts about the full truth of Stewart’s pamphlet were spun off into a detailed controversy—complete with a court case, the published testimonials of many worthy men on either side, and several more pamphlets—between its author and his former business partner about whether or not Stewart had been acting as his “agent” or merely his “employee” when he made several off-the-books sales, after which the other man seemed to have many fewer goods but little more money. The image of a commercial economy that was extended beyond its physical capacity to send information and safely move money—dependent for its daily bread upon a potentially insurgent labor force that had already penetrated its most intimate hideaways, pasted together by a racial ideology that was only skin deep, and protected from an outside world in which history seemed to be moving in another direction by only a few fictional lines drawn on a map—subsided into nostalgia. By 1836, Virgil Stewart was touring Mississippi not as a prophet of the disaster that was to come, but as the hero of an event that everyone seemed to believe had happened long ago and far away, fêted on the Fourth of July along with the republic’s dead founders.⁴⁴

Like the terrors of the summer of 1835, John Murrell was consigned to the past. Gradually, Murrell’s story became legend, part of the river lore of the flatboat era, the bygone times before the steamboat. “Murrell died a savage

jungle cat, crushed by the dawning age of steam, to which he could not reconcile himself. . . . Alive, he had passed at various times as a lawyer, doctor, and a preacher. Dead, he marked the end of an epoch.”⁴⁵ “The race, in short, of these singular beings, is becoming extinct,” wrote the traveler who called herself Matilda Houstoun, commenting on white men such as Murrell. Like the Indians whom they resembled, these white men were being pushed by progress into banditry, drunkenness, and racial degeneracy.⁴⁶ According to any number of travelers, the racial backwash of the steamboat era was apparent at every landing where the boats stopped to take on fuel. There, one could see men like Gersham Brown, the slave-stealing woodsman who lived on Island No. 95: “outcasts,” “squatters,” “men of broken character”; “worn and sallow,” with “miserable pallid children,” Thomas Hamilton called them; “tall, lanky, unwashed men, with clay-colored faces, looking for all the world as though they had been made of the same mud that dyes the Mississippi waters,” wrote Mrs. Houstoun; “the squalid look of the miserable wives and children of these men was dreadful . . . their complexion is of a bluish white that suggests the idea of dropsy,” wrote Frances Trollope.⁴⁷ Whatever they were—sallow, pallid, clay-colored, bluish—the woodsmen, their wives, and their children in these tellings were not quite white; they represented a sort of racial residuum, white men left behind by the progress of their race.

The legend of John Murrell became part of the process by which class differences among whites were translated into other sorts of difference: historical differences, which made poor whites seem like men from another time; racial differences, which made them seem not quite white. Far from being extinguished by the capitalist transformation of the Mississippi Valley, however, these men, like John Murrell, Joshua Cotton, and Gersham Brown, were created by it. They were the aspirant cotton farmers whose crops had not yet come in, the immigrant laborers trying to work their way up, the second-order white working class who stitched together the political economy of slavery. They were clerks, coopers, and carpenters; shopkeepers, barkeepers, and housekeepers; actors, dancers, and prostitutes; slave traders, slave overseers, and slave catchers; steamboatmen, railroadmen, and night watchmen; typesetters, tailors, and tinsmiths; upriver truck farmers, Eastern fortune seekers, and European immigrants; riverboat gamblers, roadside bandits, and horse thieves. They may have been the relative losers in the process by which the “empire for

liberty” became the Cotton Kingdom—the process by which the racial promises of white supremacy were foreshortened into the class privileges of slaveholding—but they were not going anywhere. Usually, when they looked at their white faces in the mirror, they saw not-yet winners, rather than losers, and stayed loyal to the program. Sometimes, however, they saw themselves for what they were: incomplete members of a society in which privilege was defined by slaveholding even more than by race. At those moments, they would once again seem as dangerous to slaveholders as they had in the summer of 1835.

3

The Steamboat Sublime

A resistless feeling of depression falls slowly upon us, despite the gaudy sunshine and the green cotton-fields. This, then, is the Cotton Kingdom—the shadow of a marvellous dream.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of the Black Belt”

ACCORDING TO LEGEND, Robert Fulton’s *New Orleans* was the first steamboat launched on the Mississippi River, in 1811. According to historians, Fulton may not have been the first to get his boat onto the water, but he was certainly the first to make money doing it. Fulton would surely have appreciated the difference. For the *New Orleans* was not simply an invention—it was a visionary speculation.¹ In Fulton’s creative mind, the introduction of steamboats to the Mississippi Valley would be the first phase in a process “that meditated nothing less than the introduction of steam navigation throughout the civilized world.” “The object,” he wrote, “is immense.” Fulton’s own object was to obtain the exclusive privilege to run steamboats on the Mississippi for a period of at least twenty years, in exchange for the time and money he had invested in the boat. When Fulton was granted such a monopoly by the Orleans Territory, in the sort of his-business-partner’s-brother’s-best-friend sweet-heart deal characteristic of nineteenth-century capitalism and statecraft, he was rebuffed by a flood tide of resistance: “Our road to market, must and *will* be free. . . . The citizens of the West insist on . . . the privilege of passing and re-passing, unmolested, on the *common highway* of the West.” Fulton’s great antagonist in the Western steamboat wars was Henry Shreve, who launched several boats on the Mississippi and Ohio rivers in the 1810s, most notably the

Enterprise, which was seized on two separate occasions for violating Fulton's state-protected monopoly. The question of "exclusive franchises" on the nation's internal waterways was finally decided in the U.S. Supreme Court in *Gibbons v. Ogden* (1824), although by the time Fulton and his business partner were dead, the "free" navigation of the Mississippi was a well-established fact, and Henry Shreve, along with many others, was making money hand over fist.²

Origin stories invisibly shape the history they seem to narrate. They reframe economic history as a story of self-made men, of inventors and entrepreneurs. In the nineteenth century, they were a regular feature of the didactic literature of commercial self-improvement; comparisons of Fulton and Shreve to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, for instance, were a hallmark of the genre. That importance notwithstanding, the stories that boosters told themselves about the steamboat elided deeper structures of history. They overwrote the history of conquest with the history of technology. They transformed the history of capitalism into the history of technology, the results of incentives and investment into inventions. They were bright, didactic bubbles floating on top of the muddy tide of the history of the Mississippi Valley.

So spectacular was the confrontation of the emergent rhythms of steam power with the patterned ecology of the Western waters that travelers on Mississippi River steamboats often used the word "sublime" to describe it.³ Their usage was an artful one, in keeping with the idea (current in nineteenth-century philosophy and aesthetics) that there were places or experiences that could carry human beings to the edge of language and reason—"spectacles," in the words of the historian Simon Schama, "of holy terror."⁴ Sights and sounds that could overawe the senses: immense, ineluctable, terrifying, marvelous. "There are few objects more truly grand—I almost said sublime," wrote Edmund Flagg in an 1838 passage emblematic of the convention, "than a powerful steamer struggling with the rapids of the western waters." And a few pages later, again: "The mighty stream rolling its volumed floods through half a continent is sublime." And again (and again and again): "Its resistless power is sublime. . . . The memory of its bygone scenes, and the venerable moss grown forests on its banks are sublime; and lastly, the noble fabric of man's workmanship, struggling and groaning in convulsed, triumphant effort to overcome the resistance offered . . ." Flagg's downriver passage to New Orleans carried him

to the edge of the known world, to a place where human beings tore history from the relentless current of time: “the terrible Mississippi . . . fearful and sublime.”⁵ In trying to imagine the Mississippi, Flagg was overcome by his sense of the spatial and temporal scale of the river world.

The dimensions of the Mississippi Valley served those who wrote about it as an index of the importance of their subject. The most famous of these was Mark Twain, who began *Life on the Mississippi* with a geography lesson framed in terms of commercial transportation, carefully noting the river’s unprecedented watershed, including “fifty-four subordinate rivers that are navigable by steamboats, and . . . hundreds that are navigable by flatboats and keels.”⁶ Twain wrote this in 1883, after the river had been replaced by the railroad as the commercial artery of the West; his book was an elegy, his account of the vastness of the Mississippi Valley almost an apology, put forth as a justification of why his subject was still “well worth reading about.” Fifty years earlier, the heyday of the steamboat had been in the future rather than the past, and accounts of the river’s range had been correspondingly optimistic. The Mississippi Valley, wrote Robert Baird in 1832, comprised “more than 1,300,000 square miles of the most fertile country, taken as a whole, that the earth affords . . . country which will one day, and that not very distant, contain a population of 100,000,000 immortal beings.”⁷ For Baird, who turned out to be closer to right about the exponential increase of the population than he was about its immortality, the future could be seen on the plain face of a map.

Translated into the conventions of the steamboat sublime, the commercial geography of the Valley was rescaled in the key of awe. “No river in the world drains so large a portion of the earth’s surface,” wrote Thomas Hamilton. “The imagination asks, whence come its waters, and w[h]ither tend they? They come from the distant regions of a vast confinement, where the foot of civilized man has never been planted. . . . On what lonely and sublime magnificence have they gazed?” The effect of traveling on a Mississippi steamer dulled his senses into “dreamy contemplation,” the lonely melancholy of a traveler lost in time: “Day after day, and night after night, we continued driving to the South; our vessel, like some huge demon of the wilderness, bearing fire in her bosom, and canoping the eternal forest with the smoke of her nostrils. How looked the hoary river god, I know not; nor what thought the alligators, when awakened from their slumbers by a vision so astounding.” In his descriptions,

Hamilton presented the voyage down the Mississippi as a sort of time travel: a journey backward in history to a point at which the voyage itself was unimaginable, a time of gods and monsters, not modern machinery. Less dreamily than Hamilton, but to the same effect, J. S. Buckingham wrote that traveling the Mississippi aboard a steamboat “carries one’s admiration to the verge of the sublime,” an effect he likewise represented as a sort of break in time. “In the valley of the Mississippi, the chief interest lies in the signs of promise for the future, as contrasted with the wild and savage nature from which it has just emerged into a giant infancy, advancing on to manhood with colossal strides.”⁸ In these accounts, past, present, and future were cut, remixed, and placed edge to edge by the worldmaking power of steam.

The words used to represent nature in such accounts—“wild,” “savage,” “uncivilized”—suggested the history of conquest that was embedded in the steamboat sublime. As one celebrant of commerce and conquest wrote of the Mississippi Valley: “In that wide land, where so lately the beaver and the honey bee were the only representatives of labor, and a painted savage the type of manhood, are maintained all the necessaries of life, letters and the fine arts are cultivated, and beauty and fashion bloom around us.” As the “painted savage” fell before the ineluctable power of superior technology, human beings were only as relevant as their transportation technology. “It is needless to do more than mention the Indian canoe, the smallest and rudest of boats,” in order to suggest that “the introduction of the steamboats upon the western waters . . . contributed more than any other single cause, perhaps more than all other causes which have grown out of human skill,” to the civilization of the West.⁹ In the nineteenth-century science fiction of the steamboat, the history of conquest and capitalist transformation overrode the Native history of the West as inexorably as one of its floating palaces might have run down a rude pirogue crossing its path.

Steam power became, in these accounts, a sort of alibi for imperialism and dispossession: a *deus ex machina* that shifted the terrain of conquest to a scale of action beyond politics and war—a literary conceit that acquired a terrible historical correlative when the steamboat *Monmouth*, packed with Creek Indians being forced out of their homeland, exploded about twenty miles north of Baton Rouge, killing hundreds of those aboard.¹⁰ The steamboat sublime took expropriation and extermination and renamed them “time” and “technology.”

From the vista of the steamboat deck, Indians were consigned to prehistory, the dead-end time before history really began, represented by the monuments of “remote antiquity” that lined the river’s banks.¹¹

The confrontation of steamboat and wilderness, of civilization and savagery, of relentless direction with boundless desolation, was called “Progress.” And progress was measured in what Twain referred to as the steamboat’s “time-devouring” capacity—which others, using a more conventional formulation, termed “the annihilation of time and space.”¹² “The steam-engine, second only to the press in power,” wrote Edmund Flagg, “has in a few years anticipated results through the New World which centuries, in the ordinary course and consequence of cause and event would have failed to produce.”¹³ And the acceleration of time could be measured in the compression of space. “Steam navigation colonized the West!” wrote James Lanman. “It brought the western territory nearer the eastern by nine-tenths of the distance. . . . It has advanced the career of national colonization and national production at least a century!”¹⁴ In the Mississippi steamboat, a visionary future had come true: “What has heretofore been merely the speculation of enthusiasts has been realized,” wrote one such enthusiast.¹⁵

Behind all of this expressive urgency was a single epoch-making fact: steamboats made it possible to ship goods up the river on a previously unimaginable scale. Whereas the economy of the Mississippi Valley had previously been subject to the downward flow of its drainage, steam made it profitable to ship goods against the current. The Valley’s agricultural goods had once been shipped to market on flatboats, which were broken up and sold for salvage at the river’s end by men whose most direct pathway home was on foot. And the goods imported to the Valley had once been dragged over rutted muddy roads by teams of oxen, or had been poled or pulled up the river by the muscular exertions of Western keelboatmen. The power of steam, however, had made possible the “independence” (a favorite word among the steam boosters) of the Mississippi Valley from the Mississippi River.¹⁶ “Instead of spending many months in warping a barge or ‘cordelling’ and ‘pulling’ and ‘bush-whacking’ a keelboat from New Orleans to Pittsburg against the impetuous current of the Mississippi and Ohio,” wrote Robert Baird, “a steam-boat now makes the journey in fifteen or twenty days, stopping also at all the immediate places of importance. . . . Distance is no longer thought of in this region—it is almost an-

nihilated by steam!”¹⁷ Steam power had emancipated the Mississippi Valley from its reliance on animal energy, allowing a concomitant increase in the ratio of cargo to dead weight, and enabling an exponential increase in the volume and velocity of upriver trade.

It was not simply that, in practical terms, steamboats moved goods to market; in economic terms, they moved the markets closer to the goods. “New Orleans,” announced the *St. Louis Republican* on May 9, 1844, “has been brought within four days travel of St. Louis, in immediate propinquity.”¹⁸ The measurement and comparison of record travel times between cities along the Mississippi River became a popular pastime among men-in-the-know, a regular feature in newspapers, and a sort of commonsense measure of commercial and historical progress. Tables such as the one reproduced here (see Table 1) conveyed the era’s commonsense belief in progress.¹⁹

But the ultimate measure of the steam-driven “revolution” (another favorite word) in the geography and velocity of commerce was the declining price of goods. “Not only has *time* been gained, but the expense of traveling, and of transporting goods has been diminished *three or four fifths*,” wrote Baird. “Merchandize of all kinds is now carried between the extremest points for a very small amount.”²⁰ The universal equivalent of the steamboat sublime—the standard measure of the technological transcendence of nature, the compression of time, and the shrinkage of space—turned out to be the dollar.

The economic and cultural—or, to be truer to the terms of the day, “civilizational”—effects of steam power were reckoned together in direct variation: the one followed from the other. “A simple mechanical device ha[s] made life both possible and comfortable in regions which heretofore have been a wilderness,” wrote one traveler. “The moral changes alone which are felt throughout the west on price are almost incalculable,” added another.²¹ Teasing out the common sense encoded by the notion that lowering the price of goods had a moral aspect (and setting aside for the moment the idea that steamboats were mercantile as well as mechanical vessels, that they were made of capital as well as of wood and iron), we can follow the account of technology, economy, and human development provided by many nineteenth-century observers: steam power spawned commercial development, which provided the goods necessary to civilize the Valley’s population. “Steamboats,” wrote the French traveler Baptiste Dureau in 1850, “are the salvation of the valley of the Mississippi.

Table 1. From New Orleans to Natchez—268 miles.

	Days	Hours	Minutes
1814, <i>Orleans</i> made the run	6	6	40
1844, <i>Comet</i> made the run	5	10	..
1815, <i>Enterprise</i> made the run	4	11	20
1817, <i>Washington</i>	4
1817, <i>Shelby</i>	3	20	..
1819, <i>Paragon</i>	3	8	..
1828, <i>Tecumseh</i>	3	1	..
1834, <i>Tuscarora</i>	1	21	..
1838, <i>Natchez</i>	1	17	..
1840, <i>Edward Shippen</i>	1	8	..
1842, <i>Belle of the West</i>	1	18	..
1844, <i>Sultana</i>	..	19	45
1851, <i>Magnolia</i>	..	19	50
1853, <i>A. S. Shotwell</i>	..	19	49
1853, <i>Southern Belle</i>	..	20	13
1853, <i>Princess No. 4</i>	..	20	26
1853, <i>Eclipse</i>	..	19	47
1855, <i>Princess</i> (new)	..	18	53
1855, <i>Natchez</i> (new)	..	17	30
1856, <i>Princess</i> (new)	..	17	30
1870, <i>Natchez</i>	..	17	17
1880, <i>Rob't E. Lee</i>	..	17	11

Source: E. W. Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi; or, Gould's History of River Navigation* (St. Louis, 1889), 541.

... They are the most essential agents of social life; if they were wiped out, the rising civilization of those extensive regions would disappear with them.”²² Or, once again, this time in the deluxe version: “A steamboat coming from New Orleans brings to the remotest village of our streams, and the very doors of the cabins, a little Paris, a section of Broadway, or a slice of Philadelphia.”²³ By overcoming the commercial friction represented by the river’s downward current, steamboats had transformed the commercial geography of the Mississippi Valley: they made it possible for capital and labor invested in agricultural production to be repaid in an equal measure of consumption. Steamboats made it possible to turn a bale of cotton floated down the river into a piano on the way up.

Nowhere was this steam-powered metamorphosis more evident than on the docks that lined the Mississippi River in New Orleans. “A great[er] number of

large, handsome, and fine vessels seemed to me to line the magnificent curve of the Mississippi than I had ever seen before in any one port. The reflection that these are all congregated here to receive and convey away to other lands the produce of such mighty streams as the Missouri and the Mississippi, the Ohio, the Tennessee, the Arkansas, and the Red River . . . carries one's admiration to the verge of the sublime," wrote J. S. Buckingham. Imagining the itineraries of the goods reefered out along the levee, Buckingham was struck by the awesome magnitude of the valley before him.²⁴ The profusion of goods on the levee in New Orleans served Buckingham (and many others) as a sort of standard proxy for the outer reaches of imagination.

The latent commercial potential of the Mississippi Valley came to fruition on the levee in New Orleans. The city's position, according to Robert Baird, was uncannily, perhaps even providentially, adapted to trade: "Where on earth can another city be found whose situation is so favorable," he asked, "in regard to the extent of the country, whose productions, as it were, naturally tend to this great centre of trade; almost like material substances on the earth's surface to the center of gravitation."²⁵ Conducting his reader on a tour of the levee, Baird pointed out marvels in every direction: "nothing can be more interesting"; "this is one of the most wonderful places in the world"; "I was perfectly amazed the first time I saw this spectacle"; "if he turns his back to the river, he will see wonderful 'sights.'"²⁶ From the meanest flatboat, destined in a few days to be pried apart and sold for the value of its own fiber, to the steamboats that arrived in scores every hour, to the most magnificent tall ship, towed up the river and docked a hundred miles inland like some sort of gargantuan traveler from another world, he was surrounded by boats. The vessels concentrated along the levee in New Orleans gave material form to the web of trade that bound the elements of the Mississippi Valley to one another and to the world. Baird's version of the steamboat sublime must also be understood as a sort of global-commercial sublime; on the levee in New Orleans, he confronted the global economy of the nineteenth century from one of its nodal points.

And before him lay the produce of the Mississippi Valley: flour and corn harvested from the fields of Missouri, Kansas, and Illinois; salted beef, pork, and lard from animals raised and slaughtered a thousand miles away; hides and furs from Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota; cattle, hogs, horses, mules

from an animal economy that stretched into the far regions of the West; “Old Monongahela” whisky from distilleries along the Ohio; and tobacco from Kentucky. Almost all of this was destined to be sorted, sold, and sliced into profit before being reshipped up the river to supply the farms and plantations of the Cotton Kingdom. And alongside these goods designated for upriver consumers were the hundreds of thousands of bales of cotton and hogsheads of sugar that would pay their price, each of these tagged with a bright flag that denoted the identity of the merchant responsible for their handling and that forecast their sale in the great metropolitan markets of the Atlantic world: Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Havana, Marseilles, and, above all the others, Liverpool.²⁷

Baird’s account of the barely imaginable commercial wonders of the levee in New Orleans was intermixed with what we might call the Mississippi Valley’s racial sublime. “If he passes through the market, he will see such a scene as he never before witnessed,” he wrote. “Babel itself could not have exceeded it. He will hear French, Spanish, English, and sometimes German languages spoken by Negroes, mulattoes and *quartre unes*, and whites. The words ‘pica-yune’ (6¼ cents) and ‘bit’ (12½ cents) fall upon the ear at every step as one passes through the trafficking crowd.”²⁸ The ceaseless, restless, violent energy of commerce and sexuality on a global scale was momentarily stabilized in imaginary fractions of blood and value—the mutually defining measures of the slave market. And then Baird launched back into the crowd: “Such crowds (especially along that part of the levee which is opposite the market-house) of *Negresses* and *Quartre-unes* (written Quadroons by those who do not understand French) carrying on their *bandanaed* heads, and with solemn pace, a whole *table*—or platform as large as a table—covered with goodies, such as cakes, and apples, and oranges, and figs, and bananas or plantains, and pine-apples, and cocoanuts, &c.”²⁹ The progression of Baird’s account from race to money to exotic fruit implied without invoking—bespoke without speaking—the wonder, the desire, and the terror that defined the city’s sublimated racial-commercial-sexual sublime.³⁰ The eye-catching “quadroons” of these accounts are always already female, the exotic fruit and flora surrounding them suggestive of their worldmaking fertility and their owners’ sexual license. In these women, the unspeakable obvious—slaveholding sexual conquest, itself half-

veiled by the projected concupiscence of white-supremacist fancy—was daily displayed on the levee. The blood-thread history of sexual violence was here represented as sexual novelty.³¹

The sound of slaves singing as they worked was a ready-mixed aspect of descriptions of the levee in New Orleans. Edmund Flagg (who, like Baird, both described the levee as indescribable and likened it to Babel) wrote of the way that the rhythmic beat of the steamboats' pistons was overlaid by the "shrill hiss" of escaping steam, "and the fitful port-song of the Negro firemen rising ever and anon upon the breeze."³² Indeed, the sound of the slaves on the levee singing at their work, "the chant by which the Negro boatmen regulate and beguile their labor on the river," as Frances Trollope put it, reverberated through many travelers' accounts.³³ And beneath the canopy of sound was the spectacle of slave labor. Mrs. Trollope, who found "little that can gratify the eye in New Orleans," made an exception for "the large number of blacks seen on the streets, all labor being performed by them, and the grace and beauty of the Quadroons," comparing such people to "the unwonted aspect of the vegetation" and the "huge and turbid river" as evoking that "species of amusement which proceeds from looking at what one never saw before."³⁴ The rapid cuts between race, value, and consumable goods in these sentences—the fact that the apparently boundless profusion of goods was also an account of the seemingly boundaryless confusion of peoples—signals the underlying source of both the wealth and the human complexity that so fascinated the travelers. Some of the goods on the levee were also people. Or, as Baird put it in his *seriatim* account of the boats on the levee and the cargo they carried, "occasionally, some are to be found which are full of Negroes."³⁵

The comparisons made in these descriptions between "Negroes," goods, money, and steam engines hint at the fascination and apprehension these writers felt on the levee, in the presence of slavery. Following the literary convention that the unimaginable might be approached through its worldly aspect—that the endless Valley of the Mississippi, for instance, might be represented by the goods that ended up on the levee in New Orleans—their accounts were deductive, moving backward from evident effects to unimaginable causes. Analyzed according to this upstreaming logic, the desire and the dread braided together in travelers' accounts stretch toward some sort of finally unfulfilled aspiration to understand the slavery that surrounded them. What hidden force

animated the spectacle of the singing slaves? Was it the drumbeat engines and steam-whistle harmony of the steamboats by which their songs were framed? The rhythm of labor orchestrated by some purpose beyond their own? Or was it the evidence of some unfathomable kindred sorrow?

The heart of the racial-commercial sublime was the spectacle of slaves at work—never more so than when they worked at night, their actions illuminated by the torchlight play of signs and shadows, of evident effects and obscure causes. “When the operation of taking on wood is performed at night, it is picturesque in the extreme,” wrote Charles Mackay. “A gang of Negroes, singing at their work, pass on shore and return laden with a pile of logs of cottonwood and cypress, and pile it upon the deck for the all-devouring furnace.” J. S. Buckingham provided one of the fullest, wildest evocations of slave labor as a sort of dark rite, in his description of slaves loading cotton onto a steamboat moored at a mid-river landing. His account is so utterly symptomatic of the genre that it is worth quoting at length:

The Negroes, from the plantation above had come down to assist in loading their master’s goods. . . . The night was cloudy and dark, [and] strong torchlight was therefore necessary, to enable the labourers to do their work. The pitch-pine of the woods, so full of resinous matter, was accordingly used for this purpose; and the glare of several such torches moving spot to spot without any visible agent—the persons of the Negroes, who carried them as high as they could elevate them in the air, being hidden in the shade—the occasional waving of these torches to and fro, the bright lights on some parts of the cliff, and the deep shadows on others, with occasional flashes of forked lightning, rolling of thunder, and shouting of the men, when they hailed from the summit of the bluff above, or responded from the beach below—formed altogether a scene of . . . terror and grandeur.³⁶

Human beings animated as if bidden by a hidden hand, dark labor darkly concealed, the songs and shouts of the slaves commingled with the basal rhythms of the engines and the low roar of the thunder. So powerful was the impression of the labor of the slaves on the landing, that Buckingham chose the scene as the subject of one of only four engravings in a book of almost 600 pages.

The others were a view of the harbor of Charleston, the town square in Augusta, Georgia, and the sale of slaves beneath the rotunda of the St. Louis Hotel in New Orleans.

In these accounts, the proximity of slaves to fire—the “all-devouring furnace,” the torchlight by which they worked, the lightning flash on the horizon—signals and specifies the disquiet lurking within the promethean grandeur of the river world.³⁷ Buckingham’s account, in particular, is full of foreboding, imbued with dread of the coming storm. In the space that the travelers sometimes described as indescribable, lurked an ever-present but rarely acknowledged fear that the slaves who had built that world might one day rise up and burn it all down. “I can imagine nothing more frightful than a general revolt of the slave population in this country,” wrote Matilda Houston in a passage that summarized impressions gained from conversing with Louisiana planters during her journey down the Mississippi. “They are (especially on plantations) in such a vast majority in proportion to the numbers of white men, that the effects of insubordination would be most disastrous.”³⁸ In Mrs. Houston’s telling, the images of slaves animated in unison by a hidden purpose, of their songs that mixed in the air with the steam of the pent-up boilers, of the torchlight on the landing held high in the hand of a slave, dissolved into a fantasy of racial apocalypse. At the heart of the steamboat sublime resided the terror of Mississippi Valley racial-capitalism: in a word, Haiti.

Whatever currents of history—whatever desires and whatever fears—flowed through the imagery of the steamboat sublime, they culminated in the port of New Orleans. What had been, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a relatively unimportant outpost of European empires—nothing in comparison to Havana or Kingston or Rio—was, by the middle of the century, routinely described as one of the great cities of the world. It had become a city to be numbered among the metropolitan centers of Atlantic commerce: the “great port of the South,” comparable to New York and Liverpool as a center of global trade. By 1850, New Orleans was the third-largest city in the country (the largest in the South); in the 1840s, it was already the *fourth-largest port in the world* in terms of the value of its exports.³⁹ Visitors complained of the city’s muddy streets and miasmic atmosphere: “The sun, acting upon soil so impregnated with moisture, must naturally cause a great miasma and unhealthy effluvia,” wrote Arthur Cunynghame.⁴⁰

Growing out of the swampy earth, however, was a city full of mercantile wonders. J. S. Buckingham called its St. Charles Hotel “the largest and handsomest hotel in the world,” comparing it favorably to seventeen other hotels in London, Paris, New York, Boston, and Baltimore, while noting the height of its dome, the dimensions of its dining rooms, the number of its supporting columns, and the magnificence of its portico, graced in the middle by a sculpture of George Washington presented to the building’s owners by the slave trader John Hagan, Esq. Visitors to New Orleans rarely failed to note the city’s elegant ballrooms, above-ground cemeteries, and proliferation of churches (though the prevalence of Catholic churches, and relative paucity of Protestant ones, disturbed some). No visitor to New Orleans failed to mention the city’s commercial infrastructure: the streets lined with banks and money traders, commission merchants and cotton presses, the shipping and insurance companies, the riverside boardinghouses and gin joints, the gambling parlors and cockfighting pits, the U.S. Mint, and the slave market. The subheads in the twenty-second chapter of J. S. Buckingham’s book *The Slave States of America*, where he described New Orleans, give some idea of the way the city disclosed itself to a visitor: “Hotels: St. Charles, St. Louis, and the Veranda—Merchants’ Exchange—Municipality Hall—Banks, Markets, Public Baths—Cotton Presses, size, extent, and operations—Sugar refining, size, costs, and productions—Water-works, plan and operations—Theaters, the Orleans, St. Charles, and the Camp—Balls, Operas, Concerts, and Masquerades.” The slave market had its own chapter.

As well as a city of merchant bankers and planters, of steamboatmen and slaves, New Orleans was a city of clerks, of vast back rooms where young men calculated, entered, and transferred the goods (and people) they daily passed in the street. That the city’s hypertrophic mercantile architecture—temples of trade built on muddy foundations—represented the material residue of the capital flows that connected the Mississippi Valley to the rest of the world is suggested by two mutually explanatory facts: (1) the state of Louisiana regulated banking more strictly than almost any other state in the union, making it almost impossible to charter a bank outside the city limits of New Orleans; (2) in terms of the proportion of whites living in cities, Louisiana in 1840 was *the most urbanized state in the United States*.⁴¹ Turning one’s back on the goods arrayed on the levee and walking into the city, nineteenth-century

observers encountered the city as financial center, global market hub, and export-processing zone, a city where the pathways ultimately followed by goods and people were presaged in paper: circuits of credit and capital.⁴²

The repatterning of the global economy—American cotton, British capital—was daily made material in the shape of human beings, lined up along the walls of the slave pens, available for inspection. At the epicenter of the Mississippi Valley economy was the city's slave market, the largest in the South. The emergence of the city of New Orleans and of the river trade that sustained it depended on the forcible relocation of as many as one million enslaved people from the declining agricultural regions of slavery's Upper-South heartland (especially Maryland and Virginia) to the emerging regions of the Lower-South cotton boom (Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana).⁴³

During the trading season, thousands of people were daily put up for sale in the slave traders' high-walled "pens"—as many as twenty separate establishments during the peak years of the slave trade, in the 1830s and 1850s. Dressed in blue suits and calico dresses, turned out in front of the pens lining Gravier and Baronne streets in the city's business district, and Chartres and Esplanade just downriver from the French Quarter, these slaves embodied the future of their buyers and the region as a whole: their labor converted the forests of the Mississippi Valley into the cleared fields of the Cotton Kingdom; their reproduction transfigured their flesh and their families into their owners' legacies—white families made, over time, out of the broken pieces of black ones; their domestic service covered over the barbarism of slavery with the social forms of civilization. The commercial civilization of the nineteenth century, the pathways of supposed progress that stretched upriver from New Orleans and out across the broad alluvial plain of the Mississippi Valley (or, for that matter, from the cotton fields of Louisiana to the looms in Lancashire), was enunciated in the labor of its slaves.⁴⁴

In addition to their labor (and that of hundreds of thousands of others who were sold in the smaller slave markets of the Mississippi Valley—at Donaldsonville, Clinton, and East Baton Rouge in Louisiana; at Natchez, Vicksburg, and Jackson in Mississippi; at every roadside tavern, county courthouse, and crossroads across the Lower South), the slaves sold in New Orleans represented a congealed form of the capital upon which the commercial development of the Valley depended. Because, according to the ethical and legal

norms of slaveholding civilization, enslaved people were more partible than land, because there was a ready spot market in human beings in every Southern city on every day of the week, and because they could be moved from place to place depending on the disposition of a lawsuit or the division of an estate, enslaved people represented a primary form of collateral in the credit-based economy of the Mississippi Valley.⁴⁵ The cords of credit and debt—of advance and obligation—that cinched the Atlantic economy together were anchored with the mutually defining values of land and slaves: without land and slaves, there was no credit, and without slaves, land itself was valueless. Promises made in the Mississippi Valley were backed by the value of slaves and fulfilled in their labor. If the dollar was the universal equivalent of the steamboat world, as often as not its value turned out to be backed by flesh rather than gold.

The commercial geography of capitalism and slavery in the Cotton Kingdom was shaped in dialectical interchange with the ecology of the Mississippi Valley. All told, there were something like 17,000 miles of steamboat-navigable river connecting New Orleans to the settlements, village, towns, and cities in the heartland of North America. As the steamboat economy spread upward along inland rivers and streams, it pushed the increasingly archaic upriver economy of the keelboats farther and farther back along the Mississippi's tributary streams, until keelboats serviced only the most remote capillaries of Valley commerce. Somewhere around 1840, however, the steamboat economy reached its physical limit: the point along each of these thousands of waterways beyond which the water was too shallow or the channel too narrow for a steamboat to pass. "No form of inland transportation," the historian Louis Hunter wrote, "has been more bounded by geographic limitations than the river steamboat."⁴⁶

The outer limit of the Mississippi steamboat economy annually expanded and contracted with the climate. In the early months of the spring, the Western rivers swelled with Northern snowmelt, a freshet that traveled southward at a rate of about fifty miles per day, and that was marked by an advancing fog-bank that eventually stretched into the Gulf of Mexico. As the amount of water in the rivers declined through the summer months, the ambit of the economy shrank; by the end of summer, where traffic through the Valley was possible at all, it was limited to smaller, lighter-drafting boats, the so-called

Mosquito Fleet. With seasonal rains, the rivers rose again in the fall, although traffic along the upper reaches of the inland network was intermittently halted when the rivers froze.⁴⁷

Below Memphis, the Mississippi generally remained navigable year-round, but the steamboat trade was nevertheless subject to the water that supported it. As the Mississippi flowed across its broad alluvial plain, it meandered from side to side: “On the Mississippi,” wrote Hunter, “the river bed was a thing literally alive, writhing and twisting in its course, its contours in constant process of change. The channel followed no regular and fixed course, but swung from one side of the river bed to the other, shifting its position with every change of volume and velocity of the water.”⁴⁸ As the river moved horizontally across the face of the Valley, the bed beneath its surface shifted along a vertical axis. The stronger current on the outside of its bend eroded its banks and deepened the channel on the outside edge of every curve. What was cut away upstream was gradually deposited in the form of sandbars that formed on the inside edges of the downstream riverbends, where the current was slower and the water shallower. Over time, that is to say, the river became more difficult to navigate: its bends more extreme—its bed more fickle—until at some point it jumped its course entirely.

When the outside-edge currents on either side of one of the river’s sinuous turns finally cut through the land that separated them, a “cutoff” formed, transferring huge spits of lands that had once formed the curve’s inside bank to the opposite side of the river, and shortening the river’s downstream course by twenty or thirty miles at a stroke.⁴⁹ Mark Twain famously described the way that the movement of the river reorganized both the legal and commercial geography of its banks: “The town of Delta used to be three miles below Vicksburg; a recent cut-off has radically changed the position, and Delta is now *two miles* above Vicksburg. . . . A cut-off plays havoc with boundary lines and jurisdictions: for instance, a man is living in the state of Mississippi today, a cut-off occurs tonight, and tomorrow the man finds himself on the other side of the river, within the boundaries and subject to the laws of Louisiana!”⁵⁰ The Mississippi Valley was less a fixed place than a slow-moving ecological process—one that, as Twain suggested, could undermine the human aspirations that depended on it.

As the river pursued its “sidewise” course, cutting away its banks and filling

in its elbows with silt, it undermined the trees that stood on the shore. Especially during times of high water, the river was full of trees cut away from its banks. As they floated downstream, these tree trunks became waterlogged, and when the high water that had loosed them from the shore began to subside, and the tree trunks became too heavy for the current to carry them any farther, they lodged in the riverbed like gigantic halberds waiting to puncture the hull of a passing steamboat. Those trees which lodged pointing upstream were known as “snags”; those oriented downstream, as “sawyers,” for their undulating motion as the river washed over them. Depending on the stage of the river, these accidents-waiting-to-happen could be identified from the pilot house of an oncoming steamboat, if one was lucky. They lay concealed just beneath the surface, making it difficult for all but the most experienced readers of the river to see, or submerged in malign anticipation of the low water that would render them once again dangerous to passing boats.⁵¹ As snags accumulated—as snags snagged other snags—they began to form barriers that strained downstream matter from the river’s current: wood, rocks, sand, silt. Eventually, this mid-river buildup formed logjams in the middle of the river; sometimes those logjams grew into islands, or even “rafts,” which stretched from one bank of the river to the other, effectively damming its flow and rendering shipboard passage impossible. Beneath its smooth surface, the Mississippi River was constantly in the process of becoming something else.

Efforts to limit the ways that the river changed—efforts to stem the tide of time and create a stable space over which to travel and trade—were the “internal improvements” imagined by the commercial visionaries of the nineteenth-century Western waters. Most likely to be cited by the folklorists of life on the nineteenth-century Mississippi were the bullheaded improvers and midnight ditch-diggers who cut through the narrow necks between riverbends, straightening and shortening the channel of trade, while supposedly vastly increasing the value of their formerly landlocked plantations by stealing their neighbors’ frontage.⁵² Other visions were more public spirited; the most ambitious perhaps was the never-realized plan to create a colossal system of reservoirs that could be used to eliminate the seasonality of the river trade by storing water in the spring and releasing it into the system during times of low water.⁵³ Engineers and laborers were more successful in the case of the Red River Raft, which blocked the Red between Natchitoches and Shreveport. The raft was a

snag that had been accumulating for 600 years: dead branches and trees were pulled from the wandering river's alluvial banks and implanted themselves in the bed; later trees piled up until a sort of skeletal island formed in the river's course; silt and more wood filled out the blockage until it reached from shore to shore; plants and trees began to grow atop it, their roots binding it ever more tightly together. By the time U.S. government engineers and laborers under the direction of Henry Shreve began to clear the raft in 1833, 150 miles of the Red had been transformed into a swampy morass of pools and rivulets, navigable by only the smallest steamboats during the highest water. The work was not completed until 1880.⁵⁴

Like all similar efforts at environmental reengineering, the commercial "improvement" of the Mississippi River was subject to ecological feedback and unforeseen consequences—to what the historian Timothy Mitchell has called "overflows."⁵⁵ The exponential growth in the number of wood-burning steamboats on the river put pressure on riparian forests. By the middle of the century, it was increasingly difficult for boats to find fuel within an economical distance of the river anywhere along its length from Cairo to New Orleans. Deforestation along the banks of the river increased soil erosion; the river meandered more frequently and forcefully, undermining its downstream banks and producing obstructions in its wake. The improvers responded by trying to control the river's channel: dredging, straightening, and leveeing.⁵⁶ Although it has apparently escaped the notice of generations of river improvers down to the present day, a flatter, faster, straighter river was more prone to flooding. As Arthur Cunynghame put it in 1851 when writing about the cutoffs by which the river was shortened and straightened, "The assistance which they have received . . . has indirectly proved the cause of great destruction to property; the same fall in the water in its flow towards the ocean, which by nature made the distance seventy-five miles, having thus by the art of man been limited to twenty-five, has caused the stream, during a sudden rise of the river to descend with an increased and undue velocity [and] caused the destruction of many levees as well as plantations."⁵⁷ Once overtopped by a flood, levees ceased to be man-made barriers that protected commercial agriculture from the vagaries of the river on which it depended, and became man-made obstacles in the pathway of water trying to return to the riverbed. Or, to put this differently: levees created swamps.

The dialectic of economy and ecology was nowhere more apparent than in the technical design of the steamboats that populated the Western waters. The backwash effects of river improvement never dampened the flow of capital into the river trade, and each of the thousands of steamboats constructed between 1820 and 1860 represented a sort of commercial-ecological-mechanical hybrid: a speculation made on the margin between the specific challenges to navigation posed by the Mississippi Valley environment and the potential rewards of owning a boat designed to overcome them. The “brilliant success” of the steamboat, wrote the traveler James Hall, was the dual product of the “wealth of the western merchant and the skill of the western mechanic.”⁵⁸

Mississippi River steamboats were empirical machines. As the historian and nautical archaeologist Adam Kane has shown, the development of the Western riverboat, which reached its consummate form in the huge steamers that traveled the lower Mississippi, took place in a theoretical vacuum. There was no journal of steamboat architecture where engineers circulated scale drawings, shared tables that calibrated cargo weight to displacement ratios, and presented their latest calculations of the per-square-inch thermodynamic pressure necessary to drive a 300-ton steamboat upward against 650 cubic feet of water flowing downstream at three miles per hour. Indeed, there were no such drawings, tables, or calculations at all.⁵⁹ Mississippi River steamboats were designed according to rules of thumb, rather than the laws of physics. That is, Mississippi River steamboats were designed according to plans and principles that owed as much to the properties of the commercial world as they did to those of the physical world.

Steamboats were generally custom built: fabricated in the shipyards of the Ohio Valley (close to the iron ore on which they depended) according to the specifications of a particular buyer. As an article in the *Wheeling Gazette* put it in 1846, “Boats are constructed . . . for particular trades, and are specially adapted for the purposes for which they are intended.”⁶⁰ The boats, that is to say, were reverse-engineered to suit the purpose of carrying large loads on shallow rivers full of underwater obstructions: their design maximized cargo capacity in relation to draft. Rather than having a deep rigid keel to maintain the shape of the boat, cut the current, and hold the boat on course against crosswinds, Western steamboats were built flat and light. Their draft was shallow enough to pass over obstructions, their keel flexible enough to bend over a

sandbar without breaking; their hulls were lengthened and their cargo capacity was increased by internal “hog chains” that counterpoised the ends of their elongated hulls, like the cables that hold up a suspension bridge.⁶¹ While the earliest Western boats had snag chambers, which reduced the risk of sinking, even this small concession to safety was soon given over to cargo. The evolution of the Western steamboat—longer, lighter, more flexible—was a piecemeal process, occurring in fits and starts, spurred by the ever-more-ambitious specifications of various buyers and the gradually accreting observations of various engineers.⁶² The resulting boats were something new under the sun: they “flagrantly ignored the conventional wisdom of [their] day . . . sail[ing] on the water instead of *in* it.”⁶³ By the 1830s, Mississippi Valley steamboats could carry more freight on less water than any other boats in the history of the world. They were like bubbles.

Unlike oceangoing vessels, steamboats were built above the water line; as much as 80 percent of their total structure was visible to observers on the shore. Steamboat engineers solved the problem of increasing cargo capacity while decreasing draft—of working within the ecological parameters of the Mississippi Valley while expanding market share—by building layers of superstructure out of light, flexible boards, primarily pine. The main deck of a Mississippi steamboat rode just above the water line. The deck was generally open on the sides; at its center was the engine room; beneath was the shallow hold. The open space on the deck provided most of the space for cargo on Western steamboats, as well as space for deck passengers, who passed their days and nights packed in amid the cargo. The area of the deck was often extended by “guards,” which were effectively cargo platforms hung from the edge of the hull, sometimes exceeding its width by as much as 75 percent. Above, built out over the open deck, was the “boiler deck” (so called even though the boilers were actually located on the main deck), which housed the ship’s cabin—the long central parlor, surrounded by staterooms, for which Mississippi River steamboats were justly famous. Still higher, on the roof of the main cabin, and cut through with skylights that illuminated the parlors below, was the “hurricane deck,” mostly open to the air, with a central enclosure containing cabins for the crew. Finally, atop that, as much as fifty feet above the water line, was the pilothouse, the small glassed-in enclosure from which the boat was steered.⁶⁴

Mississippi River steamboats were gigantic commercial platforms, built layer-upon-layer to maximize the horizontal surface area available to carry cargo. During the cotton season, downriver boats were packed so high and tight that the only structural elements of the boat visible from the shore were the pilothouse and the smokestacks. The rest was encased in layers of cotton: 500-pound bales packed five or six deep and a dozen high.⁶⁵ Although they were often finely ornamented and richly appointed—style-setting “floating palaces” that defined the “Steamboat Gothic” style of rivertown architecture—beneath their polished surface, Mississippi River steamboats were really floating warehouses, vessels designed and built to the specifications of the goods they were supposed to carry.

The nineteenth-century commonplace that a steamboat was “an engine on a raft with \$11,000 of jigsaw work [fretwork]” hinted at what the leading historian of Western riverboats has termed “their most distinctive technical feature”: their high-pressure engines. The low-pressure condensing steam engines used on the earliest Western steamboats represented the most advanced technology of the day. Low-pressure engines were driven by a relatively modest flow of steam (around ten to twelve pounds per square inch) that was released into a piston cylinder and then channeled into a condenser, where it was rapidly cooled by a jet of cold water, creating a vacuum. The first blast of steam pushed the piston upward, driving the engine wheel; the vacuum sucked it back. Indeed, most of the energy used to drive the engine was produced by the vacuum, rather than by the initial burst of steam—the engine derived its power by creating a differential in atmospheric pressure when hot steam met cold water in the condenser. The high-pressure engines, which quickly predominated on Western riverboats, did away with much of the technical complexity of the low-pressure condensing-vacuum engines. High-pressure engines worked by using a great deal more steam pressure (around 100 pounds per square inch by the 1840s) to drive the piston directly; rather than being channeled into a condenser, excess steam was simply released into the air.⁶⁶

The high-pressure engine was the defining technical feature of the Western steamboat. Whereas the low-pressure engines employed on Eastern and European steamboats relied on precise tolerances to ensure the creation of a vacuum, high-pressure engines simply overcame any imprecision in manufacture (which caused leakage) through a vast overemployment of power. Whereas

the low-pressure engine used cold water to create a pressure-increasing temperature differential, lowering the overall running heat of the engine, the high-pressure engine simply pushed power from the top of the scale. Whereas the low-pressure engine, with its reversed flows, its condenser, and its cold-water line relied on huge heavy machinery, the high-pressure engine had smaller, lighter boilers that reduced the ratio of boat to freight. Whereas a low-pressure engine made an engineer dependent on Eastern manufacturers for precisely fitting parts, a high-pressure engine could be fixed in mid-river by a blacksmith. Whereas a low-pressure engine was sufficient to power an aquiline steamboat on the deep waters of the Hudson, a high-pressure engine could produce enough power to drive a flat-bottomed steamboat over a sandbar going upriver on the Mississippi.⁶⁷ High-pressure engines were cheaper, lighter, simpler, and more powerful.

They were also less efficient and more prone to explosion. They were a dirtier, more dangerous technology, already antiquated at the moment of their increasing employment on the Mississippi; their usage, according to one critic, “shows how far prejudice, and a spirit of servile imitation, can prevent advances dictated by science or successful experience elsewhere.”⁶⁸ Depending on their size, their load, the condition of the river, whether they were running up or down, and so on, Mississippi steamboats used anywhere from twelve to seventy-five cords of wood a day (one cord is 128 cubic feet of wood). Unlike oceangoing vessels, which had to trade cargo space for fuel at the beginning of every journey, steamboats could stop along the way and take on more wood, which they generally did twice a day. The steamboat economy came to support hundreds of wood yards along the river’s course, one every several miles on the busiest sections of the river. The historian Adam Kane has described the techno-commercial-ecological history of high-pressure, wood-burning steamboats like this: “Although the fuel consumption for the engine type was high, this drawback was relatively minor in light of the West’s plentiful and inexpensive wood supply.”⁶⁹ Another way to say this would be: the deforestation (and consequent increase in soil erosion) of the Mississippi Valley was the condition that made possible the expansion of the steamboat economy.

The resolution of the demands of that economy with the limitations of the environment has often been told—most famously by Mark Twain in *Life on*

the Mississippi—as a story of the skill of the riverboat pilots, who steered their commercial cargo safely through the hazards and shoals of the lower Mississippi. Because the river so frequently and persistently changed course, the pilots could not use maps. Instead, they navigated by committing the river to memory, riding the stronger currents on the outside edge of the river downstream, and holding to the slack water on the inside of the curves when fighting the current upstream. Continually jockeying for efficiency, each had to cross frequently from one side to the other to maintain the most advantageous position, memorizing 2,000 miles of crossovers, shortcuts, and obstacles. Skilled pilots knew all of the onshore landmarks by which they judged their course, using them to track changes in the river—the tree that marked the truest passage across the English Turn, the eroded bank that signaled the river’s stage, the density of driftwood that told whether the water was rising or falling—reading the face of the river to reveal its hidden third dimension, spotting the faint dimple on the water’s surface which meant “a wreck or a rock was buried there that could tear the life out of the strongest vessel that ever floated.”⁷⁰ They had to do all this upriver and downriver, on high water and low water, in daylight and in darkness.

Steamboat pilots were the era’s emblematic empirics; the way they knew the river was a byword for the precedence of practical over theoretical knowledge. Where perception met experience, a new world of insight unfolded before the eyes of the seasoned riverboat pilot. Almost subconsciously, he recognized that the appearance of the sun denoted the next day’s wind forecast, the movement of a log signaled a rising river, the roiling surface of the water marked countless sandbars, shoals, and channels. To his skilled eye, the totality of the environment—water, earth, sky, and everything contained therein—served as a barely legible narrative of hidden snares and hazards, the ever-changing, ever-fatal rhythms of the river world. Standing in the pilothouse, fifty feet above the river, the steamboat pilot was a human being whose abilities—whose eyesight, imagination, hand on the wheel—determined whether a given shipment of goods would make it through the obstacle course of ecological hazards. Or, reversing course for a moment, we might say that the riverboat pilot was a human being whose abilities were determined at the meeting of commercial imperatives and ecological parameters: a person formed by the river

trade. The pilot's empirical knowledge was a way of coordinating the senses and the flow of time, through the use of memory, observation, deduction, prediction, reaction.

In this way, a pilot was not so different from the era's other emblematic figure: the riverboat gambler. Gamblers were speculators on the flow of time, on the divination of undisclosed parameters. A poker hand, once dealt, presented a gambler with a pattern of visible clues and unknown possibilities: two cards showing, say, and three cards lying face down. The trick of poker was to be able to calculate (or at least estimate) the possible combinations that could be made between the shown and concealed cards. Betting was framed against the underlying knowledge that there were only fifty-two cards in the deck—that there was a limited set of given facts as yet unrevealed. As the players watched one another play—who bet, who held, who folded, who flinched—they refined their estimates of what might be hiding in the cards. To employ the conventional usage: they “navigated” the hand. The cards in a given hand had names. The first card dealt was the “hole” card; the middle cards were the “flop” or “turn” cards; the final card, dealt face down—the unknown known that would determine who won the hand—was called “the river.”

4

Limits to Capital

We suffer the mighty despotism of steam to roll over us with the cold and grinding regularity of fate, and, shutting our ears to the shrieks of its victims, congratulate ourselves on the fact that on the whole we are more powerful, rich, and civilized than we could have been without it.

—*Charleston Mercury*, 1838

AS THE MISSISSIPPI Valley expanded, thousands of investors rushed to launch their boats on the river. “No property pays so great an interest as that of steamboats upon these rivers. A trip of a few weeks yields one-hundred per-cent upon the capital employed.”¹ Apart from land and slaves, steamboats were the leading investment sector in the Mississippi Valley economy after the 1820s. “The Great West,” wrote one of the steamboat’s boosters, “has now a commerce within its limits as valuable as that which floats on the ocean between the United States and Europe.”² And the effect on upriver commerce was an order of magnitude greater than even the exponential growth of the downriver trade: “Previous to the year 1817, the whole commerce from New Orleans to the upper country was carried in about twenty barges, averaging one-hundred tons each, and making but one trip a year, so that the importation from New Orleans to the upper country was carried in about twenty barges, averaging one-hundred tons each, and making but one trip a year, so that importations from New Orleans in one year could not have much exceeded the freight brought up by one of our largest steamboats in the course of a season.”³

By the middle of the 1840s, as we have seen, the steamboat economy had

discovered its outer limit: every inland backwater that had just enough water in the spring to carry a steamboat was already being serviced.⁴ There were no more new routes to establish, no more hinterlands to draw into trade; the geographic limit of the frontier of accumulation had been reached. But this did not mean that entrepreneurs stopped investing in steamboats; it meant only that their investments were less likely to be successful. By 1848, steamboat owners were trying to protect their own market share by advising others to get out of the business: “Let those who can with convenience withdraw from this fascinating business of steamboating. Let all who are not involved in it stand aloof until the tonnage on the rivers be reduced to the wants of the country; until remunerating prices can be obtained.”⁵ As capital continued to flow into the river trade and as more and more boats crowded into the competition for a given number of rates, steamboat owners faced a falling rate of profit.⁶ They responded by running their boats harder, faster, and longer—an intensification that sometimes bolstered short-term profits, but only by increasing the risks to crew, cargo, and passengers.

Because the river was their infrastructure, because they ran on “the common highway of the west,” steamboats required comparatively small initial startup investments. In contrast to the railways, which required the purchase of lands for the right-of-way, the laying of tracks, and the building of terminals, as well as the elaboration of a subsidiary coal-mining and coal-delivery economy, a steamboat had merely to be built and launched to begin business. The commercial organization of steamboat companies generally reflected these relatively low barriers to entry. Rather than being owned by joint-stock companies or highly leveraged investment consortia, most steamboats were owned by individuals (often their captain) or small partnerships of merchants and rivermen who went in together on a given boat.⁷

The hostile environment and the fearsome way in which the boats were often run—over sandbars and snags, onto the bank at riverside landings, wide-open, around the clock—meant that steamboats depreciated quickly. “As the boat was not expected to last more than five or six years, at best,” wrote the traveler James Hall, “and would probably be burned up or sunk within that period, it was considered good economy to reduce expenditures, and to make money by any means during the brief existence of the vessel. Boats were hastily and slightly built, furnished with cheap engines, and placed under the con-

trol of wholly incompetent persons.”⁸ Steamboats, Hall suggested, were disposable. Capital, of course, was not, at least not to capitalists. To make certain that they could spirit their money out of its temporary vessel in the event of a snagging, sinking, burning, exploding, or otherwise decomposing en route, steamboat owners bought insurance.⁹ Though they were often limited to three-quarters of the supposed value of the boat (to prevent owners from simply burning their own boats to save themselves the trouble of running them up and down the river), these insurance policies represented another dimension of the resolution of the clashing commercial, mechanical, and ecological imperatives of the steamboat economy: insurance insulated capital from the hazards of taking the temporary form of a steamboat.

There were two principal ways to do business in the steamboat economy: the transient trade and the packet trade. Transients ran routes determined by the business they could find on the river. For instance, the *Empire*, according to one of her crew, “was confined to no particular trade, running wherever most inducements in the way of business offered.” Sometimes she ran to St. Louis; sometimes, to Louisville; sometimes, all the way to Cincinnati. The question of whether to continue upriver or return to New Orleans was reopened at every stop, and was determined according to the freight available for shipping on the levee.¹⁰ Passengers, or those with freight to ship, often simply waited on the levee for a boat to appear on the river, signaled it, and negotiated a price for their passage.¹¹ Because transients’ journeys were charted according to their loads and because their loads were never certain until they had left the shore, their schedules were uncertain and their rates were low—once the boat had committed to a given course, it was in the owner’s interest to add as much business along the way as possible. “The great object of all these boats is to procure cargo,” Matilda Houston explained, “and with this end in view, they of course endeavor, as much as possible, to outstrip each other and arrive first at the town or landing where cotton and molasses or other cargo is likely to be waiting for them.”¹² Transients competed fiercely with one another for market share, especially during the low-water season, when routes shrank and more boats crowded onto smaller rivers in search of cargo and passengers.

The transient trade was notorious for shady business practices. As James Hall put it, “The most inexcusable devices were used to get freight and passengers.”¹³ Tickets were sold and freight was contracted on the basis of an an-

nounced departure time that receded ever further into the future, following a hope of cargo that never materialized. Emblematic was the story of John Lobdell, who found himself sleeping rough on a night in July 1836, while the captain of the *James Madison* searched the city of New Orleans for crewmen on a journey that had been scheduled to begin hours before. Lobdell's baggage was already aboard the boat, and he could not unload it himself, having relied on the since-departed crew of the boat to haul it all aboard. He was, in effect, being held hostage by his possessions and his aversion to taking on an even greater risk—that of trying to find another boat, which itself might not depart on time.¹⁴ Passengers like Lobdell hedged their bets in various ways: they would purchase tickets for only small stages of their journeys so that they could bail out and switch to another boat (or re-up) as circumstances along the way dictated.¹⁵ For both owners and passengers, the transient trade was characterized by a constantly shifting set of speculative possibilities; it had all of the predictability of a riverboat card game.

Packets ran fixed routes according to fixed schedules. Bolstered by mail contracts, which guaranteed the packets cargo and guaranteed the post office an increased degree of regularity, the packet trade grew throughout the 1840s and 1850s.¹⁶ In return for higher ticket prices and freight rates, packets absorbed the risk of uncertain cargoes; whether or not the staterooms were full and the deck packed, the packet would depart on schedule. For those with freight to ship, the packet trade offered obvious advantages. In the cotton market, where prices were volatile, packets offered the best chance of getting cotton to market quickly. For planters with cotton to sell (or, really, for anyone simply hoping to get someplace within some measure of time slightly more predictable than “whenever”), a guaranteed departure time was worth the price premium.

Of course there were no absolute guarantees in the steamboat business; once a packet left the dock, it was subject to all the contingencies and hazards that characterized life on the Mississippi. Though leaving for a fixed port at a set time did not clear the river of snags, straighten its channel, or deepen its waters, the packets did transform the river trade, concentrating it at given points along the way (rather than at every plantation landing that fired a signal indicating a load to be carried) and anchoring the inherent unpredictability of the steamboat business with at least one fixed point in time.¹⁷

As more and more boats competed along a given number of routes, the

issue of boats' "character" and "reputation" became central features of the steamboat trade. Arthur Cunynghame portrayed the competition that characterized the river trade in describing a scene on the levee at Cairo, where he switched downriver boats at the cost of a "few extra dollars." "I was particularly struck with the neat and clean appearance of the *Lexington*. . . . She was advertised to sail on the following day for New Orleans, and her draught of water was considerably less than that of the *Atlantic*."¹⁸ If assurances like the ones offered by the *Lexington* proved reliable, and if that reliability was publicly discussed, a steamboat developed a reputation—an invaluable asset amid the word-of-mouth information economy in the era before consumer reports. The *Missouri*, remembered one of her crewmen, was a boat with a "very good character," and the captain did not want her detained at the dock for any reason.¹⁹ As Cunynghame's comparison of the drafts of the boats suggests, even more important than a reputation for departing on time could be one for arriving intact. The *Henry Clay*, wrote Harriet Martineau in 1833, "had the highest reputation of any boat on the river, having made ninety-six trips without accident, a rare feat on this dangerous river."²⁰

Reputation in a word-of-mouth economy was fickle—a boat that was only as good as its last journey was excessively vulnerable on the changing currents of the Mississippi—and so steamboat owners competed for customers by ensuring that their vessels would catch the eye. "To the entire population spread over both banks between Baton Rouge and St. Louis, they were palaces," wrote one owner. "They tallied with the citizen's dream of what magnificence was, and satisfied it."²¹ Twain described the sensational effect on the average ticket holder, who was allowed for the first time to enter a space characterized by the sort of opulence familiar only to world travelers and local elites: "When he stepped aboard a big fine steamboat, he entered a new and marvelous world: chimney-tops cut to counterfeit a spraying crown of plumes—and maybe painted red; pilot-house, hurricane-deck, boiler-deck guards, all garnished with white wooden filigree-work of fanciful patterns; gilt acorns topping the derricks; gilt deer horns over the big bell; gaudy symbolical picture on the paddle-box, possibly."²² The spatial limitations of riverine trade, the falling rate of profit, and the overaccumulation of capital in steamboats—more boats making less money along a fixed number of routes—produced the greatest wonders of Western architecture. As Twain's insistent contrast of surface and

depth—counterfeit, garnish, guilt—suggests, there was something ersatz about steamboat opulence, something unreliable, temporary, disposable.

The greatest of the Mississippi Valley's floating palaces were also built for speed. River lore focused on steamboat races. Twain remembered the "flush times" of steamboating as an era when races were fixed several weeks in advance, and up and down the Valley "people talked only of the coming race." Wood-supply boats were deployed in advance along the river, and the steamboats refueled as they ran.²³ No aspect of the steamboat business elicited so much contemporary discussion as the rate at which various boats made the trips between cities along the river—the upriver journey from New Orleans to St. Louis being the emblematic challenge route. Record times were sought after, recorded, and publicized. They marked the leading edge of steamboat owners' efforts to separate themselves from the ever-increasing fleet of boats competing for business along the fixed length of the river. On May 9, 1844, the *St. Louis Republican* reported that the *J. M. White* had set new records both downstream and upstream between St. Louis and New Orleans: "three days and sixteen hours on the way down; three days and twenty-three hours on the way back."²⁴ Mark Twain reproduced a table in *Life on the Mississippi* that tracked declining record times between New Orleans and the principal cities of the Valley over the course of the steamboat era (see Table 2). These record times, printed and circulated in newspapers, recapitulated and recycled in conversation and legend, were a defining element of the commercial culture of the Mississippi Valley. They set the standard by which steamboats were judged and to which their owners aspired.

The sense that time was speeding up and space shrinking was daily renewed along the levee, as the boats loaded and gathered steam for departure. They made a show of the way they pulled away from the dock, competing with one another to make the most dramatic start up the river. Again, Mark Twain: "Steamer after steamer straightens herself up, gathers all her strength, and presently comes swinging by, under a tremendous head of steam, with flag flying, black smoke rolling, and her entire crew of firemen and deck-hands (usually swarthy Negroes) massed together on the forecastle, the best 'voice' on the lot towering from the midst (being mounted on the capstan), waving his hat or a flag, and all roaring a mighty chorus."²⁵ The moment when a steamboat gathered its force, engaged its wheel, and pulled away from the levee, its

straining engines in harmony with the songs of black labor en masse, is one we have encountered before: it is the characteristic moment of the steamboat sublime. It turns out to have been a moment shaped by the limits of the steamboat economy, the increasing competition and falling rate of profit that led owners and captains to compete for business in showy departures that supposedly presaged rapid journeys and timely arrivals. Of course, this representative moment was also the moment at which a steamboat was most likely to explode.²⁶

BETTER REMEMBERED than the record times and more frequent than the races, steamboat explosions were the landmark events in the history of the era. "The history of steam navigation on the Western rivers is a history of wholesale murder and unintentional suicide," wrote one critic in 1851.²⁷ Arthur Cunynghame described the Mississippi as "a river proverbial for accidents, such as the snagging and blowing up of steamers," and remembered boarding a steamboat with a sense that he would be "lucky" if he survived the trip. If Cunynghame's journal of his time on the Mississippi is any guide, accidents were a constant topic of conversation among travelers. In the course of a two-hour conversation one evening, he and the ship's engineer discussed the explosions of the *Kate Kearney*, the *Kate Fleming*, and the *Santa Fe*. The next morning they passed the grounded *St. Paul*. Cunynghame noted that "the heads of snags constantly protruded themselves about the surface," and discussed with a clerk two prior occasions on which the man had witnessed snagging: the time that the clerk had seen a snag "run through the forecabins and crush the passengers in their berths," and the snagging and sinking of the *Tennessee*, with "six-hundred souls aboard, a hundred and eighty being drowned, the rest having to remain for thirty-six hours up to their middle in the water." The following morning, they edged through a passage of river so "matted with snags" that it was "called the grave of steamers." That afternoon, Cunynghame watched a boat with a diving bell raise "a large number of pigs of lead" and a "large assortment of English crockery" from a boat that had sunk twenty-two years before. In addition to all this, during the time he was on the river, he heard news of one steamboat exploding, one burning, and two snagging, one of which sank.²⁸

Over the course of the steamboat era, there were about 1,100 serious steamboat accidents on the Western rivers; about 5 percent of the tonnage on the

Table 2. The record of some famous trips, from Commodore Rollingpin's Almanac (D., H., and M. stand for Days, Hours, and Minutes).

FAST TIME ON THE WESTERN WATERS									
FROM NEW ORLEANS TO NATCHEZ—268 MILES									
Run made in					Run made in				
	D.	H.	M.		H.	M.		H.	M.
1814. <i>Orleans</i>	6	6	40	1844. <i>Sultana</i>	19	45			
1814. <i>Comet</i>	5	10	0	1851. <i>Magnolia</i>	19	50			
1815. <i>Enterprise</i>	4	11	20	1853. <i>A. L. Shotwell</i>	19	49			
1817. <i>Washington</i>	4	0	0	1853. <i>Southern Belle</i>	20	3			
1817. <i>Shelby</i>	3	20	0	1853. <i>Princess</i> (No. 4)	20	26			
1819. <i>Paragon</i>	3	8	0	1853. <i>Eclipse</i>	19	47			
1828. <i>Tecumseh</i>	3	1	20	1855. <i>Princess</i> (New)	18	53			
1834. <i>Tuscarora</i>	1	21	0	1855. <i>Natchez</i> (New)	17	30			
1838. <i>Natchez</i>	1	17	0	1856. <i>Princess</i> (New)	17	30			
1840. <i>Ed. Shippen</i>	1	8	0	1870. <i>Natchez</i> (New)	17	17			
1842. <i>Belle of the West</i>	1	18	0	1870. <i>R. E. Lee</i>	17	11			

FROM NEW ORLEANS TO CAIRO—1,024 MILES									
Run made in					Run made in				
	D.	H.	M.		D.	H.	M.		D.
1844. <i>J. M. White</i>	3	6	44	1869. <i>Dexter</i>	3	6	20		
1852. <i>Reindeer</i>	3	12	25	1870. <i>Natchez</i>	3	4	34		
1853. <i>Eclipse</i>	3	4	4	1870. <i>R. E. Lee</i>	3	1	0		
1853. <i>A. L. Shotwell</i>	3	3	40						

FROM NEW ORLEANS TO LOUISVILLE—1,440 MILES									
Run made in					Run made in				
	D.	H.	M.		D.	H.	M.		D.
1815. <i>Enterprise</i>	25	2	40	1840. <i>Ed. Shippen</i>	5	14	0		
1817. <i>Washington</i>	25	0	0	1842. <i>Belle of the West</i>	6	14	0		
1817. <i>Shelby</i>	20	4	20	1843. <i>Duke of Orleans</i>	5	23	0		
1819. <i>Paragon</i>	18	10	0	1844. <i>Sultana</i>	5	12	0		
1828. <i>Tecumseh</i>	8	4	0	1849. <i>Bostona</i>	5	8	0		
1834. <i>Tuscarora</i>	7	16	0	1851. <i>Belle Key</i>	4	23	0		
1837. <i>Gen. Brown</i>	6	22	0	1852. <i>Reindeer</i>	4	20	45		
1837. <i>Randolph</i>	6	22	0	1852. <i>Eclipse</i>	4	19	0		
1837. <i>Empress</i>	6	17	0	1853. <i>A. L. Shotwell</i>	4	10	20		
1837. <i>Sultana</i>	6	15	0	1853. <i>Eclipse</i>	4	9	30		

FROM NEW ORLEANS TO DONALDSONVILLE—78 MILES									
Run made in					Run made in				
	H.	M.		H.	M.		H.	M.	
1852. <i>A. L. Shotwell</i>	5	52		1860. <i>Atlantic</i>	5	11			
1855. <i>Eclipse</i>	5	42		1860. <i>Gen. Quitman</i>	5	6			
1854. <i>Sultana</i>	5	12		1865. <i>Ruth</i>	4	43			
1856. <i>Princess</i>	4	51		1870. <i>R. E. Lee</i>	4	59			

FROM NEW ORLEANS TO ST. LOUIS—1,218 MILES

	Run made in				Run made in		
	D.	H.	M.		D.	H.	M.
1844. <i>J. M. White</i>	3	23	9	1870. <i>Natchez</i>	3	21	57
1849. <i>Missouri</i>	4	19	0	1870. <i>R. E. Lee</i>	3	18	14
1869. <i>Dexter</i>	4	9	0				

FROM LOUISVILLE TO CINCINNATI—141 MILES

	Run made in				Run made in	
	D.	H.	M.		H.	M.
1819. <i>Gen. Pike</i>	1	16	0	1843. <i>Congress</i>	12	20
1819. <i>Paragon</i>	1	14	20	1846. <i>Ben Franklin</i> (No. 6)	11	45
1822. <i>Wheeling Packet</i>	1	10	0	1852. <i>Alleghaney</i>	10	38
1837. <i>Moselle</i>		12	0	1852. <i>Pittsburgh</i>	10	23
1843. <i>Duke of Orleans</i>		12	0	1853. <i>Telegraph</i> (No. 3)	9	52

FROM LOUISVILLE TO ST. LOUIS—750 MILES

	Run made in				Run made in		
	D.	H.	M.		D.	H.	M.
1842. <i>Congress</i>	2	1	0	1854. <i>Northerner</i>	1	22	30
1854. <i>Pike</i>	1	23	0	1855. <i>Southerner</i>	1	19	0

FROM CINCINNATI TO PITTSBURG—490 MILES

	Run made in			Run made in	
	D.	H.		D.	H.
1850. <i>Telegraph</i> (No. 2)	1	17	1852. <i>Pittsburgh</i>	1	15
1851. <i>Buckeye State</i>	1	16			

FROM ST. LOUIS TO ALTON—30 MILES

	Run made in			Run made in	
	H.	M.		H.	M.
1853. <i>Altona</i>	1	35	1876. <i>War Eagle</i>	1	37
1876. <i>Golden Eagle</i>	1	37			

MISCELLANEOUS RUNS

In June 1859, the *St. Louis and Keokuk Packet*, City of Louisiana, made the run from St. Louis to Keokuk (214 miles) in 16 hours and 20 minutes, the best time on record.

In 1868 the steamer *Hawkeye State*, of the Northern Line Packet Company, made the run from St. Louis to St. Paul (800 miles) in a day and 20 hours. Never was beaten.

In 1854, the steamer *Polar Star* made the run from St. Louis to St. Joseph, on the Missouri River, in 64 hours. In July 1856, the steamer *Jas. H. Lucas*, Andy Wineland, Master, made the same run in 60 hours and 57 minutes. The distance between the ports is 600 miles, and when the difficulties of navigating the turbulent Missouri are taken into consideration, the performance of the *Lucas* deserves especial mention.

(cont.)

Table 2 (continued)

THE RUN OF THE *ROBERT E. LEE*

The time made by the *R. E. Lee* from New Orleans to St. Louis in 1870, in her famous race with the *Natchez*, is the best on record, and inasmuch as the race created a national interest, we give below her time table from port to port.

Left New Orleans, Thursday, June 30, 1870, at 4 o'clock and 55 minutes, P.M.; reached

	D.	H.	M.		D.	H.	M.
Carrollton			27 ½	Vicksburg	1	0	38
Harry Hills	1	0	½	Milliken's Bend	1	2	37
Red Church	1	39		Bailey's	1	3	48
Bonnet Carre	2	38		Lake Providence	1	5	47
College Point	3	50 ½		Greenville	1	10	55
Donaldsonville	4	59		Napoleon	1	16	22
Plaquemine	7	5 ½		White River	1	16	56
Baton Rouge	8	25		Australia	1	19	0
Bayou Sara	10	26		Helena	1	23	25
Red River	12	56		Half Mile below St. Francis	2	0	0
Stamps	13	56		Memphis	2	6	9
Bryaro	15	51 ½		Foot of Island 37	2	9	0
Hinderson's	16	29		Foot of Island 26	2	13	30
Natchez	17	11		Tow-head, Island 14	2	17	23
Cole's Creek	19	21		New Madrid	2	19	50
Waterproof	18	53		Dry Bar No. 10	2	20	37
Rodney	20	45		Foot of Island 8	2	21	25
St. Joseph	21	2		Upper Tow-head—			
				Lucas Bend	3	0	0
Grand Gulf	22	6		Cairo	3	1	0
Hard Times	22	18		St. Louis	3	18	14
Half Mile below							
Warrenton	1	0	0				

The *Lee* landed at St. Louis at 11:25 A.M., on July 4, 1870—six hours and thirty-six minutes ahead of the *Natchez*. The officers of the *Natchez* claimed seven hours and one minute stoppage on account of fog and repairing machinery. The *R. E. Lee* was commanded by Captain John W. Cannon, and the *Natchez* was in charge of that veteran Southern boatman, Captain Thomas P. Leathers.

Source: Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1883).

river was destroyed in any given year.²⁹ Mrs. Houstoun described the suspension of disbelief required of steamboat passengers. The very first paragraph on the very first page of Mrs. Houstoun's account of her Western travels was headed "Steamboat Disasters"—yet "with the possibility of being either burnt, drowned, 'snagged,' or 'sawyered,' hanging over our heads (of which we *might* have been kept in continual remembrance by the ominous life preservers in our state-rooms), I do not think that it ever occurred to any of our cheerful little party that they *ought* to be nervous, or that we ever called to mind the perils by which we were surrounded."³⁰ Cunynghame, with all of his morbid curiosity and his mental catalogue of recent disasters, was apparently not part of the blithely oblivious party that traveled with Mrs. Houstoun. Reading their accounts side by side, however, one realizes the extent to which steamboat accidents were cultural events as well as material ones, things that were worried about, ignored, argued about, and interpreted even as they happened.

This is nowhere more evident than in the 1856 bestseller *Lloyd's Steamboat Directory, and Disasters on the Western Waters*. Of the 326 pages of *Lloyd's*—which included biographies of steamboat-era heroes such as John Fitch and Robert Fulton, tables of record times for various Western routes, twenty-seven separate plates which together provided a map of the length of the Mississippi between its headwaters and the Gulf of Mexico, a list of steamboat pilots and engineers residing in the cities of Cincinnati, St. Louis, and New Orleans, and a list of all steamboats on the Western waters as of the time of publication—a full 157 were accounts of steamboat disasters. Some of these accounts were illustrated with woodcuts (thirty-two illustrations of steamboat disasters, in all), and many had appendixes listing and categorizing the victims—"killed, badly wounded, slightly wounded." The table of contents of *Lloyd's* famous directory was a sort of nightmare poem of alphabetized Americana: *America*, explosion of; *America South*, burning of; *Anglo Norman*, explosion of; *Atlantic and Ogdensburg*, collision of; *Belle of the West*, burning of; *Ben Franklin*, explosion of the; *Black Hawk*, explosion of the; *Constitution*, explosion of; *Enterprise*, explosion of; *Financier*, explosion of; *Martha Washington*, burning of; *Mayflower*, burning of; *Minstrel*, sinking of; *Mohican*, explosion of; *Nick Biddle*, sinking of; *Oronoko*, explosion of; *Oregon*, explosion of; *Persian*, explosion of; *Phoenix*, burning of; *Phoenix No. 2*, explosion of;

Pocahontas, explosion of; *Rainbow* and *American Eagle*, collision of; *Star-Spangled Banner*, sinking of; *Washington*, explosion of; *Washington*, burning of; *Washington, George*, loss of; *Western World*, sinking of. There were ninety-seven disasters described in some degree of detail, often over several pages, as well as a two-page account of the burning of twenty-three steamboats on the levee in St. Louis, and fifteen pages in which 219 “minor disasters” were each treated in the space of several lines (“about one-hundred and twenty-five deck passengers were drowned”; “twenty of the crew and deck passengers were killed”; “scalding about twenty-five Germans, some of whom died in consequence”; “two Negroes were killed”; “fifty-four passengers were lost”).³¹

Lists of names were an effort to record—to memorialize—the victims of steamboat disasters. The following is an account of the dead and wounded left behind by the November 15, 1849, explosion of the steamboat *Louisiana* while it was lying between the *Storm* and the *Bostona* along the New Orleans levee. This account has been chosen almost at random from the pages of *Lloyd's*, and is representative of the genre.

KILLED—Robert Devlin, Baton Rouge; Capt. E. T. Dustin of *Bostona*; Mr. Gilmer, second mate, and Andrew Bell, pilot, La.; wife and child of Mr. Robert Moody, clerk of the steamer *Storm*; Capt. Edmonston, St. Louis; Mr. Roach, deck hand of the *Storm*; Mr. Knox, head steward of do. [ditto]; a cabin boy of do. name unknown; two firemen of do.; John Sullivan, James Wolf, and a third name unknown, newsboys; the coachman of St. Charles Hotel; several Negroes and deck hands of the *Bostona*; Dr. Thomas M. Williams, Lafourche; Dr. Blondine, Point Coupee; Robert Mackin, clerk of the *Louisiana*; J. J. Gillespie, Vicksburg; J. Merring, Cincinnati; Mr. Wilson, grocer, St. Louis; Mr. Edgar, Washington Co., Miss.; Sylvester Prescott and Aeneas Craft, Memphis; Mr. King, clerk of the firm of J. J. Grey & Co., St. Louis; Mr. Elliot, clerk of the firm March & Rowlett, New Orleans; Merrick Morris, clerk of the firm of Small and McGill, New Orleans.

WOUNDED—Isaac Hart, New Orleans (supposed to be incurable); Mr. Ray, clerk of Moses Greenwood & Co., New Orleans; S. Davis, Mobile; Augustus Fretz, brother of Capt. Fretz, formerly of steamer *Memphis*; A. Bird, planter, near Baton Rouge; Capt. Hopkins, of the *Storm*;

John Mason, pilot of the *Storm*; Mr. Horrell, of the firm Horrell & Gale, New Orleans; Mr. Price, clerk of the *Bostona*; chambermaid of do.; Harvey W. Bickham; Daniel Eckerle; Henry Livingston; Isaac Garrison; Hugh McKee; Henry, a slave; Samuel Fox; William Welch; Clinton Smith; Miley Mulley; a female slave of Moses Murray, and her two children; John Evans; William Burke; John Laws; Charles, a small Negro boy; William Tucker; Henry Tucker; James Matthews, Juan Montreal; William Nee; Sandy, a slave of J. Adams; Sam, a slave of Captain Cannon; James Welch; James Flynn; Patrick McCarthy; twenty or thirty other emigrants, whose names could not be ascertained; H. Rea, New Orleans; Thomas Harrison, Missouri; Frederick A. Wood, New Orleans; Samuel Corley, Ky.; Cricket, Harrison, Missouri; George, a slave; and a Negro child.³²

In the immediate aftermath of a steamboat accident, lists such as this carried the first reliable news about the dimensions of the tragedy. Published in the newspapers in New Orleans, this list would have informed the family and friends of Dr. Thomas Wilson, say, whether they could ever expect to see him again.

Reprinted in *Lloyd's* at a distance of seven years and eight hundred miles from the epicenter of the explosion of the *Louisiana*, such a list served a different purpose. It memorialized the dead, certainly, though this must have had a secondary function for virtually every reader of *Lloyd's*. It was immaterial to them whether James Wolf survived and Isaac Garrison died, or *vice versa*; whether it was the coachman of the St. Charles or the St. Louis Hotel who was unlucky enough to carry the riverbound guests that afternoon; whether Captain Robert Devlin lived in Baton Rouge or Donaldsonville; or whether Mr. Ray was the clerk of the slave dealer Moses Greenwood or of the commission merchants Marsh and Rowlett. These recycled lists of the dead were a way of measuring the magnitude of the disaster and communicating it to those upon whom it had no immediate effect. The known names of the unknown dead (A. Bird, E. T. Dustin, Merrick Morris, James Flynn, Sam, Mrs. Moody) and the victims' social roles (planter, ship's captain, clerk, immigrant, slave, wife) served as placeholders in the mind of an empathetic reader: *It could have been me*. Even as those lists specified and substantiated the human cost of the

river trade, they allowed a reader to feel—for a moment and at a distance—the thrill of being a survivor, of living to risk dying another day. Indeed, taken as a whole, *Lloyd's*, which juxtaposed the history of steamboat accidents that had occurred as many as forty years before with ostensibly current information about the Mississippi Valley, at once signaled the underlying dangers of the steamboat economy, unstably contained them within its “history,” and reaffirmed a shared commitment to that economy through a sort of remembering (the dead) that was also forgetting (the danger). It memorialized past catastrophes but only, always, and already in the service of present commitments. It was a reliquary.

If *Lloyd's* insistently, though only implicitly, linked the daily business of the steamboat economy to past and potential catastrophe, it did so in terms designed to materialize the unimaginable. Accounts of steamboat disasters often emphasized the suddenness with which oblivious passengers were confronted with oblivion. The explosion of the *Lioness*, for example, “took place at an early hour, on a calm and beautiful Sabbath morning in the spring. Many of the passengers had not left their berths.” As in the case of the *Lioness*, the shock of disaster was often represented by referring to victims who went to sleep in one history and awoke in another. “Mrs. Seymour,” traveling aboard the *John L. Avery* in 1854, “had retired to her state room for an afternoon nap, from which she was aroused by the concussion [of the boat’s hull being torn asunder by a snag] when the boat struck; and soon after she found herself in the water.” Likewise, Charles Stone went to sleep in his cabin aboard the *Pennsylvania* in June 1858, and “when he awoke he found himself in the water.”³³ When they were not sleeping, steamboat victims were often amiably chatting with one another, only to be cut down as they talked. “It was a pleasant afternoon, and all on board probably anticipated a delightful voyage,” began an account of the explosion of the *Moselle*; none more so than Captain Perrin, “who at the time of the accident was standing on the deck, above the boiler, in conversation with another person.” “He was,” the story continued, “thrown to a considerable height on the steep embankment of the river and killed, while his companion was merely prostrated on the deck and escaped without injury.” The canonical account of the explosion of the *Louisiana* conveyed both the unexpectedness and arbitrariness of a steamboat disaster through a similar set of images:

The fragments of iron, and blocks and splinters of wood, which were sent with the rapidity of lightning from the ill-fated *Louisiana*, carried death and destruction in all directions. . . . Dr. Testut, of New Orleans, was standing on the wharf, having just parted from his friend Dr. Blondine, of Point Coupee, who had embarked in the *Louisiana*, and was killed by the explosion. A fragment of iron struck a man down at Dr. Testut's feet; the poor fellow, while falling, stretched out his hands and convulsively grasped the doctor's palletot, tearing a pocket nearly out. His grasp was soon relaxed by death.³⁴

Steamboat accidents, particularly steamboat explosions, were the nineteenth century's first confrontation with industrialized mayhem, and their chroniclers published accounts that—along with the narratives of escaped slaves—constituted some of the era's most graphically violent literature.³⁵ Any number of examples might be cited. The explosion of the *Clipper*, on September 1843, near Bayou Sara, Louisiana:

The hapless victims were scalded, crushed, torn, mangled, and scattered in every direction; some were thrown into the streets of the neighboring town [Bayou Sara], some on the other side of the bayou, three hundred yards distant, and some into the river. Several of these unfortunates were torn into pieces by coming in contact with pickets or posts, and I myself . . . saw pieces of human bodies which had been shot like cannon balls through the solid walls of houses at a considerable distance from the boat.³⁶

The explosion of the *Louisiana* on the levee in New Orleans, on November 15, 1849:

The body of a man was seen with the head and one leg off, and the entrails torn out. A woman, whose long hair lay wet and matted by her side had one leg off, and her body was shockingly mangled. A large man, having his skull mashed in, lay dead on the levee; his face looked as though it had been painted red, having been completely flayed by the scalding water. . . . Legs, arms, and the dismembered trunks of human

bodies, were scattered over the levee. One man, it is said, was blown through the pilot house of the steamer *Bostona*, making a hole through the panels, which looked like the work of a cannon ball.³⁷

The shock wave of energy released by the exploding boilers pulverized both boat and passengers, reducing each to a sort of debased materiality: the elements of the splintered boats were projected through their passengers; the passengers were dismembered, their remains mixed with the wreck of their boats.³⁸

Add the sounds. From the explosion of the *Constitution* on May 4, 1816, near Point Coupee, Louisiana:

The shrieks of the wounded and dying were reverberated from the distant shores, and many a ghastly and heart-sickening spectacle presented itself on the deck of the ill-fated vessel. One man had been completely submerged in the boiling liquid which inundated the cabin, and in his removal to the deck, the skin had separated from the entire surface of his body. The unfortunate wretch was literally boiled alive, yet although his flesh parted from his bones, and his agonies were most intense, he survived and retained all his consciousness for several hours.³⁹

Or from the explosion of the *Ben Franklin*, near Mobile, on March 13, 1836:

This fine boat, which had on that very morning floated so gallantly on the bosom of the water, was now a shattered wreck, while numbers of her passengers and crew were lying on the decks, either motionless and mutilated corpses, or agonized sufferers panting and struggling in the grasp of death. Many others had been hurled overboard at the moment of explosion, and such were the numbers of drowning people who called for assistance, that the crowd of sympathizing spectators were distracted and irresolute, not knowing where or how to begin the work of rescue.⁴⁰

One must imagine the progression: the sounds of a normal day, the pistons, the churning wheel, the tinkling of silverware and glasses in the cabin, conversation, laughter; the concussion of the disaster, the deafening disorienta-

tion; the sudden stillness; the rising murmur of recognition; shrieks of agony; prayers for deliverance.

IN THE aftermath of every steamboat explosion came an accounting of the losses. Boats and the goods they carried were generally insured separately. Owners carried insurance on their boats, although insurers generally agreed to cover no more than three-quarters of the boats' estimated value, in order to discourage fraud. The common law, which held that carriers were responsible for the loss of goods under their care, generally did not apply on the Mississippi.⁴¹ After a few early court decisions holding that steamboat accidents were ipso facto evidence of negligence on the part of the boat companies, steamboat owners began to use contracts to shift the risk of accidents to the shippers of goods. On the Mississippi during the steamboat era, responsibility for the cargo was generally allocated according to specific provisions of the bills of lading, which "excepted the steamboat from liability for losses caused by the 'unavoidable dangers of the river and fire'"—that is, anything likely to go wrong on a steamboat.⁴² Part of the business of commission merchants in New Orleans (and in other cities) was to arrange insurance for the goods they shipped. The river trade depended on insurance; without it, nothing would have moved.

After the wreckage had been hauled away, the wounded attended to, and the dead buried, the attorneys and the accountants took over. According to the alchemical laws by which goods were given value—the laws of the market—it was possible to come to a final, if rarely consensual, allocation of costs in the aftermath of a steamboat accident. It was likewise possible in many cases to quantify uninsured losses, particularly in the case of the hard money that passengers often carried on the boats: \$38,000 lost by a man who had hidden it in his pillow aboard the *Ben Sherrod*; \$900 lost by Mrs. Seymour on the *John L. Avery*, also hidden in her pillow; \$500 lost by Mr. Graham; \$900 lost by Mr. Jolley and a thousand by a "young man" in the explosion of the *Georgia*; \$8,000 belonging to General Lafayette and \$1,300 held in the captain's desk, sunk along with the *Mechanic*.⁴³

Because enslaved people had value—because they embodied capital—they were often among the accidents' enumerated losses. When the *Ben Sherrod* burned, "only two Negroes escaped out of thirty-five." When the *DeSoto* col-

lided with the *Buckeye*, “Mr. Haynes lost sixteen slaves who were on the lower deck. Mr. Alexander McKinzie, formerly of Florida, lost his wife, seven children, and four slaves. Mr. John Blunt, who was also from Florida, lost his wife, child, and seven Negroes.” When the *Georgia* burned, “B. F. Lofton, of Lenoir County, N.C., lost two slaves. Rev. J. M. Carter, of Clinton, Ga., lost three Negroes. . . . Dr. J. M. Young, of Hancock, Ga., lost a valuable slave, all his medical books, surgical instruments, and everything, in short, except the clothing he wore at the time of the disaster.”⁴⁴ Losses were deemed to be \$1,500 for the slave Job, killed aboard the *James Monroe*; \$2,000 for Etienne, run down by the *America* as he tried to cross the river in a pirogue; \$650 for “Brick Yard Jack,” killed while cordelling the *Maryland* through low water at the English Turn.⁴⁵ And so on. The value of slaves determined the way they were included in the archive of steamboat accidents—the way they were enumerated, remembered, and accounted for in the aftermath of a disaster.

The nameless dead were noted but not counted in the rolls of the disasters. Unlike cabin passengers, those who traveled on the decks of the steamboats bought tickets without reservations, their identities going unrecorded. Unlike enslaved people, those who were “free” had no monetary value; their deaths occasioned no legal action and left no courtroom biography of their cut-short lives. “No estimate of the number killed was ever published,” went a contemporary account of the explosion of the *Black Hawk* just out of Natchez, further explaining: “A large proportion of the passengers on Western steamboats are persons from distant parts of the country, or emigrants, perhaps, from the old world, whose journeyings are unknown to their friends, and whose fate often excited no inquiry. When such persons are the victims of a steamboat calamity, their names, and frequently their number are beyond all powers of research.” Hundreds of others had a similar epitaph: “The number of lives lost by this accident could never be ascertained”; “the number of the victims cannot be ascertained with any degree of precision.” “Nearly one hundred deck passengers are supposed to have been sacrificed, the names of a great majority of whom were unknown.”⁴⁶ It perhaps goes without saying that no steamboat owner would ever have been unable to “ascertain” or even “estimate” how many bales of cotton, barrels of sugar, or bales of hay were on a boat at the time it was lost.

The interchange between the valuation of property and the devaluation of

“freedom” in the aftermath of steamboat disasters framed several riverworld commonplaces. The first (an enduring one) was that poor whites’ lives, Irish lives, German lives, or simply strangers’ lives were somehow worth less than enslaved lives, because no one got paid for them.⁴⁷ The confusion between having a capital value and being socially valued underlay this fragment of white-supremacist irony, which functioned as a sort of vernacular wisdom along the Mississippi. The traveler Arthur Cunynghame recalled the story of the *Sultana* (which later exploded in one of the most horrible and notorious steamboat accidents of the nineteenth century), which had been badly damaged just out of St. Louis but nevertheless continued on its way to New Orleans, taking on both water and more passengers all the way down the river: “We afterwards found out that the *Sultana* had taken in (in all of its senses) sixty more passengers at Cairo, who were, of course, ignorant of the state she was in; the excuse being that the underwriters had agreed to stand by the insurance, and that, therefore, if she was considered safe for her freight she was equally so for her passengers.”⁴⁸ The value of human life, according to the underwriters and the owners, was incidental to an accurate accounting of commercial risk—unless that life was given a market value. Cunynghame again:

It is proverbial on the Mississippi that so long as a good per centage or handsome dividend is the result, loss of life and limb weighs too lightly in the opposite scale, and that so long as this property on the river can find underwriters to insure it, it is considered all that is requisite; indeed I have often received for answer, when alluding to this subject, “Why, sir, there are plenty of life insurance offices; if you are the least alarmed, why not insure your life?” as if the recompense of a few thousand dollars, which a man would leave behind him, were a sufficient expiatory oblation for the sacrifice of his own life.⁴⁹

Making sense of the steamboat economy required the recognition that, in order to be valued, life on the Mississippi had to have a price.

When a steamboat crashed, sank, burned, exploded, or otherwise destroyed the value invested in and packed aboard it, the owners and underwriters looked for someone (else) to blame. Often they began with proximate causes. Just before the *Ben Sherrod* exploded, for instance, “the firemen were shoving in the

pine knots, and sprinkling rosin over the coal, and doing their best to raise more steam. They had a barrel of whisky before them, from which they drank often and freely until they were beastly drunk.” Likewise, on the *Brandywine*, “for the purpose of producing more intense heat, and thus accelerating the boat’s speed, a large quantity of rosin had been thrown into the furnaces.”⁵⁰ Or, as the Scottish traveler Charles Mackay put it, in an omnibus statement which made plain the connotations of blaming the firemen in the first place: “The crew and stokers were all Negro slaves: and this was a circumstance to be deplored perhaps, but not remedied; for the recklessness of the Negroes, recklessness caused not by wickedness, but by want of thought, want of moral dignity, consequent upon the state of slavery, is doubtless one cause, among many, of the frequency of accidents in all the waters where they form the crews of the navigating vessels.”⁵¹ From the perspective of steamboat owners, these racial accounts of responsibility had the virtue of shifting blame downward along the chain of command and, not incidentally, away from anyone with the power to do something about it.⁵² Indeed, given the extraordinary unlikelihood that any firemen would survive an explosion in the engine room, these narrow accountings of cause shifted the blame away from those who might have had some power to remedy the situation by placing it squarely on those who no longer had the power to do anything at all.

More commonly and more credibly, observers blamed steamboat engineers for fires and explosions aboard their boats. Charles Cist, who in 1848 testified before the U.S. Senate about the causes of steamboat explosions, expressed the riverworld’s common sense: “The opinion and judgment of every competent man I am conversant with, to which I add my own deliberate judgment, [are] that there never was an explosion not chargeable to the incapacity, or oftener, the negligence of the engineer.”⁵³ The unschooled (empirical) character of Western engineering came up again and again as an explanation.

Another and not unusual cause of accidents, arises from the temerity, or rather roguery of the (so called) engineer. I have already mentioned the wonderful *cuteness* [cleverness] for which these people are remarkable, and also the rapidity with which they seem to acquire a knowledge of any business or profession in which they intend to embark; thus it happens that, on these great western waters, many a man who has acquired no further knowledge of a steam engine than that which can be picked up

by acting as a *stoker* for a voyage or two, passes himself off as a first-rate engineer, and risks the lives of hundreds of human beings by his unprincipled duplicity.⁵⁴

If accidents were not the fault of the engineers, they were attributable to the pilots—pilots who switched sides of the river either below or above where other boats commonly did, or who steered too far out into the current or too close to the shore. The collision of the *Monmouth* and the *Tremont*, which killed 400 Creek Indians being deported to Arkansas, was blamed on the officers of the *Monmouth*: the boat had been “running in a part of the river where, by the usages of the river and the rules adopted for the better regulation of steam navigation on the Mississippi, she had no right to go, and where, of course, the descending vessels did not expect to meet with any boat coming in an opposite direction.”⁵⁵ There were pilots who held their course in the river rather than steering out to avoid another boat, or who waited too long to ring the bell that signaled the engine room when it became clear that a boat could not get out of the way. Other pilots—at least according to those whom they ran down and those who had underwritten their actions as long as they were prudent and predictable—acted with a “want of care” or even “malice” as they navigated.⁵⁶ Still others exaggerated the difficulty of their jobs in order to cover for their mistakes, and thus provided a bed of misinformation that was sedimented into what was believed to be known about the river:

The popular belief in New Orleans, that the progress of the banks near the mouths of the river has been very rapid, arises partly from the nature of the evidence given by witnesses in the law courts, in cases of insurance. When a ship is lost the usual line of defense on the part of the pilots, whether for themselves or their friends, is to show that new sandbars are forming, and shoals shifting their places so fast, that no blame attaches to any one for running a vessel aground. To exaggerate, rather than underrate, the quantity of sediment newly deposited by the river is the bias of each witness.⁵⁷

And if the blame did not lie with the pilots, it lay with the captains, who would gather steam before they pulled away from the dock, or would race up and down the river. “Most of the accidents, which have resulted from the

bursting of the boilers,” wrote Robert Baird, “have taken place when the boat was leaving port.”⁵⁸ Among the famous explosions that occurred as the boats pulled away from the dock with a full head of steam were those of the *Anglo-Norman*, the *Helen McGregor*, the *Ben Franklin*, and the *Louisiana*.⁵⁹ The most notorious cause of steamboat accidents was racing. The *Ben Sherrod* was trying to catch the *Prairie* when “the boilers became so hot that they set fire to sixty cords of wood on board.” The *Brandywine* was racing the *Hudson* when sparks from the engine ignited the straw that had been used to pack several carriage wheels being shipped on her deck. And the *John L. Avery* had just “left the *Sultana* (with which she appears to have been racing) about a mile astern, when she struck what was supposed to be a tree washed from the bank by a recent freshet.” The boat almost immediately sank.⁶⁰

At some point, all of these reckonings turned into riddles. Whose fault was it that the engine exploded if the captain had ordered the engineer to produce more power faster, the engineer had weighted the “death hook” that held the engine’s safety valve down beyond its designed release, and the firemen had thrown pine knots into the furnace? Whose fault was it if the passengers rushed to one side of the boat as it departed, tilting its hull and dangerously displacing the water in the boilers, or that, primed by newspaper accounts of steamboat races and the era’s obsession with speed, they egged the captain on when another boat came into view on the river? Whose fault was it that a pilot had chosen to cross the river at a point where another pilot might not have, on a day when there might not have been enough water to run any closer to the shore and there might have been too much fog to see clearly, on a boat that may not have been able to stop within 200 feet of the point at which its pilot gave the order to the engineer? Whose fault was it that an engineer could not see through an inch-thick iron boiler to tell whether there was enough water inside to keep it from getting so hot that when more water was eventually added it would explode? As the traveler Edmund Flagg put it, “It is a question daily becoming of more startling import: How may these fatal occurrences be successfully opposed? Where lies the fault? Is it in public sentiment? Is it in legal enactment? Is it in individual villainy?”⁶¹ There were no easy answers to these questions. The multiplicity of possible causes often summed up to nothing in the way of clear-cut accountability.

Which did not mean that litigants and lawyers stopped trying. The legal

action that followed the collision of the steamboat *Abeona* was instructive in that regard. Traveling upriver on December 20, 1834, with a boat in tow, the *Abeona* struck the clipper *Cultivator*, which was hauling a load of sugar downriver from Donaldsonville. Eighty-six hogsheads of sugar sank with the *Cultivator*, and their loss occasioned two separate cases before the Louisiana Supreme Court. In one, the court held the steamboat responsible: it had been “impossible” for the schooner, traveling with the current and without wind in its sails, to avoid the steamboat. In the other, the court released the steamboat from any obligation: given the conditions on the river, the accident had been “unavoidable.”⁶² Or as Mark Twain put it in evaluating a bit of river lore, which claimed that the combination of a preacher and a gray mare among those aboard a boat was an augury of disaster: “That this combination—of preacher and gray mare—should breed calamity seems strange and at first glance unbelievable; but the fact is fortified by so much unassailable proof that to doubt it is to dishonor reason.” The tessellated agency of those who worked aboard the boats, as well as the confusion that surrounds any industrial accident, made the assignment of responsibility into an act of faith.

THE MOST notable effort to establish responsibility for (avoiding) steamboat accidents was “An Act to Provide for the Better Security of the Lives of Passengers on Board of Vessels Propelled in Whole or in Part by Steam,” passed by the U.S. Congress in 1852.⁶³ The Steamboat Act, as it was conventionally known, provided for the inspection of steamboats and the licensing of engineers and pilots. Boats were to be equipped with fire pumps, lifeboats, and life preservers. Boilers were to be inspected biannually and certified to be able to withstand pressure in accordance with a prescribed ratio; the legal standard was set at 110 pounds per square inch for a forty-two-inch-diameter boiler made of quarter-inch-thick iron.⁶⁴ Engineers and pilots were to be examined and licensed. An engineer would be granted a license after demonstrating “that his character, habits of life, knowledge, and experience in the duties of an engineer are all such as to authorize the belief that the applicant is a suitable and safe person to be entrusted with the powers and duties of such station”; a pilot, after the examiners were “satisfied that he possesses the requisite skill, and is trustworthy and faithful.”⁶⁵ In cases where accidents were found to result from technical noncompliance, steamboat owners were held liable to the passengers

for their losses. In cases where accidents resulted from the “carelessness, negligence, or willful misconduct of an engineer or pilot,” the malfeasant officer was held liable.⁶⁶ Of course, there were cases where neither noncompliance nor malfeasance could be demonstrated. The Steamboat Act addressed disasters on the Western waters as a series of technical and managerial problems. It was structured around a series of fables—the rattle-trap machinery, the reckless engineer, the inexperienced pilot—that would have been familiar to any reader of *Lloyd’s Steamboat Register*. To say that these were fables of accountability is to say not that they were untrue, but only that they told the story of the explosion of the *Louisiana* or the sinking of the *John L. Avery* or the collision of the *Talisman* and the *Tempest* within a given commonsense narrative of cause and consequence. They addressed the behavior of individuals—owners, captains, engineers, and pilots—without calling into question the character of the economy that channeled their choices. They addressed the problems on the boats without addressing the problems on the river. On the Mississippi, there were too many boats making too many runs competing for too little business on too little water.

Having reached the outer limits of the inland waterways, steamboatmen could not simply “throw out new branches” to expand their service area. Steamboats competed by trying to burrow ever further into time. Whereas steamboats in the 1820s had generally laid up at night, by the 1830s they were operating around the clock. A steamboat that ran twice as many hours could make twice as many journeys over the course of a season; faster turnarounds led to more rapid returns. By intensifying the rate of trade on the river, steamboat owners tried to increase the circulation of capital. Of course, running at night was dangerous. At night the river was habited by phantoms and false hints. The banks and bars got up and moved around; snags hid in the shadows.⁶⁷ Running at night increased returns, but it also increased risk.

In addition to extending the length of the day, some steamboatmen tried to stretch the trading season by squeezing in a final run on the diminishing waters of the Mississippi system. Although snags were more visible when the water was low, steamboats were often grounded during river passages that one contemporary observer likened to jumping from one puddle to the next. The likelihood of getting grounded during low water increased with the amount of water the boat displaced—which is to say that steamboat owners made bets

about grounding, calculated the risk, as they loaded their boats. “In order to gain a higher profit,” Arthur Cunynghame remembered of the owners of the *Atlantic*, “they had caused her to be laden with freight, deeper, by at least two feet, than she ought to have been. That evening we found ourselves again firmly fixed upon what was called Sliding Island Bar.”⁶⁸ Steamboat groundings were less spectacular than explosions or fires—a cargo was delayed rather than destroyed, and passengers were inconvenienced rather than incinerated—but there were nevertheless lives at stake in steamboat owners’ decisions to send their boats on one more run up a disappearing river. Once a steamboat was grounded, it had to be forced off a sandbar. Sometimes boats were put in reverse and driven through the bar; sometimes they were pulled off by other boats; sometimes they were “grasshoppered” over the bar with long levers attached to the sides of the boat—lifted up, pushed forward, and dropped until they had “walked” over the bar; sometimes they were “cordelled” across with ropes that were stretched to the shore, anchored, and then wound back around a shipboard capstan. In any case, the force necessary to drive (or pull) the 10,000-square-foot hull of a 900-ton boat (these were the dimensions of the *Magnolia*, which ran between New Orleans and Louisville in the 1850s) was enough to kill anyone unlucky enough to be standing nearby when something went wrong.⁶⁹ Because those most likely to be standing nearby were the working-class or enslaved crewmembers of steamboats, their deaths did not usually make the papers.

The principal way in which steamboat capitalists tried to make sure they got their money back out of the boats was by running them faster. It was well known that steamboat owners favored “hot engineers,” a piece of conventional wisdom that transmitted the imperatives of capital into the engine rooms and pilothouses. “A man’s pride and reputation was to be known as a hot and fast engineer. Men of this kind were sought and always had a position. . . . I don’t think they ever took into consideration the tensile strength of the iron to know the pressure to the square inch or anything of that kind. The only thing was to make the boat go and avoid breaking up the machinery, very little concerned about blowing up and hurling all to Kingdom come,” wrote one memorialist of the steamboat era.⁷⁰ As long as the vessels arrived intact, faster boats paid better. “The great object of all these boats is to procure *cargo*,” Matilda Houstoun explained, “and with this end in view they endeavour, as much

as possible, to outstrip each other, and arrive first at the town or *landing* where cotton, molasses, or other cargo is likely to be ready for them.”⁷¹ A reputation for speed drew paying passengers, who often added their voices to the imperatives of accumulation as steamboats raced up and down the river. “Great was the *triumphing*” when one boat managed to pass another, remembered Houstoun.⁷²

It is with this in mind that we should return to the history of the high-pressure steam engine that was standard on the Mississippi. As early as the 1820s, high-pressure engines were technologically residual; they were dirtier and more dangerous than the low-pressure engines that were employed on steamboats elsewhere. They could, however, generate more power than low-pressure engines; they made it possible to run boats faster and harder—over sandbars, against the current, past the competition, and so on. They were also cheaper. Indeed, the historian Paul Paskoff has argued that the transition to high-pressure engines in the Mississippi Valley was driven by increasing interest rates: as money became more expensive to borrow, steamboat capitalists saved money by switching from heavier, more expensive low-pressure engines to lighter, cheaper high-pressure engines.⁷³ That high-pressure engines were more likely to explode and faster boats more likely to sink when snagged were known risks, deliberately taken. Competition in the steamboat business spurred technological degradation rather than technological innovation. Danger was built into the boats.

Still, the passengers kept buying tickets. Running high-pressure steamboats faster along the Mississippi, it might be argued, was an economically optimal solution, one that balanced the desires of passengers to get where they were going with those of steamboat owners to cut costs and maximize profits. The problem was that one group of participants in the market for steamboat tickets had all the information they needed to make an informed decision; the other group had their lives on the line. Ticket purchasers like Arthur Cunynghame or Matilda Houstoun made their choices on the basis of rumor and superstition: the “proverbial” knowledge that steamboats were dangerous; the blind faith that the boat they chose to take would not be the next to blow its stack. Ticket sellers, on the other hand, calculated the risk of disaster into their margins and carried insurance on their boats. “What makes our ships last such a short time,” Joel Poinsett explained to Alexis de Tocqueville, “is the fact that

our merchants often have little disposable capital at the beginning. It's a calculation on their part." From this perspective, the horizon of responsibility stretched beyond the engine rooms and pilothouses of the boats, backward toward the countinghouses and clerks of New Orleans, St. Louis, and Louisville. "Accidents," James Hall wrote, "were set down as among the unavoidable chances of navigation, and instead of adopting measures to prevent them, they were deliberately subtracted from supposed profits as a matter of course. As the boat was not expected to last more than four or five years, at best, and would probably be burnt, blown up, or sunk within that period, it was considered good economy to reduce the expenditures, and to make money by any means, during the brief existence of the vessel."⁷⁴ Steamboat accidents, these critics suggested, were the result of close accounting rather than careless engineering. In such a world, there was an exculpatory blurring between the "unavoidable," the predictable, and the intentional. The accountant's calculations allowed steamboat owners to protect themselves from risk without taking responsibility.

The risks taken by individual steamboat capitalists (and transmitted to their subordinate captains, engineers, and pilots as imperatives) responded to—and were determined by—the challenges faced by the steamboat sector as a whole. One critic described the process by which the number of steamboats continued to grow, even as the rate of profit in the river trade began (and then continued) to fall: "At an earlier day [steamboats] cost much less than at present, and a company, or even an individual, who represented any unencumbered real estate could easily secure sufficient credit to build a steamboat without any money. Thousands of men in the Mississippi Valley have lost their homes, their farms, and their all, by pledging them to pay for building a steamboat they had no use for. The result, of course, was to increase competition, and ruin those who were engaged in legitimate business."⁷⁵ James Hall suggested a connection between specific steamboat disasters and overinvestment in steamboats more generally:

A curious fact was ascertained by a committee of gentlemen, who were appointed a few years ago, by a number of steamboat owners, to investigate the whole subject. They satisfied themselves that although the benefits conferred on our country by steam navigation, were incalculable, the

stock invested in boats, was, in general a losing investment. . . . These facts go far toward accounting for the enormous proportion of accidents and losses which occur upon our rivers. A few instances, in which large profits were realized, induced a great number of individuals to embark in this business, and the tonnage has always been greater than the trade demanded.⁷⁶

The river had become too crowded. Capitalists chasing the rumor of profit jostled together like steamboats trading paint at a narrow riverbend; as more capital was pushed onto the river, it became more difficult to turn a profit, and consequently more dangerous to travel. Steamboats, Hall suggested, exploded because of the flood tide of speculation upon which they had been floated.

Even though steamboat catastrophes were often referred to as “accidents,” it was not really accurate to term the mishaps that befell somewhere between a third and a half of the boats on the river “accidents.” “Portents” might be a better term, or perhaps “symptoms.” These “accidents” were expressions of the essential character of the economy they seemed to interrupt: speculative, explosive, wanton. The explosions, the fires, the collisions, the snaggings, and the sinkings were evidence of the undertow of the steamboat era: risks known, but ignored; fears at the margin of hope. They were evidence of the violence that the commercial boosters called history.

THE STORY of the end of the steamboat era has often been told. By the 1850s, the Mississippi River was yielding to the railroad as the “commercial highway of the West.” “Trade is seeking new channels,” wrote one Western newspaper editor. “Railroads are the greatest revolutionists of the age, and the most radical republicans too. They do not respect rivers; and locomotives outstrip steamboats. In consequence the tide of trade is setting eastward.”⁷⁷ Gradually, the eastward flow of trade spread southward. At St. Louis and Memphis, at Canton, Jackson, and Vicksburg in Mississippi, at Clinton, Opelousas, and Terre-Aux-Boeufs in Louisiana, the Mississippi Valley was joined to the nation’s emerging railway system. At first, many of these rail links were intended to carry produce *to* the river, but by the mid-1850s railroads were tapping the river trade, bypassing New Orleans and carrying cotton directly eastward to market. Trains ran faster, more directly, and with greater regularity. They in-

creased the predictability and velocity of the circulation of goods (and thus of capital). And they ran year-round. The railroad continued the transformation of space represented by the steamboat: it accelerated the emancipation of trade from the landscape. No longer did goods need to sit on the levee waiting for water; no longer did merchants need to hoard and store merchandise they had to keep on hand, but could not yet sell; no longer were passengers stranded—in the rail era, they were merely late. In the late 1850s, for the first time in the nineteenth century, the port of New Orleans began to export more than it imported. The Mississippi Valley was falling off the map.⁷⁸

5

The Runaway's River

Les rivières sont des chemins qui marchent. [Rivers are roads that move.]

—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

IN 1857, HERMAN Melville published a novel entitled *The Confidence-Man*, which, even by the standard measures of misunderstood literary genius, was a stupendous failure.¹ *The Confidence-Man* was set on board a Mississippi steamer, the *Fidèle*, bound downriver from St. Louis to New Orleans on April Fool's Day. The *Fidèle* is referred to as both a "ship of fools" and a "ship of philosophers," but, more than anything, is a ship of strangers, of people who left their pasts behind as they embarked, and could be known only through their appearance. "Though always full of strangers," Melville wrote, "she continually adds to, or replaces them with strangers still more strange." The book is pitched between two opposed propositions about proper conduct in a world of strangers: "Charity thinketh no evil," taken from First Corinthians and chalked on a signboard by a deaf-mute beggar on the deck; and "NO TRUST," painted on the signboard of the steamboat's skeptical barber. Confidence, Charity, and Trust: the dilemma of estimating inward intention from outward sign, of how strangers can be known and their actions estimated—these were the dramas of steamboat travel along the nineteenth century's commercial frontier, according to Melville. And, as anyone who has ever tried to read the book can attest, *The Confidence-Man* provides no easy answers.

Throughout the book, the question of trust among strangers is posed in terms of race and money. One of the book's opening chapters, "In Which a Variety of Characters Appear," has at its center a crippled black man named

Guinea, who begs on the boat's deck. As the crowd about him grows, one "sour" man shouts out, "Looks are one thing, and facts another," and the others begin to turn against Guinea, questioning both his seeming debility and his claimed freedom. In response, Guinea names eight men who will vouch for him: the man with a weed in his hat; the gentleman in the gray coat; the gentleman with the big book; the herb doctor; the gentleman in the yellow vest; the gentleman with a brass plate; the gentleman wearing a purple robe; and the soldier. Indeed, throughout the course of the novel, each of these eight appears on the boat, and introduces himself to an unsuspecting mark by talking about the black man who was on board at the beginning of the journey, but who has since mysteriously disappeared. In the words of the man with the weed in his hat, who is about to borrow money from a merchant (and in return provide the merchant with a can't-miss inside tip about another man on board with some stock to sell): "[Does not] the circumstance of one man, however humble, referring for a character to another man, however afflicted, argue more . . . of the moral worth in the latter?" Each successive character, that is, uses for guarantee the very man who first used him as guarantor, building a sort of Ponzi-pyramid of reputation on board the *Fidèle*, and in the process drawing the identities of the black and white characters into ever denser and more unstable interdependence. Indeed, never do any two of these eight men appear at the same time or in the same place, leaving the reader with the distinct impression that behind each of the mutually vouching money seekers is actually one man in a series of disguises: the singular "confidence-man" of the book's title (the conclusion that a reader would reach by judging the book by its cover).

The economy of vouching and crediting aboard the *Fidèle* suggests nothing so much as the paper-and-credit economy of the Mississippi River system, where spirals of speculation were built out of insubstantial promises. The Mississippi Valley was a region of wildcat banks and credit-issuing merchant houses, of unbacked paper money and bills of exchange—termed "endorsements." These last were promises to pay, guaranteed over and over again by successive holders as they moved ever further away from the initial transaction along the chains of debt that linked the Western economy to the rest of the world. In a specie-scarce economy, questions of accountability were twinned with those of identity in every trade. Doing business required a leap of faith,

or at least a leap of confidence, into an insubstantial medium of exchange: commercial paper, vouched for only by the appearance of those who presented it and by paper-thin representations of debtors who were no longer anywhere to be seen.²

And as the presence of Guinea at the center of the web of imposture aboard the *Fidèle* suggests, the economy of personal identity in the Mississippi Valley was always already racial, as well as commercial. Aboard the *Fidèle*, there is one man who stands out for his creditworthiness: a “Gentleman with Gold Sleeve Buttons”—a man whose specie-backed authenticity is worn on his sleeve. The hands of this man are, like his gloves, perfectly white; even amid the grime and soot of the steamboat’s deck, “these hands retained their spotlessness.” What first appears to be a “marvel,” however, is eventually revealed to be something else entirely. For it is not that the man’s hands are not dirtied by what they touch—it is that they don’t touch anything: the work of touching is done by a “Negro body-servant.” The secret of the “Gentleman with Gold Sleeve Buttons” turns out to be the magic of slavery: his substance depends upon the laundered labor of his slave. When this spotlessly white man finally reaches into his wallet to draw out the bills he contributes to the Asylum for Seminole Widows, they emerge “crisp with newness, fresh from the bank, no muckworms’ grime upon them.”

Behind the apparent solidity of specie lay the seeming constancy of racial slavery (and the racial conquest that had turned Seminole women into widows). Yet racial difference itself is unstable and ineffable aboard the *Fidèle*: its supposed essence is as elusive as Guinea, who passes out of sight amid a crowd of skeptical onlookers, only to appear as a white man in a later chapter. Like many of his contemporaries, Melville portrays the Mississippi steamer as a “world in miniature,” a microcosm of the nineteenth century’s commercial frontier. And in Melville’s telling, anxiety and identity, race and money, confidence and credulity chase one another along that frontier in an unending circuit. A Mississippi steamer was a world of many chances, but few certainties.

Melville’s *Fidèle* was not the only microcosm on the Mississippi. Indeed, it was a nineteenth-century literary commonplace to describe a Mississippi steamboat as a “world in miniature.” Like today’s airports or train stations, the Mississippi steamer provided a teeming representation of contemporary society. The historian Louis C. Hunter described it vividly:

Western farmers accompanying their produce to market, southern planters returning with their families from a summer sojourn in the North, country merchants on their annual buying trips, well-to-do emigrants headed for a new purchase, politicians bound home from the nation's capital, artists and theatrical companies on tour, members of the titled aristocracy and intelligentsia of Europe, land speculators, editors, preachers, gamblers, and slave traders . . . immigrants from abroad, migrating families from the older states, artisans, laborers, and their families were all thrown together, often for days, in this mixing bowl.

The social world of the steamboat was characterized by all of the curiosity, desire, fear, and disgust that people experience when social hierarchy is compressed into temporary proximity. It was this mixture, perhaps, that Frances Trollope was trying to capture when she compared Mississippi steamboats to floating bathhouses.³

JUST AS characteristic of steamboats was the nineteenth century's emergent strategy of social management: segregation. Deck passengers traveled at a fraction of the cost of cabin passengers. They provided their own food, slept rough amid the cargo, luggage, and livestock on the deck, and often paid off their passage by helping to load and unload the boat, cutting and carrying wood along the way, and performing other chores. Matilda Houstoun described what she had seen on the deck of the *Leonora* when she had traveled from Louisville to New Orleans: "We had some horses and mules and a vast number of what are called 'deck passengers.' The latter consisted principally of emigrants from Ireland, *loafing* characters from the North, and German settlers with a very small amount of money in their pockets. . . . [They] were exposed to all the inclemency of the season, and . . . the sufferings, particularly those of the women and children were severe." Houstoun went on to describe (in a way that was presumably meant to be satirical) the callous lightheartedness with which those in the cabin regarded those on the deck. One afternoon, she recalled, her group was momentarily frozen by the cry of "Man overboard!" followed by relief at the realization that "it was *'only one of the deck passengers'* and *not* one in whom we were interested that was at that moment struggling for life in the rapid current." The following morning there were

mordant jokes “at breakfast about how many deck passengers had been lost overnight.”⁴

For Houstoun, these incidents seemed exemplary; their protagonists were “specimens,” “characters,” “western men,” “immigrants,” representatives of “a race of singular beings.”⁵ Class differences among whites were made concrete aboard the *Leonora*; differences that might otherwise have been ignored or papered over with the broad sloganeering of “white supremacy” were daily acted out on the deck. Both Matilda Houstoun and Harriet Martineau referred to the crying of the children on the deck, not so much because they empathized with their plight (or that of the parents), but because the noise the children made intruded on the other passengers’ sleep. Houstoun also referred to the way “even the cabin” was “impregnated” with the odors of the deck, a sensation of violation she shared with David Stevenson, who wrote that the deck of a Western steamboat “generally presents a scene of filth and wretchedness that baffles all description,” but which he contrasted with the “plentiful supply of fresh air” available to cabin passengers. To nineteenth-century observers, who would have associated close quarters and fetid air with the miasmas they thought caused disease, the contaminating smells of the deck held the threat of contagion. When a man died on the deck of the *Henry Clay*, Harriet Martineau remembered, the captain had his body removed from the boat and laid beneath a tree at a woodlot, “hoping that this incident should be passed over in entire silence, as he was anxious that there should be no alarm about disease on the boat.” And there were, finally, what the traveler Robert Baird termed “scenes of shocking depravity . . . disgusting to every virtuous mind.”⁶ Segregation on Western steamboats (like segregation anywhere else) both mirrored and reproduced specific anxieties about difference—about what, exactly, was threatening to rich white people about poor white people. Steamboats were unquestionably vectors of disease, but there was something more to these accounts of social contagion than a simple fear of cholera.

At the heart of cabin passengers’ accounts of the disgust with which they viewed the deck are descriptions of normal people doing normal things: trying to control their livestock and comfort their crying children, cooking over an open fire, smoking, talking, laughing, drinking (perhaps even to the point of falling overboard), relieving themselves, making love, getting sick, convalescing, dying, keening, mourning. But on the decks of the steamboats, in

the voyeuristic eyes of the passengers in the cabin, the very human normality—the base commonality—of these activities provided a screen for anxieties about the nature of race and class amid the changing circumstance of the riverworld. These images weave together animals, children, sexuality, filth, and disease: they are images of social and sexual contamination. At some point during the voyage of the *Leonora*, Houstoun and several of her passengers approached the boat's captain to complain about the "cruel and tyrannical" treatment of the passengers on the deck; they were, one of the group said, being treated worse than "Negroes."⁷ For Houstoun and her friends, there was something scandalous, even subversive, about the conditions on the deck. The abjection, the exposure, of the white people on the deck undermined the racial premises upon which the Cotton Kingdom was founded.

The world in which Houstoun took refuge was the ladies' cabin, which was generally at the back of the boat, away from the heat and noise of the engines. Unmarried men were not allowed in the ladies' cabin, which was separated from the main cabin, where all of the cabin passengers took their meals, with the "ladies" seated together at the head of the table.⁸ The gendered order of the steamboat cabin neutralized the threat posed by (and to) women in public. It spatially reinforced the idea that white women in the cabin were virtuous rather than promiscuous, no matter how far they were from home. The door of the ladies' cabin, according to Houstoun, opened onto a different world: that of the gentlemen's cabin, where the "amusements were truly those of the western world—namely playing at cards with remarkably dirty packs, smoking cigars, using violent language, and drinking brandy and other 'fancy cocktails' from morning to night."⁹ The door between the cabins served as a sort of a buffer between the "ladies" and the (Western) world through which they traveled, a sort of material marker of the space they inhabited as private and domestic. In the ladies' cabin, women were defined and protected by their relationships to men—mother, wife, daughter. Like the segregation of deck and cabin, however, the boundary between the ladies' and the gentlemen's cabins conveyed a sense of difference and danger it could not finally contain.

There were dangers of various types. Houstoun had begun her journey down the Mississippi by passing beneath a large sign reading "BEWARE OF THIEVES" as she boarded the boat.¹⁰ The passengers aboard Mississippi steamboats often carried a great deal of money. Planters traveling to town,

farmers returning from market, immigrants moving west, merchants restocking their stores: the Western waters were full of marks for a man with the wrong sort of intentions and the right set of skills. Steamboats were notorious for pickpockets, cat burglars, and especially gamblers—to such an extent that even today the words “riverboat” and “gambler” imply each other, much as do the words “raise” and “call.”

The self-proclaimed “King of the Riverboat Gamblers” was George Devol, who started his career on the river as a teenager in the 1840s and published a record of his exploits entitled *Forty Years a Gambler on the Mississippi* in 1887. There were, it turned out, as many ways to fix a card game as there were card games. Gamblers generally worked in teams. A standard con had one man peeking at the cards in the hand of the mark, and signaling his partner by moving a toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other or by covering the crest on the back of the cards with his index finger. In another con, one partner would deal and conspicuously lose several hands of a game like three-card monte (three fast-moving cards; keep track of the jack to win). More players would join in, only to find that the odds had changed in the dealer’s favor as soon as they did. Still other cons involved taking side bets on a game played between confederates; using marked cards that had been provided to the bartender in advance; dealing from the bottom of false-bottomed card boxes (counterfeits of the boxes generally used, which were designed specifically to prevent dealing from the bottom of the deck); one partner insistently raising on a losing hand (“cross-lifting”), so the other could win without drawing undue attention; and on and on and on.¹¹

At some point, it would all stop being funny—sooner rather than later, if you were among the gamblers’ unwitting marks. The stories of those who lost their money to gamblers on the Mississippi suggested the flimsiness of the protection provided women and families by the curtain that hung between the cabins. “Gambling,” warned Robert Baird in his “emigrant’s and traveler’s guide” to the Mississippi Valley, was “an *amusement* of the most dangerous and seductive character,” and one which promised only a “hardening and chilling effect . . . upon the *heart*.”¹² A young man who snuck away from his wife in order to gamble with the money she had brought to their marriage, like the man George Devol encountered on the *H. R. W. Hill*, might end like the wretch condemned by Robert Baird: the fellow gambled day and night in the saloon

of a Mississippi steamer, while his “young, interesting, and beautiful, but *dying*” wife wasted away in the ladies’ cabin. A riverboat card game could entice a young man to abandon all that he should have held dearest for the fleeting pleasures of chance. There were sons who lost the legacies entrusted them by their fathers; husbands who blighted the hopes invested in them by their young wives; self-made men unmade by their own underlying weakness; men who lost “not only their fortunes, but . . . their souls by gambling.”¹³

Maintaining order on board was the responsibility of the boat’s captain. Many of Devol’s tales told of victims who appealed to the captain to retrieve their money and put the gambler off the boat on the nearest sandbar. Sometimes Devol managed to convince the captain that the complainant himself had been running a hustle; sometimes the gambler already had the captain in his pocket; sometimes he was forced to run for his life (Arthur Cunynghame remembered that gamblers were made to walk “as in a treadmill” on the paddle wheel of a steamer, or had their ears nailed to the bulkhead).¹⁴ The larger point is that each steamboat was a small, unstable polity where order depended on the willingness and ability of the passengers and crew to back the captain’s authority—if need be, with violence.¹⁵ Every steamboat captain presided over a potential kangaroo court; every passenger was a possible vigilante. Thomas Hamilton noted that passengers on Western steamboats were often armed. When he himself traveled by steamboat to New Orleans, a well-dressed man in the cabin had the ivory hilt of an “unmanly and assassin-like” dirk protruding from his waistband.¹⁶

But even when gamblers were kept off, smoked out, busted, beaten, and put ashore, their ghosts haunted the steamboats. Stories about riverboat gamblers were standard in the travel literature of the day, as well as in penny-press broadsheets like the *National Police Gazette*. Those stories accompanied passengers onto the boats. “No one can travel the Mississippi,” wrote Arthur Cunynghame, “without hearing stories of the knavish tricks ascribed to a set of men called in the south, Gamblers.”¹⁷ Various points along the Mississippi were known to be frequented—“haunted” was the favored contemporary synonym—by gamblers; when the boat touched at Randolph or Vicksburg or Natchez, conversation in the cabin turned to “gamblers, thieves, ruffians” and the rough measures necessary to keep them at bay.¹⁸ New Orleans, wrote J. S. Buckingham, was the “principal haunt” of “gamblers, sharpers, and ruffians”

in the Mississippi Valley. During the winter months, he continued, “they throng [to the city] to prey upon the unsuspecting. When the season is over they disperse themselves through the towns of Natchez, Vicksburg, Memphis, St. Louis, Louisville, and Cincinnati, and lead a similar fraudulent course of life during the summer and autumn, gambling, cheating, and swindling in the steamboats by the way.”¹⁹

The gamblers’ itineraries traced the flipside of the commercial ties that stitched together the Mississippi Valley economy. Devol’s list of his takings provided an account of the sorts of wealth that could be skimmed off the leading edge of the nation’s commercial frontier: the diamonds that belonged to a young man’s wife; the watch, spectacles, and sermons of a hypocritical minister; a daguerreotypist’s kit, together with the boat on which he plied his trade; the wages of the crews of several steamboats—sums that Devol won from the moneylender who supplied the docks; all of the money that a gang of “Texans” had sewn into their coats and stuffed into their boots to keep it safe on their way to New Orleans to celebrate New Year’s Eve; the gemstone stickpin and vest buttons of a double-crossed partner; twelve bales of cotton from a planter on his way to market; forty-five slaves from a slave trader on his way downriver; a seventeen-year-old whom he termed “one of the prettiest quadroon girls” he had ever seen; an old black woman pledged for a thousand-dollar debt.²⁰

The moral of many of Devol’s stories was that he merely did to others what they would have done to him—a hustler’s version of the Golden Rule. “When a sucker sees a corner turned up, or a little spot on a card in a game of three-card monte, he does not know that it was done for the purpose of making him think that he has the advantage,” Devol wrote. “He feels like he is going to steal the money from a blind man, but he does not care.” By his own account, “the king of the riverboat gamblers” was simply a projection, an objectification, of the greed of those upon whom he preyed. “I have downed planters and many good business men, who would come to me afterwards and want to stand in with my play,” Devol continued, “and yet the truly good people never class such men among gamblers.”²¹ Devol was a professional gambler, not a cultural anthropologist, and so it was enough for him to note the hypocrisy of his critics without probing the anxiety that lay behind it. But he had a point: the greed upon which he played was not characteristic only of “the gamblers,

thieves, and ruffians” with which he was classed, or the barrooms and smoky bordellos in which he plied his trade, or of Natchez or Vicksburg or New Orleans. It was utterly characteristic of the full-throttle capitalism of the Cotton Kingdom. Devol was just a symptom.

While Devol cast his success as proof that the boundary between “gambling” and “business as usual” was, in the final analysis, bogus, he still needed a cover when he boarded a steamboat and began to play a mark. “I had the Negroes all along the coast so trained that they would call me ‘Massa,’ when I would get on or off a boat,” Devol wrote. “I would go on board, with one of the Negroes carrying my saddle-bags and those sucker passengers would think I was a planter sure enough; so if a game was proposed I had no trouble to get into it.”²² The irony was perhaps too great for even Devol to appreciate: a petty criminal garbing himself in the supposed respectability of a stealer of souls. Devol’s hustle, that is to say, was in part a racial masquerade. Like Melville’s confidence man, the whiteness of his character was vouchsafed by a black man. And just as Devol’s card games allow his readers a peek at a larger set of nineteenth-century anxieties about the corrosive effect of commercial culture, his race-vouching gambit tips us to keep a close eye on the racial theatrics of the steamboat cabin.

LIKE MONEY, slavery was a stock topic of conversation among steamboat passengers. Large sections of the travelogues published by Arthur Cunyng-hame, Matilda Houstoun, Charles Lyell, and J. S. Buckingham were given over to rehearsals of debates between the moderate anti-slavery of the writers (or, to put it more directly, their Negro-phobic free-laborism) and the paternalist pro-slavery of their fellow passengers. Topics discussed included the eagerness with which slaves looked forward to the end of the harvest; the fondness of “the black race . . . for dancing and all kinds of music”; the quality of slave housing; the condition of American slaves versus that of people confined to workhouses or impressed onto men-of-war in Great Britain; the valuation of enslaved children for sale by the pound; the supposed culpability of enslaved women for the high rate of mortality among their infants; the way in which slaveholders were judged by the condition of their slaves and the corresponding effect on their conduct; the reputed cruelty of black drivers; the ways enslaved people made money from the garden plots allowed them by their own-

ers, and whether or not said owners later found themselves indebted to their slaves; the “cunning . . . of most of the Negro race”; the question of whether “slavery was a much greater curse to the owners than it was to the slaves”; the “ingenious” ways in which enslaved people made themselves mortally ill in order to avoid labor; the terrific increase in the slave population; the fearful thought that “a conflict for emancipation” would sooner or later take place—an eventuality which, according to those with whom Houstoun met as she traveled to New Orleans aboard the *Leonora*, would likely result in “an indiscriminate massacre by the slaves.”²³ These conversations represent an important aspect of the intellectual history of the Cotton Kingdom: the process by which steamboats served to disseminate ideas about slavery and mastery up and down the river. They also must be understood as white-supremacist rituals, serving as a vehicle by which white people unknown to one another could make connections based on a conversation about black people. In the process, they reinforced a racialized notion of the subject and object of the conversation—“us” and “them”—and, finally, resolved ideological differences about the morality of slavery with a shared horror at the notion of a war against white people.

Overlapping and punctuating these conversations, however, was another set of dialogues about racial difference and anxiety. When Buckingham was not busy discussing the comparative merits of impressment and enslavement, or worrying about the rate of black reproduction and the possibility of a racial apocalypse, he was apparently occupied with minute observation of the racial etiquette of the steamboat cabin—especially at mealtimes. On board with Buckingham were three women he described as “mulattoes of dark-brown colour . . . who remained sitting in the cabin all day, as if they were on a footing of perfect equality with the white passengers.” When “mealtime came,” he continued, “then was seen the difference. . . . They were not high enough in rank to be seated with the whites, and they were too high to be seated with the blacks and mulattos, so they had to retire to the pantry where they took their meals standing, and the contrast of their finery with the place in which they took their isolated and separate meal was painfully striking.”²⁴ Charles Lyell told a similar story. Aboard the boat on which he traveled down the Mississippi was “a young maid, fairer than many an English brunette, but who, though a free woman, did not happen to belong to the white aristocracy.” When it was

noticed halfway through dinner that she was sitting at the table “where the officers of the ship and the children were dining,” this “prodigious breach of decorum” brought dinner to a halt as the maid was sent away, the stewardess who had seated her at the table was taken to task (“observing,” in self-defense, “that the girl was undistinguishable by her complexion from a white”), and apologies were made to the parents of the white children with whom she had been seated. There was also aboard, Lyell noted, “a quadroon lady . . . of very respectable appearance and manners, who was taking all her meals in her own state-room, thus avoiding the risk of meeting with similar indignities.”²⁵

These parlor theatrics served to shore up the inherent instability of the idea that human beings could be divided into races. The presence of these women in the cabin was threatening precisely because they seemed to belong there; in the absence of other information, they might simply have disappeared into the crowd. The micro-choreography of segregation served to reiterate the presence of otherwise evanescent difference—the presence of fictional portions of black and white blood upon which the Southern social order depended for coherence. Yet these command performances of difference left an aftertaste of doubt. As Arthur Cunynghame put it, about one of the men he met on the Mississippi: “One of these men was almost as white as an European, indeed, much more so than many Portuguese whom it has been my lot to encounter, and must have possessed a considerable proportion of the freeborn citizens in his veins.”²⁶ Why, he asked, should a tiny fraction of “black blood” hold dominion over so much “white blood” in the laws of the land?

Alongside that hairline fracture in the ideology of “blood” ran another. For if the figure of the “tragic mulatto”—white in every visible respect, and yet not—held a certain kind of fascination for travelers on the Mississippi, what about the person who was not white in every respect, but seemed so? The flip-side of the racial—the racist—summoning which so insistently tried to bring “black blood” to the surface by segregating the near-white from the white was the anxiety that some on-board blackness might go undetected. Charles Lyell: “When we sat down to dinner in the cabin, one of the creoles, of very genteel appearance, was so dark that I afterwards asked an American, out of curiosity, whether he thought my neighbor at the table had a dash of Negro blood in his veins. He said he had been thinking the same thing, and it made him feel very uncomfortable during dinner.”²⁷ Once pledged to the rituals of white-

supremacist purification, people found it hard to know where to stop; at moments like this, the everyday practice of whiteness threatened to undermine the social solidarity it supposedly represented. Every white face might mask some sort of hidden social impurity.

When a traveler named Robert boarded the *Western World*, bound from New Orleans to Cincinnati in March 1850, he was, to all appearances, a white man. “I should have thought he was of Spanish origin,” remembered one of his fellow passengers, “he was a man of clear skin and dark complexion.”²⁸ But even more than the way Robert looked, the passengers aboard the *Western World* remembered how he acted: “he had more the appearance of a gentleman than a plebian”; “he was very genteely dressed and of a genteel deportment”; and, as almost every one of his fellow passengers who was later asked about him seemed to remember, “he usually seated himself at the first table, high up, near the ladies.”²⁹ As the phrase “near the ladies” suggests, Robert was alleged to have inverted the order of the steamboat cabin. He was suspected of clothing himself in rules of decorum—the rules that defined the race-class-and-gender social order of the steamboat cabin.

Robert’s fellow passengers later claimed that his supposed whiteness had been a visual effect of his surroundings: that it was only on the surface; that the rituals that were supposed to regulate the social summoning of evanescent “blood” had been turned inside out. And yet: Robert made them nervous. At first there were rumors, and then jokes. “I heard no complaints made about him being in the cabin,” remembered Rufus Blanchard, “just some jokes passed to the effect that, if he actually had African blood, he was a very smart fellow.” Indeed, Blanchard noted, the joke had initially been on him. Hearing a suggestion that “there was a passenger on board who probably had African blood in him, I thereupon asked my informant if it was *such* a person, pointing out the *wrong person*.”³⁰ Once the presumptive racial order of the *Western World* had been called into question, it was difficult for those aboard to regain their bearings. Even those who thought that Robert was not all-the-way white had to admit that there were people they “knew [*sic*] to be free and white” who were “darker than this person.”³¹

The rumors and the jokes—the doubts—intensified as the *Western World* traveled farther north. When it reached Memphis, the captain summoned Robert to his office, where, behind closed doors, the captain, the ship’s clerk, and a

cotton factor from Memphis, who had apparently been asked on board due to his experience with such things, examined Robert, asking him questions about where he had been born, where he had lived, where he was going, and so on. The factor was "suspicious that he was not a white man," but told the captain that he would "run no risk" in the matter. The captain then "told the boy that he would have to get off, and be confined until he could prove himself a white man, and not a runaway." "If he should prove a white man," the factor remembered the captain telling Robert, "[the captain] would be extremely sorry for this course."³²

The immediate problem Robert posed for the captain was soon covered up. A man named Williamson came forward and claimed that Robert was his slave. The jailer in Memphis found Williamson's claim credible enough to send Robert back to New Orleans to be sold.³³ But the doubts he had raised were harder to lay to rest. Robert was put off at Memphis not because he was known to be black, but because nobody could say for certain that he was white. The same, of course, could be said about anyone else on the *Western World*. And while Robert's passage up the Mississippi did not leave in its wake a wholesale reconsideration of the fictive character of racial identity, it did occasion a considerable breach in the practical ethics of white solidarity. Long after Robert had been put off the boat, one group of passengers continued to attack another for having treated a white man like a slave, while the latter group accused the first of being "abolitionists" for saying so.³⁴ The hairline fracture in the racial order that had become visible in the cabin of the *Western World* could not bear much pressure without beginning to widen beneath the weight of its own absurdity.

Unlike Robert, who died in the slave market and was buried in the potter's field, a man named Felix was able to cloak his slavery in his whiteness long enough to make it out of the Mississippi Valley. As the testimony of many witnesses later revealed, there had always been questions about Felix. Many people in St. Louis, where he had grown up, assumed he was white. Thomas Labaune, who had known Felix as a child, remembered that he had "always seen him running about in the yard" of his master, Gabriel Chouteau, and always "thought he was from their breed." He did not realize Felix was a slave until the latter turned up among a gang of men he had hired to clear wood. Even then, he "asked the foreman why he had hired that white man." Daniel Beasley told a similar story. Before Felix's infamy, Beasley had been called upon "as

public officer to whip a slave” belonging to Chouteau. When Beasly went to find the slave, he walked right by Felix “taking him for a white man.” “After that,” Beasly continued, “[I] advised Mr. Chouteau to sell him as he was way too white.”³⁵ Felix was, in the parlance of the day, “too white to keep”: likely to blend into a crowd, board a boat, and sail away to freedom.

But not before Chouteau sold him down the river to New Orleans. The chance that Felix would escape was, apparently, the least of Chouteau’s worries; when Felix was finally sold, it was said that “the reason why [Chouteau] sent him off and sold him was that Felix cuckolded his master.” Felix apparently spent several years in New Orleans as a slave, before hiring himself aboard the *Missouri* as a white man and working his way first to St. Louis, then to Galena, Illinois, and finally to Niagara Falls, New York, where one of the men who had known him on his journey (a clerk on the *Brazil*, which Felix took from St. Louis to Galena) later found him “waiting on tables at the Principal Hotel.”³⁶

Those who had met Felix along the way were at pains to explain why they had thought this white man was white (lest they or their employers be held legally responsible for repaying his erstwhile owner). “*God damn the boy is so white that you cannot tell if he is a white man or a slave!*” shouted the captain of the *Missouri* when confronted with the accusation that Felix had escaped aboard his boat.³⁷ The hands aboard the boat backed the captain in terms that would have been clear to anyone who had ever been aboard a steamboat where there was a doubt about a passenger. Felix was “so white that [I] never would have refused him a seat at the table,” said one; “if Felix had taken passage in cabin, [I] would have allowed him to sit at the table as a white man and would not have ordered him to leave the table as being a colored person any more than any passenger on board.”³⁸ Daniel Beasly made even more pointed comparisons: “[I] would not have taken him for a slave more than any white man in the street. . . . He is as white as any man in this court room,” he proclaimed, hastily adding, “with two or three exceptions.”³⁹ And that was really the point: in the wake of his escape, Felix left a trace of awkward self-consciousness. Am I, each of the self-styled white men in the courtroom must have wondered, one of the two or three whitest, or is my whiteness, too, suspect?

The cases of Robert and Felix were spectacular examples of how the techniques of governance and social control in the Cotton Kingdom could be

turned inside out: they used the visual code of white supremacy to undermine the code itself. Apart from their sheer existential significance—the subversive bravura of a performance like Robert’s, the amazing itinerary of a life like Felix’s, the heroism of these escape attempts—passing slaves had an effect that went well beyond their numbers. A historian might say that they revealed the fictive character of race on its most vulnerable margin. But aboard Mississippi Valley steamboats in the nineteenth century, their impact was less abstract, more directly felt: the fact that they existed, the fact that they were possible, made “white people” nervous.

There were other, more quotidian cons—so many, in fact, that one slaveholder estimated that “thousands” of slaves had been “carried by [steamboats] to the free states” in the 1840s alone.⁴⁰ The steamboat economy depended upon black labor—as many as 3,000 slaves and 1,500 free people of color were working on riverboats at any given time in the 1850s, close to a quarter of the total workforce on the Western waters.⁴¹ Slaves and free people of color served as stevedores, stewards, waiters, cooks, chambermaids, and especially stokers on the Mississippi River.⁴² Aboard steamboats, the demand for labor, rather than the categories of caste, often determined who was assigned to do what work: enslaved people, free people of color, European immigrants, and working-class whites (the instability of categories themselves being a part of the story) worked side by side on the docks, decks, and cabin floors. The work could be hellish. For the stoker, or fireman, cleaning the boilers required that one lie “flat on one’s stomach on the tip of a twelve-inch flue, studded with rivet heads, with a space of only fifteen inches above one’s head, and in this position haul a chain back and forth without any leverage whatever, simply by the muscles of the arm with the thermometer at 90 degrees in the shade.” Steamboat labor entailed being away from home for long stretches, serving drunken, demanding passengers, disembarking to cut wood and haul cargo no matter what the conditions or the dangers, stoking and tending the scalding boilers. It was not work that many wanted to do. Whether the laborers were “free” or not, they were generally employed by the season. Hiring free men or renting slaves gave steamboat owners greater flexibility than buying slaves; they did not have to provide for their workforce during slack times, nor did they have to worry about the longevity of any specific worker. Besides the risk that they would have to indemnify the owner of a slave injured, killed, or es-

caped on their boats, steamboat owners had only to worry about a worker's ability to survive a single season. The following season they could hire or rent someone else. "We have on the river," proclaimed one steamboat pilot in a statement that projected the attitudes of the steamboat capitalists as resulting from the characteristics of their hirelings, "an indifferent sort of men."⁴³ The steamboat economy introduced some of the flexibility and heedlessness—the interchangeability of workers, the indifference to the reproduction of the labor force except in aggregate, the ability to respond to changing economic conditions by cutting labor costs—generally associated with industrial labor relations into the heart of the Mississippi Valley economy.⁴⁴ Indeed, steamboat capitalists treated their labor force much as they did their capital: run hard and hot until expended; discard; repeat.

THE PERPLEXITIES of the contrasting imperatives of capitalist accumulation, steamboat technology, and racial control were expressed in the laws governing the employment of blacks on boats. An 1816 Louisiana law required that steamboat captains take any "Negro or mulatto man or woman, persons of color," being hired aboard a steamboat and present each prospective worker at the office of the mayor of the city of New Orleans, along with "*authentic written proof*, or by oath of two *credible witnesses*," that the person in question was either free or a slave being hired under the "*written direction*" of his or her owner.⁴⁵ By setting up a mechanism to account for black labor, the 1816 law attempted to resolve the contradiction between social order and economic progress that was emerging at the heart of the Mississippi Valley economy. The very boats on which the economy materially depended could be used to escape its reach, and the very people whose labor was required to run the boats could use the boats to run themselves.⁴⁶

The double-checking and proving-out that the state believed was required to maintain racial order was impractical for steamboat owners and captains, who were faced with the problem of filling out a crew on a schedule dictated by the demands of their passengers and their cargo, as they tried to wring as much profit as they could from the capital invested in their boats. Their standard operating procedures were considerably less formal than those prescribed by law. "[I] never knew" a steamboat captain to "go there at all," said the captain of the *El Dorado*, referring to the mayor's office.⁴⁷ Steamboat captains,

who had to fill out their crews under the pressure of making a timely departure, often sent their mates or stewards to hire a crew from among the men on the levee. The stories later told about slaves who had escaped on steamboats often noted that they had been regulars at these informal labor fairs. For instance, a slave named Peter, who eventually escaped aboard the *Lion*, “was always running about on the levee to be shipped as a fireman.”⁴⁸ From the perspective of steamboat capitalists, the timely circulation of capital through the steamboat economy required a relaxation of the laws governing the circulation of labor. On Mississippi steamboats, the imperatives of racial capitalism were sometimes self-contradictory.

As the registration system prescribed by the 1816 law suggests, pieces of paper played an important role in the effort to align the requirements of capitalist accumulation and racial regulation.⁴⁹ In theory, the ability of free people of color to move freely and seek employment depended upon the “free papers” that proved their status. The most organized among the steamboat companies kept proof of the freedom of their employees locked in a box in the clerk’s office. Like any tool of identification, free papers could be faked: they were only as good as the person reading them. The engineer who took Peter on board the *Lion*, for instance, remembered that Peter “had free papers with him the first time [I] shipped him,” but also that “[I] did not look at the free papers of the Negro.”⁵⁰ The engineer either did not know or did not care if the papers Peter exhibited were authentic. Perhaps he could not read. Perhaps there were no papers at all.

Although paper was the legally accepted way of proving freedom, the steamboat business sometimes operated according to a different standard of proof. People of color—whether free or enslaved—were often hired, regardless of legal status, on the word of others. A man named Thomas Taylor shipped aboard the *Tiger* on the word of the ship’s cook. Taylor said “that he had come here from New York on the ship *Orleans* [under] Captain Lucas . . . that he had been taken sick and was carried to the hospital . . . where he lost his free papers.” The cook aboard the *Tiger* backed him up, telling the captain “that he had seen the Negro in Liverpool and visited him and his family at No. 12 Mulberry Street.”⁵¹ Likewise, when Peter boarded the *Lion*, “some of the hands remarked that the boy was known by everyone on the levee . . . as a free man.”⁵² Before a man named Jacko was hired on board the *A. M. Wright* as

a free man, remembered the steward who hired him, he was “on board the boat often. . . . He used to come and see a boy named Andrew Lockett, with whom he was intimate.”⁵³ Another named Jack, when he first boarded the *Chesapeake*, did so “in the company of another Negro formerly employed on board of the boat, who represented himself as his brother.” Another named Sam made his way onto the *Lady Washington* “in company with a sister of his, a connection of the wife of the cook.”⁵⁴ Enslaved people’s social networks, which overlapped those of the levee more generally, could provide enough cover—enough credibility—to get a paperless person onto a boat.

Those who tried to escape slavery on steamboats needed to supply themselves with a past; they had to use counterfeit papers or mistaken testimonials or outright lies to give themselves a history believable enough to at least get them up the river. Sometimes they just acted it out. When a man known as Prince boarded the *New York* in November 1836, he told the engineer that his name was Ned, and that he had just arrived in New Orleans aboard the *Farmer*. He was, he said, a fireman; and when the engineer agreed to hire him, he went to get his clothes from the *Farmer*, or at least he went off in “the direction where the *Farmer* was then lying.” The engineer later admitted that he had relied on Prince’s own representation that he was free: “All of the instructions of the Captain to me was to never hire a colored man unless on production of his free papers, but thinking his statement true that he was free and had just left the *Farmer*, [I] did not demand of him his free papers.”⁵⁵ Perhaps Prince really had come down on the *Farmer*; perhaps he really did go back to get his clothes; perhaps the engineer really did think he was free: it did not really matter. Prince’s pantomime had provided a representation of a past convincing enough to get him from the boat he claimed to have taken downriver onto one that would carry him upriver—toward freedom. A man named Scott managed a similar self-transformation. Hired by his owner aboard the *DeWitt Clinton* to work as a cook, Scott spent the season acting as if “he had no master.” Acting free was not enough to get him free, at least not aboard the *DeWitt Clinton*. But the next season he used the reputation he had made for himself to hire himself as a cook on the *Louisiana*, which he took upriver as far as Louisville, before he disappeared from history, or at least from its written record.⁵⁶

Some slaves boarded steamboats without even the protection of a threadbare alibi of the sort furnished by Prince or by Scott. Indeed, as dependent as

was the Mississippi River economy on slave labor and as chaotic as was the process of loading a steamboat, the important question was not who got on before the boat departed, but who got off. "It is impossible for us to know who is and who is not on the boat until we leave the landing," remembered Captain Wilder, who ran the *El Dorado* between Jackson Square and the mouth of the river. Passengers are continually coming aboard and passing and repassing to take care of their friends," he continued. "Negroes come on board to see their friends, their master or mistress as the case may be, or to take baggage, cotton, or anything else on board." Once the boat was on the river, the crew worked from end to end, taking tickets and checking papers, making sure that no one had slipped on board. In the case of the *El Dorado*, at least, this procedure provided time enough for a slave named Enos Phillips to slip his wife and two children on board. They made it safely as far as Balize (at the mouth of the Mississippi), where they planned to board a ship bound for England, but were finally undone by a telegram sent ahead by their owner.⁵⁷

Henry Bibb was more successful, so successful that his story seems to encapsulate—enumerate, even—many of the strategies of a slave attempting a boat-borne escape. Instead of free papers, Bibb used an empty trunk to secure his passage onto a boat: "Soon a boat came in which was bound to St. Louis, and the passengers started down to get on board. I took up my large trunk, and started after them as if I was their servant. . . . The passengers went up into the cabin, and I followed them with the trunk." Once the boat was under way, Bibb carried his trunk down to the deck, and "insinuated" himself among the passengers there. After standing for several rounds of drinks, Bibb asked one of the men to go up to the clerk's office, and buy him a ticket. "When they came round to gather the tickets before we got to St. Louis, my ticket was taken with the rest, and no questions were asked me," he remembered.⁵⁸ The same was done by John Parker, who boarded the upstream *Magnolia* by lying in wait for the lanterns lighting the gangplank to burn down, as the boat was being loaded one night.⁵⁹

William Wells Brown knew the river better than most. He spent several years as a Mississippi River slave trader's enslaved assistant, running between St. Louis and New Orleans. Eventually sold to a steamboat captain in New Orleans, he rode up with the man as far as Louisville, and when the boat made a landing on the Ohio side of the river, he remembered, "I [took] up a trunk,

went up the wharf, and was soon out of the crowd.”⁶⁰ In the first half of the nineteenth century, tens of thousands of slaves were sold down the Mississippi River by traders like the man who owned Brown. The Mississippi River trade—the agricultural goods and cotton, the money and the slaves—gave the institution of slavery a whole new life in the first half of the nineteenth century: it determined the course of African-American history, and it debouched in the largest slave market in North America. Yet the upriver passages of men like Brown chart a powerful countercurrent. In addition to connoting a threat (slaves feared being “sold down the river”), the Mississippi represented an opportunity. Solomon Northup, who had been kidnapped from New York and shipped around the coast to New Orleans, hoped to be sold in the latter city, for, he remembered, “I conceived it would not be difficult to make my escape from New Orleans in some north-bound vessel.”⁶¹ John Parker, who did just that, remembered that once he arrived in New Orleans, “there was a fascination about the river that I could not resist, because I knew that was my only escape from my bondage.”⁶²

At the shadowy edge of these stories lie the traces of the networks of trust and solidarity that made it possible for slaves to escape. Although enslaved people ran away one at a time, very few did so alone; they depended upon relatives, friends, and, sometimes, total strangers to help them reach freedom. Jacko boarded the *A. M. Wright* under the auspices of his “friend” Andrew Lockett; Jack got aboard the *Chesapeake* on the word of someone who “represented himself to be his brother”; Sam was allowed on the *Lady Washington* in the company of “his sister,” who may or may not have been related to the ship’s cook by marriage (those who knew her disagreed when questions were later asked).⁶³ The premeditated actions of friends and family were only the most intimate and predictable results of larger networks of solidarity among the enslaved. John Parker, whose hunger drove him to “desperation” as he hid on the levee waiting to sneak on board a steamboat, finally tried to steal some food out of a nearby kitchen, where he was discovered by the cook. “There was no fooling that cook,” he later wrote. “She took one short look at me. My heart sank low down, and I thought it was all over for me. But she was a wise and friendly soul who knew. Without either of us saying a word, she went to the cupboard, took out a good-sized bowl, put it in front of me, handed me a ladle, pointed at the pot of soup, and went out of the room.”⁶⁴ The action

of this enslaved woman, who put herself at risk in order to help a man whom she had never seen before and would never see again, hints at an eddy of wordless affiliation among the enslaved that ran against the downriver flow of the Mississippi economy. Slaves—rarely, perilously, but always consequentially—could disappear from their owners' history and into a world of concealed networks and actions that could only be known "by Negro evidence," as a steamboat captain tracking a slave who had escaped aboard his boat put it.⁶⁵

In the end, such escapes had to be accounted for. Someone—some white person—had to pay for what these black slaves had done. The law as written was clear in its apportionment of responsibility. According to the 1816 law and its subsequent revisions, responsibility for ensuring that a slave did not escape on a steamboat lay with the "master and commander" of that boat.⁶⁶ Strictly speaking, it did not matter whether the captain knew whether a slave like Robert or Felix or Jacko or Sam was on board. A slave might have booked a cabin passage and passed for white, or been hired by the steward at a "shakeup" (employment fair) on the levee, or escaped the attention of an overstressed clerk taking tickets on the deck—whatever the case, it was the captain's fault.

There are several things to say about this law. By making captains liable for the value of slaves who escaped on their boats and by levying an additional \$500 fine, the law represented a novel accounting of the meaning of human agency under the changing circumstances of racial capitalism in the Mississippi Valley. The 1816 law represented a managerial construction of responsibility. Owners, who set the schedules and reaped the profits, were absolved; somewhere along the chain that carried the steamboats' profit backward into their pockets, their responsibility for what happened aboard those boats apparently disappeared. (Although many steamboat captains owned their own boats, not all of them did; and when they did, the law applied to them in their capacity as captains rather than as capitalists.) Shipboard subordinates, too, were absolved. Despite coming into court and swearing that they had mistaken slaves for free people of color in dockside hiring fairs, that they had mislaid forged passes or not looked at them at all, that they had taken the word of people they hardly knew as attesting to the freedom of people they did not know at all, the clerks, cooks, and engineers aboard Mississippi riverboats were not held liable for the value of those who escaped on their watch.

Amid the rapidly changing circumstances of the riverworld, the workings

of capital were too attenuated, and those of labor too diffuse, to be successfully regulated. The 1816 law settled instead on a fiction of managerial accountability that remained intact throughout the antebellum period—namely, the idea that a captain could control and should be held responsible for whatever happened on his boat. Never mind that the business-structured imperatives of an on-time departure meant the “captain in leaving the wharf has as much as he can do to look out for his steamer without looking for slaves.” Never mind that the captain might not know the cook had hired a relation of his wife’s sister to serve in the scullery. Never mind that no one at all knew John Parker was hiding in the hold of the boat. The captain was responsible.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the law holding captains responsible whenever slaves escaped on the boats they commanded occasioned a great deal of appellate law. Steamboat captains generally took one of two courses in these upstream battles against the law. Sometimes they would suggest that the slaves in question were incorrigible. The commercial law of Louisiana, in keeping with the racial “science” of the day, treated running away as a “vice of character” or a disease (infamously termed *drapetomania* by the Louisiana “race doctor” Samuel Cartwright).⁶⁷ A slave named George had been sold under an “act of sale” which explicitly stated that he was not warranted against “the vice of running away”—and the captain of the *Chieftan* pointed this out when defending himself against a suit filed by George’s owner. How could he be held responsible for the slave’s escape? If George had not sneaked aboard that boat, he would have found another.⁶⁸ The *Chieftan* was simply a vector of a first cause beyond the captain’s control.

At other times, the captains would suggest that the slaves’ owners were incorrigible, or at least incompetent. The best defense in a suit brought for the value of an escaped slave was apparently a good offense. After a man named Enos escaped aboard the *El Dorado*, the ship’s captain based his defense partly on testimony that the slave’s owner “was a very mild master. . . . [His] Negroes were not kept strictly.” The elusive Felix had been allowed “to travel about the country as a free man and without [anyone] controlling him in any manner”; the captain of the *Missouri* argued that this had been going on for a long time before Felix escaped. “He appeared to be his own master controlled by his own person,” added one of the captain’s witnesses. Likewise in the case of Scott, who escaped aboard the *Louisiana*: “He seemed to have no master.

He acted as he pleased.”⁶⁹ These slaves, the captains were asserting, had escaped because of the failings of their owners. According to the “like master, like man” theory of racial mastery, the supposedly lax oversight exercised by owners who allowed slaves to behave as if they were their own masters induced a sort of cumulative corruption of their character: when unmastered, even once-dutiful slaves would eventually stray.⁷⁰ Those seeking damages for their steamboat-escaped slaves sometimes found their own reputations as slaveholders—as men—at issue in the courtrooms where they pursued their causes.

Although the difference between these various ways of apportioning responsibility had significant legal implications for the parties to court cases arising under the 1816 law, each of the commonplace accounts of slaves’ escapes shared a basic racial premise: enslaved people were not the subjects of their own actions, at least not when they ran away. Whether arguing that running away was caused by an underlying disease or brought on by bad mastery, whether arguing that steamboat capitalists or captains or even cooks should be held responsible for slaves who escaped on steamboats, the lawyers and litigants involved in these cases operated under the assumption that a full accounting of responsibility could be made without reference to the individual, personal, existential, biographical motivation of the slaves in question. Robert, Felix, Jacko, and Sam emerge from the docket-record pages of these court cases not as human beings with complex motivations—people willing to risk everything they had on an upstream bid for freedom—but as the objects of external stimuli, as figments of white supremacy. Thus were the countercurrents of enslaved resistance on the Mississippi reincorporated into the slaveholders’ historical record. Thus was black aspiration recirculated as white supremacy.

Yet like a barely concealed snag causing a ripple on the otherwise smooth surface of the river, these escapes left a trace of doubt in the minds of those who navigated the Mississippi. At any given moment in the steamboat era, there were hundreds of boats on the river, servicing hundreds of thousands of white settlers and a comparable number of slaves, providing the most visible symbol of the tens of billions of dollars invested along the leading edge of the greatest economic boom the world had ever seen. The rapidity—the propulsive force—of the Valley’s capitalist development vastly outstripped the avail-

able techniques of identification and verification. In the blinding flash of the boomtimes, it was hard to know who anyone really was. The era's emblematic tricksters—the con men, gamblers, and escaping slaves—embodied the fears of a world in which identity had been unmoored from geography, in which people could turn up in the most unlikely places, in which certainty was a fantasy and plausibility served as the coin of the realm, in which anyone could be vouched for and no one could be trusted. It was a world in which the confidence upon which business depended was always twinned with anxiety.

6

Dominion

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

—Genesis 1: 27–29

And his brethren said to him, “Shalt thou indeed reign over us? Shalt thou indeed have dominion over us?” And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words.

—Genesis 37: 7–9

WHEN SEPTEMBER 1841 came and the cotton bloomed in the fields along the Red River, Solomon Northup was driven out to pick it. Northup was new to Louisiana, and he had been sick for several weeks, feverish, nauseous, emaciated. And he was new to cotton, unable to grasp the fiber and place it in his sack with the same “dexterity” he saw among the other slaves in the field. He worked slowly along his row, fearful that his lagging progress would be noticed, and his “sick and drooping” body infused with the “temporary energy . . . of the drivers’ lash.”¹

The plant Northup picked had transformed the Mississippi Valley into one of the richest agricultural societies in human history. It was a new thing on the face of the earth, created in Rodney, Mississippi, around 1820. *Gossypium barbadense*, this worldmaking strain of life, was a hybrid: it blended Georgia and Siamese cotton, which had been planted in Mississippi from the end of the eighteenth century, with the Mexican cotton introduced to the region in the nineteenth. In the first instance, it was the work of the winds and the insects,

which cross-pollinated fields that had been planted with various strains; in the second, of a group of scientifically inclined planters, who had culled seeds from their most promising plants and, in the process, had narrowed the genetic spectrum of the cotton in their fields down to that of a single strain. Originally known as “Mexican cotton” for the strain that provided its defining characteristics, this changeling was soon patented as “Petit Gulf cotton” for the bend in the Mississippi along which it had been created, and was transformed into an income stream for the lucky planters of Rodney and the New Orleans merchants through whom they sold it.²

Over the next thirty years, planters and seed merchants introduced countless other hybrid strains of Petit Gulf—Vick’s, Tarver’s, Hogan’s, Brown’s Seed, Sugar Loaf, Money Bush, Mastodon, Pitt’s Prolific, Multibolus, Mammoth, Rob Smith’s 25-Cents, Banana, Chester, Prout, Pomegranate (the latter four were allegedly Hogan’s sold under other names).³ Because the defining qualities of both plant and seeds annually degraded through exposure to the airborne pollen of other strains, those who could afford to do so bought new seeds every three or four years in an attempt to maintain a seed stock which would reliably produce plants of the desired quality.

Quality was determined according to “the production, the quality of the lint, and picking qualities” of a given strain, with Petit Gulf representing the ideal hybrid of ecological and economic characteristics.⁴ It grew prolifically in various soils and climates. It bloomed two weeks earlier than other strains, which lengthened the picking season. At least in the short term, it was immune to cotton rot. And it produced long, fine cotton fibers, which made it exceptionally marketable.⁵ But foremost among the qualities of Petit Gulf cotton was what planters called “pickability.” Whereas fifty pounds of picked cotton per day had once been “accounted fair work” for an adult, in the era of Petit Gulf this amount would be “tasked to a child,” enthused one planter; an adult might be required to pick 200 pounds or more.⁶ Petit Gulf (and its hybrid descendants) bloomed in large, wide-open bolls, the sharp edges of the dried bur peeling backward to expose the lint. In Petit Gulf cotton, nature was adapted to the mechanical capabilities of the human hand.⁷

And in the Cotton Kingdom, hands were likewise suited to their labor. Charles Ball remembered that when he was offered for sale, prospective buyers would grasp his hands and work his fingers through a set of motions, to

ensure they were “capable of the quick motions necessary in picking cotton.” When slaveholders were asked to describe the way their slaves looked, they often began with the hands, noting missing or mutilated fingers, “small hands,” or “short fingers.”⁸ There was, that is to say, a two-sided character to the way slaveholders viewed the relationship of ecology and labor in the Mississippi Valley. Plant was to be shaped to hand, and hand to plant; natural complexity was simplified into a single strain; human capacity was rendered increasingly productive, even as it was reduced to the capillary repetition of a single motion.

Indeed, the “hand” was the standard measure that slaveholders used when calculating the rate of exchange between labor and land. Cotton planters began the year by calculating “to the hand.” By multiplying the number of hands times the number of acres each hand could be expected—would be forced—to tend, they planned their sowing. “A good cotton crop,” wrote one, “[is] ten acres to the hand; under favorable circumstances a little more may be cultivated, and on some lands less.” And at the end of the year, by calculating bales per hand, or bales per hand per acre, they measured their success. “A bale and a half to acre on fresh land and in the bottom. From four to eight bales per hand they generally get: sometimes ten when they are lucky”—this was how one Mississippi planter described the commonplace benchmarks used to measure the quality of the crop. “His land on the creek is very good and will not plant an acre of cotton that will not yeald a bale per acre,” wrote another of his Amite County neighbor.⁹

Beneath the threadbare trinomial accounting of acres, bales, and hands, some discerned a deeper economy. Yield per acre served as a ready shorthand measure of soil quality in an era when knowledge of organic chemistry was still limited. When planters decided whether to plant five or eight or ten or fifteen acres per hand, they were making an estimate, often quite explicitly, of the quality of their soil. Would their cotton bloom early and full enough to keep their hands busy through the picking season? Would there be hands enough to tend all the acres they had planted, or would their cotton end up choked in grass and blown away by the wind before it could be picked? In addition to the quality of their soil, planters used the hand to assess the worth of their slaves. Slaves in the Mississippi Valley (and elsewhere in the cotton South) were measured against their work. Healthy adult men and women were accounted “full

hand”; suckling women, “half-hands”; children in their first years of work, “quarter-hands”; and tiny children were no count at all. When hands fell short—when they were not “up to the task”—they were hectored, threatened, tortured, or starved to make them work better and faster. In effect, their senses, their muscles, and their minds were reeducated to suit their work. Measuring crops and slaves “to the hand” was an ecological as well as an economic measure—an attempt to regulate the exchange between slaves and soil by prescribing benchmark measures for the process by which human capacity and earthly fertility were metabolized into capital.¹⁰

THE STORY of Petit Gulf cotton and the hands that picked it suggests that the “plantation” was not simply a way of organizing labor, but a way of organizing nature. It likewise suggests a history of slavery in which picking cotton was not only “labor”—a dimension of slaves’ relationship to owners—but also “work”: a dimension of the relationship of human beings to the natural world. And finally, it suggests a history in which the effects of staple-crop-producing agro-capitalism were evident not simply in the effects that planters and slaves had on the landscape, but also in the bodies and material lives that were shaped—even determined—by work.

The enslaved people who built the Cotton Kingdom started by clear-cutting the woodlands of the Mississippi Valley. “There was no let up in the driving,” remembered John Parker, who had been sold from Virginia. “Whole forests were literally dragged out by the roots.” The first clearing was often done by slaves with axes, who felled oaks and cypresses, and then hauled the wood out. A “full hand” accustomed to working with an axe might cut an eighth of an acre a day; if a planter cleared enough land to employ the same hand fully, the cultivation of a first crop of cotton took three or four months. Subsequent clearings often began with the “girdling” of the trees on a given tract. Louis Hughes of Mississippi described this as the process of wounding the tree by stripping a neat band of bark from around the base of the trunk. Shorn of its protective layer and vulnerable to diseases, molds, insects, and dehydration, targeted trees typically died within three years and were subsequently cut and then burned after the cotton crop had been brought in. Whatever trees fell in the busy summer months were left lying until winter, when they were “grubbed out” with the underbrush and likewise piled and burned. Impatient

to get their land into cotton, planters sometimes ran their rows between the decaying trunks of the girdled trees. Hughes himself remembered how difficult it was to run a plow around the roots of a relic stump.¹¹

Slaves split the harvested wood into the fence rails that delimited the fee-simple cartography of the emergent landscape. They cut the wood into the boards they would use to construct their rude cabins, the somewhat more refined dwellings of their owners, and the barns, stables, and smokehouses that defined the regulated flow of grain, flesh, and energy through the plantation economy. They burned the wood on the hearths that transformed flesh into meat and grain into cereal. Slaves and slaveholders alike relied on that wood to warm their bodies. It was pulped into the reams of paper upon which both settled title and speculative ploy had come to depend. It was heaved by the cord into the engines of the steamboats that carried cotton to market and to the presses that shaped raw cotton into bales. It was left to decay at the margins of the cotton fields, and tumble from the eroded banks into the rivers and the streams.¹²

When layers of vegetation were cut away, water traveled more quickly through the Valley's hydrological cycle. Runoff eroded the newly cleared fields, carrying away topsoil full of carbon-stored energy accrued over thousands of years. As the traveler Joseph Holt Ingraham put it, "Every plough furrow becomes the bed of a rivulet after heavy rains—these uniting are increased into torrents before which the impalpable soil dissolves like ice under a summer's sun." Floods became more frequent and more intense. Planters tried to protect their lands from floods, first through an ad hoc system of locally built levees which dated from the eighteenth century and relied on the pressure of neighbor upon neighbor (and slaveholder upon slave) for upkeep, and later through a federally funded and state-administered effort to channel the Lower Mississippi along a fixed course. While upriver levees opened rich alluvial lands to cultivation (and deforestation), they increased the risks of flooding downstream, particularly in and around New Orleans. And when levees were breached, as they frequently were throughout the antebellum period, they inverted their function, holding water in rather than out, and creating new swamps at the margins of the new fields.¹³

Following the course of that water, one could argue that the emergence of the Cotton Kingdom shifted the axis of nature from vertical to horizontal.

Layers of biomass were cut down to the ground, burned, and shipped away to ready the bare earth for plowing and planting, leaving behind, according to the former slave Moses Grandy, a few bewildered squirrels and raccoons foraging in the newest of the cleared fields.¹⁴ The planters brought human beings across from Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas, and down from Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri to clear their fields, tend the cotton, and attend to their needs. They bought grain and salted meat shipped down the Mississippi to feed themselves and their slaves. They first imported and then raised domestic animals—cows, horses, mules, pigs, and dogs—to help them do their work. Through their own labor, but more often that of their slaves, they repatterned the land according to its stage of development: old-growth forests and cypress swamps were pocked and then checkered with clear-cut fields in the first decades of expansion; later, as the soil wore thin and grew tired, scrubby forests of cedar and loblolly pines and swampy meadows—“oldfield”—took over the wasted land as the fields were pushed into the woods on their margin.¹⁵ From the air, the face of the landscape would have presented a visual image of the whole of nature arrayed in the service of a single plant.

That plant demanded careful attention. The cotton season began with the preparation of the field. Wrote one farmer: “My rows are always laid off by stakes, with a shovel-plough, and then two furrows turned to it, one from each side, with an efficient turned plow; this is performed as early in March as I can, endeavoring to postpone my spring ploughing until after the heavy rains.”¹⁶ Among cotton planters, the optimal distribution and orientation of those rows was a subject of considerable argument, or what the planters called “judgment.” Depending on who was talking, it was essential that rows be laid out anywhere from three to five feet apart. Because the rows were more broadly spaced across than the plants were along the rows, many planters ran their rows east-west, thus maximizing the daily southern exposure of each plant to the sun. No topic aroused the ire of agricultural reformers so much as the endemic erosion that resulted from commonsense heliocentrism—that is, orienting the rows on an east-west axis no matter what the pitch of the field. They termed it “hydrophobic” agriculture, the “cripple and kill system,” a “vandal policy,” and compared its practitioners to “carnivorous animals [who] seem to have a natural propensity to destroy.” They complained that farmers abandoned land within ten or fifteen years of clearing it, “leaving the old fields and

hill-sides worn-out and wasted while the branches, ponds, and lagoons without are filled and choked up with fertility.” The reformers advocated the “horizontal system,” in which gradually declining rows would be laid out across the incline of the land, and bounded and interspersed with ditches to control runoff. “By the falling of the rain,” one explained, “the lighter and finer particles of the earth are taken up and float in the water, which is called sediment, and all of which is returned to the land, if the water is held by the water furrows.” Because even a 5 percent grade could lead to soil erosion, the horizontal method prescribed a third dimension of rationalized practice—most notably a huge, triangular level constructed out of eight-foot-long boards and chucked under one corner with a three-inch block, so that an incline of three inches for every eight feet might be exactly traced across the face of an undulating hill.¹⁷

Passing over, for the moment, the appropriative I-language, the labor-eliding passive voice, and the slippery subject-verb relationships that deform the grammar and define the meaning of virtually every recorded statement made by cotton planters about their agricultural practice, we can follow the progress of the season in the ways that planters talked to one another about what needed “to be done.” When the rows were laid out and the seedbeds raised, the field was ready for planting—sometime in the last week of March or the first weeks of April.¹⁸ Seeds were selected from those culled in previous years or were purchased anew, and, among the reformers, were sometimes treated with salt water, with lime and potash, or with “brine made by steeping stable manure.” A furrow was cut into the beds, most often with a light plow, and then five or ten seeds at a time were deposited in a small hole (a “drill”), which was then covered over with loose dirt from the bed through the action of foot, hoe, or harrow. Seeds were to be placed “by a careful hand” anywhere from “fourteen inches” to three feet apart, depending on how full the planter expected his plants to grow—the object being to keep the branches from becoming tangled with those of the plants on either side within the row.¹⁹ The numerous dangers posed to the cotton plants made redundancy in planting a given, and agricultural reformers railed against the wastefulness of those who “broadcast” their seed: “There is no one custom so uniform among cotton planters as that of consuming and throwing away in the process of planting six to ten times as many seed per acre as are necessary to secure a good and certain stand. This is a bad policy—unnecessary, and a waste of both time and

money.” “A better stand and more uniform can be had by planting only *one peck* to a half bushel per acre, as we take great pleasure in showing every year. It consumes more time to ‘chop out’ the superfluous quantity that comes up from such profuse planting, than was required in the process of planting.”²⁰

As the cotton began to grow, it was “thinned” or “chopped,” the weaker cotton plants being culled from the base of those the planter hoped to bring to fruition. Various combinations of hoe and plow were used to do this work, which involved cutting a row of (ideally) healthy and evenly spaced cotton plants out of the stands that had sprouted in the fields. Cotton’s “greatest antagonist”—the grass that grew up between the cotton plants, and competed with them for nutrients, water, and sunlight—was chopped out with a hoe or pulled out by the roots. A plow or harrow was then run between the rows, first turning the dirt outward from near the base of the plant to uproot anything growing nearby, and then back again to turn dirt from the edge of the ridges onto the base of the exposed plants. A crop might be hoed anywhere from two to four times before being “laid by” (allowed to mature) toward the middle of July, once the cotton plants had grown to a sufficient size that their roots could dominate the subterranean struggle for nutrients and their branches could shade out any competition for sunlight.²¹

Toward the end of August, the plants having flowered and the flowers given way to bolls now opened on the branch, enslaved men, women, and children were sent out into the fields to pick cotton. “The picking of cotton should commence just as soon as the hands can all be profitably employed,” advised one planter, “say as soon as forty or fifty pounds to the hand can be gathered.” A field planted in cotton might be picked anywhere from three times—the “bottom, middle, and top crops”—to six or seven, as the plant continued to grow and bloom through the fall and early months of the winter.²²

As the cotton was taken in, it was sometimes set out on a “scaffold” to dry in the sun. “With proper care and attention,” explained one planter, “great improvement may be given to the complexion of the staple by a little heating in bulk.” And in any case, “the cotton when ginned out ought to be so dry that the seed will crack when pressed between the teeth. It is often ginned wetter, but just as often the cotton samples blue.” (That is, the color would be poor if the cotton was not thoroughly dried first.) The fine wires that lined the gin’s

spinning roller separated the seeds from the cotton fiber knotted around it. Ginned cotton was often separated into piles of roughly similar quality before being pressed into bales. Finished bales, wrapped in burlap or cotton bagging and wired tight, weighed about four hundred pounds. "Too much pain cannot be taken in preparing cotton for market," advised one planter. "Neat packing is of no small importance in the sale of cotton, and no little taste may be displayed in making the package."²³ With that, the cotton was sent forward for sale.

The "radical simplification" of the landscape was attended by the forcible reconditioning of the hands that worked the land. Many of them were among the hundreds of thousands or so people who were transplanted to Mississippi and Louisiana through the interstate slave trade. They went into the fields for the first time stripped of the social networks and, in many cases, the skills that had enabled them to survive slavery under the different crop regime of the Upper South. And they did so as members of slave communities that had been reconfigured around slave-buying planters' desires. The slave trade focused with particular intensity on people of "prime age"—that is, fifteen to twenty-five. These were people who had survived childhood and grown strong enough to tend cotton, and who were old enough to reproduce. Putting it in the way that Mississippi planter John Knight did when he described the slave force he was trying to assemble in the market, one could say that a planter's ideal was "half men and half women . . . young say from 16 to 25, stout limbs, large chests, wide shoulders and hips, etc." Putting it another way, one could say that planters in the Mississippi Valley preferred to outsource the raising of at least their plantation's first generation of slaves to the Upper South, while reserving for themselves the benefit of those slaves' years of greatest productivity and fertility.²⁴

Cotton planters preferred field slaves, whose immune systems had already been "acclimated" to the epidemiology of the Mississippi Valley—the "Creole" slaves whom one slaveholder estimated sold at a 25 percent premium in the New Orleans market. Imported slaves often suffered through an extended period of illness after they arrived in the Lower South, a period slaveholders referred to as their "seasoning"—the process by which their bodies were acclimated to local environmental and labor conditions. Slaveholders used color

as a proxy for this inward accommodation of human being to landscape. According to the *American Cotton Planter*, a monthly journal published in Montgomery, Alabama, during the 1850s and read by planters across the Deep South: "If stout, hearty, durable, long lived slaves are wanted, and if pecuniary interest is a permanent consideration, the pure African should be chosen in preference to the mulatto; and *the blacker the better*. The jet black, shiny, unadulterated, greasy-skinned, *strong-smelling* negro is the best every way." Here were Negrophobia and commercial practice twisted together and called science.²⁵ And then distributed as a set of slave buyers' rules of thumb. "I must have if possible the *jet black* Negroes, they stand this climate the best," wrote Mississippi planter John Knight as he planned a foray into the slave market.²⁶ Thus were human beings reconditioned (and read) according to their application to the culture of cotton.

Prosperous slaveholders often tried to mark the boundary between their houses and their fields with different sorts of slaves. Those who could afford to do so purchased household slaves whose skin color was taken as *prima facie* evidence of suitability. According to prevailing medical ethnography, slaves of mixed blood were best suited "for those offices requiring more intelligence," due to "a mental superiority which is inherited from the white progenitor." Such characteristics "render mulattoes very valuable as house-servants, mechanics, body-servants, carriage-drivers, negro-drivers, or overseer."²⁷ "The girls are Brownskin and good house girls," wrote a slave trader about young women he hoped to sell. Similarly, a slave named Mary Ellen Brooks was variously described as "delicate," "intelligent," "well-suited for a house servant," "fancy," and "a mulatto" by the men who sold her. These slave traders knew that cotton planters used household slaves to distinguish between domestic and economic space, between the refined lives they lived and the contaminating soil from which they drew their wealth. Slaves' skin color came to articulate the distance between the sphere of (white) consumption and that of (black) production, between slaveholders' houses and their fields, between intellectual and cultural attainment and gross physicality and unending toil. That the men who described Brooks were doing so in connection with a lawsuit arising from her rape and murder at the hands of a Louisiana planter who had claimed to be buying "the little girl . . . to wait upon his wife and do the sewing for a small family" suggests the extent of the moral rot

that lurked just behind these slaveholding pantomimes of civilization, “good breeding,” and refinement.²⁸

Slaveholders projected specific capacities onto enslaved people’s bodies, and matched them with the tasks dictated by the cultivation of cotton. Louis Hughes remembered that when a plantation was cleared, men usually felled the trees and cut the wood, while women grubbed out the underbrush. “I never saw women put to the hard work of grubbing until I went to McGee’s,” he wrote of his introduction to a particularly hard master in Mississippi, “and [once I saw that] I greatly wondered at it.” Similarly, men generally drove mule-drawn plows, while women labored alongside men using hoes to cut the grass and weeds away from the base of the cotton plants. Finally, men did most of the “translocal” work in the Cotton Kingdom—hosteling, carriage driving, message carrying—while women were more often employed inside slaveholders’ houses and in bearing, nursing, and caring for children.²⁹ For now, it is enough to say that enslaved people were assigned to plantation labor in ways that both reflected and concretely reproduced slaveholding notions of their gendered capacities.

Children from the ages of eight or nine to twelve or thirteen were assigned to do work that would have wasted the skills and strength of a “full hand.” The *American Cotton Planter* recommended that ditching, which required little precision once a line had been established, be done by “a small boy with a hoe suited to his size.” Children of this age were also set to dropping the cotton seeds into the drills, carrying water for use by members of the white household and by adult slaves in the fields, and washing the dirty linens and soiled clothes belonging to the white people. “If we did not get the clothes clean,” remembered Peter Bruner, “my mistress would send me over to the tanyard and have my master whip me, and I let you know she examined every piece thoroughly.” “Children from nine to twelve years of age and women who were known as ‘sucklers,’ that is women with infants,” remembered Louis Hughes, were sent out in August to pick the “first crop” of early opening bolls that bloomed close to the ground. Along with “all the old people that were feeble,” nursing mothers and children were detailed to the “trash gang,” which followed the principal workforce along the rows to pick whatever cotton had evaded their fingers and remained in the boll. For slaves, the labor they did became a way of marking biographical time. William Hayden remembered

that he was hired out “at the time I was large enough to plough with a shovel plough.” He was, a slaveholder might have said, “just growing into money.”³⁰

THE MATRIX of human qualities—skin color, sex, and size—arrayed in the service of the cotton plant was the outward manifestation of a process of physical reorganization that occurred within every human being employed in the cultivation of cotton. Charles Ball remembered hearing a slaveholder explaining that people under twenty years of age were “prime articles in the market” because they “would soon learn to pick cotton.” “As to those more advanced in life,” Ball continued, “he seemed to think . . . they could not so readily become expert cotton pickers.” When slaveholders talked, as they often did, about rows cut by an “expert ploughman” and seeds “strewed by a careful hand,” about “practiced hands” and “hands of the best judgment,” about “the careful movements required of house servants” or “hands with a short training” who could “pick almost, if not quite, as much without trash as with it,” they were describing a set of learned actions—a recoordination of nerves and muscles, eyes and hands, which extended their dominion beyond the skin of its subjects, into the very fabric of their form.³¹

This forced neuro-muscular transformation created embodied knowledge. “Of all the labors of the field, the dexterity displayed by the Negroes in ‘scraping cotton’ is most calculated to call forth the admiration of the novice spectator,” wrote one observer. “The field-hand . . . will select one delicate shoot from the surrounding multitude and with his rude hoe he will trim away the remainder with all the boldness and touch of a master, leaving the incipient stalk unharmed and alone in its glory; and at nightfall you can look along the extending rows, and find the plants correct in line, and of the required distance and separation from each other.” The extent to which cotton planters depended upon their ability to channel the intelligence and dexterity—the humanity—of their slaves into labor success is perhaps best indexed by the resistance that cotton posed to mechanized farming. Long after other crops were harvested by machine, cotton was still being picked by hand. The fact that the bolls opened unevenly over the course of several months required judgment and care in the picking, if the takings were to be maximized.³²

Each of the countless actions sacrificed to the annual crop represented a way of knowing and of working the earth. Former slaves were very specific

about the bodily discipline required to pick cotton. Solomon Northup, who used the words “precision,” “dexterity,” “celerity,” and “knack” to describe the abilities of accomplished pickers, described his own efforts to pick cotton in a way that itemized the steps in a process he found “incomprehensible”: “I had to seize the boll with one hand and deliberately draw out the white, gushing blossom with the other. Depositing the cotton in the sack, moreover, was a difficulty that demanded the exercise of both hands and eyes. I was compelled to pick it from the stalk where it had grown. I made havoc with the branches, loaded with the yet un-broken bolls, the long cumbersome sack swinging from side to side in a manner not allowable in a cotton field.”³³

Indeed, the detailed descriptions of former field hands such as Solomon Northup, John Brown, Louis Hughes, and Charles Ball provide a better account of the culture of cotton—fuller, more informative, more tactile, more masterful—than anything found in the pages of the *American Cotton Planter*. They run to dozens of pages, and include the sort of calendrical and spatial overviews of cotton culture that rival anything found in the planters’ periodicals. But more than that, they are full of eye-level detail and practical wisdom absent from the sources produced by slaveholders: “Sometime the slave picks down one side of a row, and back upon the other, but more usually there is one on either side, gathering all that has blossomed, leaving the unopened bolls for a succeeding picking. . . . It is necessary to be extremely careful the first time going through the field, in order not to break the branches off the stalks. The cotton will not bloom upon a broken branch,” wrote Northup in the midst of his lengthy account of cotton.³⁴

Northup’s itemization of the skills necessary for cotton picking could be extended to the whole run of tasks required of slaves. What was the best way to plane a log into boards, or run a straight fence line across a curving hill? Where did the cows hide when they were turned into the woods? How much downward pressure on the plow was necessary to cut an even furrow about five inches deep? How could a furrow be cut parallel to another across an unmarked field? Which seeds would grow into the best plants? How close to the base of the plants should one plow, in order to throw up enough dirt to cover the weeds on the surface without cutting the roots beneath? How could one translate one’s sense of the field to the animal at the end of the reins? What was the best way to cut an even grade across a declining surface? How should

one aim the blade of the hoe, so as to get close enough to “hill” a plant without scraping its stalk? How hard should one swing a hoe, in order to cut grass without breaking the handle? How much cotton would press out into a four-hundred-pound bale? How could one lay on whitewash thickly enough to cover rough-cut wood, but not so thickly that it clotted and flaked away? How long should leather be left in a tanning vat? What was the method for bending a board without breaking it? What was the best way to master a team and keep a wagon from getting mired in a rut? How hot should an iron get before one touched it to the clothes? How could a cook bring an entire meal to completion at the moment the guests sat down at the table? What was the best way to polish a carriage to the point that a slaveholder could see his reflection in its face? How could one manage to appear cheerful, or willing, or downcast as the moment demanded? How could one sleep wakefully while awaiting a call during the night?³⁵

In its primary guise, slave labor was a bloody and hierarchical social relation. But the labor that slaves did was also work: the application of human energy and imagination to the physical world. It is in this aspect that we can begin to understand the satisfaction—even the pride—that ex-slaves expressed about some of the work they had done in slavery (though certainly not all of it), and about their own mastery of the conversion of the natural world into usefulness. The examples, drawn from the accounts of the escaped, are many: Solomon Northup noted that after his struggles in the cotton field, the cultivation of sugar “suited me”; Charles Ball remembered the time he had spent cutting a field from the forest as a time of “happiness”; John Brown boasted that “at farming, at carpentering, and at all kinds of labor, I was a match for any two hands”; Louis Hughes presented an affecting image of trying, as a child, to ring the plantation bell in such a way that it voiced the words, “Come to dinner,” and expressed pride in meeting slaves who could pack a bale of cotton to within ten pounds of a given limit without the aid of a scale. In Mississippi, Hughes recalled, there were slaves who could “turn their hands to almost anything.”³⁶

Thinking of such efforts as work first and only then as labor is important for several reasons. It gestures toward a realm of enslaved people’s embodied experience that was conditioned—even determined—by slavery, yet never fully reducible to their status as slaves. It helps us to imagine a world of sensations

and satisfactions that haunts the edge of our historical vision: the ways that slaves came to know and master nature, the knowledge they had in their hands, the pride they felt in it. It helps us to understand slavery as the violent appropriation not only of abstract labor, but also of material knowledge—of ways of knowing that planters might command or even claim as their own, but that they could never fully understand.³⁷ Thus do we find the celebrated Mississippi planter and agricultural reformer M. W. Phillips explaining, in his article entitled “Cotton Seed,” that his own prize seeds were “selected from the field by myself and an old Negro woman.” Thus was Vick’s Prize Cottonseed advertised as having been selected from the fields by its namesake’s “most intelligent Negroes.” Thus did Governor James Henry Hammond advise planters throughout the South that “a few old hands, or very young ones, breeding women, sucklers, and invalids” should be set to the crucial task of sorting the cotton by grade (an operation both visual and tactile) before it was packed into bales. Thus can we understand Frederick Law Olmsted’s observation that “there is always on hand . . . some Negro who really manages his owner’s plantation, his agricultural judgment being deferred to as superior to that of any overseer or planter in the country.” Thus was the slaveholding contradiction between not knowing and claiming knowledge expressed along the juncture of the unfathomable and the incomprehensible, the lived experience of slaves and the efforts of planters to explain what they themselves only half knew. And so the masters of the Cotton Kingdom left behind barely readable “explanations” of the very basis of their prosperity: “The necessity for running the first furrow on the lower side is obvious to every ploughman. It is because having an open furrow to turn the furrow slice into, the resistance that would be otherwise offered to it by turning up the hill is removed, while returning on the upper side, the plough having the advantage of turning the furrow slice down the hill is enabled to lay the dirt up much better than if it was turning up hill, without the advantage of an open furrow to receive its furrow slice.”³⁸

It is with planters’ disjointed knowledge of “their” cotton crop in mind that we should return to their synecdochic dismemberment of the slaves into “hands”—or, in another formulation, the reduction of the slave to the planter’s “third arm”—and the grotesque image of self-activated hoes and plows turned out into the fields to tend the cotton: “I incline to the opinion the hoes should precede the plows, chopping into bunches, passing very rapidly on. . . .

In the second working the plows should in all cases go before the hoes. . . . Now the hoes have an important and delicate duty to perform. . . . The hoes have much to do in the culture of this crop, and must be prepared to devote pretty much all their time to it, constantly passing over and perfecting that which cannot be done with the plows.”³⁹

Planters were well aware of the gap between the practical knowledge obtained by their “hands” and their “mastery” of their own crops and fields. They strove to bridge that gap with their eyes. One need look no further than the word “overseer” to grasp the point that the discipline slaveholders exercised over their slaves on a daily basis was defined by visual power.⁴⁰ Slaveholders spoke of “superintending” and “directing” their slaves, of the need to “look each day at all the work going on, inspect the buildings, boats, embankments, and sluice-ways, and examine the sick.”⁴¹ The thousands and thousands of pages of J. A. Turner’s *Cotton Planter’s Manual*, the *American Cotton Planter*, the *Southern Agriculturalist*, the *Southern Cultivator*, and other publications might be read as a set of extended efforts to translate a practical knowledge that was most readily obtained by the field hands (and thus expropriated from them) into a set of visual terms—letters, words, charts, illustrations—which could be consumed through their owners’ eyes. Likewise, the translation of the landscape into a measured grid—rows five feet apart, furrows three inches deep, cotton seeds dropped from a distance of three feet, and countless other agricultural precepts, both inherited and created—all of these were efforts to measure, rationalize, and exert control over the process of growing cotton “to the hand.”

The clear-cut fields and parallel rows that defined the landscape of the Cotton Kingdom provided slaveholders (and their “overseers”) with a visual grid they could use to measure their slaves’ labor. Slaves in the Mississippi Valley were generally organized into “gangs,” and were watched as they worked. Charles Ball explained: “The work we had to do was to hoe and weed cotton, for the last time. . . . The captain was the foreman of his company, and those under his command had to keep up with him. . . . By this means, the overseer had nothing to do but to keep Simon hard at work, and he was certain that all the others must work equally hard.”⁴² The rate at which slaves progressed across the field provided those who watched them with a rough visual proxy of their work rate.

Former slaves' accounts of their labor convey a sense of constant awareness of the sight lines that defined the field of slaveholding power. "Epps, I soon found, whether in the field or not, had his eyes pretty generally upon us," remembered Solomon Northup. "From the piazza, from behind some adjacent tree, or other concealed point of observation, he was constantly on watch." Similarly, Ball recalled that the first time he'd gone into a cotton field, he had tried to begin a conversation with another slave, only to be startled, before the man had time to reply, by someone yelling, "Mind your work there, you rascals!" "Looking in the direction of the sound," Ball continued, "I saw master Tom, sitting under the shade of a sassafras tree, at the distance of about one hundred yards from us."⁴³ The clear-cut fields and parallel rows provided slaveholders with a disciplinary acrostic they could use to measure and regulate the rate at which their slaves worked, marking the otherwise invisible conversion of human energy into labor. This grim version of hide-and-seek was even more intense in the concentrated interior spaces of slaveholding households. Many slaves, Frederick Law Olmsted noted, detested the "close control" of domestic slavery, where their every "movement" could be observed.⁴⁴

Slaveholders' visual power had limits. Olmsted remembered watching an overseer surveying a group of working slaves from the vantage point of the back of his horse. The added height of his horse allowed the white man to see over the growing cotton plants and to survey several rows at a time. Still, "as often as he visited one end of the line of operations, the hands at the other end would discontinue their labor, until he turned to ride towards them again." Cotton in full bloom could grow so high that "the pickers in the field [were] well-nigh hidden by the tall, luxuriant plants, from the limbs of which a large crop already hangs from the open bolls." Mississippi slaveholder R. D. Powell provided an extended account of the way a slaveholder's vision could be deranged by resistant slaves. "The Negroes attempted in a very friendly way in May to make Carter lose the crop. After finding himself in the grass he took the place of the headman, or Driver, & put him to work on the first row & all the other hands to follow him, & all the hands slighted their work by covering up the grass lightly, and not cutting it up when small, and he became so restless that he did not take the time to see how the work was done, & had his plows running about, & plowing a spot here, & and a spot there, & where they did plow, they would let the plows run over the grass, & not plow it up." In these

passages, one has a sense of the overseers shuttling back and forth, widening their focus and then zooming in, trying to regain their visual advantage; and of the slaves seeing the world through their owners' eyes, and then slipping their resistance into the margins of the frame.⁴⁵

Among slaveholders, such resistance was sometimes referred to as providing "eye service."⁴⁶ Slaveholders' overseers were themselves enmeshed in a process by which "slavery," landscape, and human body were being mutually reformatted. Just as "slavery" was made materially manifest in the novel and often violent recoordination of eyes, nerves, muscles, and hands ("hands"), so, too, was "mastery"—or its synonyms "supervision" and "oversight"—expressed through human-animal-ecological hybrids such as the one described by Olmsted: the field of vision of an overseer on a horse riding up and down a row of slaves working their way across a clear-cut field planted in rows of cotton. The field of visual mastery—the discipline through which the senses and capacities of human bodies, black and white, were shaped by the demands of the mode of production (forced labor and oversight) and the limits of the landscape—was full of blind spots and hiding places. Indeed, as we will see, it ended at the edges of the cotton fields.

When slaveholders did not like what they saw—when slaves were perceived to be less than "equal to their tasks"—they disciplined their "hands." Solomon Northup remembered the lash as a sort of universal equivalent, a mechanism by which the severity of mistakes could be scaled into an astringent standard measure: "The number of lashes is graduated according to the offense. Twenty-five are deemed a mere brush, inflicted, for instance, when a dry leaf or piece of boll is found in the cotton, or when a branch is broken in the field; fifty is the ordinary penalty following all the delinquencies of the next higher grade; one hundred is called severe: it is the punishment inflicted for the serious offense of standing idle in the field." Moses Grandy remembered his owner Jemmy Coats as "a severe old man": "Because I could not learn his way of hilling corn, he flogged me naked with a severe whip made of a very tough sapling; this lapped round me each stroke, the point of it at last entered my belly and broke off, leaving an inch and a-half outside. I was not aware of it until on going to work again it hurt my side very much, when on looking down I saw it sticking out of my body: I pulled it out and the blood spouted out after it. The wound festered, and discharged very much at the time, and hurt me for

years after.” John Brown similarly bore the scars of his habituation to new labor for the rest of his life. Brown remembered bending down one day to show his owner where the handle of his plow had come loose from the blade, making it impossible for him to run a true line, and then being knocked backward by a kick he never saw coming. “The blow struck me right between the eyes, breaking the bone of my nose, and cutting the leaders of my right eye, so that it turned quite round in its socket. I was stunned for the moment, and fell, my mouth filling with blood, which also poured from my nose and eyes. I have never been able to see so well since, and cannot now look long at print without suffering much pain. The letters seem cloudy. To this day my right eye has remained out of its proper place.”⁴⁷ Slaves’ scars bore witness to their forcible reeducation in the cotton fields of the Mississippi Valley.

Labor provided the spatial framework of slaveholding surveillance: slaves were supposed to be in certain places at certain times. To be elsewhere—missing from the line, standing at the edge of the field, lurking around the kitchen—was seen by slaveholders as evidence of a larger, hidden disorder. It was to be liable. But to be in place was to be vulnerable. Former slaves often gave very concrete accounts of where their owners had tracked them down to discipline them. On one occasion when he was beaten, Isaac Mason remembered, his master “met me in the yard, after I had put up the horse he had been using”; on another, after he had run away and then returned home starving, “my boss met me when I was coming from the barn.” Similarly, after William Green told his owner that he would fight rather than accept a beating, he went back to work; his owner, however, “went immediately to the house and gets his pistols and bowie knife, and comes to the barn where I was attending to the horses.” The intimacy of household slavery concentrated the interchange of service and violence. Louis Hughes remembered that his childhood mistress would try to “box my jaws and pinch me” when she encountered him in the house. She would direct him to sit with her while she prepared the loom for weaving, and then “she would warp the thread herself and place it in the loom, then I would have to hand her the threads, as she put them through the hames. For any failure in quickly comprehending or doing my work, I did not fail to receive the customary blow, or blows, from her hand.” Likewise in the dining room, “if any little thing was not pleasing to her at mealtime,” he continued, “it was a special delight for her to reach out, when I drew near to her to pass

her something, and give me a blow with her hand.” Similarly, Henry Bibb remembered that his mistress was “every day flogging me, boxing, pulling my ears, and scolding so that I dreaded to enter the room where she was.”⁴⁸ These memories bespeak spaces and routines that were dense with the threat of violence inflicted on bodies exposed by their labor.

Behind closed doors, in outbuildings, or in the woods at the margins of the fields, the choreography of service, surveillance, and space defined a landscape of sexual violence. In the room the adolescent Henry Bibb had feared to enter was a white woman who “would often seat herself in a large rocking chair, with two pillows about her, and would make me rock her, and keep off the flies. She was too lazy to scratch her own head, and would often make me scratch and comb it for her. She would at other times lie in her bed in warm weather, and make me fan her while she slept, scratch and rub her feet.” Slaveholders used the well-grooved patterns of plantation life to construct a simulacrum of domestic and agricultural order over sexual predation. Solomon Northup remembered the drunken overseer Epps standing at the edge of the field, making clear his “lewd intentions” by “motioning and grimacing” as he beckoned a woman named Patsy to leave her work and come over to him. Mary, sent to the barn “to look for nests where a number of the hens were supposed to have been laying,” was there surprised by her owner’s son, who ordered her “to take her bed among the hay and submit to his lustful passions.” When Louisa Picquet was fourteen, she was hired out to a boardinghouse where her owner sometimes stayed. She later recalled an instance when “Mr. Cook told me I must come to his room that night and take care of him. He said he was sick, and he wanted me and another slave girl to come to his room and take care of him.” When Picquet told the woman who ran the boardinghouse of her fear of being alone with Cook, the older woman went herself to care for him. Late that night, when he had been left alone, Cook “sent down by the boy to tell me to bring him some mustard” for his cold; again the landlady did his bidding. Still later he sent down to say that his pitcher of water needed to be filled; this time the landlady sent “the boy” to serve him. Over the next few days, Cook stayed confined in his room and made a series of requests: for salt, more water, for a button to be sewn on his waistband, for his boots to be blacked, all designed to maneuver Picquet into his room so that he could rape her. Finally one morning, having been told the previous day that she was out,

Cook left his bed and “came to me in the ironin’-room, down stairs, where I was and whipped me with the cowhide, naked.” In some cases household labor was less an alibi for sexual torture than it was the thing itself. Harriet Jacobs, who had herself been pursued through the house by her master as a child, remembered a neighboring slave who was kept tied to his crippled owner’s bed wearing only a loose cotton shirt. In *Humphreys v. Utz*, the Supreme Court of Louisiana quietly determined the guilt of a slaveholder who had nailed an enslaved man’s penis to the bedpost in the owner’s room. As their slaves were pieced out in the market, deployed in their houses and their fields, and degraded before their eyes, slaveholders were defining the human condition of mastery: the condition of gazing, claiming, supervising, delighting, penetrating, climaxing, and maiming at will—the human condition of owning.

In the broad light of day, slaveholders produced theatricals of discipline and punishment that concretized their authority—their property—in the public form of a wounded slave. Peter Bruner lost control of a team of horses, which stampeded down the dirt road and covered a neighboring white woman’s “very nice black silk dress” with dust. “In return,” he recalled, “she had me come in and take off my coat and vest and had all of her slaves come in and look at me while she cowhided me.” On his first day on a new plantation, Charles Ball was called by his overseer to watch the punishment of an old woman who had “left several hills of cotton in the course of the day, without cleaning and hilling them in a proper manner,” along with two others who were “charged in general terms with having been lazy, and of having neglected their work that day.” The overseer made all three women raise their dresses and flogged them as they lay upon the ground. “I had never seen people flogged in the way our overseer flogged his people,” remembered Ball.⁴⁹ As well as through the application of direct force to skin, muscle, and nerve, these slaveholders were attempting to control their slaves through the spectacle of violence—by conscripting their eyes into witness.

Perhaps even more insistently, slaveholders tried to cow slaves into submission by jamming their senses with the sounds of human suffering. “It is the literal, unvarnished truth, that the crack of the lash, and the shrieking of the slaves can be heard from dark until bed time, on Epp’s plantation, any day almost during the entire period of the cotton picking season,” remembered Solomon Northup of his time in Louisiana. On one occasion, John Brown heard a

man being beaten for three hours, “groaning piteously all the time whilst his master looked on and chuckled.” On another he was summoned along with others to register the punishment of a man who had been suspended by his hands: “His shrieks and groans were most agonizing, and could be heard at first a mile and a quarter off, but as the punishment proceeded, they subsided into moans scarcely audible at the distance of fifty paces.” Louis Hughes remembered standing “trembling from head to foot” after hearing his wife beaten. One of William Wells Brown’s earliest memories was of hearing his mother beaten in the field for arriving late at her place.

As soon as she reached the spot where they were at work, the overseer commenced whipping her. She cried, “Oh! Pray—Oh! Pray!—Oh! Pray!”—these were generally the words of slaves when imploring mercy at the hands of their oppressors. I heard her voice, and knew it, and jumped out of my bunk, and went to the door. Though the field was some distance from the house, I could hear every crack of the whip, and every groan and cry of my poor mother. I remained at the door, not daring to venture any further. The cold chills ran over me, and I wept aloud. After giving her ten lashes, the sound of the whip ceased, and I returned to my bed, and found no consolation but in my tears. It was not yet daylight.

Frederick Law Olmsted remembered a woman crying out as she was beaten for missing the morning’s work. “Yes, sir!” or “Ah, sir!” or “Please, sir!” she cried as she knelt before the overseer. After a time, he told her to draw her dress up around her shoulders and lie down. “She now shrunk away from him, not rising, but writhing, groveling, and screaming, ‘Oh, don’t, sir! Oh, please stop, master! Please, sir! Please, sir! Oh, that’s enough, master! Oh, Lord! Oh, master, master! Oh, God master, do stop! Oh, God master! Oh, God master!’” Olmsted recalled that he spurred his horse away from the field, and “the screaming yells and the whip strokes had ceased when I reached the top of the bank. Choking, sobbing, spasmodic groans only were heard.”⁵⁰ We are accustomed to thinking of sounds as fleeting, as impressions that end when our eardrums cease to vibrate—but these memories tell of sounds that were as lasting as the scars on the former slaves’ bodies. These sounds, too, were part of the

nexus of body and landscape which defined the Cotton Kingdom, slaves' senses turned against them, their hearing tortured with the sounds of others' suffering: lamentations, pleas for mercy, shrieks, groans.⁵¹

The interchange of visibility and vulnerability, power and pleasure, landscape and labor that characterizes the incidents we have come to label "torture" was diffused through the entire landscape of labor. Long before the mainstream—one might even say civil—discussion of torture in our democracy defined the term down to the bare-minimum example of a single practice ("waterboarding," or "controlled drowning"), it was widely recognized that chronic sleep deprivation produced sensations of acute physical and psychological disorientation.⁵² When not specifically deployed as torture or used in order to extract as much labor as possible, chronic sleep deprivation was often implemented as an offshoot of bizarre anthropological theory. "It is common opinion among the people that the Negro requires less sleep than the white man," wrote a critic of this view in the *American Cotton Planter*.⁵³ The conventional description of slave labor as lasting from "sunup to sundown" presents the question of sleep deprivation under the cover of a folksy nostalgia. Henry Bibb wrote that slaves often worked from early in the morning until late in the night, before being sent in to weigh their cotton, "and then they would have to prepare something to eat before they could lie down to rest. . . . By the time they would get their suppers it would be midnight; then they would herd down all together and take but two or three hours rest, before the overseers' horn called them up again to prepare for the field." Louis Hughes remembered being so tired in the field that "I could hardly stand." Moses Grandy recalled being kept awake for five days running to wait upon his gambler master as the white man played cards. "I was standing in the corner of the room, nodding for want of sleep, when he took up a shovel and beat me with it: he dislocated my shoulder, and sprained my wrist and broke the shovel over me."⁵⁴

Slaves often remembered the work they did as a form of extended, repetitive torture. John Brown recalled that when the slaves "scraped" the cotton, they were "compelled to go across a thirty, forty, or fifty acre field without straightening themselves one minute, and with the burning sun striking their head and back, and the heat reflected upwards from the soil onto their faces." Making it to the end of the row, where one might briefly stand straight up and perhaps drink some water, took between an hour and an hour and a half. Some

slaves, Brown noted “could not stand straight to save their lives from constant stooping,” their bodies bent in forced tribute to the cotton plant. In picking season, Brown continued, “the boll of the plant when split by ripeness, pricks the fingers, even when you are careful and lacerates the flesh round the nails to cause great soreness . . . till the blood runs from the tips of their fingers, where they have been pricked by the hard pod. . . . The perspiration, meanwhile, streams from every pore of the body till the whole of it, head, hair, and all, are covered with a crust of mud.” Preparing the cotton for market was likewise difficult: “Packing is very hard, oppressive work. The dust and fibers fly about in thick clouds, and get into the chest, checking respiration, and injuring the lungs very seriously. It is a common thing for the slaves to sicken off with chest diseases acquired in the packing room or gin-house, and to hear them wheezing and coughing like broken-winded horses as they crawl about to the work that is killing them.”⁵⁵ In Brown’s account, we see the outlines of the gradual process by which human life was turned into cotton: the torturous conversion of labor to capital, and of living people to corpses.

The bullwhip served as a sort of universal equivalent by which the system of converting pain to production could be measured; recall the scale of punishments for various offenses against cotton plants, provided by Solomon Northup. Yet the whip—standing apart from the work process as a term through which different sorts of concrete offenses (breaking a branch, coming up short at the end of the day, running away) might be compared to one another—suggests an analytical separation between work and torture. The apparent frequency with which slaves were wounded with the tools of their labor supports no such clear separation. Leonard Black was knocked down with a “johnny-cake board” when he spilled some cornmeal, and was “struck in the mouth with an iron-toothed rake” when he offended in the field. Isaac Mason was beaten with a pitchfork in a feedlot. Peter Bruner was “nearly drowned” in a tanners’ vat; “I thought I was nearly drowned when I came out, but as it happened I was still alive.” James Longuen’s owner jammed the handle of a broken hoe into his mouth. John Brown’s owner rubbed the worms he found on his cotton crop into the mouths of the slaves who had overlooked them. Moses Roper was suspended by his arms from the spinning wheel of a cotton press.⁵⁶ And so on. Whenever slaveholders turned tools into weapons, they

emphasized—played out—the symbiosis of labor and torture essential to re-making the landscape and its inhabitants in the image of cotton culture.⁵⁷

Sometimes slaveholders used extreme speedups of the labor process to torture their slaves. John Brown and Jacob Stroyer both recalled being forced to run throughout the day as a form of punishment. Moses Roper recalled an old man named Phil who could no longer keep tilling his row; “for this his master used to chain him round the neck, and run him down a steep hill.” Peter Still remembered a pregnant woman named Delphine who finally lost her child after being “compelled day after day to plow with her mule at a trot. She dared not stop, for his eye was ever on her.” Andrew Jackson was tied by his neck to a horse and run barefoot down a road. So was Roper. So was Simon, whose torture, because it became the subject of a legal action in the State of Mississippi, was recorded in the sort of state archive generally beloved by those who believe that the accounts former slaves gave of their lives were exaggerated.⁵⁸ The use of animals in many of these tortures was, as we will see, anything but incidental. For now, it is enough to say that such tortures expressed the ultimate logic of calculating cotton production “to the hand”: human bodies were grotesquely stretched to meet the limits of merciless traction. Think of Roper hanging from the cotton press, literally rotating around the cotton he had helped to pick.

7

“The Empire of the White Man’s Will”

They are food for the cotton-field.

—Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”

Yet even then the hard ruthless rape of the land began to tell. . . . The harder the slaves were driven, the more careless and fatal was their farming.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of the Black Belt”

THROUGHOUT THE antebellum period, the Lower Mississippi Valley, declared by its chroniclers to be the richest agricultural region in the world, imported most of the wheat, corn, beef, and pork its residents required to live from the Midwest and the Ohio Valley. The entire economy was devoted to agriculture, yet it could not feed itself. Cotton, it was said by one planter, was “so much more profitable than other kinds of cultivation,” that planters supplied themselves “almost entirely from the upper country.” There were, scattered among the many plantation owners who planted nothing but cotton, a few planters who tried to diversify their crops, usually with corn. Corn would provide feed for livestock, who could in turn reduce Southern planters’ dependence on imported foodstuffs—a concern that became particularly pressing during the Depression of 1837, when a sharp drop in the price of cotton made imported food seem even more dear. “We were driven by necessity to break our intolerable bondage to the grain growing states, and raise within ourselves what was necessary for our own consumption,” wrote one Hinds County planter in what most would have regarded as a too-optimistic assessment of the potential of Mississippi Valley plantations to feed their owners.

Planters who valued self-sufficiency used corn to feed the cattle and pigs

they hoped would reduce their reliance on imported foodstuffs. Cattle and pigs were marked with patterns cut into their ears or with brands on the flank, then turned out into the woods, swamps, and roadways to forage for feed. In the autumn, Charles Ball remembered, "Neither the hogs nor the cattle required any feeding at our hands. The woods were full of nuts and the grass was abundant." Hogs were generally driven in from the woods to be slaughtered after the cotton had been shipped, but while it was still cold enough to preserve their flesh as it was processed into meat. "Each carcass is cut into six parts," explained Solomon Northup, "and piled one above the other in salt, upon a large table in the smoke-house. In this condition it remains a fortnight, when it is hung up, and a fire built, and continued more than half the time during the remainder of the year." "This smoking," he continued, "is necessary to prevent the bacon from becoming infested with worms." For planters, this feral economy—from forage to flesh to meat and milk—had the advantage of providing protein at the cost of little extra labor: the cows and pigs themselves did much of the work of converting nature to the service of the cotton economy (as well as, in many cases, converting the bounty of the public domain into the benefit of private consumption).¹

There were, however, well-known limits to stock raising in the agro-capitalist ecology of the Cotton Kingdom. Like corn, livestock drew upon the same land and labor as cotton. The energy of each sector of earth could be converted to stock or staple, but not both; the labor of each hand had to be committed to raising either fodder or fabric. In an economy where both planting and productivity were measured by a calculation of bales per hand per acre, allocation of either land or labor away from cotton and toward corn, cattle, or hogs represented an unaccountable loss in the minds of cotton-crazed planters. Or at least an unaccounted loss, as was suggested by one planter who observed that "large plantations" were not suited for the raising of pigs, "for it is found to be almost impossible to prevent the Negroes stealing and roasting young pigs." And so, during the antebellum period, planters throughout the Mississippi Valley (and elsewhere in the Cotton Kingdom) imported food in order to export cotton. In an 1860 article, the pro-slavery essayist David Christy defended slavery in terms that were, at once, economic and ecological: "From this view of the subject, it appears that slavery is not a self-sustaining system, independently remunerative; but that it attains its importance to the

nation and the world, by standing as an agency, intermediate, between the grain-growing states and our foreign commerce. As the distillers of the West transformed the surplus grain into whisky, that it might bear transport, so slavery takes the products of the North, and metamorphoses them into cotton, that they may bear export.”² The local result of this economy, in which Southern slaves metabolized Midwestern corn into cotton to be sold in the Atlantic market, was clearly described by the former slave Charles Ball. “When corn has to be purchased on a cotton plantation,” he wrote, “the people must expect to make an acquaintance with hunger.”³

Cotton planters regulated the metabolism of nature into energy in weekly rations. “Meat is generally not fed to the laborers in this part of the state,” wrote one planter, before providing tallies of the weekly rations provided on nearby plantations: “One bushel of potatoes a-week, from about October 1st to February 1st. Then one peck of corn, ground as preferred; or one peck of broken rice. Meat occasionally.” “One bushel of potatoes, or ten qts. corn meal, or eight qts. of rice, and four qts. of peas, with occasional fresh meat, and twenty barrels of salt fish and two barrels of molasses during the year. Number of people 170.”⁴ For planters, these rations represented points along an indifference curve between cotton and provender where the cost of food was generally treated as the dependent variable. In good times, the slaves might fare better and get a little meat; in bad times, they might starve, “their meager allowance of corn stinted rather than it shall be said the master was obliged to sell them,” remembered Charles Ball.⁵

The narratives of ex-slaves contain more information about food than any topic other than beatings and escapes. Long after they had escaped slavery, narrators remembered their weekly rations. “Three and half pounds of bacon and corn enough to make a peck of meal.” “The practice among slaveholders was to allow each slave one peck of corn weekly, which was measured out every Monday morning; at the same time each one receiving seven salt herring.” “With respect to food, he used to allow us one peck of Indian meal each, per week, which, after being sifted and bran taken from it, would not be much more than half a peck.” “A peck of unsifted meal, and three and a half pounds of bacon, was the weekly allowance. The piece might be more than half bone, yet no additional weight was allowed on that account. No vegetables were provided.” “A peck of meal and three pounds of bacon a week; some did not give

so much meat." "For my breakfast I had a pint of pot liquor, half a herring, and a little piece of bread. Whether this would stay the cravings of a young appetite or not, there was no more to be had." "Since my arrival . . . I had never enjoyed a full meal of bacon." "Our allowance of food was one peck of corn a week to each full-grown slave. We never had meat of any kind."⁶

Malnutrition was visible to the eye.⁷ Diets low in calories and especially in protein led to the wasting away of subcutaneous fat, in which the human body stores energy. The skin of malnourished slaves would hang in loose folds, dry and wasted for want of nutrition; their hair would become brittle and discolored. Charles Ball again: "A half-starved Negro is a miserable-looking creature. His skin becomes dry, and appears to be sprinkled over with whitish husks, or scales; the glossiness of his face vanishes, his hair loses its color, becomes dry and when stricken with a rod, the dust flies from it. . . . Many young girls who would have been beautiful, if they had been allowed enough to eat, had lost all their prettiness through mere starvation; their fine glossy hair had become of a reddish color and stood out round their heads like long brown wool." Or Henry Bibb's observation, after he was sold to a cotton planter who lived along the Red River: "When we arrived there, we found his slaves poor, ragged, stupid, and half-starved. The food he allowed them per week was one peck of corn for each grown person, one pound of pork, and sometimes a quart of molasses." In January 1836, the Northern traveler James Burn Wallace saw a group of "half-starved" Negroes being unloaded from a boat above Vicksburg, as he was going upriver from New Orleans. Bibb noted that such slaves, when sent to market, were often forced to wash their faces in greasy water to hide the privation evident in their "rough dark" faces.⁸

Planters used food to control their hungry slaves. Molasses and meat at Christmastime were the standard expression of slaveholders' benevolence. Louis Hughes and Solomon Northup both devoted pages in their narratives to detailed descriptions of holiday banquets—trench-smoked turkey, pork, and beef, biscuits and fruit preserves, molasses and milk—and of the way that their owners came down from their house to watch the slaves enjoy the meal. "Only the slave who has lived all the years on his scanty allowance of meal and bacon can appreciate such suppers," Northup wrote. Even more to the point than the theatrical exchange of meager bounty for feigned loyalty was the conversion of calories to energy, and some planters apparently monitored that closely

enough to know that their slaves had very little margin for survival. Rations were commonly increased during periods of the year when (even) more labor was required of the slaves. "At time when the labor is hard, a quart of soup a day, and in light work, twice a-week," advised one model planter. "The general opinion," confided another to Frederick Law Olmsted, "is that Negroes work much better for being supplied three or four pounds of bacon a week."⁹

BUT REFORM-MINDED planters did not solely, or even chiefly, concern themselves with the fact that their slaves were starving. Reformers warned other planters that by choosing to allocate their land and labor with an eye toward maximizing cotton production and relying on imported grain and meat to nourish a human population too focused on cultivating cotton to feed itself, the planters were following a false economy. Cows and pigs allowed to forage at will were spewing the fertility of the country back into the woods, swamps, and roadways, where it escaped the dominion of the cotton plant. What worried reformist planters most was manure.¹⁰

At least from the publication of Justus von Liebig's *Organic Chemistry in Its Applications to Agriculture and Physiology* (issued in German and English in 1840), manure was the basis for scientific agriculture and modernization in the nineteenth century. Liebig's *Chemistry* allowed farmers to see plants in a new way. By tracing the process of growth and decay at a molecular level, Liebig enabled farmers to visualize how their crops were depleting the nitrogen in their fields, and to see how the very nutrients drawn off by staple crops could be replaced through the planting of other crops (such as clover) and fertilizers (such as manure and guano), which returned fertility to the earth at a rate equal to its extraction. Liebig's *Organic Chemistry*, in the hands of Karl Marx, would provide an ecological model for the critique of industrial capitalism. For Marx, the transformation of a rural peasantry into an industrial peasantry had occasioned a "rift" between ecology and economy. Urban workers who could no longer feed themselves were drawing upon the rural economy for food, but instead of returning the nutrients they consumed to the soil in the form of fertilizer, they wasted it in their rank, promiscuous shit.¹¹

In the same years that Marx was reading Liebig, Southern agricultural reformers were using the chemist's work to critique their own society's grain-flesh-meat-manure ecology.¹² For Southern readers of Liebig, the wealth of

the land was being drained away by the false economy of to-the-hand monocropping. As the mission statement of the reformist journal *American Cotton Planter* put it, "American cotton planters produce *too little grain*, and consequently *too little bacon*. . . . It is a fixed fact, that where there is no stock raised, there will be little manure, and where there is no manure, rich land grows poor and poor land grows unproductive."¹³ Rather than cycling nutrients through the circuit of grass-meat-manure fertility, slaveholders had created a wasteful economy in which manure was held in the Midwest while the Cotton Kingdom imported meat to feed its slaves.

Reformist planters imagined a landscape in which perhaps a fourth of the land and labor allocated to cotton would be given over to provender and stock. One recommended that planters raise twenty head of cattle for every five slaves—a ratio which (at an estimated rate of 120 pounds of voided matter per cow per day) would have required each slave to shovel and spread almost 88 tons of manure a year. He bragged that by so doing on his own plantation, he had been able "to make 2,500 bushels of good rich compost manure per hand every year." Achieving such improvement required an investment of both capital and labor that would reorder the agricultural landscape. The planter went on to explain: "The farmer's golden rule is emphatically applicable here—'a place for every thing and every thing in its place.' Each kind of stock must be provided with lots and shelter, and they must be induced or driven into their quarters every night during the entire year. These lots, stables and shelters are to be constantly and regularly kept well littered with vegetable matter, which being broken and tread upon by the stock walking and trampling over it, forms a most valuable absorbent for preserving the fluid portions of excrements."¹⁴ "Manure is wealth," "your manure is your gold mine," the failure to produce manure resulted from "the want of *determination*": there was a manic retentiveness to the literature of Southern agricultural reform. But the reformers were right: the bovine digestive system is an extraordinarily efficient mechanism for converting grass, fodder, and even forage into fertilizer.¹⁵ Their shit-savings were a form of liquid capital.

Indeed, as the South Carolina planter Francis Bulkely wrote in a widely reprinted article, which concluded with a long quotation from Liebig, the depletion of the Southern soil was due not only to the economy of extraction, but also to that of expulsion. The South was exporting its fertility along with its

cotton: "The Southern States are now annually sending to a foreign market three million bales of cotton. . . . These twelve hundred millions of pounds are twelve hundred millions of something essential to the fertility of our soil, which is, in the same degree diminished in productivity by their exportation to foreign countries. If the vessels on which our cotton is freighted to the old world, brought back every year fertilizing substances which would replace the elements carried off, we should then consider the account balanced."¹⁶ Following the argument through, Bulkely noted that the South was wasting not only manure, but also bones. After analyzing the chemical composition of the cotton plant and comparing it to that of corn, he argued that the nutrients of the latter might be recycled to the benefit of the former through a more thoroughgoing use of meal ground from the bones of dead animals.

Crops that become the main food of man and animals derive their value as a food in a great degree from the phosphate of lime that they contain. This substance is secreted by the digestive functions of the animal economy, carried into the circulation of the bones and there deposited, imparting to their structure such firmness and strength as no other quality of food can give. . . . *Now comes the loss.* The bones are never saved—never restored to the fields which originally yielded their substance to the seed of the cotton crop. On the contrary, whether in town or city, they are thrown aside into some receptacle of useless rubbish. . . . Who shall estimate the amount of phosphate of lime lost to the soil by the bones of all our horses and mules that die—of all the cattle, sheep, and swine that are annually consumed by all classes of the Southern population? . . . The English agriculturalist, meanwhile has ransacked the globe for supplies of this invaluable fertilizer. So far back as the year 1837, the value of bones annually imported into England from foreign countries, amounted to two and quarter millions of dollars; and at the present period probably exceeds five times that sum.¹⁷

This vision of shiploads of bones and manure circling the globe in an endless cycle of agro-capitalist repletion depended on the conceptual association of meat, manure, death, and wealth. It projected a story of capital formation on a

global scale out of the terms of enslaved abjection (and slaveholding social reproduction) in the everyday ecology of the Cotton Kingdom.

It is difficult to underestimate the benefits which manure-minded planters thought would grow out of the improvements they were prescribing. As M. W. Phillips of Mississippi put it, "It is, I admit, a tedious process to haul out three or four hundred bushels of stable manure; but no less so is it to clear, fence, and break up new ground—nor more tedious than pulling up stakes, severing all the tender endearments of 'mine own native land,' to seek at a heavy cost of time and money, a home in the western wilds, there to suffer the combined attacks of mosquitoes and fever and ague!" Where soil exhaustion led to the dispersion of the population across the landscape in search of better land, replenishing the earth with manure would support the concentration of population necessary for social development. If a planter discovers his soil is becoming more productive, he will not think of leaving it to go in pursuit of fresh lands," Daniel Pratt explained in the pages of the *American Cotton Planter*.

If he considers himself settled he will want a good dwelling house, good Negro houses, barns, stables, gin house, etc. "How is he able to obtain them? If he wants good houses—which he most assuredly will—he will have to seek for good Mechanics to build them. . . . We shall not only be able to build good houses, but we will have Machinists, Engineers, Manufacturers, and persons suitable to carry on every branch of mechanical business which we need. . . . If we at the South can get on some plan for improving our lands . . . our society will be vastly improved, our population more dense.¹⁸

By regulating the metabolism of the soil, Pratt was arguing, one could likewise regulate the transformation of economic activity into civilization.

Social development held within it the potential for enhanced "pleasure" for the planters who were to be its main beneficiaries. "For what do we live?" Pratt asked. "Is it to hoard up silver and gold? Is it to say we have a plantation of one or five hundred Negroes, or that we make 1000 bales of cotton? Is it to slave ourselves to accumulate property and not enjoy it?" Having framed the wasteful culture of "to the hand" as a form of slavishness, Pratt went on to suggest

the sort of self-care possible under the culture of improvement. “We can take more satisfaction in worshipping God in a good comfortable house, suitable for the worship of such a being, than we can in a log cabin. . . . We can see more satisfaction in a good, well-ventilated house, with good furniture than we can in a little pent-up log cabin with stools.”¹⁹ Pratt’s manure-intensive vision of social development culminated in what he termed the transformation of “temporal into spiritual happiness.” But as the parallelism of the contrast between slavishness and self-care on the one hand, and the “well-ventilated house” and the “pent-up” cabin on the other, an olfactory economy underlay his auto-apotheosis.

The regulation of smells was an elementary aspect of the sort of agricultural civilization advocated by reformers like Pratt. Indeed, only three pages after Pratt’s article in the *American Cotton Planter* was an article entitled “Farm Embellishments—Buildings—Fences,” which proved to be an extended analysis of the virtues of painting barns, outbuildings, and fences with lime-based whitewash. Along with the aforementioned emphasis on proper ventilation, whitewashing represented the best practices of social medicine in the age before germ theory. In the noxious odors of the latrine or in the emanations from the damp earth, nineteenth-century planters (along with some of the era’s best scientists) perceived the existence of deadly miasmas—invisible clouds of poisonous air.²⁰ Whitewashing outbuildings was said to “contribute materially in promoting the health of our families. . . . The neutralizing influence of the alkali of the lime thus spread out tastefully upon our out-buildings . . . exert[s] chemically upon the noxious miasm floating in the air during our autumnal evenings and thus protect[s] us from chill and fever.”²¹ Counterpoised to these efforts to establish a sort of olfactory domesticity were planters’ characterizations of the odor of poverty and deprivation as revealing the essential degradation of the people they enslaved (and impoverished and deprived). “So notoriously filthy are negroes that many persons will doubtless smile at the very mention of cleanliness when used in connection with a people closely allied to *hogs* in their nature and habits,” wrote Dr. John Stainback Wilson in the *American Cotton Planter*.²²

Social development in the age of manure was accompanied by the fearful odor of miasma. In this context, we can understand Pratt’s emphasis on ventilation. The house he was imagining for himself would insulate him from

the contaminating odor of the landscape that provided his wealth—indeed (following the common formulation), from the odor of the manure that was wealth itself. We can perhaps even imagine the architecture of this spiritually minded planter's own house, which surely allowed him to closet himself away when he voided his bowels.²³ And of course that was the point. Reformist planters were building a social order out of manure, but they could never quite outdistance its stench; nor the lewd accusation from their own bowels that they were, in the end, not so very different from the animals they herded into their barnyards so that the manure might be made into capital. To patrol the boundary between their aspirational sanctity and the animal materiality it could never outrun (indeed, upon which it depended), they had slaves. To carry out their night soil. To shovel out their steaming barnyards and rake manure into their rendered fields. To awake every morning and "sweep the large yard." To "hoard . . . the filth from the wash house, stercorary, pig-pen, hen-house, and pigeon-cote so much neglected by us." To sweep "the ground *under* and around the houses . . . every month." To take up the "sweepings of the Negro and fowl-house yards, and the rank weeds that spring up about them." "To remove the accumulation that *will* gather about all the habited places, and more especially the habitation of the Negroes"—that is, to collect their own defecation from the high grass to which they had retreated in the night, or from the open yard where it lay exposed (this last suggestion from a sitting governor who was apparently too pressed by his cotton to build an outhouse).²⁴ To deliver their own waste, along with that of all the rest of creation, to the capital fund.

WITHIN THE cycle by which nature was converted into labor—matter into energy—cotton planters established rules that mirrored and affirmed the plantation social order. Food was separated into higher and lower orders and distributed accordingly. In outlining the social meaning of food in the Cotton Kingdom, one might begin with Louis Hughes's typology of vegetables: the "coarse" was provided to the slaves; the "delicate," reserved for the owners. Or with Charles Ball's typology of fish: "Of the common fish, such as pike, perch, suckers, and others we had the liberty of keeping as many as we could eat; but the misfortune was that we had no pork or fat of any kind to fry them with. . . . We could have lived well if we had been permitted to broil the shad on the coals and eat them, for a fat shad will dress itself in being broiled, and is

very good without any substance being added to it. All the shad that we caught were carefully taken away.” Or with a planter’s careful instruction that “when a beef is killed the fifth quarter” (meaning the head, and explicitly excepting the hide) be provided to a favored slave. Or with Susan Dabney Smedes’s reminiscence about the alimentary politics preserved by her slaveholding relatives as they relocated their plantations from Virginia to Mississippi: “One of the first [difficulties] was the unavoidable delay in getting supplies of meat for the servants . . . although the supply on hand was ample to last the white families till more could be procured.”²⁵ One could then follow the logic of these examples throughout the entirety of the plantation economy and its far-flung network of supplementary imported food: cornbread, bacon fat, and molasses for the slaves; biscuits, meat, and sugar for their owners. Not to mention salt, milk, and butter. Or chicken, turkey, duck, and goose. Coffee, tea, and tobacco. Cornish game hens, fine wines, liquor, and imported fruit.²⁶

By regulating the food that passed the lips of their slaves, planters materially affirmed and naturalized a version of social order based upon higher- and lower-order bodily functions: taste on the one hand; digestion on the other. Whereas slaves cooked, ate, lived, and slept in the same space or field where they worked, the transformation of flesh into meat and grain into cereal was most often spatially and functionally isolated from the rest of slaveholding life. In the kitchens of slaveholders’ houses, enslaved people did the work of transforming the carnal into the edible, the remnants of death into the substance of life. This transformation was expressed in its highest form in the disciplined theatricality of table manners. The use of fine china and silverware, the interposition of serving between preparation and consumption, the dispensing of portions from serving platters onto individual plates, the sanctification of food with prayer: all these forms of preconsumption and embodied social discipline expressed the passage of matter from the natural to the social world—from the animal to the human.²⁷

Indeed, even as they constantly pushed downward upon their slaves’ subsistence level, slaveholders likewise degraded the conditions under which enslaved people ate and drank. Slaves were provided with food like pot liquor, table scraps, molasses, and fatback—the by-products, or even waste products, of more refined products reserved for slaveholders. The bulk of their diet consisted of items (like corn and peas) that were also fed to animals. Alongside

Hughes's memory of the association of slaves and peas might be placed the opinion stated in the *American Cotton Planter* that "the pea, in all its varieties, furnishes the planter cheaply with an invaluable article of food for the fattening of stock and for the Negro, when properly used." Beneath each image lay the mean apportionment of King Cotton, as described by a planter bemoaning the passing of oxen: "A large number are annually consumed in the teams from the state of the roads during the hauling season, the carelessness of the planters and overseers, and the rascality of Negroes who often drive the beasts for days with scarcely any feed, reserving what was given to them for use on the road to sell for their own benefit." Animal feed converted by the planters' starveling economy into slaves' food: perhaps the only image to approach the socio-ecology of the Cotton Kingdom with greater force than this was provided by John Brown, who remembered his body breaking out into running sores after his owner tried to vertically integrate his operations by feeding his slaves on cottonseed oil.²⁸

The structured competition of enslaved human beings and domesticated animals for food was processed into a surplus of social meaning. The former slave Andrew Jackson recalled that his master "fed them the refuse of his table where he fed his dogs." "When I was a boy," recalled Lunsford Lane, "the pot-liquor, in which the meat was boiled for the 'great house' together with some little corn-meal balls that had been thrown in just before the meat was done, was poured into a tray in the middle of the yard, and a clam shell or pewter spoon given to each of the children, who would fall upon the delicious fare as greedily as pigs." These nauseating command performances provided slaveholders with a set of images structured by their control of the food supply—images that identified whiteness with refinement and taste, over and against the elemental economy of flesh and feed. And they provided (ex)slaves with an image to mark the unnatural character of slavery: human beings treated like animals.²⁹

Nowhere was the process by which slaveholders converted black hunger into white supremacy more apparent than in the processing and distribution of meat. When an ox was slaughtered, Louis Hughes remembered, the best meat was sent to the "Boss." Isaac Mason gave some sense of the remainder that was termed "meat" in describing a Christmas breakfast: "six pounds of sausage meat, which was the scrapings of the meat block, and after we had extracted

the wood of the suffering block from it, we had approximately, three pounds of meat.” Similar memories from Henry Bibb: “My food was coarse corn bread and beef shanks and cow’s heads with pot liquor, and a very scanty allowance of that. I have often seen the meat spoiled when brought to us, covered with flies and fly bows, and even worms crawling over when we were compelled to eat it, or go without any at all.”³⁰ The splintered traces of the process by which muscle was made meat, the malevolent individuality of the boiled head, the repulsive carnality of the infested flesh: decay could not be cooked out of this meat.

The indecent proximity of meat and mortality frames a story told by Isaac Mason about an occasion on which he was presented with a “gift” of food. In August 1846, he remembered, his master’s family “became short of meat.” Mason and another hand were sent out into the forest to bring back a steer for slaughter. They returned the next afternoon, having spent a day and a half trying to find and capture the animal. “At five o’clock he was slaughtered and hanging on the gallows, and by seven o’clock that night he was in the cellar, salted down and packed away for future use. In less than three days our supply of beef was completely spoiled, having maggots in it nearly as long as a little finger. A new life had come into it.” At this time, a niece of Mason’s mistress, daughter of a slaveholder who lived nearby, was residing with his owners, helping them attend to their children and housekeeping. “When this miss of a housekeeper discovered the great calamity that had befallen the store of beef—making it unfit for the delicate stomachs of her aunt, uncle-in-law, cousins and her own—she ordered that some of it be taken to the kitchen and boiled for the hands. . . . None of us could eat it. It had to be rejected because the stomach refused it. I was so bold to cast my portion out to the dog, an act, I thought unseen by any but those who were with me.” For Mason, as he later remembered it, this had been an assertion of his full humanity: “A slave’s stomach was considered not to be human, but this undainty dish proved that it was.”³¹

When Mason’s owner heard what he had done, he went out to the barn where Mason was putting up his horse and, holding a large stick in his hand, ordered Mason to go down into the cellar to “pay the penalty” for being “impudent to Miss Wallace.” Mason refused and fought with his master, pushing him over a pile in the wood, and gaining enough time to run into the woods as the white man went to get his gun. After two days, the slaveholder sent word

for Mason to come in. When he did, the two men argued again about the spoiled meat. "To use his own expression: 'It was an insult to Miss Wallace because she had sent it out to the kitchen.' I replied that I did not know it was an insult, I did not mean to insult her, and she did not know how bad it smelled." Mason was then sent back to the field to work, and for several months heard nothing more of the matter.³²

When the crop was in and his owner could spare his labor, Mason was sent with a horse and a cart to Mr. Wallace's place to pick up a barrel of turkeys and geese. Arriving at the plantation of the man whose daughter he had "insulted," he was given a pitchfork and told to muck straw into the manure collected in the "treading yard." This he did for several hours until it began to grow dark and he asked Mr. Wallace "would he please give me the turkeys and geese? . . . He, to my great astonishment, struck me with his pitchfork with so much force that he broke it over my shoulders."³³

Mason's story tracks several aspects of the human-animal ecology of antebellum slavery. There is the by-now familiar story of the metabolism of nature into human energy, and the way that cycle was routed through the ritual hierarchies of enslavement, first as gift and then as an insult. But what is striking about Mason's story is that he was being trafficked through the same circuits as the food, traded backward along the chain of gifts that cemented the two households to each other: the beef that Miss Wallace (herself an avatar of social connection) gave to the slaves; the turkeys and geese her father was supposedly to send to Mason's owner.³⁴ And when these white men planned to beat Mason down, they chose to do so in a cow-shit pen and a cellar where the slaughtered meat was stored. He was to be broken amid the filth and rendered flesh.

Analogous proximities of human to animal flesh structure many of the accounts that escaped slaves gave of their time in bondage. William Wells Brown, who had been the enslaved "steward" of a Mississippi River slave trader, referred to his owner's cargo of "human flesh." Henry Bibb likewise referred to being sold in "the human flesh market." While it might be argued that these were writerly metaphors, it is also clear that they acquired their rhetorical force by resignifying what was, in fact, the slave market's essential character—even its occasional practice. When John Brown was ten, for example, he was weighed in a balance-scale against a saddle and sold by the pound. That,

likewise, was how the slave trader Tyre Glen paid for slaves: “\$600 for plow boys, five to six dollars per pound[;] if the boy is very likely and ways [weighs] 60–90 or 100, seven may be given.”³⁵

In many cases, the connections between flesh, feces (the dead matter which bore witness to the material commingling of human being and animal flesh), and enslaved abjection were anything but metaphorical. William Wells Brown remembered that slaves in the interstate trade, like those who had preceded them in the Atlantic trade, traveled southward trapped in their own filth. Moses Roper remembered a woman who was “given a dose of castor oil and salts together, as much as she could take,” and then sealed into a coffin-sized box overnight. Other slaves were punished with meat. Jacob Stroyer remembered a man named Jim being beaten for stealing a hog. “A cured middling of a hog was [then] tied around his neck. . . . One morning when the overseer went to his place of confinement to take him into the field, he found him dead, with the large piece of meat hanging to his neck.” More commonly, slaves had notches cut into their ears or were branded like cows and pigs turned out to forage. These practices were extensively documented in the descriptions that slaveholders themselves gave in the advertisements they placed for their runaway slaves. John Brown remembered one such case, a runaway whose master had branded his own initials, T.S., onto “the fleshy part of his loins.”³⁶

Such tortures often took place in the slaughterhouses and smokehouses where animal flesh was prepared for human consumption. William Wells Brown recounted the story of Lewis, a Mississippi slave who had been taken up at night while traveling to visit his wife. When Brown saw him, Lewis was “hanging between the heavens and earth . . . tied up to a beam, with his toes just touching the floor.” When Brown himself was caught out on the road, he was “tied up in the smokehouse, and very severely whipped.” Louis Hughes remembered that his mistress followed his wife into the smokehouse, where she had been sent to cut meat. “I am tempted to take that knife from you, Matilda,” she threatened, “and cut you in two.” When he was suspected of kidnapping a white girl, Charles Ball was directed to go down to the cellar. There, “I was ordered to pull off my clothes, and lie down on my back. I was then bound by the hands and feet, with strong cords, and extended full length between two of the beams that supported the timbers of the building. . . . The doctor . . . opened a small case of surgeon’s instruments and told me he was going to skin me alive.” On another occasion, when he had been caught cooking a stolen

sheep, Ball was hung from a post and beaten. He described the flensing sensation of his skin being cut away by the lash: "I felt my flesh quiver like that of animals that have been slaughtered by the butcher and are flayed whilst yet half alive. My face was bruised and my nose bled profusely, for in the madness of agony, I had not been able to refrain from beating my head violently against the post."³⁷

Time and again, the rites of the abattoir were fulfilled in flame. The accounts published in Southern newspapers describe such events: the slaveholders screaming execrations or soliciting confessions from the edge of death; the slaves pleading, shrieking, moaning, crying out for mercy; the final, spastic motions and smoldering viscera. Charles Ball suggested the wanton intimacy of one such corporeal reduction by terming it "the roasting of Dan."³⁸

These repulsive theatricals—their frequency and their nauseating consistency—suggest something more than the isolated actions of a set of particularly depraved slaveholders. Slaveholders' standard operating procedure belabored a set of structured associations of enslaved human beings with domestic animals—specifically, with cattle and pigs. Even as they were forcing their slaves into physical and symbolic proximity with animals, they were doing so with particular intensity at the junctures of the human and natural worlds where those animals were converted into meat. Their spatial practice and symbolic action associated their slaves with carnality—with flesh.

That association was variously interpreted into meaning. The critics of slavery—in particular, the formerly enslaved men and women upon whose testimony so much of what has been said above relies—used that association to condemn the unnatural character of slaveholding social relations, under which a human being could be bought and sold like a barnyard animal, or flayed like a piece of meat. Some of the most notable defenders of slavery, on the other hand, refashioned the socio-ecology of the Cotton Kingdom into racial ideology which affirmed the association of their own being with the higher-order sensations of satiety and taste, and their slaves with the lower-order functions of digestion and elimination. They processed starvation into racism.

MISSISSIPPI PLANTER and agricultural reformer M. W. Phillips, a regular contributor to the *American Cotton Planter*, wrote about soil exhaustion and crop rotation, and extolled the virtues of manuring and self-provisioning. In

one of his most widely reproduced articles, Phillips condemned planters before whom “everything has to bend [and] give way to large crops of cotton.” Through the land- and slave-driving economy of “cut and cover,” Phillips argued, the slaveholding South was diminishing the span of its own history. “Not one-fourth of the [slave] children born are raised, and perhaps not over two-thirds are born on the place, which under a different policy, might be expected.” “I am told of Negroes not over thirty-five to forty-five, who look older than others at forty-five to fifty-five.” Or, in a formulation that we will consider again below: “I favour good and fair work, yet not overworked so as to tax the animal economy, that the woman cannot rear healthy children, nor should the father be overtaxed, that his vital powers be at all infringed upon.” And, finally, the exhortation (complete with scapegoat): “Brethren of the South, we must change our policy: *Overseers are not interested in raising children, or meat or improving land, or improving the productive qualities of seed, or animals.*”³⁹

According to Frederick Law Olmsted, an observer and opponent of slavery, Phillips was a “benevolent planter.” Unquestionably, he was an exemplar of the ameliorating and reforming sort of planter whom we have come to call the “paternalist” sort.⁴⁰ Yet the proximity of human and animal, of children and meat, in this slaveholding homily should by now lead us to suspect that its paternalism was rooted in perversion. Seen in the light of the agro-animal landscape that Phillips himself did so much to improve and reform, he seems a spectacular example of the limits of a strictly ecological critique of the agro-capitalist economy of the Mississippi Valley. Phillips imagined the cotton economy in terms of flows of energy, nutrients, and fertility, all of which he was convinced were being expended at an unsustainable rate. He used images of human, animal, and mineral depletion to represent an onrushing ecological catastrophe. But he did so within the incised terms allowed him by his culture—the culture of cotton. Phillips was arguing that the slaveholding South needed to slow the rate at which it was converting human beings into cotton plants. He wanted to adjust the metabolism of social anthropology.

Stop and think for a minute about what Phillips—this “benevolent planter,” this advice-dispensing oxymoron—was saying. A third of enslaved pregnancies were never carried to term. Child mortality was at 75 percent. The fact that he was claiming other people’s children as his own, tallying them alongside his cattle and cotton, seems almost unremarkable in the light of these

extraordinary figures. Perhaps he exaggerated; his essay was a philippic, designed to spur his society to change. Perhaps the real figure for child mortality was a mere 60 percent, or 55, or 50.⁴¹ It is hard to find any solace in estimating downward by a third, or even a half. Count them out one by one: tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of dead babies.

It was not exactly that slaveholders were indifferent to the reproduction of their slaves. Certainly (and this was the point that Phillips was making), most recognized that their own social reproduction, their own legacy to the future—as a class, as members of families, as fathers—depended on the biological reproduction of the people they owned. As with other forms of property, slaveholders used enslaved people to articulate the connections between white households and generations. As a slaveholders' saying had it, there were three things necessary to beginning a family: a wife, a house, and a slave to work in it. Among slaveholders, commonplaces like that could be rubbed down to crass essentials. "I do think you and Sarah stand a chance to marry," wrote Isaac Jarratt to his cousin, "but I fear it is . . . a bad chance without a show of some Negroes and beauty, both of which is lacking with Sarah, and unfortunately for you, you lack the Negroes." Charles Ball was such a "Negro"—as a young man, he was deeded to his owner's daughter, who was getting married.⁴² This was Phillips's point when he contributed what he must have thought was an edifying little homily to the *American Cotton Planter*.

Years ago I met and knew Mr. A.B. He was an industrious, prudent, *economical* man. He had few Negroes and a tract of land. . . . He always . . . took excellent care of his slaves—really exposing himself most. Twenty-five years ago he had probably the same number of Negroes—twenty-five. He now pays taxes on over one hundred. Another friend his own age had, say twenty-five years ago, not under forty Negroes. He did for many years make doubly as many bales per hand in all probability, pushing his hands, not by any means brutally—no, indeed; but at this writing he has not over seventy-five, and very many of them bright Negroes, or their progeny. . . . And in 25 [years] C.D. confessed to me that our mutual friend could buy him out twice over.

Phillips did not write to mourn the dead, nor did he seem especially interested in looking into the paternity of the "bright Negroes," who were apparently

the fastest-growing segment of the population on his friend's plantation. His moral was that slaveholders should judge their crops not by "the money scale" but by the interests of their "heirs."⁴³

This forcible joining of family histories in which the fortunes of the white line depended on the furtherance of the black was, as Phillips suggested, a very particular notion of economy, one that his italics invited his readers to linger upon: an economy in which human semen and ovum were turned into capital. For this was what Phillips was emphasizing—the capital formation that followed from the cultivation of a crop of slaves, the long-term view that has somehow been allowed for so long to trade through the historiography under an assumed name: "paternalism." The word seems a patent fraud, a counterfeit worn threadbare by repeated gullible acceptances. Unless, of course, we see this unfathering, unmothering misnaming—this father-ist imposture by which the children born of one man and one woman came to be understood as the property of others, by which paternity was replaced with "paternalism," by which the child of one line was bequeathed to the benefit of another—as precisely the point.

If asked, the slaves of Mr. A.B. might have remembered this "economical" man in something like the following terms. "When I arrived at the age of twenty, my master told me I must marry Jane." Or: "Soon after I was brought home, the overseer compelled me to be married to a man I did not like." Or: "In July, Claypoole told us we must . . . 'get married' according to slavery—or in other words, to enrich his plantation by a family of young slaves. The alternative of this was to be sold to a slave trader who was then in the neighborhood making up a gang." Or: "I heard the Deacon tell one of the slave girls, that he had bought her for a wife for his boy Stephen, which office he compelled her fully to perform against her will. This he enforced by a threat. At first the poor girl neglected to do this, having no sort of affection for the man—but she was finally forced to it by an application of the driver's lash."⁴⁴ To hear the "Deacon" tell it, he was doing his slave a favor by buying him a "wife." This formulation reappears in a letter written by Louisiana slaveholder A. G. Alsworth, who was thinking about trading an aging man for a little girl and some cows: "Unless I can get a hundred head and a good girl that will make a wife for some of my boys in a few years I will not sell Spencer."⁴⁵ One would like to believe that there was some sort of grammatical error in that sen-

tence, though there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that Alsworth meant to do anything other than exactly what he said.

We are accustomed to thinking of sexual violence in slavery as the forcible genital penetration of enslaved women by white men. And there is no doubt that rape was an endemic feature of slavery; indeed, the landscape of slavery and labor was a matrix of sexual vulnerability. Being enslaved was not only a condition characterized by vulnerability to sexual assault—it was always already a condition of sexual violation.⁴⁶ One might begin with the children, who until the age of twelve or thirteen were provided with only a short cotton shift to wear; their buttocks and genitals—their penises, their pudenda—could scarcely be concealed as they matured.⁴⁷ One might think about the women, who “had no stockings or undergarments”—only “pantlets” made of old clothes they tied around their knees. One might follow the argument through the slave market, where women and men alike were stripped naked and felt up in public. One might point to the easy familiarity with which slaveholders used words like “breed” and “breeder” when they spoke about their slaves.⁴⁸ At the end of the series of images of acute invigilation and chronic overexposure, we might begin to understand the slaveholders’ mania for matchmaking.

As slaveholders articulated their own family lines—their worldly legacies—through the reproduction of their slaves, they extended their dominion to spaces inside the bodies of the women they owned. The racial subjection and sexual exposure of enslaved women were related to each other not only consequentially—the one leading to the other—but also consubstantially. Yet not even the idea of slavery as a condition that was, in and of itself, sexual violation quite captures what A. G. Alsworth was doing when he set about trading for a little girl to “make a wife for some of my boys.” The verb “make” is in itself interesting: Alsworth was turning to the slave market to “make a wife,” a person; he was proposing a sort of hybrid model of social reproduction in which the commercial addition of a little girl to his slave force would allow him to cross over to a biological mode of reproducing his labor force. And then he was going to present her—traffic her—to “his boys.” He was the provider, the paternalist. Indeed, one might say, it was his phallic power that was to be violently exercised through the action of these men: the semen would be theirs—perhaps the pleasure or perhaps the agony, and the shame as well; but

the offspring, like the “boys” themselves, would be his. This agnatic economy, in which the son of one man—the seed of one man—was passed to that of another, was likewise an aspect of the sexual stipulation of “race” in the antebellum South. It was typical of the perverse puppeteering through which slaveholders attempted to insinuate themselves into even the most intimate dimensions of the enslaved human being.

Of course, slaveholders often did much more than that: they often used the women they owned to convert their own semen into capital. Perhaps “used” is too rational a word to describe the way the overseer Epps would gesticulate at the edge of the field for Patsey to come and serve him; or the way Mr. Cook would call down the stairs for Louisa Picquet to come up and bring him a drink; or the way the infamous Dr. Norcom would pursue the teenaged Harriet Jacobs through his house, hiding behind the doorjamb waiting for her to come through so he could tell her about the things he wanted to do to her, whisper them in her ear.⁴⁹ Perhaps there was no intentioned rationality, no money scale, in this wild zone of assaultive revels, in the promiscuous expression of slaveholding power. Perhaps the children born of these unions seemed to slaveholder fathers less thought-through consequences than accidental by-products of their pleasures. In some cases—though many fewer than one might be led to believe on a walking tour of New Orleans’s French Quarter—their lives were diverted from the course which converted violence into pleasure and thence into capital, and they were set “free.” In others, they were put to work as slaves in the households of their father-owners (paternalism again). In still others, they were sold—converted to cash in accordance with the best practices of nineteenth-century capitalist ecology: the material remainder of consumption committed to the further augmentation of capital.

Slaveholders not only diverted enslaved family lines to the service of their own social reproduction and capital formation; they also stole mothers’ milk. Asked about the opening passages of her autobiography, Louisa Picquet responded: “When mother first went to Georgia she was a nurse, and suckled Madame Cook’s child with me. Afterward, she was a cook. I was a nurse. I always had plenty to do. Fast as one child would be walkin’, then I would have another one to nurse.” Asked about the family of her owners, she gave virtually the same answer, “I could not tell how many children [they had]; they had a lot of them. I know I been nursin’ all my life up to that time.” These families

were consubstantiated both in the "bright colored" children who went unacknowledged or were sold away, and in the milk that nourished children too young to know that they owned the breast from which they hungrily sucked. This, too, was "paternalism," or at least could be made to seem that way. William Green remembered that his mother pleaded with his owner to sell Green in the neighborhood, rather than to a New Orleans slave trader, and that the slaveholder eventually "relented a little, having some little regard for her, she having nursed him as a child."⁵⁰

All of these ways of alienating the capacities of enslaved human beings—the diversion of semen, ovum, and lactation—that they might be realized in the augmentation of enslaving families were consonant with the ideal vision expressed by the Mississippi reformer M. W. Phillips. What disturbed Phillips, what struck him as wasteful and shortsighted, was not the serial conversion of human beings into lineal holdings, or the membrane of savage intimacy that joined families like his own to those toiling in their parlors, their pantries, and their fields. What disturbed Phillips were dead babies, perhaps even the sound of them dying as he passed along the pathways and roads that lined his neighbors' fields.

Enslaved children were often raised (when they survived) at the margins of the cotton crop. According to reformers like Phillips, their owners followed the same model in raising a "crop" of slaves that they did in raising a crop of cotton: seed was prodigally spread—"broadcast," in the original sense of the phrase; what grew to fruition was harvested and tallied as gain on the "money scale." What could not survive was plowed back into the earth. Cotton planters, according to Phillips, were both deeply interested in the reproduction of their labor force in the aggregate and astonishingly indifferent to the survival of any given (future) laborer—any given person. The standard measure of the Cotton Kingdom, the trinomial algebra of bales per hand per acre, allowed little margin for women to nurse their children. Together with elderly slaves, nursing mothers and children were sometimes termed the "trash gang." Nursing mothers—or "sucklers," as slaveholders termed them—were conventionally designated as "half-hands." Children over the age of ten were rated as "quarter-hands." Before that age, according to the standard measure, the value of enslaved children was purely speculative: they were hypothetical. As the slave trader J. W. Boazman put it, "Servants are less valuable with children

than without.” William Wells Brown remembered that Boazman’s colleague in the slave market, a trader named Walker, simply gave away an infant of “four or five weeks” as he traveled southward with his slaves. He was tired of listening to the “noise.”⁵¹

The piteous sound of an unknowing child crying out for comfort was as much an aspect of the landscape of the Cotton Kingdom as the lowing of stock, the yammering of the overseer, or the hooves of the horse of a “benevolent” man like Phillips striking the road in passing. Louis Hughes remembered that an old woman was left in charge of the babies for most of the day, but that nursing mothers were allowed to go in three times a day to breastfeed. “Sometimes,” he added, “the little things would seem starved. . . . The cries of these little ones, who were cut off almost entirely from motherly care and protection, were heart-rending.” Breast milk, he added, was soon replaced with pot liquor, which deranged their stomachs. After such a meal, one “little boy” on the place was “taken with cramp colic, in a few minutes his stomach was swollen as tight and hard as a balloon, and his teeth clenched.” Kate Pickard likewise recalled the sound of infants crying after their mothers returned to the fields at the end of “a few minutes” nursing—“but ‘the cotton must be picked,’” she ruefully remembered. According to Charles Ball’s memoirs, “The mothers laid their children at the side of the fence, or under the shade of the cotton plants, whilst they were at work; and when the rest of us went to get water, they would go to give suck to their children, requesting someone to bring them water in gourds.” Children who were brought out into the fields were often tied to keep them from crawling away, according to Henry Bibb. “Those women who had sucking children,” remembered Moses Grandy, “suffered much from their breasts becoming full of milk.”⁵²

The cotton must be picked. Their breasts becoming full of milk. Again, we come to the point at which the human being was tailored to the culture of cotton—at which the conversion of milk into life was diverted by the conversion of labor into income and thence, prodigally, into capital. That a man like Phillips might see his way clear to a world in which milk itself might be more efficiently converted into capital should no more lead us to confuse agricultural reform with “paternalism” than it should be allowed to dampen the insistent cries of the child expiring at the end of the row. Motherhood and mourning were inseparable in this economy. Vina Still remembered her children thus:

"She had, during the autumn of 1833, buried a baby a week old; and little Silas, after remaining with her just one year, was borne away to the hill-side in August, 1836. Again in March, 1840, a little daughter, five months old, was strangled by the croup. In July, 1841, another little boy was welcomed to their humble cabin. They called him Bernard, and for three years he remained the pet of all the little household. Then he was seized with spasms—and soon his merry voice was hushed, and his little form grew cold and stiff in death." Louis Hughes watched his twins grow "puny and sickly" before they finally died "because the milk the mother nursed to them was so heated by her constant and excessive labors as to be unwholesome." Henry Bibb dug a grave and buried his child "without even a box to put it in."⁵³ Under the dominion of cotton, reproduction (childbearing, motherhood, fatherhood) was labor (care given, love spent) in the service of capital: the conversion of living humanity into dead labor. One has to wonder if planters ever reworked the connection that Phillips made between their wasting fields and their wasting people into a seemingly obvious conclusion: that the bones of these dead babies might be harvested from their humble graves and used to catalyze the fertility of the earth into cotton plants.⁵⁴

WHEN A "benevolent planter" like M. W. Phillips came in from the fields, he entered a different sort of world. There was the heavy sweetness of oleander and hyacinth in the air. The sharp solidity of boxwood. Baby's Breath, Bachelor's Button, and Johnny-jump-up blooming in the garden, flowering vines hanging from their frames. The rustling of the oaks lining the drive. The pleasures of the porch as the sun set. The children, the correspondence, the newspaper, the Bible, stories and sermons read aloud. A cool drink and gentle breeze. The changing of the seasons. The muted sounds of the slaves in the field. Dinner coming to the table: turtle soup, sugar-cured hams, doughy biscuits, salty greens, almond pudding, fresh strawberries, rich red wine. "We had so many courses," wrote the slaveholder Miriam Hilliard on March 29, 1850, "that Mr. H. and Brother Geo. rather rebelled—turned up their sleeve cuffs and declared they would not eat another mouthful."⁵⁵ A comical figurative overturning: pleasure to the point of pain, privilege to the point of rebellion, the agony of the world recomposed into magnificent sensory tribute. These pleasures were the direct experience of mastery—what it felt like. Even more

than that, they were mastery's empirical proof, its exemplification. We can trace the process by which the material results of slave-based production were translated into the ideological justification for that production in the writings of the Louisiana slave doctor and racial theorist Samuel Cartwright.

For Cartwright, there were "physiological laws governing [the] economy" of slavery, laws that could be discovered through observation and experimentation: the material life of plantation slavery was a surface manifestation of purposes deeper than even the planters' own. As he tacked between the world as he encountered it and the belief that the world was as it should be—between "is" and "ought"—Cartwright paid particular attention to the senses. Describing those he variously termed "the Negroes," "the Nigritians," and "the Prognathous Species of Mankind," Cartwright framed his discussion of racial difference not simply around the question of color—visually—but with reference to sound, smell, taste, and touch. "All the[ir] senses are more acute, but less delicate and discriminating than the white man's," he wrote. "He has a good ear for melody but not for harmony, a keen taste and relish for food but less discriminating between different kinds of esculent substances than the Caucasian. . . . The Negro approximates the lower animals in his sense of smell, and can detect snakes in that sense alone." For Cartwright, "Negroes" were distinguished by their powers of digestion: "they prefer the fattest pork to the lean," and began smoking, chewing tobacco, and drinking alcohol with none of the revulsion which whites had to overcome in order to enjoy these baser pleasures. By their excrement: "The secretions and exertions [are] copious, excepting the urine, which is rather scant." By their smell: "The skin of a happy, healthy Negro is not only blacker and more oily than an unhappy, unhealthy one, but emits the strongest odor when the body is warmed by exercise and the soul is filled with the most pleasurable emotions. In the dance called *patting juber*, the odor emitted from the men, intoxicated with pleasure, is often so powerful as to throw the Negro women into paroxysms of unconscious, vulgo hysterics." One can almost see him making his rounds with a small notebook, a stubby pencil, and a quizzical look—sniffing their oleaginous cooking and stuffy cabins, estimating the bulk of their promiscuous turds, nodding sagely while watching them void their bladders, standing alone in the dark, listening to their sex.⁵⁶

Cartwright is an easy man to dislike; his smutty knowingness seems almost

infantile. Yet he was something more than a useful idiot: he was an intellectual superstar. The quotations above come from essays that were reprinted in E. N. Elliot's *Cotton Is King*, an 1860 *summa theologica* of pro-slavery thought. Cartwright's genius lay in his ability to make his direct experience of the plantation seem to be more than something in and of itself. He could interpret fatty meat boiled in water, the smell of sweating slaves, a fantasy of their sex not as social history or economic history or political history, but as natural history: as race.

And for Cartwright, the material life of the Cotton Kingdom was proof enough of its own necessity. Much of his analysis emerged from a problematic of labor discipline: it reworked enslaved resistance, exhaustion, starvation into Negro-ness. Cartwright noted the unwillingness of slaves to work without being hectored, goaded, or beaten, and attributed it to biophysical inability—"defective haematosis." Cartwright's racial theory was centrally concerned with respiration. He watched slaves sleeping, and noted: "Negroes glory in a close, hot atmosphere; they instinctively cover their heads and faces with a blanket at night, and prefer laying with their heads to the fire, instead of their feet." He took readings of the lung capacity of several small children with a device he called a "spirometer." "The result is that the expansibility of the lungs is considerably less in the black than the white race of similar size, age, and habit. A white boy expelled from his lungs a larger volume of air than a Negro half a head taller and three inches larger around the chest." Cartwright's observations led him to the conclusion that "Negroes consume less oxygen than the white race," a fact that, in addition to his experiments, was proven "by their motions being proverbially much slower, and their want of muscular and mental activity"—that is, by their failure to work as hard or as well as white people wanted them to.⁵⁷

It was thus physiology that decreed slavery (rather than the condition of enslavement that surfaced in physiological signs). "Like an animal in a state of hibernation," Cartwright wrote, "waiting for the external aid of spring to warm it into life and power, so does the Negro continue to doze out a vegeto-animal existence in the wilderness, unable to extricate himself therefrom—his own will being too feeble to call forth the requisite muscular exertion." For that, Nature had provided "the white man," and his "exaggerated will, more than he has use for; because it frequently drives his own muscles beyond their physical capacity for endurance." Cartwright expanded for several pages upon

“the will,” a passage so extraordinary and so revealing that it is worth quoting at length:

A man possessing a knowledge of the Negro character can govern an hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand of the prognathous race by his will alone, easier than one ignorant of that character can govern a single individual of that race by the whip or a club. However disinclined to labor the Negroes may be, they cannot help themselves; they are obliged to move and exercise their muscles when the white man, acquainted with their character, *wills* that they should do so. . . . No other compulsion is necessary to make them perform their daily tasks than *his will be done*. It is not the whip, as many suppose, which calls forth those muscular exertions, the result of which is sugar, cotton, breadstuffs, rice, and tobacco. These are the products of the white man’s will, acting through the muscles of the prognathous race of our Southern states. If that will were withdrawn, and the plantations handed over as gracious gifts to the laborers, agricultural labor would cease for want of the spiritual power called the will, to move those machines—the muscles. . . . The same ordinance which keeps the spheres in their orbits and holds the satellites in subordination to the planets, is the ordinance that subjects the Negro race to the empire of the white man’s will. From that ordinance the snake derives its power to charm the bird, and the magician his power to amuse the curious, to astonish the vulgar, and to confound the wisdom of the wise. Under that ordinance, our four millions of Negroes are as unalterably bound to obey the white man’s will, as the four satellites of Jupiter the superior magnetism of that planet.⁵⁸

Cartwright was not specific about the organic location of “the will,” but his description of enslaved muscles and nerves animated by slaveholding purpose recalls the sort of visual power emphasized in the agricultural periodicals. Indeed, substituting the word “oversight,” “supervision,” or “management” for Cartwright’s “will” would render the passage indistinguishable from much of what was printed in the *American Cotton Planter* or the *Cotton Planter’s Manual*. But there was more to it than that: Cartwright was talking about an activist, dominative, violent sort of will—a field of force. Cartwright’s racial meta-

physics took the structured slaveholding power of the Cotton Kingdom—the sight lines, the hungering landscape, the horses and dogs—and raised it to a higher order of explanation, a slaveholding apotheosis.

The same prolific logic which allowed Cartwright to generalize from his spying, turd sorting, and breath capturing to first principles of human development, and to amplify his observation of the disciplinary ecology of the plantation into a universalizing account of the sources of slaveholding power, also characterized his vision of world history. His observations, he wrote, showed "that there exists an intimate connection between the amount of oxygen consumed in the lungs and the phenomenon of body and mind. They point to a people whose respiratory apparatus is so defective, that they have not sufficient industry and mental energy to provide for themselves." Slavery, that is to say, was a global-racial-historical necessity, at least if "Negroes" were to survive: "The African will starve rather than engage in a regular system of agricultural labor, unless impelled by the stronger will of the white man." And on such truths rested the Republic: "The framers . . . built the Constitution upon the basis of natural distinctions or physical differences in the two races comprising the American population. A very important difference between the two will be found in the greater amount of oxygen consumed by the one than the other. . . . It is to anatomy and physiology we should look when vindicating the liberty of human nature, to see that its dignity and best interest be preserved."⁵⁹ Cartwright's inductive racism took him from the lethargy of exhausted, starving, resistant slaves in the field to the certainties of physiology to the bedrock truths of human history: slavery was necessary—indeed, it was the stuff of liberty. The plantation was the motor of human history.

Collected along with Cartwright's essays in *Cotton Is King* were the writings of Chancellor Harper of South Carolina. Harper began from the premise that "the institution of slavery is the principal cause of civilization." He based that statement on a remarkable reworking of the labor theory of value. His formulation went roughly as follows: (1) "Labor is pain"; (2) "Man is averse to pain"; (3) "He will not [willingly] labor beyond what is absolutely necessary to maintain his existence"; (4) "The coercion of slavery alone is adequate to form man to habits of labor. Without it, there can be no accumulation of property, no providence for the future, no tastes for elegancies, which are the characteristics and essentials of civilization."⁶⁰ For Harper, civilization was surplus—

the margin that could be extracted from laboring humanity beyond what was necessary to the bare reproduction of the population. And that surplus was to be measured sensually: in the particular admixture of cultivated sensation and intellectual capacity which the Enlightenment termed “sensibility.”⁶¹

To Harper’s mind, a plantation was a social expression of the indwelling truths of human sensuality. “The anatomist and physiologist,” he wrote, “tell . . . that the races differ in every bone and muscle, and in the proportion of brain and nerves.” And in the diminished sensibilities of the “African Negroes” lay the key to understanding the purposes of history: “In general their capacity is very limited, and their feelings animal and coarse—fitting them peculiarly to discharge the lower, and merely mechanical offices of society.” We will have ample time to reflect on the star turn taken by this vision of slavery and world history—slavery *as* world history—in the decade before the Civil War. For now, it is important to think in the other direction: about the earthly predicate of this globalist vision of race-as-sensation, about the daily sensuous division of the plantation world—higher and lower, finer and coarser, smoother and rougher, harmony and melody, fragrance and stench, clean and contaminated, purity and danger—in which it was rooted. “How can you compare the pleasures resulting from the exercise of the understanding, the taste and the imagination, with the animal enjoyments of the senses—the gratification derived from a fine poem with that from a rich banquet? How are we to weigh the pains and enjoyments of one man highly cultivated and of great sensibility, against those of many men of blunter capacities for enjoyment or suffering?”⁶² Harper’s was a metaphysics of the drawing room, the site where the surplus he claimed for himself was experienced in the delightful fancies of his own mind, fancies which had the remarkable effect of being self-justifying on both a rhetorical and an ontological level. The fact that he had the time and ability to think about penning a justification of racial slavery was, in and of itself, a justification of racial slavery.

Given his emphasis on the intellectual, the spiritual, and the immaterial benefits of slavery, it comes as a bit of a surprise that Harper forthrightly—perhaps “brazenly” would be a better word—turned his attention to the question of slaveholding rapists. But there it is: “I do not hesitate to say that the intercourse which takes place with enslaved females is less depraving in its effects than when it is carried on with females of their own caste. In the first

place, as like attracts like, that which is unlike repels; and though the strength of passion be sufficient to overcome the repulsion the attraction is less. He feels that he is connecting himself with one of an inferior and servile caste, and that there is something of degradation in the act." As for the women upon which these reluctant rapists so frequently forced themselves: "I will say that if they are to be exposed to the evil, it is a mercy that the sensibility to it should be so blunted."⁶³ For Harper, instances of interracial sex were statistically evident but existentially insignificant. On the one hand, white men were so distanced from the act by their higher nature that it was hard to say they were actually doing it in the first place; on the other, black women were so limited in their capacity to experience feeling that it was hard to say the sexual acts mattered at all. Harper wrote as if his own filthiness would leave no trace upon the page.

So we might imagine Harper in his drawing room / sensibility sanctuary, composing an essay titled "Slavery in the Light of Social Ethics," having a marginally debasing but nevertheless pleasurable fantasy of sexual impunity (is this image unfair?), holding his Bible in his other hand. At the core of Harper's reworking of the plantation into Order was his reading of the Bible, and in particular some passages on the relations of human beings and animals: "Are these regions of fertility to be abandoned at once and forever to the alligator and the tortoise—with here and there perhaps a miserable, shivering, crouching *free* black savage? Does not the finger of heaven itself seem to point to a race of men . . . and indicate that we should avail ourselves of these in fulfilling the first great command to subdue and replenish the earth?" That was an allusion to Genesis 1:28. He also quoted it elsewhere in the same essay: "Ye shall have dominion over the beasts of the field, and over the fowls of the air." And then, immediately following, Leviticus 25:44: "Both the bond-men and bond-maids which thou shall have, shall be of the heathen among you. Of them shall you buy bond-men and bond-maids." And right after that, *Leviticus*, 25:45: "Moreover of the children of strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begot in your land, and then they shall be your possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them by possession. They shall be your bond-men forever."⁶⁴ For Harper, the animal and human orders of the universe were of a piece. The agricultural order that surrounded him as

he wrote—plant, animal, and human being, all arrayed in productive tribute—was a local instance of God’s larger purpose: the plantation as Providence.

At various points in his essay, Harper advanced through analogies between enslaved human beings and domesticated animals—analogies that specified and substantiated his understanding of the relationship between dominion and mastery. He proposed that slaveholders’ property interest in their slaves was effective protection against “excessive” punishment: “Who but a driveling fanatic has thought of the necessity of protecting domestic animals from the cruelty of their owners? . . . Is it not natural that a man should be attached to that which is *his own*, and which has contributed to his convenience, his enjoyment, or his vanity? This is felt even toward animals and inanimate objects.” He argued that a concerted effort should be made to bring up slaves in ignorance: “Would you do a benefit to the horse or the ox, by giving him a cultivated understanding or fine feelings?” He suggested that it should be a generally accepted principal that some were suited by Nature for enslavement and some for mastery: “And why should it not be so? We have among domestic animals infinite varieties, distinguished by various degrees of sagacity, courage, strength, swiftness, and other qualities. . . . It is most important that these varieties should be preserved, and that each should be applied to the purposes for which it is best adapted. No philo-zoost, I believe, has suggested it as desirable that these varieties should be melted down into one equal, undistinguished race of curs or road horses.” He concluded, against all available evidence, that the idea of “a revolution or political movement” led by the enslaved was a historical impossibility: “The angry ape will still play fantastic tricks, and put in motion machinery, the action of which he no more comprehends or foresees than he comprehends the mysteries of infinity. The insect that is borne upon the current will fancy that he directs its course.”⁶⁵

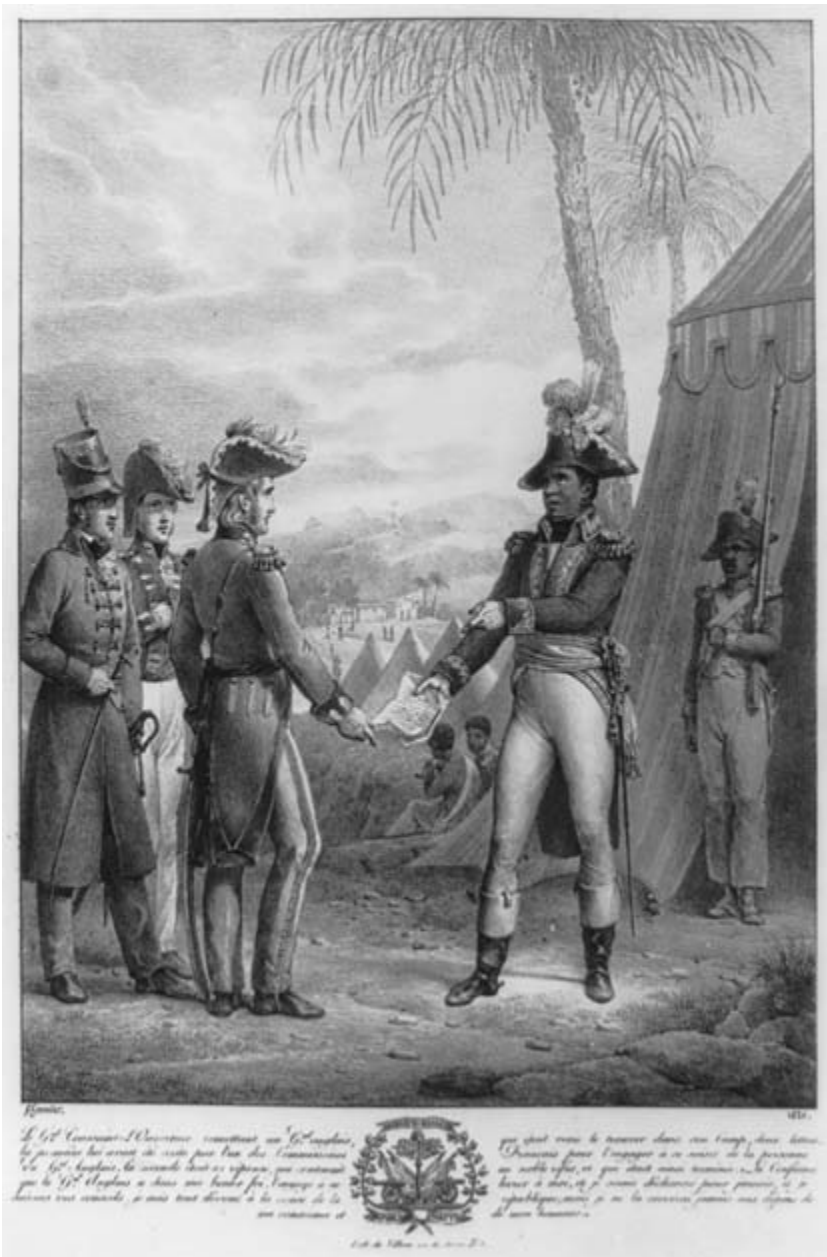
On one level, all of this traffic between the animal and the human, between dominion and mastery, between Genesis and Leviticus was to be expected. Harper was an organic intellectual drawing upon the commonsense terms of an agricultural elite; of course, he used images drawn from agriculture and animal husbandry to back his arguments with all of the authority of the material world as witness. Indeed, that is precisely the point. The agricultural order of the landscape, the standing order of slavery, the natural order of the races, and the divine order of earthly dominion were not separable for a man like

Harper; they were fractal aspects of one another. His eschatology was rooted in his ecology.

Historians have generally concluded that the writings of men like Harper "dehumanize" African-American slaves. This formulation has the virtue of signaling their repudiation of Harper's views, and of reasserting a normative account of humanity as the standard of historical ethics: these are not the sort of things that human beings should be allowed to say about one another. Yet a troubling problem remains. Harper, Cartwright, and indeed countless other slaveholders and racists in the history of the world were fully able to do what they did and say what they said, even as they believed and argued that their victims were human. Imagining that perpetrators must "dehumanize" their victims in order to justify their actions, inserting a normative version of "humanity" into a conversation about the justification of historical violence, lets them—and us—off the hook. History suggests again and again that this is how human beings treat one another. Even as he continually referred to domestic animals in his essay on slavery, Harper always did so by analogy. He did not say blacks were animals; he said they were *like* animals. Indeed, he was quite clear in affirming his belief that slaves were "human beings," members of a "cognate race."⁶⁶ There was a religious reason for his malign precision: to argue otherwise would be to question the biblical account of the origins of mankind in the coupling of one man and one woman in the Garden of Eden.⁶⁷ But there is little evidence to suggest that Harper and his class felt any conscious or unconscious need to change their behavior in light of any concern for their common humanity with their slaves. Indeed, it seems quite clear that no small measure of the reliance they placed on their laboring slaves—to nurse their own children, bring in the cows, sow the cotton, select the seeds, weigh the bales, cook the meals—signaled their reliance upon their slaves' "humanity." Likewise the satisfaction that they got from violence—threatening, separating, torturing, degrading, raping—depended on the fact that their victims were human beings capable of registering slaveholding power in their pain, terror, grief, submission, and even resistance.

A better way to think about slavery might be as a concerted effort to dehumanize enslaved people. Slaveholders were fully cognizant of slaves' humanity—indeed, they were completely dependent upon it. But they continually attempted to conscript—simplify, channel, limit, and control—the forms

that humanity could take in slavery. The racial ideology of Harper and Cartwright was the intellectual conjugation of the daily practice of the plantations they were defending: human beings, animals, and plants forcibly reduced to limited aspects of themselves, and then deployed in concert to further slaveholding dominion. In the 1830s, this plantation-based version of human history transformed the Mississippi Valley into the Cotton Kingdom. By the 1850s, it was ready to go global.



1. Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the Haitian Revolution. The successful overthrow of one of the richest plantation economies in the Americas by its erstwhile slaves made the Mississippi Valley less valuable to France, and thus facilitated the Louisiana Purchase. The revolution in Haiti haunted Valley slaveholders all the way up until the Civil War. *Library of Congress.*



2. Thomas Jefferson. The vast territory of Louisiana became part of the United States during Jefferson's presidency. In some moments, Jefferson imaged the Mississippi Valley as an "empire for liberty," populated by smallholding, self-sufficient, white yeomen farmers. In others, he hoped it would serve as a dumping ground across which the nation's potentially insurrectionary black population might be "diffused." *Library of Congress.*



3. Andrew Jackson. First as a general in the U.S. Army and later as the president, Jackson fought wars against European empires in the Americas and against the Native American nations of the Mississippi Valley. By creating a *cordon sanitaire* along the Gulf Coast, he hoped to protect the United States from the specter of an alliance between an invading army and the Africans, African Americans, and Indians living within the expanding boundary of the United States. *Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, New York Public Library.*



4. Land Office map of Mississippi. This map of Mississippi from 1837 shows the baseline of the surveys made by the General Land Office. By laying a grid across the landscape, the surveyors hoped to make the land measurable, manageable, and salable. As the blank spots and overlapping quadrants in the northwest corner of the map attest, the material work of surveying sometimes made creating an accurate abstract outline of the land impossible. *Author's collection.*

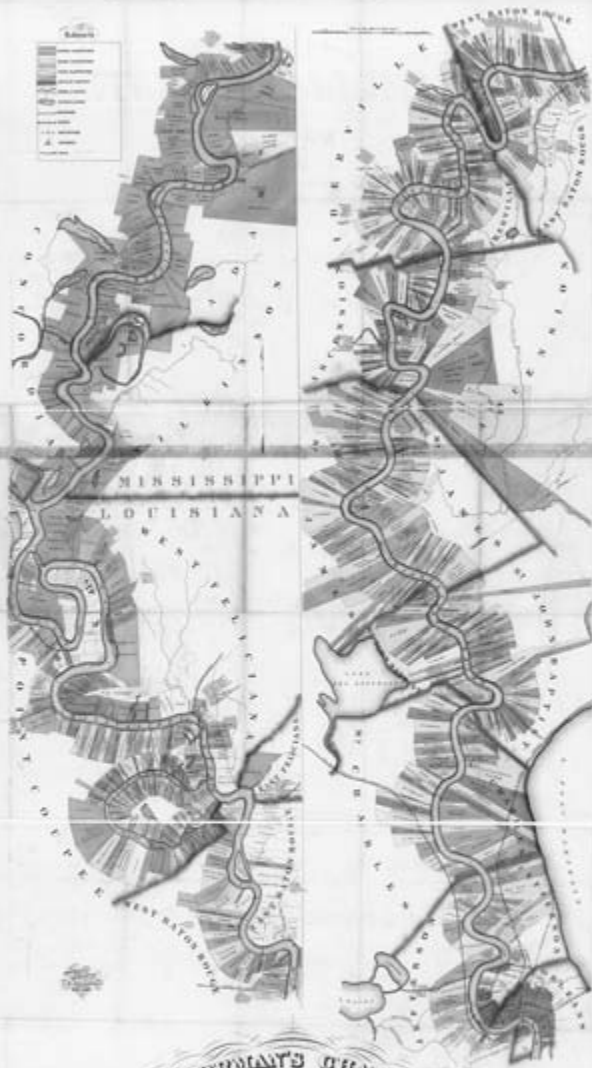


5. Enslaved man being inspected for sale. Land in the Mississippi Valley was made vastly more valuable by slaves. In the years 1820–1860, more than a million enslaved people were moved through an interstate slave trade, which underwrote the resurgence of American slavery in the emerging Cotton Kingdom and caused inestimable suffering for African Americans. *Mid-Manhattan Picture Collection, New York Public Library.*



6. John Murrell. This image depicts Murrell “enticing” a slave by offering him the first sip from a shared bottle. This signal of boundary-crossing intimacy figured prominently in the slave revolt scare that convulsed Madison County, Mississippi, in 1835. *Reproduced from H. R. Howard, comp., The History of Virgil A. Stewart (New York: Harper, 1836).*

FROM NATCHEZ TO NEW ORLEANS.



NORRIS'S CHART
LOWER
MISSISSIPPI RIVER.

BY A. PERSAC.

Published by B. W. Newman & Co.

NEW ORLEANS, LA.

(1866)



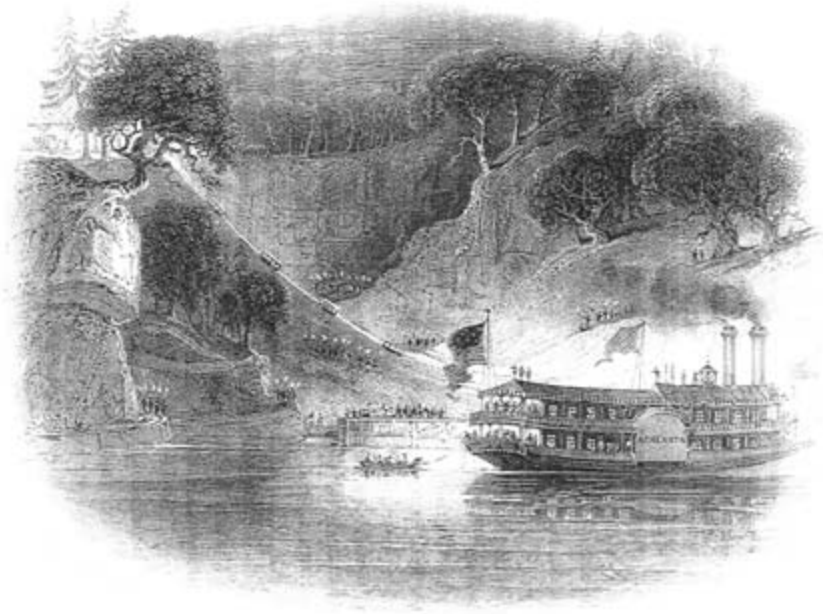


8. Bird's-eye view of New Orleans. The port of New Orleans was the largest in the South. Every year, the city exported millions of pounds of cotton that fed the global economy of the nineteenth century, and imported millions of dollars of credit that created liquidity in the Mississippi Valley and in the United States as a whole. Both the cotton trade and the credit market were founded upon the labor and assigned value of enslaved people. *Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, New York Public Library.*

7. Mississippi River plantation map. Deep plantations with narrow frontages were designed to maximize the number of planters who could have direct access to the Mississippi River (and thus to markets). *Library of Congress.*



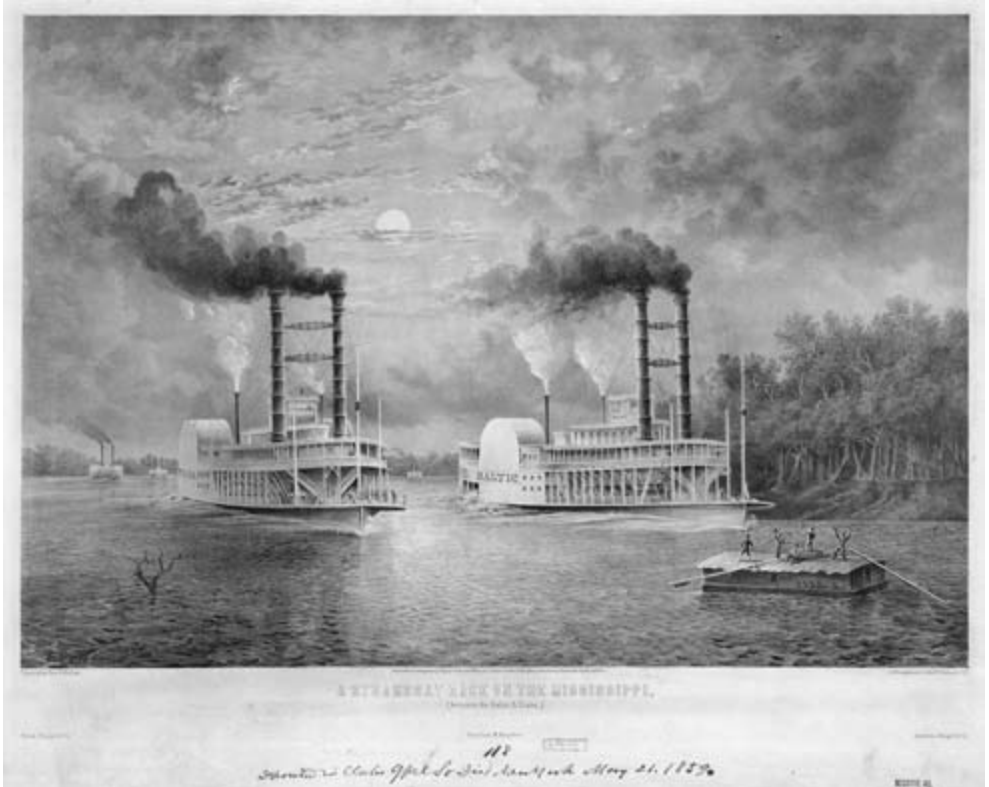
9. Mississippi River channel map. The sinuous Mississippi changed course so often that maps of it were outdated almost as soon as they were published. *The Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, New York Public Library.*



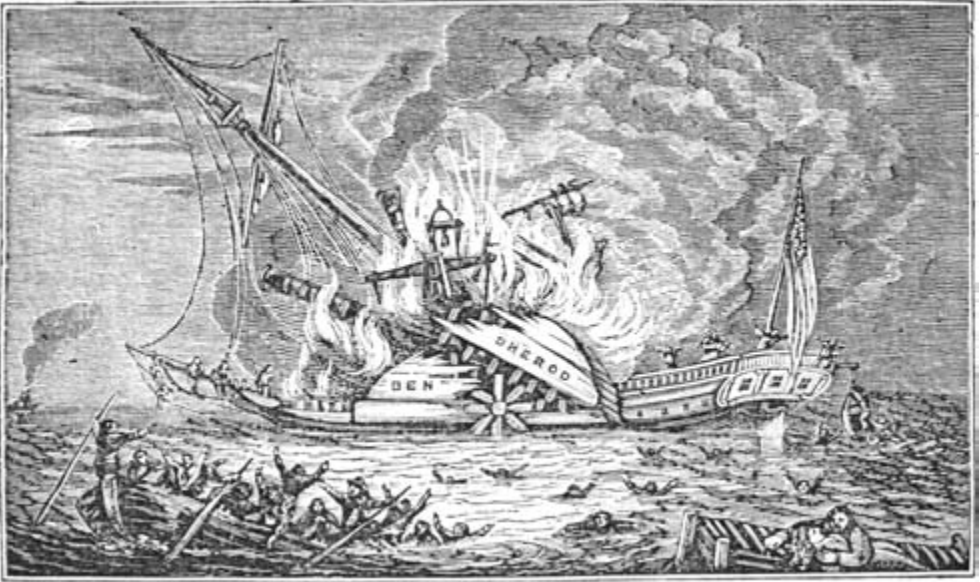
10. Slaves loading cotton at night. This stylized image, from James Buckingham's book *The Slave States of America*, depicts enslaved people loading cotton onto a steamboat by torchlight. It is characteristic of the representation of slavery in the Mississippi Valley as "sublime"—beautiful, awesome, terrifying, incomprehensible. *Widener Library, Harvard University*.



11. Steamboat *Mayflower*. As the Mississippi Valley economy grew and the river became crowded with boats, steamboat owners competed for passengers by making their boats into ever more elaborate "floating palaces." This image of the *Mayflower*, a boat that ran between St. Louis and New Orleans, is from 1855. *Library of Congress*.



12. Steamboat race. A reputation for speed was an invaluable asset in the competitive steamboat business, and steamboat races were a regular feature of life on the Mississippi. *Library of Congress.*

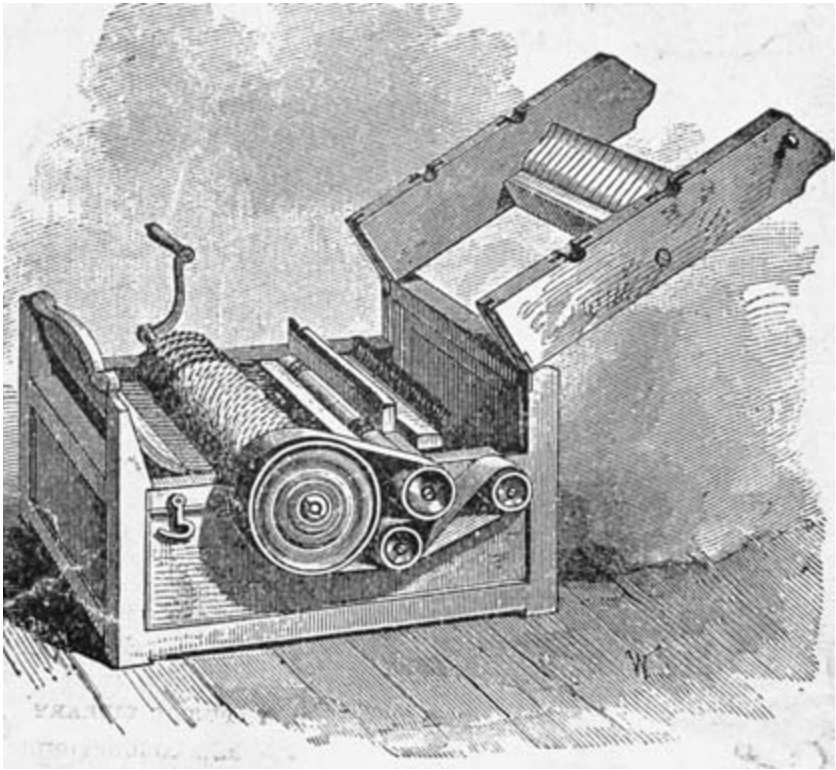


Conflagration and Explosion of the Ben Sherrod.

13. Explosion of the *Ben Sherrod*. Mississippi steamboats were powered by high-pressure steam engines, a cheaper, dirtier, more dangerous technology than was used in similar boats elsewhere in the world. When steamboat owners competed for business by running their boats harder, hotter, and longer, those boats were more likely to (and often did) explode. *Kress Collection of Business and Economics, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.*



14. George Devol. Steamboats, which brought strangers into close quarters for long periods of time, were notorious for both their social life and its attendant dangers. George Devol was the self-proclaimed king of the Mississippi riverboat gamblers. *Library of Congress.*



15. Cotton gin. The cotton gin removed the seeds tangled in the fibers of short-staple cotton, such as the Petit Gulf cotton that came to be planted all over the Mississippi Valley. It enabled growers to make money from a plant genetically adapted to the ecology of the Mississippi Valley, and, in so doing, gave new life to slavery in the United States. *Copyright © Bettmann/CORBIS.*



16. Cotton field. The majority of the enslaved people in the Mississippi Valley spent most of their waking hours tending to cotton: planting, picking, ginning, packing, shipping. Their stolen labor underwrote the Atlantic economy of the nineteenth century and much of U.S. economic development. *Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture/Photographs and Prints Division, New York Public Library.*



17. Cotton press. Once picked, cotton was packed into bales of approximately 400 pounds. Samples were cut from the bales and distributed to potential buyers. Cotton planters remained liable for damage to their cotton for weeks after it was out of their control. *Library of Congress*.



18. Mississippi steamboat packed with cotton. Steamboats transported millions of pounds of cotton up and down the Valley to New Orleans, where it was marketed and transshipped to the industrial centers of the Atlantic. Eighty-five percent of the cotton produced in the United States was shipped to Great Britain. *Courtesy of Glen C. Cangelosi, M.D.*



19. Caretaker and child, slave and owner. This extraordinary image from the Arkansas side of the river captures the interchange of dominance and dependence that characterized slaveholding life, as well as the proximity of intimacy, caretaking, and terror that defined the lives of the enslaved. *Library of Congress*.



20. The carceral landscape. This image of enslaved people at work emphasizes both the visual power of the overseer and the wooded refuge at the edge of the fields. The act of fleeing into the woods transformed the landscape from one in which power was defined by sight into one defined by sound. *Mid-Manhattan Picture Collection, New York Public Library.*



21. William Wells Brown. Brown was the enslaved steward of a Mississippi River slave trader, before escaping slavery and writing what is generally acknowledged to be the first novel published by an African American. The richly illustrated frontispiece from the Dutch-language edition of his narrative portrays various events from his time as a slave. When slaves escaped into the woods and swamps surrounding the cotton fields, slaveholders often used specially trained dogs to hunt them down. *Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture / Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library.*



22. Solomon Northup. Enticed from New York to Washington, kidnapped, and sold as a slave, Solomon Northup spent twelve years as a slave in Louisiana. His narrative provides one of the best accounts of the demands that cotton cultivation made upon enslaved people. *Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture / Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library.*



23. John Brown. Sold as a child in the slave market, where he was priced by the pound, John Brown was later “stolen” by a man he believed to be an associate of the notorious Mississippi Valley bandit John Murrell. *Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture / Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library.*



24. DeBow's Mississippi map. Published as a later appendix to the Census of 1850, under the guidance of pro-slavery Louisiana editor and census director James D. B. DeBow, this map emphasizes the geographic reach and centrality of the Mississippi Valley. *U.S. Census Bureau.*



25. Military map. This map from around 1850 portrays the maritime space of the Gulf of Mexico as an integral aspect of the strategic and economic space of the United States. Cuba and Nicaragua were seen by many supporters of slavery as key to ensuring the continuing prosperity of the Mississippi Valley, as well as the global expansion of the slaveholders' dominion. *Author's collection.*



26. Narciso López. The expatriate López led several invasions of Cuba from the United States, the last from New Orleans in 1851. After his death, arguments over his reputation served as a way to repair the idea that American empire in the Caribbean was somehow necessary and inevitable in the face of the evident failings of American imperialists. *Library of Congress*.



27. William Walker, the “Gray-Eyed Man of Destiny.” The mercenary Walker became the president of Nicaragua in 1856. Walker reopened the Atlantic slave trade to Nicaragua and tried to promote Nicaragua as a destination for nonslaveholding white men looking to become masters. *Library of Congress.*

8

The Carceral Landscape

A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears. See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change place, and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar? . . . And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority; a dog's obey'd in office.

—Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 4, Scene 6

THE FIRST EXPERIENCE Moses Grandy had of “freedom” came to him in a dream. “I felt myself so light, I almost thought I could fly, and in my sleep I was always dreaming of flying over woods and rivers.”¹ The image of people who could fly is a common one in African-American history, one commonly understood as a sign of the vital presence of the Africanness of enslaved culture in the Americas.² Yet there is even more to the image than that; to understand what it could be, we might begin with birds.

As Solomon Northup remembered them from the days when he was toiling as a slave in Louisiana, the “birds singing in the trees” seemed “happy.” He “envied them, . . . wished for wings like them, that I might cleave the air.” Like Northup, Chancellor Harper used birds to map the intersection of slavery, surveillance, and resistance, when he worried that ideas of resistance “calculate[d] to madden and excite” the slaves “continually reach them, through a thousand channels which we cannot detect, as if carried by the birds of the air.” The image seems conventional enough, indeed appearing so frequently that we might regard it as encoding a sort of commonsense understanding of the character

of enslavement.³ Following the flight of the birds, we might say that Grandy's dream represented freedom as a bodily practice—transcending of the landscape of slavery, movement and expression unconstrained by the patterned ecology of slaveholding agro-capitalism. And recognizing that, we must likewise recognize its opposite: enslavement was a material and spatial condition, as much as an economic and legal one.

One dimension of this sort of materiality is hinted at by an entry Alonzo Snyder made in his plantation record in January 1853: "4 hands getting six thousand feet of lumber up the bank." Despite its brevity, this entry is packed with historical subtext. Snyder's cotton had been harvested, and although several of his slaves were still ginning and packing his final crop, he was far enough through the season that he could turn his slaves to other labor. Indeed, the entry occurs in a portion of the book that Snyder used to record the money he made by hiring his slaves out during the slow periods of the cotton season—mostly for construction work, such as building scaffolding, raising rafters, hauling lumber. At the end of the year, Snyder tallied his profits from their hire, alongside the income from their cotton. This line of his plantation record tells us a story about exploitation and abstraction, about how human capacities were rendered as capital, about "capitalism and slavery."⁴ But it also tells us something else, starting with the numeral 4: four slaves working together.

Much of the work that slaves did was by its nature cooperative. The cooperative character of felling trees, running straight rows, and drilling holes for other slaves to drop seeds into is obvious enough. Likewise, the work at the end of the season: ginning, packing, and hauling cotton were all tasks that required the coordination of intention and action among slaves. But even the seemingly most individualized tasks—those for which slaves were held individually responsible at the end of every day—could be the occasion of cooperation. As Charles Ball remembered, "It is the business of the picker to take all the cotton, from each of the rows, as far as the lines of the rows or hills. In this way he picks half the cotton from each of the rows, and the pickers who come on his right and left take the remainder from the opposite sides of the rows." Slave labor would have been impossible without a continual process of cooperative awareness: watching, evaluating, recalibrating, responding. Childcare, as well, was cooperative. Young children were often left in the care

of a designated minder when their mothers went into the fields. Slave communities were bound together by affective relations that crisscrossed generations and lines of descent. Extend the list: from the women who aided one another in childbirth to those who prepared bodies for the grave, from those who washed and mended the slaves' clothes to those who brought food and water to the fields at midday. In daily practice, the extraction of labor was intertwined with and interrupted by the comfort the enslaved offered one another as they worked. Moses Grandy provided a glimpse of the way that cooperative labor could be inflected with other imperatives: "If a man have a wife in the same field with himself, he chooses a row by the side of hers, that with extreme labor he may if possible help her."⁵

Slaves' connections to one another, the everyday ties that added up to the historical formation scholars have termed "the slave community," were often expressed in material form.⁶ Charles Ball remembered that the slaves with whom he worked articulated their connections to one another through food. When they came in from the cotton field to grind their corn in the dark, they sorted themselves into a hierarchy of need: "The woman who was the mother of the three small children was permitted to grind her allowance of corn first, and after her came the old man, and the others in succession." Later, Ball was sold through the slave trade and placed in a cabin with a couple and their young children. In his memoirs, he recalled one particular night:

Dinah (the name of the woman who was at the head of our family) produced at supper a black jug, containing molasses, and gave me some of the molasses for my supper. I felt grateful to Dinah for this act of kindness, as I well knew that her children regarded molasses as the greatest of human luxuries, and that she was depriving them of their highest enjoyment to afford me the means of making a gourd full of molasses and water. I therefore proposed to her husband, whose name was Nero, that whilst I should remain a member of the family, I would contribute as much towards its support as Nero himself.

Jacob Stroyer recalled, in an image that conveys both the frequency of such small-scale communalism and its fragility, that "one who was accustomed to the way in which the slaves lived in their cabins could tell as soon as they en-

tered whether they were friendly or not, for when they did not agree the fires of the two families did not meet on the hearth, but there was a vacancy between them that was a sign of disagreement.”⁷

The material scarcity that people endured under slavery structured both the meaning of these acts of communion and slaves’ “agency” itself. Many slaves supplemented their diet with game hunted and trapped in the woods that edged the plantations. As Ball settled in with Dinah and Nero, he began to supply them with game. “During the fall and winter, we usually had something to roast, at least twice a week in our cabin. All the time the meat was hanging at the fire, as well as when it was on our table, our house was surrounded by the children of our fellow slaves; some begging for a piece. [But] it was idle to think of sharing with them, the contents of our board; for they were often thirty or forty in number.”⁸ In Ball’s experience, the “slave community” was organized into households that were slavery-structured hybrids of nuclear families and those joined to them in the assignment of living space and the distribution of goods. The “slave community” that Ball remembered was less a negation of his life as property than an intersecting plane of existence. His life as a piece of property and his life as a member of a family crossed over, commingled, and interrupted each other. The food that Ball hunted and shared was at once a subsidy to his owner’s economy, a source of energy for his labor, and the material substance of a set of affective social relations that could never be fully determined by the conditions of enslavement.

Although Ball was clear about the limits of the communal practices he described, such practices memorialize a fragment of the process by which the meager rations of enslavement were reworked into a practical ethics of enslaved humanity. Slaves judged their masters by their provisions. Peter Bruner conveyed the direct variance of the ratio of rations to esteem in the slaves’ moral economy: “Some few of the white people were good to the slaves and desired them to have whatever they had to eat.” John Brown remembered the slaveholder Ben Tarver according to the same standard, but to opposite effect: “I know he did not give his slaves anything to eat till noon-day, and then no more again until nine at night. They got corn, which they made into cake, but I never knew them to have any meat. . . . He was reputed to be a bad master.” Henry Bibb, who had been sold to a planter living along the Red River, re-

membered the man in similar terms: “When we arrived there we found his slaves poor, ragged, stupid, and half-starved. The food he allowed per week was one peck of corn for each grown person, one pound of pork, and sometimes a quart of molasses. This was all they were allowed, and if they got more they stole it.”⁹

“Stealing” of this sort, of course, was one of the primary forms of enslaved accumulation. As Frederick Law Olmsted traveled in the South, he was told “that everywhere on the plantations, the agrarian notion has become a fixed point of the Negro system of ethics: that the great result of labour belongs to the right of the labourer, and on this ground even the religious feel justified in using ‘massa’s’ property for their own temporal benefit. This they term ‘taking,’ and it is never admitted to be a reproach to a man among them that he is charged with it, though ‘stealing,’ or taking from another than their master, and particularly from one another, is so.” What Olmsted described as an agrarian ethic, the slave Andrew Jackson justified in biblical terms with the injunction, “Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn.” Henry Bibb addressed the same question with a notion of moral economy tinged by free-labor ideology: “I did not regard it as stealing then, I do not regard it as stealing now. I hold that the slave has a moral right to eat, drink, and wear all that he needs, and that it would be a sin on his part to suffer and starve in a country where there is plenty to eat and wear within his reach. I consider that I had a just right to what I took, because it was the labor of my own hands.”¹⁰

For slaves, the fact that the food they consumed was expended in (expropriated) labor was, at least in retrospect, a saving fact. When Louis Hughes wrote about a slave who had been badly beaten, he structured his account around the transformation of food into work: “It seems the slave had been sick, and had killed a little pig when he became well enough to go to work, as his appetite craved food, and he needed it to give him strength to do his tasks. For this one act, comparatively trivial, he was almost killed. The idea seemed never to occur to the slaveholders that these slaves were getting no wages for their work and, therefore, had nothing with which to procure what at times was necessary for their health and strength—palatable and nourishing food.” Henry Bibb provided a summary statement of this “moral ecology”: “For while the slave is

regarded as property, how can he steal from his master?"¹¹ The stolen property did not disappear from its owner's holdings; it was simply reconfigured—from his consumption to his capital.

Bibb's neat solution suggests that we should revisit the dialectics of pig roasting.¹² Domination and resistance, in this case, structured each other. Historians have often termed such actions evidence of slaves' "agency," but in so doing they have sometimes lost sight of the way that agency and resistance were themselves structured by power and exploitation.¹³ "Perhaps it was [wrong]," wrote Andrew Jackson, "but we were often *very hungry*."¹⁴ The starveling character of the Cotton Kingdom channeled slaves' concerns—their resistance, their collective action, their subjectivity—around the question of food. Indeed, Bibb's saving argument that the food he "took" was (re)converted to his owner's service through his labor betrays the extent to which the terms of his resistance reflected the terms of his oppression—the extent to which slaves' "agency" was structured in dominance. Yet the determining limits of the prevailing order did not exhaust the meaning of enslaved resistance—nor, finally, did they remain its limit.¹⁵

THE PRACTICAL ethics expressed by the notion of "taking," which prescribed the relation of slaves to their masters, was matched by an ethic of solidarity that assured slaves they could expect support when they tried to escape. Slaves who were out in the woods often received supplies from those who continued to draw rations from their owners. Solomon Northup remembered that one night a young woman appeared at the door of his cabin and asked for some bacon. He continued: "I divided my scanty allowance with her." And when, after "several nights" of such visits, his owner began to suspect something, Northup began to carry "her provisions to a certain spot agreed upon" in the woods, and he continued to do this throughout the summer. Isaac Mason, whose owner had tried to kill him, was similarly sustained in his escape "by a fellow-slave who brought me food, which removed a portion of the sorrow from my wounded breast." Slaveholders were of course aware of this off-the-grid network, and tried to cut it off at the source. When Peter Still ran away, his owner waited a month for him to come back, and then reduced his wife's rations by half. When Anders ran away, suspected of having helped to murder

his Mississippi overseer, his pursuers “found out from the Negroes that [he] was harbored in the gin by the Negroes on the Magnolia Plantation.”¹⁶

Anders’s story suggests the contingency—the agony—of solidarity. It was less an achieved state than a continual terrified request: Can you help me? Do you know the way? Will you share what you have? Will you risk your life to save mine? Many were the individuals whose supplications were unsuccessful. Paul was given up by “a woman he sometimes visited”; Henry Bibb, by “a little slave girl” who shared a cabin with his mother and pretended to be asleep when he came to visit; Leonard Black, by a man who had promised “to run with me”; and so on.¹⁷ The very act of seeking communal aid was fraught with considerable danger. Slaves had every reason to opt for self-preservation and refuse to provide help; there were also powerful inducements to betray vulnerable outsiders. The very information network upon which the fugitives relied could be broken and repurposed for counterinsurgency. Taking for the moment the part of those who refused to risk their lives in support of actions taken by another (that is, those who acted the way most of us would have to admit we would act—the way we do act every day—if we take seriously our own responsibility of historical empathy), we can see, as if in relief, the extraordinary effect of those who ran away and then asked for help. In asking—in assuming it made sense to ask—they conveyed a singular standard of solidarity. They stretched the terms of the ethics of comfort toward collective action.

Then, bloody and broken, they were brought in from the woods or fields where they had been run down. Charles Ball’s lacerated back was salved with bacon fat and he was laid on the kitchen floor. “An old blanket was then thrown over me, and I was left to pass the night alone. Such was the terror stricken into my fellow-slaves by the example made of me that, although they loved and pitied me, not one of them dared approach me during this night.” The perimeter of fear that isolated Ball in his suffering was crossed by other slaves on other nights. “John Glasgow then doctored my eye,” John Brown remembered. “He washed the blood from my face, and got a ball of tallow, and an old handkerchief from Aunt Sally, the cook up at the house. He gently pressed the ball of tallow, made warm, against the displaced eye, until he forced it back into its proper position, when he put some cotton over it, and bound it with a

handkerchief.” Similarly, Moses Grandy remembered, “To relieve them in some degree after severe floggings, their fellow-slaves run their backs with part of their little allowance of fat meat.” The spectacular character of the punishment of slaves—the fact that slaveholders used violence didactically, exponentially, attempting to cow those who witnessed or overheard the beatings as well as those who bore them—concealed within it another lesson, one that linked suffering and succor to solidarity.¹⁸

All of these escapes and beatings, all of these episodes in the history of enslaved suffering and solidarity, were also stories set down in the form of slave narratives designed to spur their mostly white, mostly Northern, mostly anti-slavery audience to more active opposition to slavery. But those published narratives showed the traces of prior tellings, in which slaves who had seen things bore witness for others—in which memory was practiced as remembrance. Solomon Northup recalled that when the slave Wiley escaped, “it was the only topic of conversation among us when alone. We indulged in a great deal of speculation in regard to him, one suggesting that he might have been drowned in some bayou, inasmuch as he was a poor swimmer; another that he might have been devoured by alligators or stung to death by the venomous moccasin, whose bite is certain and sudden death.” Northup, indeed, recounted the story of a Louisiana slave conspiracy that aimed to “organize a company sufficiently strong to fight their way . . . to the neighboring territory of Mexico”; his account was based not on his own “knowledge,” but on that “derived from the relation of those living at that period in the immediate vicinity of the excitement.”¹⁹ Northup was bearing witness to the process of bearing witness: the process by which enslaved people renewed the connection of the past to the present and transformed their connection to the departed—runaway, briefly encountered, sold, dead—into a bond with the present and the living. Slaves’ memoirs are full of such stories and stories about stories, a narrative network that the historian Herbert Gutman termed “slave passageways through time.”²⁰

All of these threads of time were stretched along the rows of the cotton fields where slaves worked: they chronicled the “agency” of the dead and the living, cooperation and comfort, sharing and solidarity. It has become fashionable in recent years to oppose the terms “work” and “culture,” or “power” and “agency,” and to use the former terms to bludgeon the latter, as if an incre-

ment added to the first in each pair of terms forced an equal and opposite diminution of the latter. In a strange way, these arguments are mirror images of those they seem so concerned to oppose, those they claim have overemphasized the degree of slaves' "agency" and autonomy. But rather than trying to specify the terms of that "agency"—what sorts of action were available to enslaved people in what sorts of circumstances, what sorts of notions of commonality undergirded their solidarity—such arguments have simply tried to cut it down to size.²¹

The lives of enslaved people were limited, shaped, even determined by their enslavement—bales per acre per slave, pounds per day, lashes and rations, field and woods, solidarity and betrayal: these were the circumstances in which slaves made history. Their love took the form of sharing food because those with whom they shared were starving; they succored the wounded because the wounded had been beaten; they sheltered the escaped because the escaped had run away; they talked about the departed because the departed had been sold. These specific forms (and others like them) were hosts of the slaves' ethic of care, which was neither separable from their enslavement nor reducible to it. Those circumstances gave their actions material shape but did not exhaust the meaning or liquidate the force of those actions. Slaves acted in solidarity because they recognized their fellow slaves not as "agents," but as family members, lovers, Christians, Africans, blacks, workers, fellow travelers, women, men, co-conspirators, competitors, and so on. Even as their enslavement provided the circumstances of their actions, it occasioned the expression and reproduction of ethics of care and practices of solidarity that transcended and actively reshaped their enslavement.²²

ANOTHER WAY to approach the idea of enslavement as a condition materially defined at the juncture of body and landscape is to read ex-slaves' descriptions of their landscape alongside the literature of nineteenth-century agricultural reform. When the runaway slave Louis Hughes had to stumble through "briar patches" and "old logs and driftwood, that had been piled up year after year," or when Charles Ball passed through "cedar thickets" that "continued for three or four miles together . . . with scarcely an original forest tree to give variety to the landscape," they were describing the wasted landscape of "old-field" that so outraged the agricultural reformers. Similarly, when John Brown

described hiding in an apple orchard, when J. D. Green told of jumping a fence at the edge of the field, when Solomon Northup recalled the fruit trees that lined his owner's road, when Louis Hughes evoked the way a "peach tree switch . . . cracked the skin so that the blood oozed out," or when Isaac Mason described being knocked down by a pitchfork in a muddy feed lot, they were portraying not simply slavery, but slavery in the landscape of agricultural reform, amid the fenced plots and fruit trees that the reformers equated with "improvement," with progress, and with civilization.²³

The most basic parameter of this sort of landed bondage was distance: from and to. When the slave trader who was driving Charles Ball southward judged that he had put sufficient distance between his slaves and their homes, he took the chains off the people in his coffle and allowed them to walk the rest of the way unfettered, since he now considered them bound by his spoken admonition that they should "give up all hope of returning to the places of our nativity, as it would be impossible to pass through the states of North Carolina and Virginia without being taken up and sent back." Solomon Northup, who had been kidnapped from New York, taken to Virginia, and then sold to Louisiana, told no one his story, for fear that he "would be taken farther on, into some by-place, over the Texas border, perhaps, and sold." Distance, in these memories, functions as an aggregate term for various sorts of dislocation: separation from family and community networks, and the devaluation of forms of "local knowledge" which characterized those networks and which made resistance possible—knowledge of whom to trust, where to hide, what road to take, which lie to tell. For slaves, "transportation" (used in the eighteenth-century sense of "conveyance to prison colonies") was a form of spatial discipline—of incarceration.

The most advanced technology of the day (steamboats, turnpikes, trains—not to mention firearms, swords, whips, chains, prisons, and so on), the most sophisticated commercial instruments (banknotes, negotiable paper, insurance contracts), and the most advanced statecraft (bills of lading, interstate comity, risk-allocating commercial law) were employed to speed the one-way passage of enslaved people into ever-deeper slavery, to reduce the friction of travel across space, which closed behind them with every southward step.²⁴ In this formulation, the carceral spaces of the Cotton Kingdom should be thought of as much in terms of discipline as in those of distance. Or, to put this differ-

ently, distance in slavery was measured not simply in miles, but also in suffering: in wounding and exposure, in the fearful nausea of a human being hunted like an animal, the mind-shattering loneliness of a person starving to death somewhere on an unknown map.

The remaking of space as discipline began with the abrasion of bare feet on the road. Runaway slaves often referred to the condition of their feet as an index of their vulnerability. Frederick Douglass remembered a time when the cracks in his feet had been broad enough to receive the pen with which he was writing his narrative. Andrew Jackson remembered that he had been slowed by having to stop to bathe his “bruised and swollen feet,” and then, shortly after, had been run down while “bare-foot in an open field.” The men who captured him then “amused themselves” by making him run to the jailhouse. Likewise, when Peter Bruner and his fugitive-companion Phil were fetched from the jail where the slave catchers had stowed them, their owner “took off our shoes and put them into his bag and said he intended to wear all the skin off of our feet before we reached home.”²⁵

The limited capacity of human beings to endure pain thus served slaveholders as a sort of physiological perimeter—a line of control. William Wells Brown remembered that on the eighth day after his escape, he was soaked through by a heavy rain; had he not possessed a tinderbox, he later recalled, he “should certainly have frozen to death.” The parsimonious rationing of shoes, coats, and blankets defined a deeper disciplinary economy, a sort of calculated disability limiting the enhancement of bare life—the enabling of human activity through technologies as humble as the coat—to forms that would be useless beyond the margin of a cotton field. Indeed, we might think of slaveholders’ power over their slaves as reaching into the fabric of those very bodies—as characterizing the embodied condition of enslaved humanity. To give a very simple example noted by many of the narrativists, slaves were not allowed to learn to swim. Their nerves, muscles, heart, and lungs were not to be coordinated in a way that would allow them to slip crosswise through the grid-structured surveillance of the Cotton Kingdom.²⁶

Hunger was another limiting condition of escape. The restrictive character of the landscape of the Cotton Kingdom was perhaps most pressingly evident in slaveholders’ control of the food supply. Many slaves who had plans to run away waited until the early fall, when the meager amounts of corn that had

been planted among the cotton fields began to ripen—a crop-based calculation which apparently eluded the cotton-obsessed Mississippi planter John Knight, who bemoaned the fact that his slaves always seemed to run off at the “most pushing part” of the cotton season. Runaways generally started off with a knapsack of food, remembered the ex-slave John Parker, but soon they began to starve. And when they searched for food at the outer margins of the fields they passed, they were more likely to find cotton than corn. Time after time, when runaway slaves were caught, it was because they had been forced by hunger to come out of hiding—to cross back into slaveholders’ field of visual power. William Wells Brown was captured after he and a companion had “finally resolved to stop at a farmhouse, and try to get something to eat.” Louis Hughes, who had stowed away in the hold of a steamboat only to find himself locked down with the cotton, was caught when he started “howling and screaming, hoping that some one would hear me, and come to my relief for almost anything would have been preferable to the privation and hunger from which I was suffering.” Peter Bruner was betrayed by a “colored man” he had dared to trust with his story, in hopes that the man would bring him something to eat where he was hiding by the side of the road.²⁷

That these stories were told at all is evidence that there were enough leakages—secret passages, helpful confederates, unwary animals, dark corners of cultivation—to sustain the lucky few across the provision-scarce landscape of the Cotton Kingdom. John Brown believed it was only the “directing hand of Providence” that had allowed him to avoid a near encounter with a slaveholder when he went into a field to steal some potatoes. J. D. Green drew a more immediate satisfaction one night when, after hiding all day in the woods, he “ventured to a farm-house, and having a club with me, I knocked over two barn fowl . . . and enjoyed a hearty meal without seasoning or bread.”²⁸ These were tactical victories in a strategic field defined by the triumph of cotton over corn—by slaveholders’ reduction of the landscape to a marketable commodity, by an economy that was also an ecology, by an extractive practice which, in its cleared sight lines and the starveling profusion of its sole staple, provided a material structure for its own enforcement. By controlling the food supply, the transmutation of nature into human energy, slaveholders were able to convert distance into privation, space into starvation.

In addition to rendering distance palpable as discipline, the agro-capitalist

transformation of the landscape provided slaveholders with a series of tactical advantages over their runaway slaves. John Parker—who had been sold in New Orleans and then escaped to Ohio, where he had been a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad—described the agricultural history of Kentucky in terms of a campaign of counterinsurgency: “When I first began my work among the slaves, [the landscape] was still covered with virgin forest, broken here and there by clearings, with many trails and few roads. . . . As the settlers began to build their cabins and make their clearings, the forest gradually disappeared. The increased population made it more difficult for the fugitives to pass through the country successfully, since there were many eyes and few hiding places to conceal.”²⁹ As Parker presented it, the land was not merely a backdrop to slavery, a sparsely furnished stage upon which the “master-slave relationship” could be immaterially transacted. The land was the thing itself, the determining parameter of his condition as a slave. His laboring and potentially escaping body and the agro-capitalist landscape it inhabited existed in a state of mutual formation and constant dialectical tension. They constituted each other, the labor of the slave refashioning land into an agro-capitalist landscape even as the transformed landscape made the human being into a visible—and thus vulnerable—slave.

As Parker described it, the transformation of the landscape imposed a corresponding set of transformations on the human beings who populated it, conferring a sort of supersensory power on slaveholders, who could now see things—people—that had previously remained out of sight and optically rendering a black figure who sought to cross that landscape into a new sort of hypervisibility. When Henry Bibb told of his narrow escape from capture on a journey which had taken him all the way from Louisiana to Missouri, he introduced his account by describing the fearful character of stripped land for a slave. “I always dreaded to pass through a prairie. . . . I walked as fast as I could, but when I got about midway of the prairie, I came to a high spot where the road forked, and three men came up from a low spot as if they had been concealed. . . . Had this been in timbered land, I might have stood some chance to dodge them, but there I was out in the open prairie, where I could see no possible way by which I could escape.” The very space that rendered Bibb so obvious also blinded him: he could not see any place to run. Andrew Jackson similarly described the sensation of feeling another set of eyes locking

him into focus against a cleared background. "I was moving cautiously along, [when] I saw a man on a small hillock in front of his house, apparently watching my movements. I had learned to look on every white man as my foe, and dared not pass near to any one. . . . I was not mistaken. As soon as the man saw my movements, he knew I was a fugitive, and ran to his house, a short distance from where he stood, and taking his dog and gun made chase for me."³⁰ These passages recount the experience of being literally targeted, captured as if telescopically, made the focal point of a landscape in a moment of mutual recognition—the frozen beat before one human being began to hunt another.

THE MASTERY of slaveholders as they hunted their slaves was channeled and amplified by being hybridized with other sorts of power, which enhanced their own human capacity. Foremost among these were horses. Horses were, of course, a symbol of power for slaveholders; Frederick Law Olmsted remembered that the "swells" of Natchez distinguished themselves by stabling more "fine horses" than he had ever seen in a comparably sized city.³¹ But horses were also the specific material form of slaveholding power. Indeed, the association of horses with policing is so axiomatic that it might be said to be hidden in plain sight. The words "slave patrol" summon to mind a vision of white men on horseback, an association so definitive that it elides the remarkable fact that the geographic pattern of county governance in the South emerged out of the circuits ridden by eighteenth-century slave patrols, which were themselves materially determined by the character of the landscape and the distance that a man on horseback could cover in the span of a single night.³²

Beginning with the idea of the horse as a tool that converted grain into policing, one might define the several dimensions of horse-borne slaveholding power. Most obviously, horses provided slaveholders with a geometric advantage over slaves who took to the roads of the Cotton Kingdom. They accelerated the exercise of slaveholding power. More than that, as the historian Rhys Isaac long ago observed, a slaveholder (or patroller) on horseback visually commanded the landscape; traveling several feet above "eye level" vastly expanded the immediate field of slaveholding power.³³ For slaves on the road, the sound of an approaching horse was a fearful portent; indeed, the list of fugitives who were run down on the roads by white men on horses perhaps even

exceeds the list of those who were captured when they crossed into a slaveholder's visual field in search of food. Henry Bibb described one such encounter with mounted whites (the one that began when he ventured into the open prairie):

They came along slowly up behind me, and finally passed, and spoke or bowed their heads upon passing, but they traveled in a slow walk and kept but a very few steps before me, until we got nearly across the prairie. . . . They soon got out of my sight by going down into the valley, which lay between us and the plantation. Not seeing them rise the hill to go up to the farm, excited a greater suspicion in my mind, so I stepped over the brow of the hill, where I could see what they were doing, and to my surprise saw them coming right back in the direction they had just gone, and they were going very fast.³⁴

As Bibb described it, their horses afforded the slave catchers an almost insuperable advantage. There was nowhere for him to run: no way for him to overcome the space-shrinking advantage (an advantage reckoned in both vision and velocity) of a mounted man on clear land. Bibb's enslavement was spatially fixed—materially determined—at the zero-point convergence of the limits of his bodily capacity, the technological advantage of horse-borne human hunters, and the open land on which they met.

It was not simply the extent to which horses provided a vector for the enhancement of slaveholding human agency that made them fearful to slaves; it was also the extent to which horses remained the agents of their own actions. As anyone who has ever observed the employment of horses in "crowd control" can attest, the unpredictable, uncontrolled character of horses makes them especially terrifying to those against whom they are deployed. A horse added a fearful layer of wildness to the already volatile encounter of a white man and a slave on an isolated road. A slaveholder would play on this when he tied a rope around the neck of a runaway and then tethered the slave to his saddle, or when he bound a runaway and tied the captive into the saddle. Bibb (on an occasion prior to the incident on the prairie) was transported in that way: "A carriage passing by jammed against the nag, which caused him to break from the man who was leading him, and his fright threw me off back-

wards. My hands being confined with irons, and my feet tied under the horse with a rope, I had no power to help myself. I fell back off the horse and could not extricate myself from this dreadful condition; the horse kicked with all his might while I was tied so close to his rump that he could only strike me with his legs by kicking.” By the time the horse was caught and Bibb was cut off its back, “the breath was kicked out of my body.”³⁵ Only the fact that he had been suspended several feet above the ground, and thus above the horse’s hooves, enabled Bibb to survive at all. No superintending law, no economic incentive, no measure of human decency (however desiccated) could save someone in his situation. He was a slave who had been intentionally placed—pinioned—in a zone of action beyond human control or responsibility, a position of animal vulnerability.

Another space-determining technology of slaveholders’ control was writing. Charles Ball was working one day when he saw an enslaved child deliver to the overseer a “piece of paper” that had been sent by the master. On that paper, though Ball could not have known it, was written a message suggesting (wrongly) that Ball had murdered a white woman, and that the overseer should find a way to bring him in without arousing the slave’s suspicion. A note like that, or like the notes that slaveholders sent along with slaves who thus unwittingly carried instructions for their own punishment to the very hand that would then beat them, created a sort of spatial relation, a force field, invisible to all but the very few literate slaves. Slaveholders’ control of literacy—of the knowledge, technique, and technology of reading and writing—provided them with a safe channel for privileged communication: a code.³⁶

Written communication had the added advantage of serial reproducibility. A single message could travel in many directions at once—as quickly as a horse, a steamboat, or later a telegraph could carry it. Slaveholders could thus fill space—or segment it in as many directions as there were roads, rivers, and telegraph wires—with information.³⁷ Escaping slaves traveled through a landscape in which they were already known, or at least suspected—a landscape in which word of their arrival had been sent ahead of them. Ex-slaves’ narratives of attempted escape convey their uncanny feeling of being overtaken by the transmitted news of their own fugitive status. The runaway John Brown remembered that when he stopped to ask directions, he was told by a “colored man” that his escape was the subject of the notices he saw posted on walls all

around the town: "Jespy James had issued the notices, and sent them flying all through the country by means of steamers and other modes of transmitting information." J. D. Green encountered his own likeness in a "bill at the corner which had been put up that evening." Henry Bibb and a fellow fugitive were ambushed by white men alerted to their presence by a notice that "neither Jack nor myself were able to read. . . . They had seen a reward out, for notices were put up in the most public places that fifty dollars would be paid for me, dead or alive."³⁸

Of course, there were plenty of whites who could not wait to start looking for slaves who had been thus advertised. Frederick Law Olmsted was told by an Alabama slaveholder that white men often traveled hundreds of miles to hunt slaves. But the posted notices had a broader purpose than simply "flooding the zone" with bounty hunters; they had the power not simply to inform people but to enlist them. Having read such a notice, one could not help starting to look—to give one's vision over to policing. In the first instance, this re-visioning should be imagined as involuntary, reflecting the way that the technology of discipline in slavery infiltrated the sensoria of whites as well as blacks, the way that both groups were materially and intellectually interpellated by the policing mechanisms of slavery. Slaveholders and slaves alike often referred to fugitives who "answered" to a given description, as if their arrival were a sort of timely response to a question that had been hanging in the air. And in a way, it was: having seen the news, one could not help wondering.³⁹

The point at which the techno-enhanced visuality of slaveholding power materialized as a boundary to enslaved mobility was the point at which someone asked the unanswerable question, "Whom do you belong to?" Seemingly as common as the encounter of an unknown black and a curious white on a country road, the question was, in effect, a pointed inquiry about local knowledge, about space. Answering it required the ability to tell what Isaac Mason referred to, in a revealingly materialist way, as a "palpable lie." As escapee Peter Bruner phrased it, the question could not be answered without knowing who "a great many of the people were" in a given area. The question imposed the geography of ownership upon apparently errant slaves, who were then forced to account for their location—as free people unaccountably without papers, as dutiful slaves without passes, or in some other way. Andrew Jackson

described a series of such encounters with what he termed the “usual salutation”: “Where are you going, n—r?” “Whose boy are you?” One man he was able to shake off by claiming to have a pass that would prove him the “turnpiker” he claimed to be, and then taking such a long time to look for it that the white man gave up; another he was able to outpace, once he noticed that “he was lame and could not follow me, not get to a house very soon to give the alarm.”⁴⁰

In recounting the history of these encounters, Jackson reflected on the character of the property rights these repeated questions made manifest: “It often appears to me that the slaveholders and southerners generally, are much more regardful of their neighbors’ property and interests than the people of the north. I cannot account for it on any other supposition than the very peculiar *character of the property*. If slaves were like money, simply transferable by the owner, I presume it would be quite different. But inasmuch as it often takes *legs* and *runs away*, it becomes a matter of mutual interest for each to protect his neighbor’s ‘rights’ in order to render his own more secure.” As Jackson suggested, the ambulatory character of slave property determined patterns of slaveholding class formation; because their property was mobile, slaveholders came to see their individual interests in a common light. They came to understand themselves not simply as a class in themselves, but as a class *for* themselves. And from Jackson’s point of view, this class “position” was anything but abstract. Slaveholding property did not exist in the set of ambient social conventions that allowed money to pass easily from one hand to another, or, he might have added, in the registered deeds filed somewhere in the county courthouse. It existed in social policing, in the way a black body on an open road provoked a question that was always already structured by a supposition. “Supposing me to be a ‘runaway,’ as men generally do in such cases,” Jackson concluded his discourse on the dialectics of property and policing, “they armed themselves with guns and dogs and gave chase. I soon heard the dogs with their frightful baying, and the men hallooing at the top of their voices—‘Stop, you damned n—r, or we will shoot you!’”⁴¹

If slaveholders’ visual field, their landscape-structured bodily power, often translated seeing into a sort of wanton induction (shoot on sight), the accounts provided by former slaves often frame enslaved seeing as a process of partial occlusion and uncertain deduction. John Brown, escaped and questioned on a

northbound steamboat, “noticed” the captain “shake his head as he turned away, and I concluded he doubted my story.” Moses Roper, likewise on the run, met some white teamsters along the road, who “agreed to take me with them as far as they went, if I would assist them.” When the group stopped to water the horses, however, Roper “saw the men whispering, and fancying I overheard them say they would put me in the Charlotte jail when they got there, I made my escape into the woods, pretending to be looking for something until I got out of their sight.”⁴² These recollections slow down and itemize a process of watching and deducing (Brown “noticed,” then “concluded”; Roper “saw,” then “fancied,” then ran) that, if these slaves were to save themselves, had to occur in the blink of an eye. Like the way eyes, muscles, and hands were coordinated for the task of picking cotton, or, still more to the point, like the landscape-empowered visibility of mastery, this way of seeing represents a hybrid form of social embodiment: human being under the condition of enslavement.

Roper’s account of the way he tried to look (as if he were looking for something!) once he saw the way the white men on the road were looking at him reveals something essential about the play of gazes and appearances: within slavery, looking was a multiform action, performed and beguiled according to set-piece understandings of the way things were supposed to look. When Solomon Northup explained what it meant to live for a decade as the property of another man, he noted the way his labor had been converted into the white man’s “possessions” and then immediately turned to the embodied aspect of enslavement: “Ten years I was compelled to address him with down-cast eyes and uncovered head—in the attitude and language of a slave.” Similarly, Jacob Stroyer used an image of embodied submission when he recalled his childhood fear of an overseer who beat him regularly for a reason Stroyer never understood: when summoned, “I ran to him as if to say by my actions, I am willing to do anything you bid me, willingly.” The fact that slaves and slaveholders shared a mutually comprehensible visual grammar of plantation order—of the daily command performance of dominance and submission—made it possible for enslaved people to hide behind their own hypervisible appearance. Isaac Mason captured this doubleness of seeming and seeing when he described the way he had loaded wood onto a boat while watching out for a slaveholder whom he suspected would try to attack him while he worked: “My

readers must not suppose that my eyes were idle while working there. My hands were working to serve Mansfield, but my eyes were working or watching to serve . . . Isaac.”⁴³

Runaway slaves were able to draw upon the animal order of the Cotton Kingdom to explain what they were doing when they were caught out of place. For slaves, hunting a lost horse was often the most plausible explanation for being away from home. When William Hayden and Henry Bibb ran away, they both took bridles with them as a sort of counterfeit pass. A similar trick, recounted by Andrew Jackson and Moses Roper, was to hide beside the road waiting for a horse-drawn conveyance. A fugitive could then, as Roper explained, follow along in the wagon’s perceptual wake: “If I happened to meet any person on the road, I was afraid . . . would take me up, I asked them how far the wagons had got on before me to make them suppose I belonged to the wagons.”⁴⁴ The same animal energy which slaveholders harnessed to impose their control upon the landscape—the way that a horse represented a geometric increase in the velocity of a human being over cleared ground—could be used by an escaping slave as a form of cover. Indeed, the peculiar character of equine animality—the fact that horses (unlike pigs or sheep) could have their energy efficiently converted to a vector of human action, and were (unlike dogs) subject to promiscuous direction rather than governed by prior habits of “loyalty”—meant that slaves were sometimes able to “turn” a slaveholder’s horse and ride to “freedom.”⁴⁵

PRESSING IN upon the cleared fields and patrolled roads of the Cotton Kingdom, as is evident in many of the stories recounted above, was another sort of landscape. The 160-acre plats marked out on the survey maps of the General Land Office, and the diagrams of the riparian division of the land into plantations—graphic schemas that provided the most familiar images of plantation geography—depicted the landscape as “property.” And that property was actualized in daily agricultural and disciplinary practices: in the gestures of clearing, planting, picking, packing, shipping, watching, beating, starving, stealing, raping, and hunting. But at the edge of that landscape there was another sort of landscape. In uncleared woods and undrained swamps, in fields gone to meadow and scrub pine, in both the residual landscape of the frontier and the ruined postcapitalism of Southern “oldfield,” the spatial premises of

the Cotton Kingdom, the structured and mutual formation of body and landscape called “slavery,” disintegrated.

Many slaves familiarized themselves with the off-the-grid landscape in the course of their daily work. Their knowledge was gendered, in accordance with their labor; as the historians Stephanie Camp, Susan O’Donovan, and Anthony Kaye have argued, it was generally enslaved men who were employed as hostlers and herders, jobs that required them to take to the roads and woods. It was likewise men who were generally the traveling partners in “abroad” marriages, where the members of a single enslaved household were divided between neighboring enslaving ones.⁴⁶ Yet it is clear that enslaved women had ample occasion to venture into the woods and swamps surrounding the plantations. They were tasked with driving the stock out of the woods; they gathered food and herbs; they tended the elderly slaves who had been sent out to spend their last years in the (cost-saving, for their owners) isolation of the woods.

There was nothing secret or occult about the fact that enslaved people knew the land in a way that slaveholders did not. Indeed, slaveholders depended on their knowledge—on the ability of their slaves to track cows in the woods, fetch the mail from the post office, carry notes to the neighbors, accompany goods to market, bring cotton to the levee, and make a journey cross-country on foot in the same time that it took a slaveholder to get there on horseback via the road. “The white gentlemen then mounted their horses, and set off by the road. . . . I had orders to take a short route through the woods and across a swamp, by which I could reach the cabin as soon as the overseer,” remembered Charles Ball of one such occasion. Isaac Mason recalled another: “The distance by the public road was ten miles, and it would be some time before I could return. I was acquainted with a road that would take me directly there, by crossing the lands belonging to other persons, and the distance would not be more than three miles; so in order to economize time for the boss, I took that route.”⁴⁷

Enslaved people were thus privy to a landscape only partially accessible to their owners. Their narratives recall landmarks that seem coordinates of an alternative geography of the South—one defined not by roads and cities (still less by maps and timetables), but by the concrete experience of travel across the land, and especially through the woods. Isaac Mason, sent into the woods on another occasion to cut timber, spent the night in “an old barn that I had

frequently seen in that neighborhood.” William Hayden remembered traveling a road “generally known as ‘THE OLD TRACE,’ which had not been traveled for some time. This was thickly covered with timber, the principal part of which was young hickories.” Such a landscape was historical and experiential—one known through practical navigation rather than ordinal abstraction.⁴⁸

For enslaved people, the woods and swamps striated across the grain of the land were a refuge from the mean dominion of cotton. Slaves took to the woods to hunt, trap, and fish to supplement their rations. Deer, raccoons, rabbits, turkeys, opossum, pike, perch, catfish, and shad all populated the woods and waters of the Mississippi Valley, and all were used by slaves to supplement their rations.⁴⁹ Charles Ball provided an especially detailed account of enslaved woodsmanship: of how he baited deer with salt, and trapped raccoons and opossum when the “ground was thickly strewed with nuts”; of the six-foot rattlesnake he skinned and stretched on a board; of the way that the peculiar behavior of his hunting dog alerted him to the presence of a panther while he was working in a pond, stripping wet tree branches of their bark, from which he planned to make some “very good ropes.” Indeed, Ball thrived in the woods, to such an extent that his overseer said he could “smell the meat” on Ball’s body, and began to suspect the slave of stealing cotton. “Charles, you need not tell lies about it; you have been eating meat, I know you have, no Negro could look as fat, and sleek, and black, and greasy as you if he had nothing to eat but corn bread and river chubs. . . . Let us know where you got the meat that you have been eating, and you shall not be whipped.”⁵⁰

As it turned out, Ball had been harvesting not cotton but fish, which he had transformed into bacon by means of barter. In the meat-poor agro-capitalist ecology of the Cotton Kingdom, slaves generally had a ready market for their game.⁵¹ The sort of “outsourcing” represented by sanctioning supplemental provision patches or hunting for game contained troubling concealed costs, for what slaveholders saved in food, they sacrificed in discipline. Ball found a “fence” for his fish in the person of a white boatman, whose riverine business allowed him ready access to his neighbor’s slaves.⁵²

Enslaved itineraries were often consonant with the purposes of the cotton economy; they were structured by the slave’s required labor or by the outsourcing through which slaveholders forced their hungry slaves to sustain

themselves. Yet beyond tracing the geography of exploitation and human suffering in slavery, each itinerary represented an accumulation of vital knowledge. The itineraries of self-provisioning slaves and the nodal geography of illicit interracial commerce intersected in the woods and swamps bordering the cotton fields. As miserly slaveholders forced their slaves to provide for themselves by offering only the meanest rations, they enabled their slaves to learn about the landscape in a way that placed them beyond their owners' control. Pressing down upon their slaves' threshold of survival, they pushed their people out into the woods to fend for themselves, unwittingly allowing them to acquire the knowledge necessary to more effectively resist and even escape slavery.

The landscape of forage and that of resistance overlapped in the woods and swamps of the Cotton Kingdom. Before Charles Ball had begun to steal fish and sell them on the riverbank, he had drawn upon his knowledge of the animal landscape of slavery to sneak food out to a fugitive he had encountered while searching for swamp turtles to eat. He had made his way, he remembered, "with no path to guide me, but the small traces made in the woods by the cattle." Leonard Black planned to run away with a fellow fugitive he had met, similarly, in "the pasture in which our horses were kept, . . . about a half a mile from the village" where he lived. For the slaveholders investigating the appearance of the dead body of the overseer Duncan Skinner in the woods near his Mississippi plantation, the information that a slave named Reuben had been "out to kill some squirrels" provided what they took to be a crucial break in the case.⁵³ As we see from the image of Ball following the cows he might have been sent to chase, or that of Black meeting a man in a horse-chosen spot they both knew from their work, or that of Reuben using the cover of a squirrel hunt as he lay in wait for his overseer, plantation slavery left traces upon the landscape—landmarks for enslaved people as they looked for a passageway out.

When slaves ran away—whether they planned to try for "freedom" or simply to hide out while waiting for a change in circumstances—they ran into the woods and swamps at the edge of the cleared fields. John Parker spoke for the tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people who took to the woods during the period of slavery: "Once away from the fields across which I ran like a scared rabbit, I hid in my friend the forest until night." Narrative after narra-

tive registers similar reversals of the parameters of the landscape of enslavement. Slaves camped in forests and swamps during the day and moved at night, under the cover of darkness, to traffic their contraband and cook their stolen food, to worship and to plot, to search for something to eat if they planned to stay out, to care for, support, and sustain one another in both exigency and resistance, to take to the roads and wend their way northward until the dawn began to break.⁵⁴ Frederick Law Olmsted remembered slaveholders gesturing toward the “thickets,” “swamps,” and “rugged . . . hills” with the peculiar resigned determination that characterizes the banter of men looking forward to the hunt. The Cotton Kingdom’s daytime landscape was edged with a crepuscular sense of incompleteness—of contingency, challenge, and even vulnerability. As obvious as it seems on the face of it, then, the fact that slaves ran for the cover of the woods and swamps, that they moved at night and hid out during the day, tells us something essential about the landscape of slavery: it was not in a steady state.⁵⁵

Under cover—as runaways sheltered at night, amid the timber, deep in the swamps, prone in a ditch beside the road, crouched beneath an overhanging bank—the sensory landscape of slavery was transformed. If the geography of slaveholding power was characterized by its visibility, that of resistance and escape was characterized by aurality—by the precedence of the ear over the eye. John Parker, who was for years a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad based in Ripley, Ohio, described how he moved along a tree-lined road in the dark: “Being on hostile soil, I was careful to keep in the grass rather than on the hard road, where my footsteps could be heard. I was fortunate I took this precaution, for I had hardly gone a quarter of a mile when I heard voices ahead of me. Secreting myself in the bushes, I waited to see who the men were.” Charles Ball evoked the soundscape of the swamp: “With the coming of the morning, I arose from my crouch, and proceeded warily along the woods, keeping a continual lookout for plantations, and listening attentively to every noise that I heard in the trees, or amongst the cane-brakes. . . . As I cautiously advanced forward I heard the voices of people in loud conversation. Sitting down amongst the palmetto plants, that grew around me in great numbers, I soon perceived that the people whose conversation I had heard were coming nearer to me. I now heard the sound of horses’ feet.”⁵⁶

Even during daylight hours, but especially at night, the woods neutralized

the advantage slaveholders enjoyed on open land. Horse-borne policing was well-adapted to controlling the roads, the fields, and even the meadows, pastures, and prairies of the Southern landscape. In the woods, however, horses often moved with more difficulty than human beings, and riders were more prone to get caught up in branches hanging above the forage line than were people on foot, who could duck through vegetation cleared to the height of deer, cows, or pigs. In swamps, horses were useless. And as Ball suggested, the noise that horses made on the roads and (particularly) in the woods provided fugitive slaves with an early-warning system that they could use to track the slaveholders who were trying to track them. Slaves who ventured out of the woods in order to improve their time across the land listened intently to protect themselves. Charles Ball: "At dark, I again returned to the road, which I traveled in silence, treading as lightly as possible with my feet and listening most attentively to every sound that I heard. After being on the road more than an hour, I heard the sound of the feet of horses, and immediately stepped aside and took my place behind the trunk of a large tree."⁵⁷

Increasing the density of the landscape also increased the difficulty of slaveholding communication. Enslaved people, of course, were accustomed to eavesdropping upon—or even just listening to—slaveholders. The more comprehensive the service that slaveholders demanded of their slaves, the more information they gave away. The narratives of former slaves are filled with stories of actions taken based on overheard snippets of slaveholding conversation: escapes made in anticipation of a "secret" plan to sell slaves or settle an estate, news of runaways who had made it all the way to Canada, information about the advancing strength of the Union Army during the Civil War. In Louisiana, William Hayden went so far as to learn French so that he could eavesdrop in case he was sold to "a Frenchman."⁵⁸ By definition, slaveholders who were chasing their slaves through the woods or swamps faced a contingent situation—one unfolding beyond the structured parameters of the Cotton Kingdom. In order to coordinate their actions, they had to communicate on what was, in effect, an open channel. Andrew Jackson, who had thrown himself over a "precipice" as he fled from a pair of slave catchers, crawled up under the "shelf of the bank," where he could hear the men discuss where he had gone and finally conclude that he must have killed himself in the jump. Similarly, Charles Ball remembered that he had repeatedly gleaned informa-

tion from listening in on the conversations of the white men who were out hunting him. On one occasion, he heard enough of a conversation to orient himself in relation to a nearby river; on another, he overheard a man say that “he had seen an advertisement at the store, which offered a hundred dollars for the runaway, whose name was Charles.”⁵⁹

Because fugitive slaves often coordinated their signals in advance, they sometimes started out with an advantage over their pursuers. In many circumstances, sound is a more useful sense than sight for coordinating collective action over distance; think of the starter’s pistol, the factory whistle, or the call to prayer. Noise allows for those who are obscure to one another to be commonly hailed, and it penetrates the consciousness of even the unaware. Isaac Mason recalled the prearranged signal he used to find the man whom he had agreed to meet in the woods: “As a signal of our meeting in safety he would give the signal crying out, ‘yea! yo!’”⁶⁰ Off the grid, in the woods and swamps where they were no longer so easily fixed in a slaveholders’ gaze, where they could lay up and listen as slaveholders came after them, where they could plot their pursuers’ course in advancing sounds, where their owners’ structured power was rendered contingent, tactical, by the landscape, fugitive slaves had the advantage of holding the better ground over their masters—for a moment, sometimes for a day or even a week, sometimes, indeed, long enough to get what they wanted before coming in again or even to make it all the way to “freedom.”

TO REASSERT control of the landscape, slaveholders used dogs. Frederick Law Olmsted recounted a conversation in which a white man told him how slaveholders trained their dogs. “Dogs were trained when pups, to follow a n—r. [They were] not allowed to catch one, however, unless they were quite young so they couldn’t hurt him much, and they were always taught to hate a Negro, never permitted to see one unless to be put in chase of him.” The use of bloodhounds transformed the landscape of escape. In the woods and swamps, where slaveholders’ view was occluded and where slaves could use their ears to evade their pursuers, dogs’ sense of smell made them the masters of the landscape. Charles Ball, recalling a conversation he overheard between his owner and the posse that had gathered to chase a slave named Hardy, conveyed a sense of how slaveholders relied on these mercenary specialists: “The

overseer thought that from the intimate knowledge possessed by him [Hardy], of all the swamps and coverts in the neighborhood, there would be little hope of discovering him [without dogs]. The overseer advised them to wait the coming of the gentleman with his bloodhound before they entered the woods.”⁶¹ “Loyal” to their masters (or those to whom their masters hired them) and able to travel more rapidly than any human being across even the most difficult ground, these weaponized dogs were implacable enemies, driven by a purpose beyond that of even their owners.

Solomon Northup described the baying of hounds in the woods as a sort of sonic tracer by which slaveholders could follow their progress remotely: “Frequently their loud bay is heard in the swamps, and then there is speculation as to what point the runaway will be overhauled.” The narratives of former slaves, many of whom had been fugitives, return again and again to the baying of the hounds: the joyous, savage, indecent vigor with which they hunted; the sense of the extreme liability of being run down along a vector from which one could not depart. Louis Hughes recalled: “I had been asleep, when suddenly I heard the yelp of the blood hounds in the distance. It seemed quite far away at first, but the sound came nearer and nearer, and then we heard men yelling. We knew now that they were on our trail.” John Parker: “I heard the yelping of the hounds, [and saw] the despair of fugitive slaves. The sound grew louder and louder, closer and closer.” And Northup again: “I stood upon the fence until the dogs had reached the cotton press. In an instant more, their long, savage yells announced they were on my track. . . . Every few moments I could hear the yelping of the dogs. They were gaining on me. Every howl was nearer and nearer. Each moment I expected they would spring upon my back—expected to feel their long teeth sinking into my flesh. There were so many of them, I knew they would tear me to pieces.”⁶²

Fugitive slaves tried to evade the dogs by jamming their senses with information that would put them off the track. J. D. Green had the run of a neighboring plantation where the bloodhounds were nightly released on patrol, because “I had made them acquainted with me by feeding them at intervals quietly.” Northup, who had managed to evade the dogs on the day just described by swimming along the bayou (only to be captured shortly after), subsequently developed a new policy in relation to dogs: “I never allowed an opportunity to escape, when alone, of whipping them severely. In this manner I

succeeded at length in subduing them completely. They feared me, obeying my voice at once." Green and Northup, each in his own way, had remapped the canine perimeter of their enslavement by associating their scent and sound with mastery. Knowing how dogs perceived the landscape helped slaves to escape. "From bog to bog, where I had stepped, they could still keep the track, though impeded by the water," wrote Northup. "At length, to my great joy, I came to a wide bayou, and plunging in, had soon stemmed its sluggish current to the other side. There certainly the dogs would be confounded—the current carrying down the stream all traces of that slight mysterious scent, which enables the quick-smelling hound to follow in the track of the fugitive. . . . Around two o'clock in the afternoon, I heard the last of the hounds."⁶³

For dogs, the chase did not end with capture: their aggression knew nothing of due process or even human property. Slaves who could not elude the dogs—and their outsized number among the fugitives is a testament to their desperate courage—searched, often in vain, for sanctuary. "When pushed hard," one of Frederick Law Olmsted's informants told him, "a Negro always took to a tree." Olmsted went on to repeat the following story told by a clergyman about his neighbor:

He was out once with another man, when after a long search, they found the dogs barking up a big cottonwood tree. They examined the tree closely without finding any Negro, and concluded that the dogs must have been foiled, and they were about to go away, when Mr. —, from some distance off, thought he saw a Negro's leg very high up in the tree. . . . He called out, as if he really saw a man, telling him to come down, but nothing stirred. . . . He then cut half through the tree on one side, and was beginning on the other when the Negro halloed out that if he would stop he would come down. He stopped cutting and the Negro descended to the lowest limb, which was still far from the ground and asked the hunter to take away his dogs, and promise they shouldn't tear him. But the hunter swore he'd make no conditions with him after having been made to cut the tree almost down. The Negro said no more, but retained his position until the tree was nearly cut in two. When it began to totter, he slid down the trunk, the dogs springing upon him as soon as he was

within their reach. He fought them hard, and got one of them by the ear; that made them fiercer, and they tore him till the hunter was afraid they'd kill him, and stopped them.⁶⁴

Compare that story to the following one, from Andrew Jackson:

While they were going over the cotton picking for the last time, one of the slaves named Little John, ran away. The hounds were started upon the man's track, and the overseer and a part of the slaves followed. But in a moment all was still. At this awful moment of soul harrowing suspense, anxiety to see our friend and fleeing victim was depicted in every countenance. But what did they see? Nothing of John—but the hounds in a gore of blood, all over their heads and legs. . . . John was not found that night. Early the next morning search was made for the slave. Little John was found, stiff upon the ground, torn and mangled by the hounds, in the cane. His body had been dragged around, and the pieces were found sticking to the snags as though he was a wild hog.⁶⁵

In these stories, dogs seem to be the final instance of slaveholding power—the last savage tool for patrolling the unruly boundaries of the Cotton Kingdom, for laying bare the verge of fugitive life.

When they were run down by dogs, slaves sometimes fought for their lives. Charles Ball recalled encountering a dog as he slipped into a farmer's yard to steal peaches to sustain him on his flight: "I stood still as a stone, but yet the dog growled on, and at length barked out. I presume he smelled me for he could not hear me. In a short time I found that the dog was coming towards me, and then I started and ran fast as I could for the woods." Another dog joined the first, and they soon caught up to Ball. "I now thought of my master's sword, which I had not removed from its scabbard, in my great coat, since I commenced my journey. I snatched it from its sheath, and, at a single cut, laid open the head of the largest and fiercest of the dogs, from his neck to his nose. He gave a loud yell and fell dead on the ground. The other dog, seeing the fate of his companion, leaped the fence, and escaped into the field, where he stopped and like a cowardly cur set up a clamorous barking at the enemy he

was afraid to look in the face.” A similarly spare account of the relationship between enslaved human beings and repurposed dogs characterizes J. D. Green’s account of being set upon as he fell from a tree.

In this emergency, I called out the name of one of the dogs, who was more familiar with me than the others, called Fly, and hit my knee to attract her attention and it had the desired effect. She came fondling towards me, accompanied by another called Jovial. I pulled out my knife and cut the throat of Fly, upon which Jovial made an attempt to lay hold of me and I caught him by the throat, which caused me to lose my knife, but I held him fast by the wind pipe, forcing my thumbs with as much force as possible. . . . I made a powerful effort to fling him as far away as possible, and regained my knife; but when I had thrown him there he lay throttled to death. Not so, Fly, who weltered in blood, and rolled about howling terribly, but not killed.⁶⁶

These descriptions of dog killing are almost didactic; they describe not simply what was done, but how it was done. Many former slaves wrote about their fights with slaveholders or other whites in similarly specific terms, beginning with what they saw. At the core of John Brown’s description of the slave trader who carried him South as a child was an account of the man’s hand (providing, in the process, a vivid counterpoint to the way the same slaveholder might have described Brown’s hands): “He might have killed me easily with one blow from his huge fist.” Other accounts provided traces of what must have been a constant strategic sense of the wounding latent in every object within a slaveholder’s reach. Isaac Mason was working along with some other slaves to load a boat when he saw a slaveholder coming down to the bank. “On he came with his silver-headed stick in hand,” he later wrote, in a recapitulation of the flash reckoning he made of the situation. A like materiality characterizes J. D. Green’s memory of his enraged owner: “I knew he had on heavy cow-hide boots, and I knew he would try to assist me in my outward progress.” And John Parker remarked, “A whole book could be written on the hobnailed boot as a weapon of offense and defense. The strategy of using the hobnailed boot is an art.”⁶⁷

The representation of violence as a form of embodied knowledge is even

clearer in the accounts former slaves gave of the way they moved during fights. Ordered to strip himself down to be beaten, Solomon Northup instead returned his owner's "malignant look":

"Master Tibeats," said I looking him boldly in the face, "I will *not*." I was about to say something further in justification, but with concentrated vengeance, he sprang upon me, seizing me by the throat with one hand, raising the whip with the other in the act of striking. Before the blow descended, however, I had caught him by the collar of the coat and drawn him closely to me. Reaching down, I seized him by the ankle and pushing him back with the other hand, he fell over on the ground. Putting one arm around his leg, and holding it to my breast, so that his head and shoulders only touched the ground, I placed my foot upon his neck. He was completely in my power.⁶⁸

John Parker provided a similarly detailed account of a fight with a white man:

I had been through too many rough-and-tumble fights not to know the tricks of combat. With the notice I had given my man, it was impossible for me to get in the first blow, which is a very important point in this sort of contest. . . . In one of my rushes, my opponent's impetus carried him over me, throwing him heavily to the hard floor. I was on him like a flash. When he staggered up I hit him fairly on the jaw, knocking him down again. . . . As he arose I swung hard on his jaw. He trembled all over. Then I hit him with every ounce of vengeance I could muster. This time he went down for good. I gloated over his bruised face, discolored eyes.⁶⁹

These are genre pieces. They are characterized, on the one hand, by the "operational aesthetics" so important to antebellum popular writing, and, on the other, by the thematics of becoming-a-man so central to slave narratives more generally. "As a free man, I had met him fairly and asserted my superiority," Parker concluded.⁷⁰ Yet, magnetized though they are by form, there is something about these descriptions that exceeds their literary resonance: a sense of the concerted repurposing of one's own body. They refuse the con-

ventional description of “knowledge” as a condition of the mind rather than the body.⁷¹ There is satisfaction—even pleasure—in these descriptions of inflicting harm. The wounding has been choreographed, practiced, exercised, earned, enjoyed, celebrated. It is to be reveled in. Such accounts provide a useful reminder of the sanguinary character of “resistance”; of the hard-earned pleasure of being the perpetrator; of retribution. When we write a history in which the word “resistance” blooms with a sense of its bruising satisfactions, we will be closer to the world as it was known by John Parker.

NOWHERE IS the violence that characterized that world more apparent than in the trial records of Mississippi slaves accused of capital crimes. When Lot Ellis and his brother Willis accused their slave Simon of killing an enslaved child named Norvell, they based their suspicion on the rudimentary forensic conclusion that a footprint found near the boy’s body resembled that of Simon. Using dogs to track the fleeing Simon six miles through the woods, they found him up to his neck in the bayou, although the slaveholders alleged they could still see the scythe blade in his submerged hand. As they ordered Simon from the water, one of them struck him on the head, tearing open an old wound and causing blood to stream down his face. The dogs then attacked the stricken prisoner. As the posse of slaveholders led him back through the woods, Simon’s owner advised him to come clean, saying, “It will be better for you to tell the whole truth about the matter.” When Simon finally confessed to Norvell’s murder, he was bound by a noose looped around his neck and tied on the other end to the pommel on one of his captor’s horses. Taken to a log cabin, shown Norvell’s body, and placed before a makeshift jury of white men, Simon’s words initially failed him, but upon being termed the “murderer” by one of the white men present, he again confessed.⁷²

The same elements run through any number of other accounts of the interrogations carried out by Mississippi slaveholders investigating crimes.⁷³ For example, Peter, accused of killing a white man, was interrogated while he was chained to the floor of an outbuilding and surrounded by “a volunteer jury” that one witness thought might have numbered fifty men. As the mob outside “expressed a determination to hang the prisoner forthwith,” Peter confessed after reportedly being told that “it would be better for him to tell the truth.”

Alec and Henry were likewise chained in a house that was surrounded by

“sixteen or twenty white men.” They admitted murdering their master, after being told “it would be better for the guilty ones to confess[,] that the innocent might not be punished.”

When one of William Miles’s guests took ill at his breakfast table, his “attention was arrested by the phenomenon of little streaks of smoke coursing and running in little veins over the hominy and at intervals exploding in thick clusters with a faint flash like Lucifer matches.” Miles noticed that his slaves Israel and John were peculiarly silent and had strange expressions on their faces. They were separated and beaten within one another’s hearing and then again out of earshot, until, upon being told that each had implicated the other, they confessed. They had, they said, tried to poison their master with arsenic, a plot they had hatched in the “old field on the way to the post office.”

The slave Isham was accused of murdering a white man named William Hoggat. The evidence was a drop of blood (identifiable even when scraped off together with the blacking that allegedly covered it) that had been found on one of Isham’s shoes. Hoggat had been murdered on the road about “one hundred and fifty or two hundred yards from [the house of Isham’s owner] by the path or short cut across the field, but about four to five hundred yards by the road that led to the deceased’s house.” The body had then been dragged off the road and thrown in a nearby sinkhole. Isham was taken to a bayou, where another slave, Dick, had been tied to a log and was being whipped “to make him confess what he had done, if anything.” One of the men interrogating Isham remembered that Dick’s screams could be heard “quite plainly” as another white man made “the proposition” to buy and hang Isham as his own loss, and then told Isham that Dick had confessed and implicated him.⁷⁴

These stories were told in Mississippi courtrooms, where at least part of the issue under consideration was whether the confessions in question were legally admissible. They had come before the court, presumably, because the very slaveholders who had coerced confessions from their slaves wanted to make sure that it was the state that carried out those slaves’ executions. Not because the owners were squeamish about brutality, but because it was only in the case of an execution under the auspices of the State of Mississippi that they would get reimbursed for the value of their dead slaves. These cases, then, capture one element of an ongoing struggle concerning a basic question: Who, ultimately, was sovereign over Mississippi slaves: their owners or the state?⁷⁵ In-

deed, such cases capture the ambiguous results of the efforts of Southern lawmakers to essentially buy the right to interrogate and execute slaves by paying slaveholders a bounty for the dead.

One can sense in these cases not only a shared occasion, but also the sort of sight-reading by which slaveholders tried to resolve the mystery behind the appearance of a dead body in a landscape over which they had only partial control. A knife held underwater, a footprint in the dust, a puff of smoke in the grits, or a drop of blood smeared with boot-blackening might be transformed into certain conviction of a slave's guilt. But above all, there is the physiognomy. These slaveholders believed that they could see the evidence of guilt as it flickered across their slaves' faces; and once they saw it, they tortured the slaves until they got the confirmation they wanted. Indeed, it is their insistence on a confession that outlines the limits of their vision. Ultimately, these slaveholders could never be sure they were right unless the slaves told them so.

Slaveholders used torture to close the gap between what their straining eyes could see and what their overheated imaginations suggested. The picture of Mississippi that emerges from these cases is that of a "wild zone" of unchecked power through which slaveholders reasserted their power when they thought it had been challenged. Suspected slaves were run down and attacked by dogs, dragged through the woods on a noose attached to a horse, beaten with sticks, cut with whips, stapled to the floor of a cabin while a mob gathered outside. These nightmare images produced a climate of intimidation so pervasive that in the Mississippi courts after 1850, the bare statement "It will go better for you if you tell the truth" was legally considered evidence that a slave's subsequent confession had been coerced. In Mississippi it became a settled principle of law that in a very few hours outside the authority of the law, slaveholders could make slaves say whatever they wanted.⁷⁶

In addition to the sickening compass of the historical arc that joins these stories to Abner Louima and Abu Ghraib, such accounts of enslaved human beings *in extremis* share another set of historical traces. Many of these cases shared not only a legal venue, but a physical setting as well: these events occurred beyond the bounds of the cotton economy. The extraordinary violence of the incidents betrays slaveholders' sense of their own vulnerability outside the landscape of their materially predicated control. This was a landscape that defied the slaveholders' visual field of power, a landscape that disclosed itself

to them only in pieces, its woods and bayous occluding their sight lines. It was a landscape that transformed the sensory terrain of mastery and resistance—a terrain in which slaves could hear their owners coming after them, and in which slaveholders had to rely upon the noses of their dogs to guide them. At the moments when these slaveholders followed their dogs into the woods or beat a confession out of one of their slaves, they encountered the spatially embedded character of their power (and the material thickness of their slaves' resistance) as the fearful edge of their own apprehension. At the margins of the fields—whether in the residual frontier spaces of uncleared woods and undrained swamps, or in the exhausted agricultural spaces of post-capitalist fields gone to meadow and piney oldfield—it was clear that the Cotton Kingdom was less an accomplished fact than an ongoing project, less a fixed bastion of slaveholding power than an excruciating becoming: a landscape being fiercely cleared in a counterinsurgency campaign to which there could be no end.

9

The Mississippi Valley in the Time of Cotton

Gambling converts time into a narcotic.

—Walter Benjamin, “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century”

AT FIRST GLANCE, the experience of slaves in the Mississippi Valley seems far removed—indeed, conceptually antithetical—to the world of “capitalism.” They labored far from the banks and factories of the North and Great Britain. There was nothing mystified or abstract about the slave mode of production: exploitation did not occur under the cover of contract. Yet the cotton they picked tells a different story. For the daily standard of measure to which slaves in the Mississippi Valley were held marked the conceptual reach of the global economy in the first half of the nineteenth century: lashes into labor into bales into dollars into pounds sterling. Cotton planters, moreover, were not simply concerned with their slave-generated profits (although they surely were); they were also concerned with their slaves’ *productivity*. They extracted profit from their slaves not simply by economizing on inputs (food, clothing) and extending the working day (“sunup to sundown” was the commonplace), but by trying to make their slaves work harder, faster, more efficiently. Between 1820 and 1860, the productivity of the average slave on the average cotton plantation in Mississippi increased sixfold.¹

To track that productivity, slaveholders relied on tools like *Affleck’s Cotton Plantation Record and Account Book*, one of the bestselling books in the Mississippi Valley. Priced at \$2.50 and published every year from 1847 until the Civil War, *Affleck’s* provided a list of the things to which a commercially minded

cotton planter should attend, and provided neatly lined printed pages across which they could be tracked: pounds of cotton by the slave, by the acre, and by the bale; prices gained for the same, less the cost of shipping and marketing; total yield, total expenditure, total profit (or loss).² *Affleck's* represented (or, more precisely, urged planters to represent as they attempted to square their practice to its empty rows and columns) the cotton business as a series of sum totals: days, bales, dollars. Those increments were the measures of cotton-planting success.

In the midst of the season, however, the cotton business was less a series of summed-out totals than a set of polyrhythmic processes, causes and effects, risks and calculations, sometimes in profitable consonance, sometimes in disastrous dissonance. To judge by the records that planters kept, three sets of processes were of particular concern to them: the natural processes by which sun, water, and soil were converted into cotton; the labor process by which cotton plants were made into marketable bales; and the financial process by which credit was transformed into income, the money they had borrowed transformed into the sale of the cotton that represented its repayment. In order to “manage” their crop, planters had to negotiate a series of exchanges between the natural determinants of the growth of their cotton plants, the social determinants of the diligence with which it was picked, processed, shipped, and sold, and the financial determinants of the time-scaled commercial instruments which made it possible for them to plant the cotton in the first instance and sell it in the final. Cotton was, in the parlance of the day, “made” at the juncture of these processes—ecology, labor, marketing, and credit. Indeed, we might say that, along with the cotton, planters themselves were made at the juncture of these processes. The notations contained in their record books abstracted—represented as measured, tamed, mastered—centripetal forces which daily threatened to escape their control; which, indeed, the planters came to believe by the 1850s, were more powerful than almost any other force on the face of the earth.

It was not simply the bare reckoning of pounds of cotton into pounds sterling that marked the cadence of Valley slave life; it was the rate of the conversion. Slaveholders prided themselves on the rate at which their slaves worked. Of one, John Brown remembered that “he had a name for possessing the fastest cotton-picking Negroes in the whole county.” Of another, William Green

said that “he called himself the Great Labor Savings Man.” “Time’s money, time’s money!” repeated a cotton planter who found himself stuck on a slow-moving steamboat; according to Frederick Law Olmsted, he worried that his slaves were not working hard enough in his absence.³ Getting slaves to work harder and faster and better: this was the meaning of the planters’ favored terms, “supervision” and “management.” As one of the reformist planters put it, “If cotton seed be scattered very regular, so as to give a stand no stalks touching, the hoe hand can thin out faster, and thus save time. If I were able to plant my cotton crop with [this] neatness and order . . . I believe I could cultivate an acre or two more per hand. . . . If planters will devote more care and attention in tilling their lands, and putting in their crops in a good manner, they will be able to make more, and yet spare their servants and their beasts much labor in the cultivation.”⁴ The dominion of the planters’ gaze was ruled by the imperatives of productivity. After all, they were not actually planning to “spare” labor; they wanted only to convert it into cotton with greater efficiency.

With this in mind, it is worth returning for a moment to the Cotton Kingdom’s ruling trinomial: bales per acre per hand. This standard measure was widely employed. Indeed, the calculation of bales per acre per hand framed the intensity with which planters overcropped their cotton and leached the fertility from their land. Revisited in light of the question of efficiency, however, we can see that the formula was, in essence, a tool for calculating the productivity of labor. The ecological exhaustion of the planters’ fields was intertwined with the bodily exhaustion of their laborers: they were depleting their lands in an effort to “save” labor. Given that slaves could plant about twice as much cotton as they could pick in any given season, planters had to calculate the amount of labor they could get out of their slaves in order to know how to allocate their acres. As the *American Cotton Planter* declared in 1853, “the great limitation to *production is labor*.”⁵

By the 1860s, defenders of slavery were pointing to the productivity of labor and the way it had increased over the course of the century as an essential measure of the vitality, the progress, of the Cotton Kingdom. “Not only has the increased number of hands added to the production, but the number of bales per hand that can be raised has risen from 4 and 5 to 8 and 10 per hand in some localities,” wrote the pro-slavery economist Thomas Kettel. Similarly,

referring to the “seeming productiveness of slavery,” David Christy noted that “the total cotton crop of 1853 equaled 395 lbs. per slave—making both the production and export of that staple in 1853 more than four times as large, in proportion to the slave population, as they were in 1820.”⁶ Far from being unconcerned with the productivity of their labor—the essential modern measure of the extraction of surplus—these defenders thought it a defining feature of Southern civilization.

As much as they were concerned with aggregate yields—bales per acre per hand—the governing standard of the Cotton Kingdom was calculated in pounds per day. Looking at the records of the cotton planter Alonzo Snyder, who owned Buena Vista plantation in Tensas Parish, Louisiana, we find that during the week of September 6, 1852, the slave John picked 280 pounds on Monday, 135 on Tuesday, 320 on Wednesday, 330 on Thursday, 315 on Friday, and 325 on Saturday. His total for the week was 1,705 pounds. Letty picked 320 pounds on Monday, 325 on Tuesday, 385 on Wednesday, 365 on Thursday, 365 on Friday, and 350 on Saturday. Her total for the week was 2,110 pounds. Sophia picked 135 pounds on Monday, 165 on Tuesday, 140 on Wednesday, 120 on Thursday, 130 on Friday, 145 on Saturday. Her weekly total was 835 pounds. And so on. Those totals represent the work of three of the twenty-five slaves Snyder worked on Buena Vista. They are drawn from the third page of the forty-three-page plantation record, and represent the third week of picking in a season that lasted through the first week of January 1853. They are a few of the thousands of such numbers in Snyder’s record book, representing millions of pounds of cotton his slaves picked, cleaned, ginned, packed, and shipped on his behalf.

There is nothing remarkable about Snyder’s record book, beyond the sheer fact that it records the work done by human beings whom he considered to be his property. Nothing that strictly separates it from thousands of similar documents lining the shelves of Southern archives. Slaves’ names were listed along the left-hand margin, their weekly totals along the right-hand margin, and their daily totals in columns in between, allowing the planter to track each slave’s daily and weekly progress against both their own past labor and that of the other slaves in the field. Running totals for the poundage picked by the entire slave force could also be easily calculated on a daily or weekly basis, as could each slave’s total poundage over the course of the season.⁷

The daily weighing of picked cotton was a ritual of plantation life in the Mississippi Valley. Frederick Law Olmsted remembered visiting a Red River plantation where “a slate hung in the piazza, with the names of all the cotton pickers, and the quantity picked the last picking day by each, thus: Gorge, 152; David, 130; Polly, 98; Hanna, 96; Little Gorge, 52; etc.”⁸ Those numbers were used to track daily deviations from standards set at the beginning of the season; they were representations of both slaveholding discipline and enslaved agony. Solomon Northup, who had been enslaved along Louisiana’s Red River, explained: “When a new hand . . . is sent for the first time into the field, he is whipped up smartly and made for that day to pick as fast as he can possibly. At night it is weighed so that his capability in cotton picking is known.” The “task” might vary upward, but never down. Northup continued: “The day’s work over in the field, the baskets are . . . carried to the gin house, where the cotton is weighed. No matter how fatigued and weary he may be—no matter how he longs for sleep and rest—a slave never approached the gin house with his basket of cotton but with fear. If it falls short in weight—if he has not performed the full task appointed to him, he knows that he must suffer. And if he has exceeded it by ten or twenty pounds, in all probability his master will measure the next day’s task accordingly.” As Charles Ball put it, the exchange rate between the plantation record and the produce it represented was reckoned in suffering: “On some estates settlements are made every evening, and the whipping follows [the weighing] immediately; on others the whipping does not occur until the next morning; whilst on a few plantations, the accounts are closed twice or three times a week.” And nowhere, John Brown remembered, were the daily rates calculated so meanly as in Mississippi.⁹

For slaves, violence was the metric of production. Failing to make weight, leaving cotton in the boll, breaking the branches along the row, spoiling the cotton with dirt or twigs, running away during the “pushing” part of the season—all of these translated into a scale of punishments: fifteen lashes; thirty lashes; two hundred; four hundred; so severely that the fibers of the shirt healed “fast to my back”; until “my clothes were all full of the blood that flowed from my own body”; “until the blood ran out of his shoes”; so that he was out of work for ten days, two weeks, three weeks, five months; so that he “knew nothing for two days”; so that it was five weeks before he could walk; so that “he was always subject to fits after that”; so that “no pen can ever de-

scribe what my feelings were”; so that language itself collapsed under the onslaught.¹⁰ These were the standard measures of cotton production, measuring the speed and efficiency of the process by which capital and labor were transformed into cotton. As such, they were articulated with another set of standards that assessed the cotton’s quality: Inferior; Ordinary to Good; Ordinary; Low Middling to Middling; Good Middling; Middling Fair; Fair; Good Fair; Good and Fine—all of these “assimilating” to the standards of the Liverpool Exchange. The grading of cotton introduced the standards of exchange into the calculus of labor discipline in Louisiana, for quality depended on how quickly and carefully a crop was picked and processed.

To understand the relationship between the rate at which slaves labored and the market grade of the cotton they picked—between the scale of punishments and the standard “assimilating” to that of Liverpool—one must know something about how cotton matured in the field. From the moment it bloomed, its value was diminished through “exposure.” “It is of great importance, not only to the success of the work, but to the complexion and character of the staple, to keep well up with the picking,” wrote one planter in a cool summary of the way that the ecological character of Petit Gulf cotton and the commercial imperatives of the Atlantic economy were resolved through what the planter’s called “care,” but what in another context might have been called “slave driving.” The Petit Gulf cotton prized for its “pickability”—for the breadth of its open boll, and the ease with which the fibers could be drawn from their roots—was correspondingly vulnerable to wind. Every breath of wind in the interval between the time a crop bloomed and the time it was picked diminished the season’s yield. Wind on a dry, hot day blew dust and sand into the open bolls, mottling their color and leaving them grainy to the touch. Still worse was rain. A hard rain could mat the cotton fibers together and entangle them with the damaged husk of the open boll. Cotton near the bottom of the plant could be splashed with mud from the bed, leaving indelible brown stains on the fibers. A light rain or morning dew tinted cotton gray. Frost toward the end of the season would stain it a deep red, effectively destroying the value of whatever was left in the field. Even the blood from fingers abraded by the rough husks of the cotton boll could stain the precious fibers contained within.¹¹

The quantitative metric of pounds per day was a convenient proxy for the biological process through which the marketability of the crop was diminished

if the cotton was left standing in the field after it had opened; but this metric was a poor template of the crop's ultimate quality. Slaves who knew that their work would be measured by the pound at the end of the day had little incentive to pick "clean" cotton. They gathered up leaves and stems with the bolls, dragged their sacks over the soil, emptied them on the ground at the end of the row, packed them down with muddy feet, and so on. "These things," one cotton merchant wrote, "are rarely seen by the proprietor; and consequently, when his merchant writes him that his cotton is a little dusty, he says how can it be? You are surely mistaken."¹² The merchant's point, in line with dozens of other criticisms about the lack of "care" taken with the cotton crop, was to emphasize the direct connection between the degree of supervision of slaves in the field and the quality of the cotton they produced.

As cotton approached sale, it was classed according to both color and staple—the length and strength of the strands, which determined how finely it could be woven (today referred to as "thread count"). The impressions of the hand counted, as well as those of the eye: "it is strong and feels rough in the hand"; "it is softer and silkier than the quality spoken of above"; "it is ordinarily too harsh"; "it is different in character from the second description, as well as shorter in fibre"; "it is drier, fuzzier, and more like rough wool"; "our great consumption and demand is for the soft, white, silky, moderately long cotton of America"; "soft and silky, but not clean nor of a very good color, but still decidedly American in color."¹³ Planters who tried to project the metropolitan standard through the process of preparing their cotton often depended on their slaves to embody (literally) that standard. First, in the field, where eyes and hands determined the quality of the cotton picked: "In the gathering from the field, great care is taken to keep it clean, and free from trash and stained locks." Then, in the gin house, where slaves determined which cotton was ready to be ginned (that is, to have its seeds and other waste material removed)—"cotton should never be ginned until the seeds are so dry as to crack between the teeth"—and sorted the cotton by grade in a rough approximation of the prevailing standard: "It is of great importance to sort the cotton carefully into several qualities, in ginning and packing, for by mixing all qualities together, the average price is certainly lowered." Then, on "the mote-table, where a woman looks over it very carefully and picks out every little mote or stained lock as fast as two men gin."¹⁴ There is something intimate about the knowl-

edge shared by the fingers and eyes of those in Louisiana and those in Liverpool, as they performed the capillary actions of the global economy of the nineteenth century at either end of its reach.¹⁵

Cotton went to market in the form of bales, and the shape and condition of those bales was the final determinant of its “merchantability.” Cotton bales were large and heavy: between four and five hundred pounds apiece, four to five feet long, and one to three feet on a side, depending on how densely they had been pressed. They were wrapped with cotton bagging, and tied with rope or wire. Their size made them difficult to handle, and they often reached market with “country damage”—that is, caked with dirt on their bottom side, from having been “skidded” along the ground as they were maneuvered from the press to the landing, from the landing onto the steamboat, from the levee to the market exchange. Cotton that was exposed to rain at any stage during its journey might arrive in market “wet-packed,” its surface caked into a stiff, stinking sheet. Finally, if cotton in the gin house had been improperly sorted, either through lack of attention to separating the grades or as a result of efforts to conceal low-grade cotton by packing it in bales “plated” with better cotton, its sale might be compromised.¹⁶

Poor and fraudulent packing were sources of great concern to buyers and brokers throughout the Atlantic cotton market, who apparently saw manifold and material connections between the “capitalism” of the Atlantic market and the “slavery” of the Mississippi Valley. A Southern promoter writing in *DeBow's Review* in 1847, criticized the use of iron bands to bale cotton: “On this point reference need only be made to the horribly ragged and wasteful manner in which cotton for sale is now usually introduced to the purchaser. When a cotton buyer now examines a sample of cotton he knows that the cotton he buys is not in the condition of the sample. Why? Because the bagging is torn, the ends out, several pounds of cotton are materially injured by being exposed to the mud, and much of it has become trashy and worthless.” In 1857, the president of the Liverpool-based American Chamber of Commerce and the head of the Cotton Brokers' Association wrote an open letter to American planters, voicing a similar complaint:

Of late . . . so many instances of careless packing have occurred causing a discrepancy between the sample and the bulk, that serious loss has been

sustained both by the manufacturer and the merchant. . . . The evil complained of has, from carelessness or otherwise, increased to such an extent that in a large proportion of shipments arriving in Liverpool, instances of false or irregular packing are discovered, and occasionally whole parcels, consisting of 20, 50, and even 100 bales are found mixed in the bale, and sometimes plated—in other words, the outer bale from which the sample is taken is more or less superior in quality to the interior of the bale.¹⁷

“From carelessness or otherwise”: the adjudication of the were-they-capitalists question has generally hinged on the interpretation of phrases such as this. Were cotton planters so heedless of the standards of “the market” that they allowed their cotton to get stained in blooming, trashed in picking, mixed in ginning, and damaged in shipping? Or were they sharp-eyed players, closely watching their slaves as they handled the crop and looking after their own interests, even to the point of fraud, as it went to market? When we read letters, articles, and books by writers who projected the standards of the cotton markets or manufactories onto the labor of Southern slaves, are we to see them as traces of the general tendency of the business towards the increasing integration of standards and practices, or as voices in the wilderness?

FEW QUESTIONS have occasioned the expenditure of so much ink in the service of so many circular arguments as the question of whether the planters who owned slaves and lived by their labor were capitalists. One group of historians has argued that capitalism emerged in the seventeenth century, and was characterized by the separation of laborers from the land, the commodification of labor power (that is, the performance of work for an hourly wage), the emergence of the factory system of production, and the identification of contracts as the *sine qua non* of “free labor.” If one begins from these premises, it is hard to argue that slavery was, in and of itself, capitalist (there was no separation of labor from the land, no wages, no contracts). Hence the enduring formulation that slavery was “precapitalist” or “archaic,” or “in but not of” the world capitalist system.¹⁸ Another group of historians has defined “capitalism” as a global system of commerce and exchange that began to emerge in the fourteenth century, long before the “industrial revolution.” Noting the

centrality of slave-produced commodities (and, indeed, of slaves themselves) to the commercial worlds of the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and the Atlantic, they have argued that slavery was unquestionably capitalist. How else to describe the forcible transfer and sale of twelve million Africans to the Americas? How else to account for the emergence of industry in the very region of England which had most directly profited from the slave trade?¹⁹

The first position has the virtue of specificity. It locates the emergence of capitalism in a specific time and place (seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century England). Moreover, by defining that emergence through focusing on the mode of *production*, it places the history of working people at the center of its account of capitalism. To the critics of this view, however, its analytical specificity is hopelessly indebted to its Eurocentrism. It treats the history of capitalism in England as a global developmental paradigm, subordinating other histories by treating them either as analogies to the real thing—treating enslavement in Africa as an episode in the history of “primary accumulation” analogous to the enclosure of the commons in England, for example—or as deviations from its prescribed path, speaking of slavery as economically “behind” or “backward.” To ask why Mississippi *wasn't* more like Manchester, such critics object, presupposes that there is a reason it should have been, that there is a natural course of historical development. Indeed, as scholars from a variety of perspectives have suggested in recent years, this version of history suffers from an inescapable gulf between the specific historical circumstances that produced its categories of analysis—the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Great Britain—and the claim of those categories to be the universal categories of historical experience.²⁰

The second position has the ability to represent the simultaneous and interdependent economic histories of Europe, Africa, the Americas, and, indeed, Asia. By focusing on *exchange*, it illuminates a set of deep historical interconnections among the regions of the globe, among various ways of organizing economic space and extracting profit. This emphasis on the question of exchange, however, creates the risk of providing a history of capitalism in which the mileposts unfold regardless of the sphere of production—in which the actions of merchants and bankers define the timeline, and those of slaves and wage-earning workers matter not at all. A history of capitalism which does not make a foundational distinction between slave labor and “free” labor,

between direct domination and the “freedom” of the contract, between a plantation and a factory, between mercantile capital and manufacturing (not to mention financial) capital is clearly insufficient to the task of analyzing the material interchanges between, and the ideological interdependency of, the histories of slavery and freedom.

A materialist and historical analysis—a focus on what happened, rather than on how what happened was different from what *should* have happened if Mississippi had, in fact, been a bit more like Manchester—begins from the premise that in actual historical fact there was no nineteenth-century capitalism without slavery. However else industrial capitalism *might* have developed in the absence of slave-produced cotton and Southern capital markets, it did not develop that way. Extracting the history of industrial development (whether in Great Britain or the Northern United States) from the historical context of its entanglement with slavery, itemizing its differences from the economic field from which it had been artificially separated, labeling it “capitalism” in pure form, and then turning around and comparing it to the slavery upon which it subsisted in order to judge the latter “precapitalist” or “noncapitalist”—this way of proceeding conscripts historical analysis to the service of ahistorical ideal types.²¹

What if we sought not to measure the extent to which “the market” or “capitalism” had penetrated the culture of cotton, but rather to understand more concretely and specifically the workings of this market—this way of employing capital—in this place at this point in time? What, that is to say, if we set aside prefabricated questions and threadbare tautologies, and simply began with a bale of cotton?

IN OCTOBER 1852, Alonzo Snyder shipped his “second crop”—the cotton that had been picked in the third and fourth weeks of the season. In his record book, just below the daily and weekly sums of the weight picked, he recorded the pounds of cotton in each bale: 440, 470, 445, 450, 475, 455, 465, 465, 450, 435, and so on—a total of eighty-three bales weighing 35,795 pounds. These numbers, of course, are representations of real bales of cotton, abstractions allowing progress (bales per acre per hand; bales sent to market; drayage, insurance, storage, price per pound on same) to be viewed at a distance. They traveled from Tensas Parish, where Snyder noted the weights in his record

book, to New Orleans, where his cotton went on the market, to Liverpool, where it likely ended up, and then back again. Yet those numbers also told another story. As *The Cotton Planter's Manual* put it, with scarcely concealed exasperation: "The commercial standard in the cotton trade is generally the bale. The weight of the bale, however, is by no means uniform. Indeed, scarcely any weight, measure, or standard of capacity may be considered less so." That irregularity carried out into the Atlantic a memory of the eyes and hands that had picked, sorted, and packed them into bales. As Louis Hughes remembered—with pride in the narrow range of divergence, rather than chagrin at the fact it existed at all—there were slaves so accustomed to their work that the cotton they packed "would not vary ten pounds in the bale."²²

As the story was commonly told in the antebellum South, an overeager tax inspector interdicted the first bales of American cotton to reach the market in Liverpool. Seven bales of cotton were far more than he believed the United States could ever have produced, and he suspected the shipper of laundering West Indian cotton through an American port in order to avoid the excise. Whatever humor was produced by the retelling of this story resided in its ironic effect: the American cotton which had provided such an infinitesimal part of the global supply at the end of the eighteenth century, had, by the second quarter of the nineteenth, come to dominate not only the global supply of cotton, but a large portion of global economic activity.

In 1791, the first year for which such data were kept at all, the United States produced about 9,000 bales of cotton, exporting about an eighth of the crop to Great Britain—most of it long-staple cotton, which, in North America, could be grown only on the Sea Islands of South Carolina. The following year brought the invention of the cotton gin. Although there was (and still is) a long-running dispute about whether or not Eli Whitney had actually invented the gin himself or had claimed credit for the invention of another (in some tellings, from a slave), there was little doubt about its effect. By providing cotton planters with a machine that could remove the seeds entangled in each boll of short-staple cotton, the mechanical gin made it possible to cultivate cotton profitably in large portions of the Southern United States. High prices for cotton, especially in the early 1830s, produced the greatest economic boom in the nation's history. The Depression of 1837 destroyed value throughout the Mississippi Valley, but by the 1850s the economy was booming again. In 1821, the

states of Mississippi and Louisiana produced about twenty million pounds of cotton. By 1859, the comparable figure was 864 million pounds.²³ And of course cotton and slavery went together. Throughout the nineteenth century, prices in the slave market varied directly with those in the cotton market—no surprise in an economy where planters reckoned the productivity of labor in cotton rather than in currency. The census of 1820 recorded 69,064 slaves in Louisiana and 32,814 in Mississippi. Twenty years later, the respective numbers were 168,452 and 195,211. And twenty years after that, there were 331,726 slaves in Louisiana and 436,631 in Mississippi. In the years 1820–1860, a sevenfold increase in the Valley’s slave population produced a fortyfold increase in its production of cotton. Divided out in aggregate, this was the 600 percent increase in productivity that slaveholders could so proudly record in their individual copies of *Affleck’s Cotton Plantation Record and Account Book*.

The cotton produced by slaves in the Mississippi Valley made its way to market through the port of New Orleans. Indeed, as the cotton economy grew, so too did river traffic on the Mississippi. In 1813, twenty-one steamboats arrived in New Orleans carrying around 70,000 tons of freight. In 1820, 198 steamboats unloaded almost 100,000 tons of freight, valued at almost \$12 million. In 1840, the comparable figures were over 1,500 steamboats and a half-million tons of freight, worth almost \$50 million. In 1860: more than 3,500 boats, two million tons, almost \$2 billion. As the first historian of the system wrote in a report to Congress in 1884, “The South . . . began to insist on the sovereignty of King Cotton, and New Orleans claimed, like Mahomet, to be its prophet.” The commercial rise of the city of New Orleans—“no city of the world has ever advanced as a market of commerce with such gigantic strides as New Orleans,” enthused *DeBow’s Review*—was as an export-processing zone mediating between the Cotton Kingdom of the Mississippi and the Atlantic.

Every year, the city’s stevedores, many of them enslaved, unloaded hundreds of thousands of bales of cotton from steamboats and wrestled them onto carts for transportation into the city, where others weighed, sampled, and sold them, marked them with the initials of their owner and his agent, carried them back to the levee, and packed them onto oceangoing vessels for final shipment. “Here was a strange concert of oaths, questions, cries, and savage noises,” wrote one visitor to New Orleans in 1855. “While several steamboats heated

up for their departure and several draymen passed at a fast pace, shaking the pavement under the weight of their iron carts, the Negroes and the Irish proceeded to unload other recently arrived boats and rolled to earth bales of cotton . . . under the eye of the commissioners.”²⁴

Not all of the cotton shipped from the Mississippi Valley to Great Britain, however, headed directly across the Atlantic. Cotton was generally shipped on consignment by the firm that would eventually arrange its sale. Depending on where the firm was based, and to whom they were selling, cotton from New Orleans might take one of several paths to market. About 15 percent of Southern cotton was annually sold to domestic manufactures, chiefly in New England; though this was only a small portion of the global cotton trade, it accounted for a large portion of the industrial output of the United States. Of the remaining 85 percent or so of the crop, some was shipped directly from New Orleans across the Atlantic to Liverpool (where most of the small portion of the total destined for continental European importers was unloaded, charged, and reshipped). A great deal of the cotton that eventually made its way to Liverpool, however, was first shipped to New York, where it was unloaded, (re)inspected, consigned to a European buyer, reloaded, and only then shipped across the Atlantic. Finding out the exact value of the Southern cotton that reached Europe by way of New York was something that concerned Southern economists a great deal in the years 1830–1860. Contemporary estimates were that the shippers, insurers, bankers, and merchants of New York received forty cents of every dollar spent in the cotton market.²⁵ The meridian that carried cotton so far off its apparent course—to New York, while it was en route from New Orleans to Liverpool—was capital: millions of bales of cotton, weighing billions of pounds, chasing after tiny notations recorded in little books.

The fact that the port of New York had attained superintendence over the cotton trade was a development that, by the 1850s, had come to concern pro-slavery analysts of the cotton trade more than any other. For now, it is enough to note that the commercial spaces of the nineteenth century (like those of the twenty-first) were made, not given: distance was measured not in miles, but in dollars. New York’s highly capitalized banks were able (partly through their connection to British banks, which were even more highly capitalized) to offer longer credit on better terms to those interested in buying cotton; the slower

rate at which the money paid for cotton degraded could compensate for the longer distance the cotton would have to travel to market. "The result of this," wrote Thomas Kettel in 1860, "is to force all financial currents toward the general center."²⁶ In addition to being the nation's leading money market, New York was its greatest port, a preeminence that historians have attributed to the city's domination of the packet trade to Liverpool. Whereas most transatlantic shipping well into the nineteenth century operated on a contingent schedule—when the ship's hold was full, it would begin its voyage—the volume of trade between New York and Liverpool, as well as the fact that the government had conveniently granted New York a monopoly over the mail service to Great Britain, enabled regularly scheduled ships between New York and Liverpool to operate at a profit. Beginning in 1818, regularly scheduled "packets" connected New York to Liverpool. Because the United States imported a great deal from Great Britain but exported very little other than cotton, and because the high fixed capital costs of running a ship across the Atlantic made it worthwhile to fill the hold of a ship with *something* rather than nothing, it was in the interest of the packets to ship cotton at lower rates than their competitors did (even those among their competitors who ran geographically more direct routes). The lower freight charged on outbound cotton was offset by the higher freights charged on inbound British goods, which were, in turn, covered by the financial benefits that the shipper derived from regular service. By lowering the per-pound rate for shipping cotton to Liverpool via New York, the packets effectively shortened the distance cotton traveled to market: measured in dollars, the journey from New Orleans to New York to Liverpool could be shorter than traveling directly. The packets, wrote the oceanographer and advocate of slavery Matthew Maury in 1839, had placed New York in a position of "commercial supremacy over all other ports in the United States."²⁷

Most of the cotton that was eventually sold in New York and Liverpool followed capital along these commercial pathways in the sea. Its price was pledged in advance of its actual sale—sometimes, indeed, in advance of its planting. The cotton economy depended on this "fictitious capital" for liquidity; it provided most of the money that planters and merchants used to do business during the year, before the crop came in. In his book *Southern Wealth and Northern Profits* (1860), Thomas Kettel explained the principles of the system:

“The agriculturalists who create the real wealth of the country are not in daily receipt of money. Their produce is ready but once in the year, whereas they buy supplies [on credit] year round. . . . The whole banking system of the country is based primarily on this bill movement against produce.” Kettel’s assessment echoed (and generalized) what had been the commonsense account of the cotton market’s (over)reliance on advances since at least the Depression of 1837. “Not one in fifteen, I am assured, is free of debt,” wrote the traveler James Stirling of Deep South cotton planters.²⁸ Their debts represented a principal dimension of the spatial and temporal linkages between the Mississippi Valley and the wider world of Anglo-American Atlantic capital.

Capital entered the Mississippi Valley in the winter months, when cotton was sold. As the crop came to market in New Orleans, cotton merchants—who were often agents of merchant banks based in New York or Liverpool (Brown Brothers, Barings, N. M. Rothschild and Sons), or agents for a host of smaller English and American banks—provided advances against its eventual sale. In return for lending the factors (and thus the planters) money during the time the crop was traveling to market, these cotton merchants and their merchant-banker backers received the right to sell it on a consignment basis, thus earning the commission and perhaps, in the case of some of the larger firms, the right to ship it aboard their own ships. The credit they offered generally took the form of a sight draft typically payable in New York or Liverpool sixty days after presentation. In order to be redeemed, the original notes—these paper phantoms of a cotton crop yet unsold—had to make their way back to the Northern or British houses that had originally issued them. Generally, this occurred when the banker or merchant who bought the original debt—the banker or merchant who had provided credit to Valley factors in dollars payable at a local bank, and had received in return a note in pounds sterling drawn upon an English bank or in dollars payable in New York—sold the original note through the interregional or international money market, thus making the original promise-to-pay available to someone who needed to spend money in New York or Liverpool. In practice, Northern merchants often used this money to import European goods. In order to limit their risk, merchant bankers generally tried to limit the amount they advanced to three-quarters or so of the amount for which they expected the cotton to eventually sell.²⁹

The credit extended by the merchant houses resolved the seasonal and spatial complexity of trade into liquidity. Planters in Louisiana and Mississippi were able to pay their debts when they delivered their crop; American importers were able to buy sterling debt that they could use to pay for European imports; and foreign exchange cycled from the Deep South in the fall to the North in the winter, and finally home by spring. The sterling bills paid in advance on the cotton, and the cotton itself, thus made their way back to metropolitan merchant houses along separate paths. The bills entered a transatlantic or interregional money market in which they were used to pay for finished goods imported from Great Britain; and the cotton was shipped, at the planter's risk, to a market where it was sampled, graded, and sold to the manufacturer, who would turn it in into a shirt or a sheet. The sale of the cotton was finally closed out when the note that was given in advance of the purchase was presented for payment in New York or Liverpool and covered with money derived from the final sale of the cotton it represented.³⁰

The physical dimensions (tremendous quantities of cotton, multiple markets, long distances) and temporal complexities (advance purchase, termed obligations, multiple currencies) of the cotton economy were integrated through the work of New Orleans factors and upriver storekeepers—the latter generally serving as middlemen-consolidators between their own urban factors and neighboring planters who did not have a regular representative in New Orleans. Each year, the factors and merchants recorded in their account books charges for every conceivable thing a working plantation could need: the rough-cut shoes worn by the slaves and the salt pork that was meanly rationed to them during the year; the Cornish hens and French wines for the planter's table, the schoolbooks for his children and the ribbons for his wife's hair, the sideboard for the family's parlor and the carriage in which they were driven to church; the seed from which the planter's cotton would grow, the mules that dragged the plow, the blade that would turn the earth, the hoes that would cut the grass; the bagging and baling wire for packing the cotton; the human beings whose labor would ultimately pay for all of the above.³¹ As the *Financial Register* put it in 1837, planters' indebtedness to merchants was a matter of common sense (if not necessarily a cause for celebration): "Everybody knows that the cotton planters of the Southwestern states procure large supplies of clothing for their slaves, of every article required for their own consumption,

upon credit from neighboring merchants in anticipation of next year's crop."³² The factors' account books contained a microcosmic account of the Valley planters' commercial and personal lives, an account in which the social relations of the slaveholding South were reduced to ciphers and recorded as debt.

Whether it came in the form of plantation supplies, consumable goods, or cash advances, the money that factors lent to planters and to the storekeepers who supplied them was usually not their own. Rather, it was borrowed from banks in New Orleans, New York, or even Liverpool. This money, the second stream of fictional capital that yearly flowed into the Mississippi Valley, took the form of "accommodation paper" providing a factor with credit that could be used to pay for goods over the course of the year. The money was made available to planters in the form of the supplies and services provided them by their urban factors, or in the form of drafts promising payment at a specified future date. These drafts, issued by cotton factors, could be "discounted"—traded for currency—by local bankers and money changers. Such credit allowed for the temporal and spatial unevenness of the cotton market to be smoothed out by the workings of the money market. A planter who needed cotton seed in March could have it purchased by a factor in New Orleans, who could buy it with money he had borrowed from a bank in New York. When that seed grew into cotton it would be shipped to the factor, who would sell the cotton and use the proceeds to cover his own debt to the bank before crediting the planter's account with the remainder. Whenever the sale of the cotton proved insufficient to cover the planter's debt, the factor would simply roll the debt over to the following year's crop. Factors generally lent planters money at 8 percent interest, and they charged a 2.5 percent commission on goods they bought or sold on the planter's behalf.³³

The network of advances and consignments that structured the cotton trade had the (intended) effect of shifting risk toward the end of the chain of debt. By trading cotton on consignment, both the factors and their merchant-banker backers were able to make money off the cotton trade—interest on loans, charges for handling, shipping, selling—while absorbing very little risk from market fluctuations. Consider, by way of example, the largest of the firms heavily involved in the cotton trade, as well as the one most studied by historians: Brown Brothers. The firm's directors attempted to limit their risk by advancing only three-quarters of the value they expected the cotton would even-

tually bring, preferring to pay a balance at the end of the season, rather than having to protest a note and run the risk of legal action in a distant jurisdiction. Because Brown Brothers very rarely purchased cotton on the company's account, they distributed their risk through the network of factors and cotton brokers to whom they lent money and from whom they received guaranteed consignments in return. Merchant bankers further insulated themselves from risk by requiring those who borrowed money to obtain an "endorsement" from a local merchant or planter. These "accommodating endorsers" (co-signers) then became liable for the debt if the principal borrower defaulted. Endorsers effectively lent their creditworthiness to the borrower, easing the flow of capital into the economy. Distant bankers could thus rely on a network of unofficial agent-endorsers to hector indebted planters and factors, or to pursue legal action in far-flung jurisdictions: endorsements allowed foreign capital to enter the economy with a familiar face. Endorsement respatialized (and recapitalized) risk by using local networks of trade and sociability to insulate distant merchant bankers. When such networks broke, Joseph Baldwin remembered in his memoir of the "Flush Times" of the 1830s and the Panic of 1837, "they broke by neighborhoods."³⁴

PLANTERS' MOTIVATIONS and their actions, their understanding of the processes in which they participated and their ability to intervene in those processes, were all determined at the point where the imperatives of the literal crop growing in their fields met the fictional capital that had been advanced them upon its promise. A hard rain or a high wind after the cotton bloomed could diminish the value of a cotton crop—but those were only the most catastrophic of the environmental risks that planters faced during the course of a single season. A thumbnail sketch of the 1851 growing season gives some idea of the superintending natural rhythms that could turn a planter's underlying indebtedness into a gathering threat of bankruptcy. "The past season here has been unfavorable for the growth of cotton; but its disasters, especially in the West, have not been as severe as in the preceding year. . . . The late cold spring, and the long drought in June and July, left the plants small and the bolls few and scattering. The severe storm on the 24th of August blew out on the ground much open cotton, and prostrated and twisted the stalks so much, that there has been no late crop of forms to mature in October." Too much sun in the

middle of the season could cause a crop to wither in the field; too much rain could drown it in the rows; a late spring would mean that a crop bloomed “behind,” or “backward”; an early frost meant that the picking season was cut short.³⁵

And then there were bugs. The horticultural narrowing of the genetic spectrum of Southern cotton also rendered the crop more vulnerable to insects and parasites. The effects of these pests were as dramatic as they were catastrophic. As T. B. Thorpe recounted in 1854, “rust” and “rot” represented the primary threats to the cotton plant, the former giving the leaves “a brown and deadened tinge, and frequently caus[ing] them to crumble away,” while the latter attacked the boll, beginning with a telltale “black spot on the rind” indicating the presence of voracious worms that would “find their way into the roots [and] . . . destroy the staple.” Yet these afflictions paled in comparison to the ravages wrought by the “army worm.” Thorpe described in near-apocalyptic terms the sad spectacle unfolding before the eyes of an unfortunate planter: “Day by day you can see the vegetation of vast fields becoming thinner and thinner, while the worm, constantly increasing in size, assumes at last an unctuous appearance most disgusting to behold. . . . All efforts to arrest their progress or annihilate them prove unavailing. They seem to spring out of the ground, and fall from the clouds.” What might appear to be the wrath of the heavens was in fact a clear result of earthly practice. In seeking to revise the ecological limits of slave-based economic practice through the use of hybridized seed, the agricultural reformers of the Mississippi Valley had created a biological feedback loop that annually threatened to ruin their crops.

Because planters’ debts (or those their merchants had assumed on their behalf) were due at a specific place and time, even a good crop did not protect a planter if he could not get it to market in time to satisfy his creditors. Thus, we find deeply indebted Mississippi planter Isaac Lum writing to his New Orleans factor, “I am gathering my crop as fast as possible, and shall ship as fast as I can [get] it ready.” Or William Brandon, also in Mississippi and likewise heavily indebted to his New Orleans factor: “I will go on to ship as fast as it is ready not that I think the present time will be the best of the season. But because I am now in such a position that I must go on to get out of debt, or give up.” And then two years later, after the factor had refused to furnish him with any more goods on credit until his crop was sold: “You must know that I am forwarding

it as fast as I possibly can, the bad weather has interrupted all plantation business. . . . From what you said when you were up and your last letter I fear you are losing confidence in me.”³⁶ Here we uncover another aspect of the meaning of the pronoun “I” as used by planters: in addition to transferring responsibility for the actions being described from the realm of labor to that of “supervision,” the planters’ I-language referred to their own commercial responsibility. Their usage suggests a notion of subjectivity and responsibility—what historians have often termed “agency”—determined by the structure of the cotton economy.

Even when the crops had been gathered, ginned, packed, and shipped, cotton planters remained substantially exposed: they directly bore the risks of the global market. Because their cotton was generally sold on consignment, planters retained legal ownership all the way up to the time it was finally sold, often thousands of miles from their plantations, and months after it had left their care. And because they had received advances against that sale, they could find themselves dunned for money they had already spent, in the event that their cotton eventually brought less than had been advanced for it. Cotton merchants and the merchant banks they represented competed with one another for consignments by offering higher and higher percentages of anticipated sales in advance, thus raising the ratio of fictional capital to expected return in the economy, compounding the danger of overexposure. When cotton sold for less than had been advanced against it, the bill that had been given for it worked its way backward along the chain of debt, seeking the difference. In times of crisis, when very high advances were followed by very poor sales, cotton planters (and those who had endorsed for them) could ship their cotton to market and receive in return a bill for a large balance due upon its sale. “If his first crop proves a bad one,” Frederick Law Olmsted wrote of a hypothetical planter starting out in the Mississippi Valley, “he must borrow money of . . . New Orleans to pay his first note; they will sell it to him on the best terms they can—often at not less than 25 per cent per annum. If three or four bad crops follow one another, he is ruined.”³⁷

The physical properties of cotton—its weight in bales, its variable texture, its vulnerability to fire and water—meant that a crop could go “bad” after it was out of the field. Cotton could be “skidded” across a muddy embankment, left outside waiting for a ship or train and “exposed to the weather and other

contingencies,” or carefully warehoused directly beneath a leaking roof. It could be eaten “partially by cattle, pilfered by vagabonds on the wharves or street, or suffer loss and damage in any of the various ways in which such things are known extensively to occur.” It could sit marooned on a levee waiting for water enough in the rivers to float it down.³⁸ Olmsted described the process by which cotton went to market as “truly Western in the direct reckless way. . . . A strong gang-plank being placed at right angles to the slide-way, a bale of cotton was let slide from the top, and, coming down at a fearful velocity, on striking the gang-plank, it would rebound up and out onto the boat, against a barricade of bales previously arranged to receive it. . . . Not infrequently, a bale would not strike fairly on its end, and would rebound off, diagonally, overboard.” The first news that John Close heard of the last shipment of his 1844 crop was that it was missing along with the steamboat *Panola*; later he heard that four of his bales had been recovered from the river, and that if the other sixteen bales made it to market at all, they would be likely to do so “in a damaged state.”³⁹

Much of the business of cotton factorage involved encasing bales of cotton in a protective coating of salability: the physical properties that rendered cotton vulnerable could be largely counteracted through the judicious use of paper. Valley archives are full of seemingly mundane memoranda recording the charges for insuring (in storage and on ships), sampling, weighing, pressing, and lading that were overseen in New Orleans. Cotton came to market wrapped in a vast array of receipts for services rendered, guarantees of weight and quality, partitions of ownership and risk, designations of responsibility for handling, and promises to pay in case of accident.⁴⁰ The reliability of a fully processed shipment of cotton rested less in the sheer physical attributes—50,000 or 60,000 pounds of cotton in bales weighing around 400 pounds apiece—than it did in a set of notations acquired along the way, which might be represented in the space of a page: weight by bale, grade by lot, charges for processing, handling, and insuring.

It is conventional to note that these hieroglyphs were the symbols of commodity fetishism—of the process by which the marketability of cotton came to stand in front of and obscure the process of its production, where money, valuation, and the commercial fungibility of cotton were rendered as its only socially relevant features. In his classic work on the “fetishism of commodi-

ties,” Karl Marx attempted to denaturalize the social relations of capitalism with an image of objects alienated from the circumstances of their production: tables and chairs set to dancing on their own legs.⁴¹ In line with that image, Koray Çalışkan has argued that cotton went to market on a set of commercial prostheses—tools, actually pieces of paper, that enhanced its physical form with the added support it needed to become salable. Indeed, in the event of a commercial misadventure, insured cotton remained salable even in the absence of its physical presence. Thus, when John Close’s cotton expired with the *Panola*, his “underwriters” duly resuscitated his capital.⁴² The extraction of a shipment of cotton from the temporal limitations of its own physicality also represented its insertion into a sort of commercial ever-present, where the effect of time could be measured in increments of risk of exposure to water or fire, assigned a present value according to an aggregate assessment of likelihood, and stabilized with an insurance policy. Through the labor of factorage, the “merchantability” of cotton was rendered separable from its physical form: volatile, degradable cotton was rendered commercially stable. Put another way, the task of factorage was to collapse the dimensionality of time in the cotton market into timeliness—to focus and concentrate risk into a single speculative proposition: being in the right place at the right time. As an article in *DeBow’s Review* put it in 1852: “Time has become an essential element in the value of merchandise and staple productions.”⁴³

STABILIZED BY commercial paper, cotton was rendered a suitable medium for speculation. The cotton market was characterized by extraordinary volatility; prices often varied 10 to 15 percent in the span of a single month, and might vary as much as 30 or 40 percent over the course of the entire selling season. In October 1833, for example, short-staple cotton was selling for eighteen cents a pound in New Orleans; by February 1834, it had fallen below ten cents a pound; by August, it was again at eighteen cents. Those were extraordinary years—but even in less volatile years, the price of cotton varied 20 to 30 percent over the course of the season.⁴⁴ The difference between a bad crop and a good one, between getting ahead or falling further into debt, could be determined by where the sale of one’s cotton fell on a seasonal price curve of an unknown topography. Planters’ years were reckoned in values that could shift in a matter of hours.

Timeliness in the cotton market required factors to reckon space against time. Cotton could be sold in New Orleans, New York, or Liverpool; the farther along that arc it traveled, the greater the risk that something would change between the time of decision and that of execution. Both buyers and sellers in the cotton market began the season by trying to estimate the size of the year's crop, as well as the amount of cotton that might remain "on hand" from the previous year. As the crop began to come to market, they counted the bales and matched them to the statistics gathered from past years. The *New Orleans Price Current* included tables that tracked the total receipts, exports, and stock of cotton at New Orleans over the previous ten years, the previous year, and the previous three days. On January 19, 1848, for example, there were 190,694 bales of cotton in New Orleans. Of those, 23,492 had been on hand from the previous season as of September 1, 1847. In the first four months of the season, 474,427 bales had arrived (25,264 of them in the prior three days). Reckoned on the other side of the balance sheet were the 307,226 bales that had been exported (12,207 in the previous three days). The comparable totals from the same date the previous year were 374,873 arrived, 205,637 exported, 175,568 on hand. Total receipts and exports from other cotton-exporting regions—Mobile, Savannah, Charleston, Florida, Virginia, North Carolina, and New York—were also listed for both the current season and the previous one. And against them, import totals from Great Britain, France, "other foreign ports," and "U. States North Ports" for the current year and the prior year.⁴⁵ These statistics provided a matrix that planters and merchants used to imagine the future. Would there be a shortage of cotton in the early months of the season before the entire crop came in, or would demand be absorbed by the prior crop? Would the bulk of the crop come onto the market in the middle of the season, leading to short supply at the end? Would the crop come in so slowly that prices would be high throughout most of the season, and then crash as the bulk of the crop reached market in the last month? Would a large crop or low demand in one year create a knock-on effect by leaving cotton on hand for the following year?

Mastery of the cotton trade required factors to imagine the arc of the market in New Orleans, project it into the future, compare the projection to similar ones in New York (adding the two weeks it would take the cotton to move) or in Liverpool (adding four weeks), and then push cotton onto the market just

as value crested, and in advance of increasing supply that would dampen the rising price. Needless to say, the process was utterly subjective, vulnerable to fits of speculation and depression, characterized by a high degree of mistrust among participants, and plagued by more than a little commercial chicanery. Those who mastered it had to have the judgment—the confidence—to wait for the moment, and the initiative to seize that moment when it arose.

A crucial aspect of cotton traders' speculation was estimating the size of the total cotton crop. Throughout the year, New Orleans firms sent agents into the countryside to track the growth of the crop in the field against the one that had just come to market.⁴⁶ A summary statement of the reports they received read something like N. B. Cloud's two-page report entitled "The Cotton Crop," dated September 7, 1852, which was published in the *American Cotton Planter* in January 1853, as the crop came to market. "In reference to the growing crop," wrote Cloud, "we may say, that with the exception of the general complaint, that by the coldness and inclemency of the spring, it was generally a month more backward than last year, the crop on the first of August looked well, and without casualty would yield well." He then itemized the factors that would determine the size of the crop: too much rain in Alabama, rain and rust in Georgia, the "boll worm committing great havoc in Eastern Mississippi"; the army worms in "certain localities in Louisiana and Mississippi have been alluded to, but not in a form sufficiently definite upon which to base any opinion." All told, "2,500,000 bales would be a full estimate now." Against that, Cloud balanced his estimate of global demand.

In the last five years, two very large and two over average crops were made, while the remaining one was but a little below the average of the previous figures. The simplest mode of illustrating the immense increase of consumption, is to say that the enormous stocks held in Great Britain and the Continent and the United States amounting together to 1,318,000 bales, at the commencement of this period, 1847, and the large cotton crops raised within it, has all *been consumed*, the stocks on the 1st August in Great Britain, the Continent of Europe, and the United States, not exceeding about 950,000 bales.

And not only that: "Our accounts are that the progress of building new factories both in Great Britain and the Continent is very animated, which is also the

case in portions of our own.” A backward crop, little cotton on hand, growing global demand: “It is plainly perceptible we think, prices must rule *high* in the present commercial year.”⁴⁷

These stories of the crop in the fields were never just that: in the cotton market, as in any speculative market, information was currency. In the pages of the *American Cotton Planter*, George Henry bemoaned the actions of those who sold their own cotton and then talked up the size of the crop:

Let me venture a word of advice to my planting friends and country merchants. Now you have sold your cotton and towards this crop you have no further immediate interest, and hence may be disposed of the receipts that are yet to come in, or of your ideas about prices. . . . Let us be cautious to allow no remark to escape us that is not founded upon *probabilities and facts*. . . . Judging of the past, which is the proper mode to arrive at the probabilities of the future, the coming crop *must be short*. . . . When those 3,500,000 bale fellows see how ridiculous they have made themselves and consider how much harm they have done, it is to be hoped they will not be imprudent enough to trouble any one with their opinions on this subject.⁴⁸

The cotton market—the real place where buyers and sellers haggled over prices—was daily subject to the pull of the stories told about it: to the techniques of visualization and tools of representation, the published reports and the enumerations, the tables and the comparisons, the rumors and the gossip.

Of course, what appeared to have been “rumor” or “gossip” at the end of the season entered history as “news” or “intelligence” in its midst. Such was the sensitivity of the market to information, that buyers and sellers marked the season in terms such as “the depression occasioned by the news of the *Great Western*” or “the rise occasioned by the news of the *Liverpool*” or “the letters by the *Arabia*.” Indeed, getting the news before it was printed in a newspaper afforded a significant advantage in the cotton market. The outcome of *Ward v. Warfield*, an 1844 Louisiana Supreme Court case involving a dispute between a planter and a factor over who held title to a lot of cotton shipped to Liverpool, hinged on the exact hour at which the steamboat *Acadia* had reached the city of Cincinnati early on the morning of April 28, 1844, the speed at which the compositor was able to set the type to publish its news in the papers, and the

fact that the news of low cotton prices in Liverpool “must have been received in the mail of Sunday morning and have been in the city more than twenty-four hours before the *Gazette* was issued.”⁴⁹ In 1825, a group of New York speculators exploited the gap between news and the newspaper by paying a postal contractor to transmit their cotton-purchase orders to New Orleans while holding back the mail containing the news from Europe upon which their bets were based.⁵⁰ While the advent of telegraphy in the late 1840s evened the geographic access to market information within the United States, both the overall supply in the United States—the size of the crop, the amount held over from the previous year, the amount held back in the country, the amount secretly warehoused while merchants waited for the price to rise—and market conditions in Liverpool (the transatlantic telegraph was not completed until 1860) remained subjects of speculation for those who made their living in the cotton market.

In the time it took cotton that had been shipped under one set of assumptions to reach the market in New Orleans (or, still more, in New York or Liverpool), almost anything could happen. The letters sent to cotton planter John Close of Opelousas, Louisiana, by his New Orleans factor who was marketing his crops in the 1830s and 1840s provide some sense of the hurry-up-and-wait rhythm of the cotton business. November 27, 1835: “Our market is very active at present.” December 22, 1835: “About ten days ago by the steamboat *Blackhawk* we have received twelve bales of you[r] cotton that we have sampled and found very good, but unfortunately our market was then and has continued since to be so dull that we have found it quite impossible to dispose of them. The news received Saturday and today from every quarter are of a very gloomy nature. . . . It appears impossible to maintain anything like the prices existing close as twelve days ago.” April 6, 1836: “Our cotton crop is very active since a few days.” April 16, 1836: “We are in receipt of your favor of the 10th announcing shipment of 17 Bales Cotton, which have come to hand. Our market, in the present moment is so very dull on account of the scarcity of money that scarcely any operations have taken place lately in the article.”⁵¹

Safely stowed in the hold of a ship or packed away at the back of a warehouse, a bale of cotton was nevertheless subject to countless commercial hazards. Cotton held back by low water in the country might miss the highest prices of the season, only to arrive on the market with a glutting flow of bales

that had been similarly delayed. Cotton could arrive to find the city deserted by the merchants, who had fled to escape an epidemic, or devoid of credit, which had been diverted to a more promising market. It could go on the market when there was bad news from Europe or credible intelligence that the year's crop had exceeded all estimations. It could be shipped on to New York or Liverpool in pursuit of better prices, only to find those markets awash in bales seeking the same (rapidly declining) values. The opposite could also be true. Cotton could arrive at market on the crest of a rising tide of prices: news of a short crop, long credit, expanding worldwide demand.⁵² If the time was right, cotton planters could make a killing. When one considers their degree of exposure to risk on a local, national, and global scale, along with their dependence on unpredictable (and degradable) environmental factors and their reliance upon a resistant workforce, it is not difficult to see why cotton planters were often compared to gamblers. "They turn the farmer's life into that of a gambler and speculator," wrote one Louisiana journalist. "They are dependent upon chances and an evil turn of the cards—a bad season, a fall in prices or some such usual calamity." And as every nineteenth-century gambler knew, the outcome of a game of "chance" was as likely to turn on legerdemain as it was upon luck—especially when one player was playing hands on two sides of the game.⁵³

BECAUSE PLANTERS were legally but not physically present at the sale of their cotton, the crucial decisions—when and where—were usually made by their factors. One of the few ways that planters could exert control over the sale of their crop was, paradoxically, by holding it back from the market. Describing the state of the market in 1835, an agent of the New Orleans firm Burke, Watt, and Company wrote that planters, convinced the crop was going to be short, "have to a large extent held back cotton . . . till the Spring when it is supposed the buyer must submit and pay the planter his price." The proslavery economist C. F. McKay likewise suspected cotton planters of imagining that they could get better prices "by false rumors, retaining the crop of the country until the season is far advanced, [and] publishing in the newspapers every disaster from frost or flood, and withholding the reports of abundance and plenty." The possibility that cotton was being "held back in the country" in anticipation of higher prices was a significant source of uncertainty in the

cotton market, and cotton factors seem to have uniformly and consistently urged planters to send their crops forward for sale. No matter what the condition of the market, the advice was always the same: “we would advise you to send it at the first chance”; “if your intention is to send us your crop we encourage you to do it as soon as possible”; “we would take the liberty of advising you to send as soon as possible”; “prices are very good, we believe you would do well in hurrying the shipment of the balance of your crop”; “our market is very dull . . . send your crop to town so as to take advantage of the best prices.” And so on. When the market was active and prices were high, it was best to ship the cotton to catch the wave; when the market was dull and prices were low, it was best to ship the cotton so that it was available when things began to move.⁵⁴

The factors’ all-purpose answers—and their apparent desire to get the cotton out of the planters’ hands and under their control—hinted at the structured divergence of interests which characterized every aspect of their relationships with their “clients.” Because they generally handled multiple crops and made their money on commission, the factors had much less at stake in any particular transaction than did the planters. Their income depended more on maximizing the volume of sales than on maximizing the value of any single sale. Besides, as Burke, Watt, and Company noted, withholding cotton might have seemed a useful tactic, but it was limited as a long-term market strategy: “When the buyers see the crop going off in this way, it may have some effect on them, but so long as it is kept here in the country, they suppose it *must* be offered for sale *some day or other*, and are quite indifferent whether they buy it in April or January.”⁵⁵ By withholding their cotton, planters could gamble on the rhythm of the cotton season, but they could not arrest the flow of time. There was always another crop gathering at their back, pushing their bales to market.

Once they sent their crop, planters’ control over it was mediated through written guidelines attending the shipment of cotton. On the one hand, these could take the form of legally binding limits, such as an instruction to hold bales for a specific price and ship directly to Liverpool for sale if it could not be obtained, or to “hold the four-hundred and thirty five bales of cotton until 1 April . . . for a limit in price of nine cents per pound”—a directive that the Mississippi planter Thomas Warfield sent to his New Orleans agent along with

his cotton in 1844. Under such strict instruction, a factor who sold cotton for less than the stipulated price could be held legally liable for the difference between the price he eventually obtained and that specified by the planter (or the highest price of the season). Cotton held for a limit ran the risk of going unsold (as, indeed, Warfield's did in 1844), and so planters generally afforded their factors more discretion in marketing their cotton. At their most open-ended, these guidelines took the form of prayers—legally meaningless reaffirmations of the reliance of planters on their factors. Indeed, these letters seem to oscillate between providing instructions and deferring to the factors' judgment in a way that recapitulates in microcosm the vexations of remote ownership and mediated agency: "In regard to the crop I send you this year, you can dispose of it when you think proper. I have held up for two years, but my impression is that the sooner sales are effected the better, but of this you will do as you think best, having determined to rely on your judgment in the matter." Or, more simply, "The bales are very heavy and I must request you to see that the weights are sustained relying on your efforts to get for me the best market prices." In such cases, the legal standard governing the responsibilities of factors was that, when they acted on behalf of the planters with whom they had contracted, they should behave as a "prudent" man might behave in seeking a sale for his own cotton.⁵⁶ But how would a "prudent" man behave if someone else—say, the man for whom he was selling cotton—owed him money? And how would he behave if he owed that money to someone else—say, the person to whom he was selling the cotton?

Planters received news of their cotton in written reports sent by their factors. Even as these reports had the purpose of providing the planters with news from New Orleans, New York, or Liverpool, their rhetorical form often mirrored the opacity of the planters' relationship to "the cotton market." Factors writing to planters often framed market information with phrases like "the general understanding is . . ." or "I am informed . . ." or "a decline is spoken of . . ." or "people here are generally of the opinion that . . ." Or they referred to information that came from "every quarter," "our market," "the present feelings in the cotton mart," "the gentlemen in New Orleans," "our friends in Liverpool," "knowing ones from Mississippi," or "the arrivals from Europe." Or they couched their assessments in the passive voice, as in this summary of a slow market sent by a New Orleans factor to a Mississippi planter in April

1844: "There is no expectation of any material improvement. . . . Cotton is now lower than in November, and it is confidently believed that the crop will go to 1,900,000 bales."⁵⁷ These formulations gestured at the daily business of the cotton market—the networking, the rumor-mongering, the intelligence gathering—even as they drew a curtain over the specifics of the process of transmission—who, when, where, why—that determined the news and how it should be received. Information, of course, often came at a remove of several steps: the factors who relayed estimates of the total size of the cotton crop had not seen every bale themselves, had not counted out all 1,900,000 bales, or, still less, sampled, graded, and priced them out for sale. In framing their accounts the way they did, however, they made it seem as if they might have. They shrouded the actions they took in the cotton market—a real place where real people gossiped, bargained, and bet—in the authority of the Cotton Market—a depersonalized aggregate formation which could be used to justify their actions to a planter who encountered the market only at a distance. As one Mississippi planter put it about the cotton market, "Merchants act advisedly—planters in the dark."⁵⁸

Except, of course, when the planters acted in the clear light of hindsight. In a market where time was sometimes measured by the minute, the information received by the planters was usually at least a week out of date—the time one Central Louisiana planter estimated it took correspondence from New Orleans to find a place on a steamboat and make its way upriver. Another simply described the mail service to Bayou Sara as "extremely irregular."⁵⁹ Planters' agency in the cotton market was necessarily retrospective: the result of their actions—actions legally taken on their behalf—was clear to them only days or even weeks after they had been taken, long after there was any hope of undoing them. At the end of the season, as planters looked back at the serial account of the rises and falls in prices, and compared the prices they received with those received by their neighbors ("we are always in the habit of comparing acct. sales, so that we generally know what each planter obtains for his crop for many miles around," wrote one), they often held their factors responsible for having either intemperately rushed the cotton into a market that had yet to crest, or phlegmatically missed the moment before prices declined. "As I could not have foreseen this," wrote one factor, accounting for a substantial price rise that occurred the day after he had sold E. B. Lyons's cotton in November

1850, "I trust that I shall not be censured." Lyons's response—"The extremely low (low for this season) price at which you have just disposed of my fifty-four bales gives me little promise of realizing much from my crop"—echoed that of countless others. "Why did you not sell my cotton . . . at the 17½? . . . In the future I think I shall adopt the plan of never sending cotton 'till the market will suit," wrote William Flowers to his commission merchant in May 1839. Some New Orleans agents were criticized quite bluntly: "With what might almost be characterized as obstinate stupidity they held on with a constantly and gradually declining market," wrote Beniah Magoffin—or rather his lawyer, for the (mis)handling of his crop had become the subject of a lawsuit.⁶⁰

Often cotton planters' doubts had to do less with their factors' prescience or even their competence than it did with their honesty. The cotton planter Henry Huntington referred to commercial agency as "the system of robbery of our commission houses"; Daniel Hundley classed the cotton merchants as "Southern Yankees." Indeed, the New Orleans merchant community provided ample evidence of creative accounting, promiscuous charging, and canny double-dealing when their books were opened, sometimes under the threat of legal action. If the planters are to be believed, their agents were often on the take. They would record sales at a lower rate in their books than they received in the market; or they would pay an extra quarter-cent on the pound on the first shipment of the season, only to deduct a half-cent on the rest once they had secured its promise. They might launder goods they owned themselves through third-party "sellers," thus adding a commission to their own price, or might pass on a higher price for supplies to a planter while receiving a kickback from the grocer. They would add a commission for negotiating loans upon which they were already charging interest, as if they had been forced to go looking for the money somewhere outside their own counting rooms. They would sell their cotton at face value for the deflated paper of banks in which they were principal investors, and would attempt to distract attention from the maneuver by sending a good remedy for "sniff disease" along with the report of the sale.⁶¹

In 1853, the Mississippi planter William Brandon had just about run out of neighbors who would endorse his notes, and had used up all the self-abasing forms of address in which to beg for just one more season's worth of cotton seed and the mules to make sure that he did not lose another crop to grass. He

requested a statement of his account from his New Orleans factor. Along with it, he received a letter noting that the statement had been drawn up “without any reference to correctness.” When a new statement was drawn up, this time with correctness in mind, it turned out that the account he had been trying to pay off included “entries contradicted by [the factor’s] other books,” triple charges for supplies (once for buying from the grocer, once for selling it to Brandon, and 8 percent for lending the money that had apparently accomplished both purposes), bills for the payment of debts to merchants in New Orleans and New York from whom Brandon had never received any goods, and so on. It turned out that instead of being more than \$6,000 in debt to his agent, Brandon was actually *owed* almost \$6,000.⁶²

But even beyond the risk that factors might be lining their own pockets or cooking the books, cotton planters’ suspicions were determined by debt. For if cotton had to be commercially stable (weighed, sampled, insured, and so on) in order to enter the market, the money for which it was sold was subject to rapid devaluation. The factors’ business was to make a match between a shipment of cotton and an advance payment—a simple two-dimensional transaction, on the face of it. But because they owned the planter’s debt and paid the planter’s obligation up until the time the cotton was finally sold, factors sometimes had an incentive to move the cotton as quickly as possible in order to have money on hand when a planter’s notes came due, especially when times were tight and they had other debts to pay. As the Mississippi planter M. W. Phillips explained, “The greatest drawback upon the cotton planter’s interest is the yearly practice of drawing bills upon the coming crop. The planter is thereby forced to send his cotton forward, and the merchant wants the money to replace in the bank, so as to get another loan for someone else, and he sells. Often he is compelled to sell, and very often loses for his patron one or two cents.” Because factors represented multiple planters, when they were lightly capitalized they sometimes had to short-sell the crop of one planter in order to cover the debts of another—or, indeed, to cover their own debts. And because they had often borrowed money from merchant bankers attached to particular firms and sometimes stood to gain a kickback from the eventual sale, factors had strong incentives to direct planters’ cotton to their own creditor-patrons, rather than allowing it to follow a willy-nilly course in search of the highest price the market might bear. The interests of planters might thus be sacri-

ficed—sold short—at any juncture along the chain of advance purchase and promised payment which connected the countryside to New Orleans, New Orleans to New York, New York to Liverpool, and Liverpool to the rest of England and the world. As Thomas Kettel noted, when bills were due in the metropolitan centers of the cotton market “the merchandise was generally sold at the most unfavorable moment and adverse circumstances, and frequently bought in by the acceptor, to be held for his own advantage.” Cotton, he wrote, was regularly “slaughtered” in tribute to capital.⁶³

When times were good and cotton sold high, when planters’ own crops were large, graded out well, and brought a price large enough to cover their debts—when real cotton absorbed fictional capital—the planters credited themselves. “On the experience, observation, and judgment of the planter . . . everything depends,” wrote one in an essay included in J. A. Turner’s *Cotton Planter’s Manual*. In those years, the terms through which planters understood their work—“management,” “skill,” “diligence,” “care,” “supervision,” “oversight”—were reflected back in the image of worldly success. In good times, the I-language of mastery—the “I” that at once expropriated labor and pledged its result to a superintending creditor—might be balanced out at the end of the year, along with the books. When the return was low, however, the services which made the physical cotton they produced salable—the ready credit to carry them through the season, the processing and merchandising upon which a buyer’s trust depended—seemed less like necessary supports to their eventual success than like arbitrary constraints upon their freedom of action. When times were bad, and even sometimes when they were not so bad, planters groped for another way to describe their work, to account for the type of “agency” they had. Then, they beat their slaves and blamed the merchants. “It is easy to see how this mode of banking affects the price of cotton, and depresses it beyond its true value . . . even in prosperous times,” wrote Thomas Kettel. Or, as Frederick Law Olmsted famously wrote of Mississippi Valley planters, “If they had a full crop, probably there would be good crops everywhere, and prices would fall, and then they would whine and complain as if the merchants were to blame for it.”⁶⁴

In advising one another not to do what they all appear to have anyway done, planters emphasized their loss of control over their own affairs, occasioned by their indebtedness. “Create no liens on this crop, or necessity for selling. Never

spend any of the money which it is to produce until it is sold. You are then free to choose your own market and time of selling; and as cotton is a controlling article, it will generally regulate the values of all property to be purchased, *except the redemption of an outstanding promise*," intoned the *American Cotton Planter*. "Draw bills! This bill business is the very thing that ruins us. *Keep out of debt, and control your cotton*," wrote M. W. Phillips in *DeBow's Review*, before admitting that his debts had once forced him "to accept five cents per pound for his cotton at the very time his neighbor was refusing to accept seven for his." Referring to the planter whose crop was promised to a commission merchant, Kettel compared him to "a pawnbroker of a watch pledged for debt." Hinton Helper claimed that the South, because of its debts, was being rendered "tributary" to a global network of "avaricious" merchants. In a speech to the Commercial Convention held at New Orleans in 1855, C. G. Baylor came close to unpacking the image that lay beneath the others. "Cotton planters," he began, "were mere hewers of wood . . ." He stopped before completing the quotation ("and drawers of water"—the biblical description of the Sons of Ham) and switched direction: ". . . overseers of that great estate which was managed by others."⁶⁵

THOUGH HE was exceptional in this regard, Baylor was right to cut the allusion short. Planters were overseers, not slaves. They stood interposed between the schedule of the money market and that of the cotton trade, between the demands of their obligation and the natural rhythms of the seasons and the crops, between hypothetical paper and real cotton, between speculation and cultivation, between their creditors and their slaves. They translated the imperatives of time-scaled commercial instruments into the astringent temporality of the lash: labor from sunup to sundown; half an hour in the middle of the day for a meal; water gulped in the brief interval at the end of the row; pressure to keep up with the rest of the hands and make weight at the end of the day.

As former slaves looked back upon their time in bondage, they often attributed their owner's violence to his indebtedness. Isaac Mason, remembering his owner's frantic effort to get out of debt, wrote: "I was only the property of another, working to pay the debt of another, who I suppose thought he ought to receive interest on his bill; and that interest had to be paid by me in addition

to the daily labor, by receiving a whipping every day besides losing a meal." Leonard Black similarly related his owner's declining fortunes to the "old man's" violence: "The cowhide paid the debt."⁶⁶ As artful as these formulations were, they conveyed the essence of the political economy of the Cotton Kingdom. Whereas in the conventional political economy the analytical separation of capital and labor is essential, in the Cotton Kingdom slaves served both purposes.

Slaveholders stored their savings in slaves, and those slaves thus stood security for those who owned them. In the antebellum period, the vast majority of collateralized loans in East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, involved mortgages on human beings. The mobility and salability of slaves—the fact that there was a ready spot-market in human beings on the steps of every courthouse in the Mississippi Valley, that slaves could be moved from place to place to cover distant debts, and that their families and communities could be broken down into small lots to back specific transactions in a way that land could not—rendered them the most "liquid" form of capital in the Mississippi Valley.⁶⁷ Even when they had not been legally pledged—even though their name may not have been recorded on the same piece of paper as their owner's promise to pay and the legal rate of interest—slaves served as ultimate guarantors of the loans that banks made to merchants and that merchants made to planters. They were the human hosts for the speculative loans that haunted the cotton trade. As William Wells Brown, who had been hired out for several months and was brought "home" only to be sold, described it, the lead-up to such a sale was framed by his owner as a matter of common sense: "I went home to my master in the country, and the first day after my return, he came to where I was at work, and spoke to me very politely. . . . He told me he was hard pressed for money, and as he had sold my mother and all her children except me, he thought it would be better to sell me than any other one." J. W. Longuen recalled that, as a result of indebtedness, his master had been filled with a single-minded "determination to convert his slaves, and even his own flesh and blood, into money to pay his debts."⁶⁸ When the sale of real cotton could not absorb the flow of the fictional capital that had been advanced against it, the difference was reckoned in human flesh.

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Capital, Cotton, and Free Trade

Thus was a *tripartite alliance* formed, by which the Western Farmer, the Southern Planter, and the English Manufacturer, became united in a common bond of interest: the whole giving their support to the doctrine of Free Trade.

—David Christy, *Cotton Is King*

IN 1845, MATTHEW Fontaine Maury sat down to write what would be the first of several articles about the future of the Mississippi Valley. At the time he wrote, Maury was a captain in the U.S. Navy but had no ship to command. An 1839 stagecoach accident had shattered his right leg and rendered him unfit for shipboard service. He had been assigned to duty as the superintendent of the U.S. Naval Observatory, a post he would resign upon the election of Abraham Lincoln in order to accept a commission as Chief of Sea Coast, River, and Harbor Defenses for the Army of Northern Virginia. Maury is best known as the “Pathfinder of the Seas.” Through the careful assemblage of data from the logs of military and merchant ships, he mapped the winds and currents of the Gulf Stream, enabling ships to take advantage of them and reducing transatlantic crossing times by days, even weeks. “There are rivers in the sea,” Maury famously wrote.

But along with the oceanography for which he is justly remembered, Matthew Maury was an advocate of slavery, an imperialist, and a free trader.¹ At the center of his vision of the political economy of the future was not the Atlantic Ocean but the Mississippi Valley, and beyond that the Pacific. As Maury put it in his 1845 essay about the Mississippi Valley:

If we were to calculate the value of this region, or to estimate its growing and future importance, we shall not be able to assign any limits except those of demand and supply. When the first handful of cotton arrived in England, half a century ago, could it have entered into the mind of Adam Smith, or the most gifted seer, that has ever indulged visions of political economy to conceive that the fleecy cargo which was then seen coming over the sea was destined to spread itself, in a little while, like Ahab's cloud, over the realms of commerce, and to make the broad ocean white with ships and trade?²

Like many others who wrote about the Mississippi Valley, Matthew Maury's thinking about the future of slavery and capitalism on a global scale was framed by the Panic of 1837, which brought the "flush times" of the 1830s to an end. It is clear that the Panic originated at the juncture of the markets in land, cotton, and money—that is to say, in the Mississippi Valley—though economic historians disagree about the relative weight to assign to each. By 1836, the sale of Western lands had provided the federal government with a vast budgetary surplus, which Congress, in the so-called Distribution Bill passed in June of that year, voted to disburse to the states for spending. In preparation for this distribution, the United States began to move its specie deposits to the banks, where they would eventually be paid out to the states, broadly speaking, from east to west and from north to south. Between September 1836 and May 1837, for example, specie reserves in New York City banks fell from \$7.2 million to \$1.5 million as that money was sent westward and southward to be spent.

Even as Congress was deciding what to do with the vast surplus gained from the sale of Western lands, President Andrew Jackson was attempting to reduce speculation in the land market and stem the influx of foreign capital into the United States by shifting the business of the General Land Office to a specie-only basis. Like the Distribution Bill, Jackson's "Specie Circular" caused specie to flow from east to west and from north to south, even as it undermined confidence in the paper that had funded the expansionary speculation of the early 1830s. Simultaneously, uncertainty about the value of money in the United States, and concern that too much British specie was being paid

out in return for American lands, led the Bank of England to increase the rate at which it discounted commercial paper in the United States, making it more difficult for American merchants and bankers to obtain payments and loans in silver. When money got tight and the cotton crop was abundant, prices for the Mississippi Valley's principal staple began to fall precipitously, and creditors pressed debtors to cover the money advanced against it along the chain of debt—a chain that joined even the most isolated rural planters and country stores to the factors of New Orleans, the merchants of New York, the brokers of Liverpool, and even the Bank of England.

The bubble burst. Planters and merchants throughout the Mississippi Valley were ruined. Brown Brothers, Barings, and others found themselves in possession of large estates throughout the Mississippi Valley. The boomtime landscape was replanted with signs reading "G.T.T." (Gone to Texas). Debtors had left their farms and taken their slaves to the newly independent Republic of Texas, as a shelter from legal action.³ Thus were the science of political economy, the practicalities of the cotton market, and the exigencies of racial domination entangled with one another—aspects of a single problem, call it slave-racial capitalism—as planters and merchants set about trying to reform first themselves and, failing that, the rest of the world.

The first Southern commercial convention aimed at addressing the "present derangement of the currency and exchanges of the country" was held in Augusta in October 1837. And the report of that convention began by quoting what may have been the single most important statistic in the history of proslavery political economy: "The staple growing states, while they produce two-thirds of the domestic exports of the United States, import scarcely one-tenth of the foreign merchandise which is received for it." The implication was that the difference between the South's aggregate exports and its direct imports represented a yearly subsidy—a "bounty," in the words of the convention—paid to the North. Variations of the Statistic were employed by Matthew Maury in his 1845 letter to the Commercial Convention at Memphis; by William Bedford in his 1849 speech to the Virginia Commercial Convention; by *DeBow's Review* in anticipation of the 1853 convention, also to meet at Memphis; by George Trenholm in his speech at Charleston the following year; by W. W. Boyce and John A. Calhoun at Savannah in 1856; by A. Dudley Mann

in an open letter to “the citizens of the slaveholding states” in 1856 and again in 1858; by James Lyons, T. B. Betha, W. M. Churchill, and B. C. Yancey to the Convention at Montgomery in 1859; and again by Maury in his 1861 secessionist apologetic addressed to the people of Great Britain.⁴ For those who employed it, this statistic held the key to understanding the history of Southern commercial “decline.” In the decades after the Revolution, the most historically minded of them noted, the international trade of the United States had been centered in South Carolina and Virginia, which “at one time possess[ed] almost the entire trade and commerce of the country.” But even as the staple of the South had come to dominate the nation’s exports, its portion of the import trade had dwindled: “This trade and commerce transferred to the other portion of the country . . . and these have derived the benefit of our decay.”⁵ Why?

This worldmaking statistic reflected an essential aspect of the commercial flows in the Atlantic economy: most of the trade flowed through the port of New York—huge volumes of cotton traveling coastwise before being re-shipped to Liverpool; imported goods landing at New York and being distributed from there; ships traveling “in ballast” (that is, with their holds empty of cargo) to pick up the cotton that would be shipped directly from New Orleans to Liverpool, thus forcing the cotton “to pay the freight both ways”; and so on.⁶ As such, the Statistic was an excellent indicator of some things—the degree to which the port of New Orleans was a net exporter and the port of New York a net importer, for instance—but a very uncertain measure of some other things, such as the degree to which New Orleans imported goods from Europe via New York, or aggregate Southern demand for imported goods in general. It represented many of the factors that concerned those who advocated agricultural reform and economic development *within* the South—reliance on a single staple crop, dependence upon outside capital, overinvestment in land and slaves, absence of a manufacturing sector, limited networks for mercantile distribution—as features of the relationship between “the South,” “the North,” and the rest of the world. And it ignored—indeed, it actively obscured—the fact that Southern demand for goods was low because slaveholders continually pushed downward upon the subsistence levels of their slaves, with around one-third of the population (closer to one-half in the Mississippi

Valley) actively reduced to a starveling penury.⁷ As it was interpreted among pro-slavery economists, however, the Statistic testified not to the degraded condition of Southern slaves, but to that of Southern slaveholders.

In the immediate aftermath of the Panic of 1837, according to a time-honored tradition, planters in the Mississippi Valley blamed their merchants. What we now know as the Depression of 1837 surfaces in the correspondence of Louisiana planter John Close as a series of unfortunate events—a short sale of his cotton, tight money, mishandled bales, a refusal to endorse a further advance—which Close addressed by repeatedly transferring his business from one New Orleans merchant to another.⁸ Many were the calls in the late 1830s (and after) for planters to reduce their reliance on advances and commission houses. The Louisiana planter Henry Huntington blamed “the system of robbery of our commission houses” for his own economic problems in 1837.⁹

In assigning responsibility to merchants and commission houses, planters both drew upon and refined a long-standing genre of Southern panegyric. The purpose of the South’s pro-slavery political economy was, in the words of the mission statement of the Commercial Convention that met at Savannah in 1857, “to restore what has in part been lost, the commercial independence . . . of that portion of the *union which furnishes the means for the whole.*” And in pro-slavery political economy, the extraction of surplus was the basis for historical development. “It is calculated that the South lends from year to year a trading capital to the North amounting to nearly ONE HUNDRED MILLIONS of dollars, and upon which the North receives the entire profits!” wrote one outraged defender of slavery in *DeBow’s Review*. In 1852, James D. B. DeBow himself scolded a convention of cotton planters meeting at Jackson, Mississippi, in similar terms: “Can it be wondered at, then, that the North grows rich, and powerful, and grand, whilst we, at best, are stationary?”¹⁰ And for the advocates of slavery (as well as some of its opponents) much of the blame could be credited to the account of Southern merchants—Daniel Hundley’s “Southern Yankees.” The racist-abolitionist writer Hinton Helper addressed them as the “avaricious assassins of your country” and “the channels through which more than one hundred and twenty millions of dollars—\$120,000,000—are annually drained from the South and conveyed North.”¹¹

Hundley and Helper characterized the dispute between classes (or, perhaps better, fractions of capital)—between merchants and planters—in spatial

terms, as a conflict between Northerners and Southerners. Merchants represented the agency through which Southern wealth—Southern patrimony—was diverted from its proper channel. As Albert Pike put it in an oft-quoted speech to the Commercial Convention that met at New Orleans in 1855:

From the rattle with which the nurse tickles the ear of the child born in the South to the shroud that covers the cold form of the dead, everything comes from the North. We rise between sheets made in Northern looms, and pillows of Northern feathers, to wash in basins made in the North, dry our beard on Northern towels, and dress ourselves in garments woven in Northern looms, our gardens dug with Northern spades and our bread kneaded in trays of dishes of Northern wood or tin; and the very wood which feeds our fires is cut with Northern axes, helved with hickory brought from Connecticut and New York.¹²

Thinking through the goods he received from his merchant outward toward the broader economy, Pike epitomized the way in which criticism of the economic relations between planters and merchants was formatted by ideas about space and region. The wealth of the cotton South—particularly that of the Mississippi Valley—was daily being diverted to the development of the North.

In response to this sectionalist reading of the economic crisis, cotton planters in the Mississippi Valley vowed to reform their agricultural and commercial practices in an effort to “liberate” themselves from dependence on the North. “The recent derangements of the currency,” reported the *New Orleans Bulletin* in 1837, “have taught Mississippi planters . . . to husband their resources by . . . growing their corn and meat and all their soil is capable of producing.” In the years after the Panic, leading planters and agricultural reformers in the Mississippi Valley emphasized the need for agricultural improvement and regional self-sufficiency, what in a later era might have been termed “import substitution.” Epitomized by the Mississippi planter M. W. Phillips, the planter-reformers urged cotton planters to improve their practice, diversify their crops, and develop their manufactures. For Phillips, cotton monocropping (he called it “the one-crop system”), overreliance on imported goods, and “poverty, want, and suffering” were of a piece. “Taking Mississippi for

my starting point,” Phillips wrote, “I will attempt to show that we ought to vary our labors, and that in so doing we would be more independent, comfortable, happy, and, in the end, richer and wiser.” He went on to recommend that planters grow oats, barley, and corn along with their cotton, and that they raise their own livestock instead of importing meat. “The mere culture of the hog has more in it than is dreamed of in many men’s philosophy,” he concluded.¹³

By reducing the number of acres they had planted in cotton and turning the labor of a portion of their slaves to other crops and domestic manufactures, planters could increase the duration of their land’s productivity even as they reduced their dependence upon the world outside their plantations—not to mention outside their communities, states, and even “the South” itself—for food and basic manufactures. As the Mississippi planter Colin Tarpley remembered it, in 1837 cotton planters “received our pay in worthless Bank paper of the country and paid it out and found ourselves in debt for the crops, pork, and other necessary supplies that should have been raised upon our own farms. Hence we were driven to break our intolerable bondage to the grain growing states, and raise within ourselves what was necessary for our own consumption.”¹⁴ The sort of economic development that Mississippi Valley agricultural reformers like Phillips and Tarpley imagined was one that sought to domesticate the economy: to develop self-sufficiency *within* the Mississippi Valley in order to lessen their debt-mediated dependence on the outside world. They emphasized regional independence and internal diversification over commercial interdependence and comparative advantage.

Properly reformed, agriculture would yield a full spectrum of economic development *within* the South. The inaugural issue of the *American Cotton Planter* described the cotton planter’s central dilemma—the primary dilemma the new journal sought to address—as being the need to develop other sectors of the economy in order to increase local returns on investment.

We give away to others our gold, the produce of our cotton fields, the substance of our country for grain, meat, and mules—things perishable, annuals we might almost say, that we can and should produce ourselves—and in the use of them we are *strengthened only* to produce *more gold* from our cotton fields *to barter off* in the same way. Now the effect of our suicidal policy is seen everywhere in the Northwest and grain and stock

raising States—villages of but yesterday are now cities, canals and rail, and plank roads running in all directions, whilst the eye of the traveler is greeted on every hand by fine mansions. . . . We receive nothing that we cannot produce and procure at home. We have iron ore and coal fields inexhaustible—we can grow our grain and raise our meat and mules—we can and should manufacture our Negro cloth, kerseys [woolens], etc. and our cotton bagging and rope. . . . We should foster and encourage the introduction of Cotton Manufacturing in the midst of the cotton fields. What intelligent and patriotic planter, looking forward to the interest and welfare of his children and the ultimate prosperity and improvement of our country, that does not perceive in the Manufacturing establishment and the Machine-shop, that sure and most valuable extension of the area of labor, that our energy and industry rapidly approximate? . . . How changed and beautiful the scene, at the expiration of ten years?—all the necessaries of successful and improved plantation economy produced at home—*one thousand million of dollars retained at home*, and vested in building up our towns and cities . . . and in this way augment the value of industry of each at least *three-fold*.¹⁵

Agricultural reform and regional (one might even say proto-national) developmentalism were here joined in a vision of a transformation of the political economy of the cotton South. With import substitution and the diversion of capital and labor to the development of a manufacturing sector, monocropping would be replaced by industrial development, the outflow of cash by the enhancement of productivity, and mercantile subservience by regional independence. Such a course of action required the spatial reorientation of the cotton economy. What had theretofore been an economy based on the export of staple crops—an outward-looking economy predicated upon commercial interchange with the outside world—was to develop crops and manufactures to meet its own needs. The economy was to be reoriented around the guiding principle of regional autonomy.

At this point, the line of thought that emphasized commercial independence, the development of manufacturing within the South, and a regionally bounded notion of Southern political economy began to converge with another track of pro-slavery political economy. The second strand, like the

first, originated in the crisis of 1837, and it shared with the first a set of keywords: “independence,” “development,” “the South.” Indeed, the two strands of thought often shared the space of a single page, becoming entangled in argumentative pileups that prevented both sides from reaching their logical conclusions. For in spite of starting in the same place and paying the same rhetorical fare, these two lines of thought were freighted with radically different notions of economy and space. In time, the spatial terms employed by Southern political economists turned a movement that had begun with a crisis of global capitalism and a critique of merchants into a movement supporting a thoroughgoing embrace of global trade and merchants—at least merchants of the proper sort.

This was catalyzed by the shift in the focus of pro-slavery critique from imports and merchants *as such* to imports and merchants *from the North*—from the terms of commerce and chicanery to those of geography and politics. “A system of commerce, to be the most convenient and least expensive to the whole community, must necessarily have all its import agents or merchants at their export landings or cities. Any other system is unnatural, inexpedient and ruinous,” opined *DeBow’s Review*.¹⁶ When the defenders of slavery referred to the spatial separation of exports from imports—to the fact that cotton was shipped from the South but that the goods its purchase underwrote entered the country in the North—as “unnatural” or “artificial,” they were gesturing toward the power of governance to remake economic space. As the historian Brian Schoen has recently shown, they were specifically concerned with three aspects of federal trade regulation, which they believed redistributed wealth and trade from South to North: federal tariffs that protected Northern manufactures from European competition and thus raised prices for those who purchased manufactured goods; duties on foreign shipping that supported domestic shipping by keeping “foreign” ships out of the coastal trade—regulations known as the American Navigation Acts; and federal spending on maritime improvements in the North and bounties paid to New England cod fishermen—expenditures that used tax revenue to support a localized sector of the economy. As *DeBow’s Review* put it (in a characteristically twisted comparison), “the protection from the Federal government for the encouragement of domestic manufactures and tonnage to build up commerce” had effected a transformation in the economic geography of the United States “as remarkable as that Hayti produced by the abolition of African slavery.”¹⁷ Thus it was

that sectional readings of the Crisis of 1837 led the defenders of slavery to renew their commitment to free trade—which they, emphasizing the spatial turn in their thinking, termed “direct trade.”

That the federal schedule of tariffs had been reduced in the aftermath of the Nullification Crisis in 1832, and again dramatically in 1842, did not reduce the importance of the issue to these pro-slavery free traders. The rhetoric of the direct-trade movement changed very little between 1832, when South Carolina senator George McDuffie declared that the tariff “which by an impious perversion of language is called ‘Protection’ . . . wages an exterminating war against the blessings of commerce and the bounties of a merciful Providence,” and 1860, when his successor, James Henry Hammond, declared that “the American Tariff is neither more or less than a system by which the slave states are plundered for the benefit of those states which do not tolerate slavery.” For the direct traders, federal policy was the first cause of Southern economic decline. “It may not be disguised, however, that this extraordinary and unequal state of our commercial relations, had its origin, more in the fiscal operations of the Federal Government, than in any supposed deficiency in the industry and enterprise of our citizens,” declared the final report of the Southern Commercial Convention which met in 1837 to consider the causes and remedies of the crash. In this view, the foundational inequity of trade policy had engendered the history of Southern economic decline that was emblemized by the import-export statistic. The report of a similar convention held in 1839 summarized this trajectory:

Discouraged by these burdens Southern capital sought more favorable locations for its employment or engaged in other business—merchants or capitalists removing to Northern ports with their funds, or withdrawing from commerce and investing in other employments; while others, discouraged by their example, were not found to supply their place and attempt the business they had been forced to abandon. The importing merchants of the South became an almost extinct race, and the direct trade, once so great flourishing and rich, dwindled down to insignificance.¹⁸

To this way of thinking, the historical differences between the economic geography of “the North” and that of “the South” were not exhausted by the

difference between wage labor and slave labor. Instead, that foundational difference had been reworked by federal regulation of the relationship between the economic spaces within the United States and those in the rest of the world. Internal economic development existed in an unstable dynamic tension with the global economy. Avoiding mention of the tariff protections bolstering Louisiana's sugar industry, the direct traders argued that the rules governing global/regional interchange had uniformly favored Northern merchants and manufacturers over Southern planters. Eventually, this governmental favoritism produced strikingly uneven development: Northern banks that were capable of backing long-term loans to Southern planters and Western farmers with federal deposits; New York shipping companies that were able to funnel trade to the city along federally protected coastal packet routes; federal spending that was predicated upon continued revenue from tariffs subsidizing Northern manufacturers at the expense of Southern planters. On this foundation, New York had built an empire of steam. Railroad and coastal packets had reoriented the interior spaces of the continent toward its emergent Northern commercial metropolis, even as the low rates of oceangoing packets channeled the flow of trade across the Atlantic Ocean into a corridor running from New York to Liverpool and back again.¹⁹

The idea that the economic development of the North was “unnatural,” “artificial,” and even “impious” invoked a notion of economic geography pre-dating that represented by U.S. federal policy—a notion based on “the blessings of commerce and the bounties of a merciful Providence,” as Hammond had put it. The proper course of Southern economic development—the natural course, the providential course, the “legitimate channel”—had been diverted by sectional politics and commercial artifice.²⁰ Nowhere was this clearer than in the Mississippi Valley. One after another, pro-slavery political economists pointed to the commercial history of the Mississippi as the emblem of Southern economic decline. “The great cities of the North have severally penetrated the interior with artificial lines, until they have taken from the open and *untaxed current of the Mississippi* the commerce produced upon its borders,” declared the report of a Virginia Commercial Convention. “Vigorous and sustained efforts has [*sic*] succeeded in reversing the very laws of nature and of nature's God—rolled back the mighty tide of the Mississippi and its two thousand tributary streams,” added *DeBow's Review*. James D. B. DeBow himself

wrote: "The North has opened innumerable connections with the Valley, and is draining it of its most valuable products, in return inundating it with the products of her workshops and her commerce." Or as Matthew Maury put it, with malign felicity: "The enterprise of man has . . . placed the mouth of the Mississippi as much at New York as it is at Balize. [It has] turn[ed] the Mississippi Valley upside down, causing the produce thereof to flow North and enter the sea under the highlands of Navesink [on the New Jersey coast]." ²¹

The direct-trade movement aimed to revitalize the regional economy of the South through global economic integration. In his influential 1860 book entitled *Cotton Is King*, David Christy approvingly quoted South Carolinian Robert Hayne's 1832 statement, "Next to the Christian religion, I consider *Free Trade*, in its largest sense, as the greatest blessing that can be conferred on any people." Christy went on to describe the emergence of the Mississippi Valley economy and the ascension of "King Cotton": "Thus was a *tripartite alliance* formed, by which the Western Farmer, the Southern Planter, and the English Manufacturer, became united in a common bond of interest: the whole giving their support to the doctrine of Free Trade."²² For Christy and his co-agitators, direct trade—*free* trade—represented the realignment of the principles of political economy with those of natural history. No longer would the cotton trade be deformed by the tariffs and tonnage rates that had artificially diverted Southern imports through Northern ports and turned Southern wealth into Northern profits. As A. Dudley Mann put it in a speech reprinted in *DeBow's Review*, in a world without trade barriers "the articles required for consumption from abroad will thenceforth come directly to their [Southerners'] homes relieved from intermediate agencies and vastly diminished rates. They would then cease to bend the knee to Baal—to do homage to that overpowering and fiscal fort of Wall Street." Similarly, C. F. McKay wrote in James D. B. DeBow's edited volume entitled *The Industrial Resources of the Southern and Western States*: "Free trade, unshackled industry, is the motto of the South, not only in commerce and manufactures, but in agriculture. Capital is best employed when left alone. . . . God is wiser than man, and the laws he has imposed require no aid from us to adjust and adapt them to the circumstances around us."²³ In the imagery of these pro-slavery free traders—tables and chairs marching "home" to their proper posts in the South, trade "unshackled" from politics, the will of God free from the folly of man—"the South" was

lifted out of its temporal condition of subservience to the North and placed in a more direct, more independent, more manful, more righteous relationship to the global economy. Prices would be emancipated that people might remain enslaved.

THE DIRECT traders professed to be sectionalists, rather than secessionists. As stated in the report of the Southern Commercial Convention that met at Savannah in December 1856, the emancipation of trade from tariffs was “demanded by every consideration of justice, of equality, and of sound policy.” The writer, soldier, and attorney Albert Pike had made much the same point two years earlier in a much-applauded speech in Charleston: “The way to save the Union, to make ourselves equal to the North in all respects, is to become independent, not by tearing the national flag asunder and breaking up this glorious union of states, but by commercial freedom.”²⁴ There is no reason to doubt that these defenders of freedom, justice, and equality intended to do anything other than exactly what they said—no reason to imagine that they were masking an unstated desire for sectional political division behind high-minded language about the laws of political economy. It is, however, clear that the reforms they advocated would supplant the existing territorial organization of the United States, under which the federal government regulated the interchange of “interior” to “exterior” space with a notion of spaces that was defined by economic—class—interest. Perhaps the clearest example of this visionary reorganization of the economy of the South, with respect to that of the rest of the world, came in the form of a proposal made by Robert Toombs to the 1856 Commercial Convention at Savannah. Justice might be rendered the South “easily, speedily, and constitutionally” if the slaveholding states placed an *ad valorem* tax “upon all goods, wares, and merchandize offered for sale within the State, other than those which shall be imported from foreign countries.”²⁵ Far from being the scourge upon Southern economic independence that the self-provisioners and credit scolds had imagined it to be, dependence on imported goods—though only goods imported from abroad—was to be the salvation of the South.

If the conceit of the Mississippi River emptying its wealth into New York harbor served the direct traders as a sort of argument-ending justification (what reasonable person could fail to be outraged at the image of a river flow-

ing backward?), the real river proved more difficult to harness to an actual program of economic development. By building a critique of political economy around the question of *imports*, pro-slavery economic reformers were—wittingly or not—probing at the foundations of the Mississippi Valley economy. For the low aggregate demand for imports stemmed directly from the enslavement and purposeful immiseration of almost one-half of the population, even as the southward current of the river provided a natural subsidy to exporters and a steady tariff upon importers shipping their goods against its flow. While many historians have argued that the first factor was ultimately determinative of Southern economic development—that the slave South never could have generated enough demand for goods in order to support a robust manufacturing sector, or absorb enough imported goods to make it worthwhile for merchants to ship them directly—the question of the effect of slavery on economic development was not something that the economic reformers of the 1850s publicly addressed. Instead, many of the reformers focused their attention on the spatial aspect of the problem—on how to transcend the existing commercial geography of the Mississippi Valley, and how to overcome their reliance on river channels, steamboats, and, perhaps, the city of New Orleans. They sought a spatial fix for the underlying limitations of the racial-economic order of the Cotton Kingdom.

For many promoters of Southern economic development, railroad building was the solution to the problem of commercial dependence, reducing the friction with which imported goods traveled over the land.²⁶ Speaking at a Railroad Convention in New Orleans, the local merchant and leading railroad promoter James Robb typified these arguments, explaining, “One of the chief drawbacks of New Orleans is the absence of an import trade; and why are we without imports? Why is it that a city exporting eighty or ninety millions of dollars annually, is now insignificant in that importing branch of commerce? Because of the remoteness and uncertainty of our market—our being without a speedy, rapid, and cheap communication with the interior of the country that seeks New-Orleans as a market for its agricultural productions.” According to Robb, the problem of Southern underconsumption was not a structural feature of a slave-based economy, but rather a matter of transportation. With better information and more reliable distribution—with a railroad-based refiguration of the relationship of space to time—importing goods to New Orleans

would become profitable for merchants. Railroads would transform the relation between “interior” and “exterior” economic space, revitalizing the Mississippi Valley by facilitating the penetration of imported goods. “New Orleans,” Robb prophesied, “will become a city of imports” rather than “a mere city of transit commerce.”²⁷

Though Robb saw the staple-crop exporting economy of the Mississippi Valley as old-fashioned and outmoded, he nevertheless preserved its geography by drawing his map of the economy of the future on a line from the mouth of the Mississippi River. There were others who doubted that the spatial transformation represented by the railroad could be so easily overlaid on the existing commercial landscape. The “failure” of New Orleans’s mercantile sector to support agricultural diversification and invest in industrial development, especially the development of railroads, has conventionally been seen as a hallmark of regional economic “backwardness.”²⁸ But it was merchants, particularly the export-processing merchants of New Orleans, who stood to lose the most from the reorientation of the economy of the Mississippi Valley around the railroad. They made their living, after all, by connecting New Orleans to the rest of the world: by aggregating the meat and grain of the Mississippi Valley on the levee in New Orleans, sorting it into orders, tallying their charges, and sending it back up the river to the plantations it had already passed on the way down; by providing a conduit for the foreign and cotton-backed credit that allowed planters who had all of their money tied up in land and slaves to get through the year; by grading, sampling, draying, insuring, managing, marketing that cotton as it was passed from upriver plantations to overseas manufacturers, and taking a commission on it. All goods “paid tribute to New Orleans.”²⁹

The underlying antagonism between the merchants of New Orleans and the railroad was laid bare at the Southern Commercial Convention held at New Orleans in 1854. “The scheme” of the Southern railroad promoters, argued Judge Walker of New Orleans, had long been “to circumvent the commission merchants of New Orleans,” to treat “the Mississippi River as a mere horse pond,” and to view “the existence of New Orleans factors as that of Tyre and Sidon.”³⁰ There was ample evidence to support his accusation. In an 1852 *DeBow’s Review* article entitled “Rail-Road Prospects and Progress”

(originally presented as a speech to the Southwestern Railroad Convention in New Orleans), Judah Benjamin wrote:

New Orleans has suffered herself to sleep soundly in the arms of all the prosperity which the God of nature seemed to have showered upon her. . . . Bewildered in her dreams . . . as she contemplated herself at the very foot and receptacle of all the greatest and most magnificent rivers upon earth, with fifteen great states of the confederacy claimed to be inalienably tributary to her, . . . New-Orleans, like a pet-child of destiny, laughed the doubter into scorn, and said unto herself. . . . We shall tithe and tax and levy contributions upon the world, as we hold the keys to so much of its wealth! Shall we delve and spin, who are Nature's great custom-house officers, administering her tariffs and her revenues?

Speaking at the same convention, J. T. Trezevant of Tennessee described the situation of New Orleans in the following terms: "New Orleans is engaged in a grand game of chess. Her opponents are the important cities on the Atlantic seaboard, from Boston to Charleston. . . . The pieces with which the game is played, are the great *natural* avenues of commerce, and the *artificial* ones which man is making. The prize is one of such magnitude that it will bring to the victor the seat of empire. To the loser will surely come commercial dependence." The railroad had the power to reorient the economic geography of the country—to realign the connections between country and city as easily as a player moved a pawn across a chessboard. For the traditional outlet of the produce of the vast Mississippi Valley, the future hung in the balance. "If the products of the Valley of the Mississippi are carried to Eastern ports, and, through the same channels, the millions and multiplying millions of that vast region of the country receive their foreign supplies for domestic consumption, that fate of New Orleans is sealed," editorialized one New Orleans weekly in the same period.³¹

The commercial preeminence of New Orleans depended on its position at the mouth of the Mississippi River. Reorient that riverine economy around the coordinates of railroads not yet build, and the city might quickly give way to

Mobile or Savannah or Charleston or Richmond as the emporium of the South and West. Though perhaps inconsequential or even beneficial to cotton planters, the transformation of the economic space of the Cotton Kingdom was potentially disastrous for the merchants of the city of New Orleans, raising the yearly positional tension over advances, interest, and charges to a defining contradiction between contending versions of “Southern” economic development. Indeed, the question of the railroad rendered the governing premise of regionalist political economy—specifically that of “the South”—incoherent: cross-cut by the competing interests of planters and merchants, riverboats and railroads, Gulf and seaboard, New Orleans and Charleston. In seeking to specify the avenues of economic development and direct trade, the promoters of Southern railroads were forced back into confrontation with the tensions out of which the direct-trade movement had arisen in the first place.

IT WAS left to Matthew Maury to project those tensions outward in the shape of commercial imperialism, and thus to outline the expansionist agenda of pro-slavery political economy for the 1850s.³² Maury began his career in pro-slavery political economy with an unsigned 1839 article in the *Southern Literary Messenger* that described the protectionist regionalism of the self-provisioners as a set of woefully inadequate “resolutions . . . ‘not to buy Northern goods when they can get Southern, unless the Northern are the cheapest; and not to freight Northern vessels when they can freight Southern, unless the Northern freight for less.’” The conventions reminded him of an oath taken by sailors when they first crossed the Equator: “Never to eat brown bread when we could get white, unless we preferred the brown; and never to kiss the maid, if we could kiss the mistress, unless we liked the maid best.” It would take Maury several more years to fulfill this racial-sexual-imperial imagery of the meridional play of white and colored, mistresses and maids with a genuinely global vision of pro-slavery political economy. His 1839 article focused on the factors undergirding the rise of the port of New York, particularly on the effect of regularly scheduled packets in drawing British trade to New York and providing an incentive for shippers to offer low rates for shipping goods aboard ships that would depart on time whether or not they had freight in their holds. Maury went on to recommend that the South attempt to develop a steam-powered packet line between some Southern port (he sug-

gested Norfolk) and the continent of Europe (he suggested Le Havre) to compete with the Northern lines. Yet if his jocose comparison of Southern reformers to dissolute sailors hinted at a broader, unspoken set of framing parameters, so too did the first sentence of the article: "The business of commerce presents no law, which forbids the Southern merchant to exchange his flour in Rio for the coffee of Brazil; or to barter in Valparaiso and Lima, his produce for the copper of Chili and Peru; and this again for teas and silks in China. That he should carry on a lucrative trade with the West or East Indies, with the Brazils, on the coast of South America, or in the Mediterranean, nothing is wanted but the nerve and capital of the South controlled and regulated by well-regulated energies."³³

By 1845, Maury had turned his attention to the Mississippi. In a letter to the Southern Commercial Convention meeting at Memphis, written under the pseudonym Henry Bluff (a name that he was also using to write a series of scathing critiques of patronage and amateurism within the U.S. Navy), Maury outlined a bold restatement—"retrenchment" might be a better word—of the centrality of the Mississippi River to the development of the South and West. He began by noting that the central question facing "the producing states . . . which give American commerce the sweep of its wing" was "the maritime resource and naval strength of the great Mississippi Valley."³⁴ In two long articles, he outlined a visionary program for redeveloping the Valley economy that included digging a canal which would connect the Mississippi to the Great Lakes; clearing the sandbar at the mouth of the Mississippi; building a naval academy at Memphis; rationalizing traffic on the river by providing depth markers along its entire course; building lighthouses and naval stations on the Gulf of Mexico; and gaining an exclusive right to send U.S. mail to Oregon from the Mississippi Valley. "Second in importance to no subject," however, was the development of free-trade zones in Southern port cities, especially the port of New Orleans.³⁵ Under existing customs laws, Maury argued, those who landed goods in the United States, "though they are to be re-shipped from the country the next day," were required to post a thirty-day cash bond equivalent to one third the value of their cargo, to ensure that the goods were not being smuggled into the United States under cover of a promised reexport. Maury explained, and in the process outlined, a vision of a Southern empire of commercial flows:

Take Mexico . . . by way of example. A merchant has in store, at Liverpool, a cargo of goods for the Mexican Market, with \$300,000. They are waiting for advices and an advance of prices. He is afraid to risk them in the Custom-House of Mexico, for the condition of the country is no guaranty for their safety. . . . In New Orleans or Mobile they would be perfectly safe, near their market place, and in the case of demand might be the first to offer. . . . Here is a vessel going over in ballast for cotton, and would take them at a very low rate of freight. He therefore examines the Custom-House regulations, but finds, to his surprise, that before his cargo could be landed in New Orleans, or Mobile, for this purpose, his agent there would have to raise \$100,000 in cash for the customs, that the commissions to his agent in this transaction, would be heavy—that, as long as the goods remain in the country, and thirty days longer, he would be out of the use of the money, and that when he gets his drawback, it would be further taxed with 2½ per cent. in deduction. . . . Thus cotton and produce alone have to pay freight both ways.³⁶

Though Maury never said so directly, his plan for balancing the export of the cotton wealth of the Mississippi Valley with an equal volume of imports (thus ensuring that the imports would come directly to the South and pay half the freight) side-stepped the problem of low aggregate demand that defined the Cotton Kingdom. Maury, indeed, imagined a global fix for the political economy of slavery: “Only 200 millions of consumers are supplied through the markets of the Atlantic Ocean. But there are in the Pacific, and the countries bordering upon it not less than 600 millions of people, whose wants have always been meagerly supplied.”³⁷

Over the next fifteen years, especially in the aftermath of the U.S.-Mexican War, which extended the territory of the United States to the Pacific coast, Maury developed his account of a pro-slavery commercial empire centered in the Mississippi Valley. In a May 1849 article in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Maury advocated investment in a railway joining the Atlantic and Pacific oceans across the Isthmus of Panama. Maury’s advocacy of a railway, however, was less an effort to supersede the maritime geography that defined the fading commercial advantage of the city of New Orleans than an effort to subordinate rail to river and land to sea. “If you stretch a string [between South

America and China] on a common terrestrial globe, you will find that it passes not far from New Orleans. Therefore when *that* railroad to the Pacific shall be built, New Orleans will be the thoroughfare of travel between South America, California, and China.” Maury imagined the Pacific coast of South America as a vast market for the city of New Orleans. “It is difficult to rightly estimate the national advantage of lifting eight millions of people and setting them down, as it were, within 30 to 40 days of our markets. . . . The immediate effect of this new state of things will be to give activity to the New Orleans markets[,] to cause the European houses in the South American and Mexican trade to ship[,] in the vessels coming for your cotton, whole cargoes to be deposited in the warehouses of New Orleans and distributed thence via Panama to the markets of the Pacific.”³⁸

The problem of the differential between the South’s exports and its imports—the problem of Southern underconsumption—might be resolved through commercial expansion and realignment. In Maury’s vision, space was not defined by politics, and it was neither national nor regional; the economy produced space, rather than being bounded by it. Maury’s vision of economic spaces was global and mercantile, defined by connections and flows: the riverine and maritime geography that defined the Mississippi Valley and the cotton trade was projected globally as empire.³⁹

Excepting the Mississippi, no place figured more prominently in Maury’s re-vision of the globe than the Valley of the Amazon. As he charted the ocean currents and commercial flows that he hoped would come to define the rise of the port of New Orleans, Maury returned to his trademark formulation to join the waters of the hemisphere’s two greatest rivers. “There are literally rivers in the sea, for they are as constant and almost as well marked as rivers on the land. In consequence of the Gulf Stream, the mouth of the Mississippi is really the Florida Pass. The waters of the Amazon flow through the same channel. . . . Therefore the Amazon may very properly be regarded as one of the tributaries, and its basin as a part of the backcountry, to this our noble sea.” Maury would later illustrate the first principle of this new global projection by imagining two logs—one floated down the Amazon and the other down the Mississippi—meeting at the point where the northeasterly current of the South Atlantic met the easterly current of the Gulf of Mexico. And based on his globe, on the string he stretched across the Isthmus of Panama, and on the logs he

floated down the rivers, Maury imagined the “600 millions of people who live on the shores washed by the Pacific Ocean,” and “the products of the seventy degrees of latitude” drained by the Mississippi and the Amazon, joined together under the dominion of New Orleans: “Break it down and this country is placed mid-way between Europe and Asia; this sea [the Gulf of Mexico] becomes the center of the world, the focus of the world’s commerce.”⁴⁰ New Orleans was the zero point of Maury’s map of the future. “We are struck with the fact—and it is a physical fact—that the Valley of the Amazon is but a commercial appendage of the Mississippi,” wrote Maury in an 1852 letter addressed to the New Orleans railroad convention and later published in *DeBow’s Review*. “It is for this convention to say whether these two rivers shall be united in commerce or not.”⁴¹

In addition to being an oceanographer, Matthew Maury was a racist, or what was known in the nineteenth century as an ethnologist.⁴² For Maury, as for many of the naturalists of the nineteenth century, the categories of space and race were indivisible. “Can it be so, that climate which with its multitudinous influences so strongly impresses itself upon the vegetation of a country, upon its beasts, birds, and fishes—upon the whole face of organic nature, should produce no effect either upon the outer or the inner man! His habits depend in an eminent degree upon climate and soil, and these upon latitude,” Maury wrote in an article entitled “The Panama Rail-Way and the Gulf of Mexico.” In the frigid zones of the earth, Maury argued, mere survival occupied “man” to such a degree that there was no possibility of “moral development.” The tropics of the earth were the regions most favorable to “vegetable as well as purely animal life,” but such bounty was fatal to “progress and improvement.” “Within the tropics he is enervated by the climate. Nature does not impose the necessity of severe toil there, but invites to luxury and repose; and in so doing stimulates and excites the animal propensities of moral advancement.” Maury’s racism was, at once, a theory of labor, of environment, and of social development. And it found its “happy middle” in the Temperate Zones. “Here nature is not the severe taskmaster of the polar regions, not the prodigal host of the tropics. She lures man to labor, and in the wholesome necessities of labor, he finds exercise and incentive to the intellectual being.” In order to develop, however, nations and races constantly had to move forward; and in Brazil, Matthew Maury would find the destiny of the white race.⁴³

In 1852, Maury published a revised version of his 1839 essay on direct trade. He began again with the joke about kissing the maid (though this time the choice at the bakery was between “soft” and “hard” bread, rather than “brown” and “white”) and rehearsed his familiar arguments about packet trade, steam navigation, and direct trade with Europe. But this time, Maury turned quickly to the Amazon, the question of racial destiny, and the future of slavery. “The spirit which moved men in the days of knight-errantry, which drove them in the time of the crusades, and which at a later period, carried them across the seas and conducted them to the New World in search of adventure and geographical discovery is still as rife in this country as it ever was in the world. . . . It is this spirit, which if once permitted upon the wings of free navigation to enter the grand river basins of South America, will cause the wilderness there to blossom.” Anglo-Saxonism, free trade, and agricultural development spelled racial destiny. Or, as Maury put it, “There is no colonizer, civilizer, nor Christianizer like commerce.” And there was no labor like that of “the African” to accomplish the great work that Maury had in mind. “That valley is a slave country,” Maury wrote of the Amazon. “If ever the vegetation there be subdued and brought under; if ever the soil be reclaimed from the forest, the reptile and the wild beast, and subjected to the hoe, it must be done by the African, with the American axe in his hand.” In the Valley of the Amazon, “God, in his own wise Providence, will order the destiny of the black and the white race to be fulfilled, whatever it might be.” Maury went on to argue that the Amazon might serve the United States as a “safety valve” for its own growing slave population. “What is to become of it?” he wrote of slavery. “If it is abolished, how are so many people to be got rid of? If retained, how are they to be controlled? In short, when they have increased and multiplied according to the capacity of the states to hold them, what is to be done with them, whether they be bond or free?” Send them to Brazil, he answered: “The Valley of the Amazon is the way; in this view, it is the safety-valve of the Union. It is a slave territory and a wilderness. One among the many results of this line of steamers is the entire suppression of the African slave trade with Brazil by a substitution therefore of a slave emigration from the United States.”⁴⁴

So ended the prophecy of Matthew Maury—in which the premise of the benefits of free trade was transformed into a global spatial fix for the institution of slavery; in which the interests of planter and merchant were reconciled

through the conquest of global market share; in which the Mississippi and the Amazon were united and the course of history changed; in which the continents were sundered and the oceans joined at the Isthmus of Panama; in which Anglo-Saxon civilization and African labor transformed wilderness into empire; in which free trade, slavery, and oceanography saved first the Mississippi Valley, then the Union, and perhaps eventually the world. It seems peculiar today—the sort of thing that a man with a couple of pieces of string, a globe, and an overactive imagination might work out while drawing a paycheck from the federal government. But in the 1850s and in the Mississippi Valley, this sort of global-commercial pro-slavery was deadly serious. Indeed, men died for it, in Cuba, in Nicaragua, and finally on the battlefields of the Civil War.

II

Tales of Mississippian Empire

Shall the Mississippi, while expanding its waters in the wide gulf announce to the democracy of the world that the advantages and the glory of American institutions will not pass forward—that the Queen of the Antilles, fertile and great and capable of presenting similar development of productions and well-being will stand in the way as a check to the powerful impetus?

—Leon Fragua de Calvo, “Reply to a Pamphlet Entitled ‘Thoughts on the Annexation of Cuba to the United States, by Don Antonio Saco’”

As usual Liberty was the watchword and disguise of freebooters, pirates, and plunderers. . . . Slaveholders, slave-traders, and cold-blooded tyrants of every grade poured forth their swelling words of sympathy with the oppressed and execration of the oppressors.

—Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”

THE MAP THAT COMES to mind today when we read the words “the United States” is a map of a very particular kind, one in which the illustration of the national boundary line is given precedence over all other principles of representation. The rest of the continent disappears from view, as if it had sullenly retreated from the insistent use of the word “American” to mean “that having to do with the United States,” and the nation-space pushes itself to the front of the frame, asserting its timeless naturalness even as it obscures the contingent (because historical) conditions of its own creation. The surrounding space is filled not with representations of other sovereign nations, all of which have histories of dispute over boundaries with the United States, but with insets of compass points, scales, logos, and of course the extracontinental states Alaska

and Hawaii, their constitutional status here represented as a sort of extraterrestrial spatial proximity. These maps represent the historically determined parameters of the present day as a sort of common sense: since the ratification of their statehood, Alaska and Hawaii are in some sense closer to the rest of the United States than, say, Cuba.¹

For white people in the Mississippi Valley in the first half of the nineteenth century, a map of the United States was not complete without the Gulf of Mexico.² Understanding why requires us to try to imagine the relativity of space, time, and technology by recognizing, in the words of the historian Richard White, “that space is not an absolute entity but something constituted by social processes and events—processes and events that do not so much exist in space as create and transform space.”³ When nineteenth-century Americans referred to Cuba as “Mistress of the Gulf” or “Sentinel of the Mississippi” or “Key of the Gulf” or “Gibraltar” of the Americas, they were encoding a set of calculations about politics, economy, technology, and geography—calculations so ingrained that they did not actually have to be thought through in a step-by-step way.⁴ Indeed, these calculations were so generally accepted that they were no longer visible as the products of a particular moment in history, but appeared to be facts of nature. In the era before the transcontinental railroad, there were several routes from the Atlantic to the Pacific and its untold riches: the Oregon Trail, the Santa Fe Trail, and the ocean. Given the vastness of the territory between the East Coast and the West, and the sheer difficulty of traversing it—difficulty that was both geographic and political in the era of the contested plains and the Comanche Empire—any serious effort to exploit the commercial potential of California through the bulk shipping of goods would have to involve water.⁵ And so it was to coastal routes and isthmian crossings that the merchant capitalists of the mid-nineteenth century looked when they looked west—or, to put it another way, in order to look west, they first had to look south.⁶

In 1848, in an abandoned copper mine near Cienfuegos, Cuba, a Venezuelan-born Spanish army officer named Narciso López planned an uprising against the empire he had theretofore served.⁷ His scheme was ultimately brought to the attention of the Spanish authorities through a tangled series of revelations and betrayals, involving everything from a nervous conspirator’s confession in a rural Cuban church to the efforts of López’s American-based allies to gain

the support (or at least acquiescence) of the United States in what they thought would be a “secret” meeting with the president. Upon the discovery of the plot, participants and suspected supporters all over Cuba were hunted down and summarily executed. López, traveling under a death warrant and with a price on his head, was smuggled to the coast on a pack mule and escaped to the United States aboard the steamship *Neptune*.

First in New York and later in New Orleans, López became a leading figure in a loosely affiliated network of American expansionists and expatriate Cubans variously known as the Junta Cubano, the Club de la Habana, and the Junta Promovedora de los Intereses Políticos de Cuba.⁸ The plot that began in the copper mine was the first of five in which López would be involved.⁹ In August 1849 on Round Island off the coast of Mississippi, and in April 1851 off Sandy Hook along the coastline of New Jersey, conspiracies involving López would later be thwarted through the timely intervention of the U.S. government. In May 1850, he would make it as far as the Cuban coast, invading the town of Cárdenas, defeating the Spanish forces that were garrisoned there and capturing the local colonial governor, before being driven back by the approach of a large body of Spanish troops.¹⁰ Finally, in 1851, López embarked from New Orleans and spent almost two weeks fighting his way across the Cuban countryside, before being captured and transported to Havana, where he was spectacularly executed by the Spanish. After his death, López was succeeded by his erstwhile ally (and the former governor of the state of Mississippi), John Quitman, who was said to have raised \$2 million and 10,000 men for an invasion of Cuba in the spring of 1855.¹¹

Always, the goal was the same: the overthrow of the Spanish colonial government of Cuba through the coordination of an armed uprising on the island with the arrival of an army of filibusters from the United States. Historians have provided various etymologies of the word “filibuster”—but whatever its origin, its meaning was clear enough to nineteenth-century Americans: filibusters were nonstate invaders, members of private armies that operated outside the government-structured realm of international law and diplomacy. López was deliberately vague about what would happen after he and his filibusters conquered Cuba. Dependent for support on advocates of Cuban independence, as well as on those who eagerly favored the island’s annexation to the United States, López himself never really said the same thing to people on the

opposite sides of the question about what was to be done with Cuba once it had been conquered.

López's actions were condemned as the actions of "pirates," "plunderers," "knaves," and "speculators" by the filibusters' opponents. These included, most notably, the Spanish government in Cuba, but also many in the United States who either opposed the idea of Cuban annexation entirely or supported its accomplishment through diplomacy, preferably the purchase of the island from Spain, rather than through conquest by an army of expatriates and mercenary contractors. Yet for López and many of those who supported him, fought with him, and died with him, the question of Cuba was "the great question of the age," one whose consequences "were freighted with life and death" for the South, the United States, and the world.¹²

When white people in the Mississippi Valley (and elsewhere in the United States) looked at a map of the Western Hemisphere, they saw a set of possibilities and connections that stretched across and beyond the existing territorial boundaries of the United States. As Alexander Jones put it in his ostensibly neutral and scientific account entitled *Cuba in 1851*, Cuba's "political position, all concede to be vital to the United States, and especially to the Valley of the Mississippi. This is apparent from the slightest inspection of the map." While Jones's perspective was very much of the moment in the 1850s (his book included up-to-the-minute-of-publication bulletins from López's last mission), the importance of Cuba to the interests of the United States had been a central theme of American geography and diplomacy since the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. In the words of James Monroe in 1823, for example: "I consider Cape Florida and Cuba as forming the mouth of the Mississippi." Or those of John Quincy Adams in the same year, referring to Cuba and Puerto Rico: "These islands, from their local position, are natural appendages to the North American continent"—a conceit Jones later elaborated into an alternative version of natural history when he declared that the arc of Cuba's northern shore made it look "as though in some ancient period [it] had formed a part of the American continent, and had been severed on its north side from the Florida peninsula by the wearing of the Gulf stream."¹³

As much as contemporary authors tried to portray Cuba's importance as a natural fact of geography—cartographic common sense—the relevance of

the position of Cuba to the history of the United States and the Mississippi Valley was in fact a product of a specific moment in time and a particular combination of economic, political, and technological circumstances. The imperial politics that framed the Cuba question in the 1840s and 1850s pitted the imperial ambitions of Spain, Great Britain, and the United States against one another. The conventional wisdom of the day held that the Spanish Empire had been in decline since the eighteenth century, and that Spain's American possessions were destined to fall into the hands of the other imperial powers of the Americas. Thus, the fear that shadowed every declaration of the paramount importance of Cuba to the United States was the fear that the Spanish might be succeeded in Cuba by the British—by, that is to say, the United States' leading commercial rival and the Atlantic's leading exponent of abolition. In 1823, with the Monroe Doctrine, it became the official policy of the United States to oppose, by military force if necessary, the transfer of Cuba from Spain to any other imperial power. If the Monroe Doctrine is generally treated as a landmark in the history of nineteenth-century U.S. imperialism, from the perspective of actual nineteenth-century imperialists it left things very much in doubt. For whatever Monroe had declared in the 1820s, by the 1840s the Spanish Empire *was* more than a century into its decline, and the British were interested in Cuba. And it was a settled fact among the commercially minded slaveholders and merchant capitalists of the Mississippi Valley that there was a plan afoot to leverage the enormous Spanish debt in the hands of British bondholders into a cut-rate imperial purchase of Cuba.¹⁴

For expansion-minded Americans, whatever they thought about the proper means to the desired end, nagging doubts about the possibility of a British Cuba became pressing concerns in the late 1840s. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which ended the U.S.-Mexican War, transferred the territory occupied by the present-day states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, and California from Mexico to the United States. The question of whether or not this territory would enter the Union as slave or free sparked a national debate over slavery that was only partly resolved by the Compromise of 1850. The proposed admission of California as a "free" state was represented by dissatisfied pro-slavery radicals (such as the future filibuster John Quitman, the governor of Mississippi) as an outright defeat: land for which

young Mississippians had given their lives was being transformed, by federal fiat, into an “abolition cordon” that would hem the slave states into the Southeastern quadrant of the continent.

Though Quitman stood ready in July 1850 to take the Mississippi militia to Santa Fe to fight the federal government, and in September 1850 to call for the secession of the slave states from the Union, cooler heads—not to mention the interests of the holders of bonds sold by the Republic of Texas at ten cents on the dollar and to be redeemed by the federal government at par—prevailed, and California entered the nation as a “free” state.¹⁵ Yet the question hardly ended there, for the formal incorporation of California into the union as a free state left unresolved the very real question of how the wealth of the West would flow. Whose hands would it pass through, and whose pockets would it fill? By a sort of physics of imperial energy, it was the outward-directed violence of the Mexican War that precipitated the convulsive crisis of 1850, and the resolution of that crisis, which subsequently turned the attention of the nation, the South, and especially the Mississippi River Valley, to Cuba.

AS ONE of the island’s most ardent American admirers put it, Cuba stood “like a warder in the entrance of the Gulf of Mexico . . . in a position to overawe the adjacent islands, and watch and defend all outside approaches to the Isthmus routes to the Pacific, while it guards the portals of the vast inland sea, the reservoir of the Mississippi and Mexican trade, the rendezvous of the California transit, and, what has not yet been duly heeded, the outlet of immense though new-born mineral wealth, which is yet to control the metal markets of Christendom.”¹⁶ Yet, as complicated as these imperialist reckonings of the geography of ships and markets were, there was more to metaphors like “overawe” and “defend” than simply an effort to find the route that would allow U.S. shippers to move the greatest number of goods with the least possible energy. The optical principles that transformed the island of Cuba—a piece of land in a body of water—into the “key of the Gulf” and the “leading question of the time” were codified in the nightmare scenarios proposed by any number of business- and expansion-minded American politicians and propagandists in the late 1840s and early 1850s.¹⁷ Richard Burleigh Kimball, for instance, forecast that “half a dozen steamers based in Cuba would enable Britain to execute the bold threat of her minister to ‘shut up the Gulf of Mexico, cut in twain the

commerce between it and the Atlantic states, and close the mouth of the Mississippi and its hundred tributaries to the trade and assistance of shipping and manufacturing states.” And not only that: it would put Britain in a position to control “the great highway to Mexico and South America, to Oregon, California, and the Pacific.” Would England or France allow the United States dominion over an island that “guarded the entrance of the Thames or the Seine?” asked Franklin Pierce’s secretary of state, Edward Everett, of the British ambassador.¹⁸

For those among the epigones of expansion who were slaveholders as well as capitalists and imperialists, these questions about imperial humiliations and deranged commercial flows unfolded into a truly apocalyptic vision. For them, British control of Cuba was the incubus of “Free Negroism” and race war. “From Cuba,” the New Orleans *Courier* prophesied in 1851, “there will shoot out sparks which will kindle a great conflagration throughout the South.”¹⁹ Cuba—as Mississippi Valley slaveholders were relentlessly reminded by their newspapers, periodicals, and politicians throughout the 1850s—was at the front door in a sense that went well beyond the figurative.²⁰

These fears, however, were more than balanced by the fantasies that seized the expansionists’ minds when they cast their eyes across their maps and read their magazines. It was apparently a principle of the pro-slavery, pro-expansionist press that unlocking the “Key of the Gulf” would lead to a profusion of wonders so singular that it could be described only by an author in the throes of protracted ecstasy. An article in *DeBow’s Review* entitled “Destiny of the Slave States” began by noting that \$200 million in gold was annually being added to the world’s money supply, and that the vast resources of California, Australia, and China had recently been released from their political bondage: “The Atlantic will be to the world what that Mediterranean was to the known world under the Antonies in Rome.” Seeking its rightful role, the United States needed only to cross a ninety-mile Rubicon, extending its reach across the Straits of Florida. “In the progress of the next fifty years, the commerce and trade that must concentrate upon the Gulf of Mexico will far exceed anything that man heretofore dreamed of in his wildest imaginations. The island of Cuba, for its central position and its great port of Havana, is the key to all this.”²¹ Apparently looking at the same map, Richard Kimball arrived at the same conclusion: “It is sufficient to look over the extensive valley of the Mis-

Mississippi to understand that the natural direction of its growth, the point of connection of its prodigious European commerce and of its rational defense[,] is Cuba.” Without a change of ownership, Cuba would restrict the Southern states as “a wall that divides and interrupts their manifest growth.” Kimball boldly predicted that the United States would “multiply and become more energetic to obtain her annexation in proportion as their own greatness increases and approaches the extreme South with their settlements, their arts, their wealth, their wants, and their glory.”²²

Despite their epic scope, these visions of the hydraulics of wealth and commerce were actually quite restrained in comparison to that put forward by pro-slavery imperialist Edward Pollard in his book *Black Diamonds*. Pollard seamlessly integrated the hemisphere: “Regarding the magnificent country of tropical America, which lies in the path of our destiny on this continent, we may see an empire as powerful and gorgeous as ever was pictured in our dreams of history. . . . It is an empire founded on military ideas; representing the noble peculiarities of Southern civilization.” Predicting the rise of a Southern empire “surpassing all empires of the age in the strength of its geographical position” to control global commerce and dominate the lucrative sugar and cotton trades—or perhaps just carried away by the magnificent spectacle of a passing steamboat—Pollard could scarcely contain himself. “What a splendid vision of empire! How sublime in its associations!”²³

If these visions seem a bit unmoored in their flights between past, present, and future, in their comparisons of the incommensurable—time speeding up and resolving itself into a sublime timelessness of historical inevitability, the dreams of the ancients compared to those of the moderns, and so on—it is because they are. And yet, evident in their extraordinary overstatements are the framing assumptions of imperial ambition that fired the minds of mid-century Southern (and Southern-sympathizing) expansionists, who incessantly reworked them—specifying, refining, amplifying, fancifying—and retailed them through their newspapers and periodicals to the men who would empty their pockets, forsake their families, and ultimately die in their pursuit: progress, commerce, slavery, and empire.

It was an axiom of the arguments made by pro-slavery imperialists that time was on their side. These spatial imaginings of commercial flows and imperial promise were undergirded by a set of arguments about history—arguments

that were less about any specific historical conjuncture than about the character of the historical process itself. These were arguments that, in the style of the slave market and the tent revival, took outward appearances to be evidence of inward essences, and thus sought to smoke out the eternal truths buried within what might appear from another perspective to be contingencies, coincidences, or even accidents. They were arguments framed by the words “destiny” and “providence”—words that, in the multiplicity of their usages, threaded together discussions of race, commerce, and religion and refashioned them into a potent nostrum that could transform the description of any given moment in time into an exercise in the divination of its underlying meaning.

One of the conceits of even the most moderate of American expansionists was that Spanish colonial rule in Cuba had simply run its course. One by one, the colonial possessions of Spain had either passed over to the control of other imperial powers (such as Trinidad, Florida, and Louisiana) or been revolutionized and republicanized (as with Peru, the Central American Republics, and Mexico)—events that were seen in the United States less as the vicissitudes of a specific empire under specific historical conditions than as evidence of the “spirit of the age.” That spirit was variously identified as “liberty,” “independence,” and “free commerce,” and its invocation served to mark the Spanish colonial government in Cuba as archaic, the United States’ commercial empire as emergent, and the succession of the former by the latter as inevitable. As the filibuster John Thrasher put it, at stake in Cuba was the choice between “the pathway of Progress and Liberty” and “European conservatism and the defenders of the divine right of kings.”²⁴

The framing characterization of Europe as past and the United States as present was informed by an axiom: the passage from the first to the second had been demonstrated as inevitable by the course of events. As Richard Kimball put it, “In the view of past history . . . considering the advance of the age in liberal sentiment, and in free institutions, regarding the inevitable progress of events, it cannot be held an unwise affirmation that Cuba must soon be lost to Spain. . . . There is a sense in which ‘manifest destiny’ becomes no longer a byword.” Or, according to James D. B. DeBow, “The possession of colonies, whatever might have been the fancies of other times, or even the results, is never likely again, in the notions of liberty, independence, and free commerce universally afloat to be of much advantage to the parent company. . . . In view

of these truths how remarkable and atrocious, then, must appear those arbitrary systems of colonial empire which the nations of the old world have so arrogantly put up.”²⁵

DeBow captured the accession of arguments about historical context—ideas about the situation of things at a given moment, the present—into a set of assertions about the character of history itself, the “certainties” and “truths” made evident by the flow of time. These were arguments that put themselves forward as observations, interventions in the present that masqueraded as descriptions, constructions of the character of time that were derived from its observable effects. They were, that is, arguments that had the virtue of portraying the positions they advocated as foregone conclusions as they sought to compel themselves into existence; fantasies of the future that, by presenting themselves as descriptions of the present, made it seem as if anyone who did not assent would be left behind in the past.

What seemed especially propitious about this “destiny” to its most radical, most militantly pro-slavery observer-advocates was that they had already traveled its path. They stood at the head of the procession of time, sending out filibuster adjutants to bring up the rear. For John Thrasher, “a single glance at history” was “sufficient to demonstrate [the] great truth” that it was the “mission” of the “brave and lion-hearted” among the American people to aid the Cubans in their effort “to imitate the labors of our fathers.” According to the principles of this account of time and history, invading Cuba and annexing it to the United States were not so much political actions as they were eschatological ones. Rather than happening in the present, in which there was a particular array of relations between Cuba and the United States, they represented a sort of reaching back in time to yank Cuba into the broad light of the present day—what Thrasher termed “the glorious and holy effort to elevate the people of Cuba to the plain of human freedom.”²⁶

One should not suppose that when a man like Thrasher spoke of “human freedom” or “liberty and the elevation of the masses,” he was talking about human freedom, liberty, or the elevation of the masses. Nor should one assume that when the supporters of annexation asked “What is a Cuban today?” and answered “A slave politically, morally, and physically,” or when they spoke of “the slavery and sufferings of Cuba,” they were talking about slaves or slavery.²⁷ Nothing of the kind. When it came time to specify what was wrong

with Spanish rule in Cuba, what made it a “tyranny” whose barbarity could best be conveyed through metaphors of slavery (or, alternatively, metaphors involving sharp metal objects and the soft tissue of colonial subjects), the proponents of Cuban “freedom” generally had in mind three things: preserving slavery, reducing the taxes paid by slaveholders and merchant capitalists, and promoting free trade between the United States and Cuba. Upon closer inspection, the version of “freedom” advocated by those who claimed to be its most ardent defenders turned out to be not some sort of absolute condition of human emancipation—“Freedom”—but a set of social relations characterized by the continued enslavement of the labor force, accompanied by a reduction of the prices of the things they consumed and produced.

It was the contention of many Creole Cubans (and an especial article of faith among those in favor of Cuba’s annexation to the United States) that the scarcely concealed continuation of the African slave trade to Cuba was contrary to the interests of the slaveholding class. According to this line of reasoning, the major financial beneficiary of the slave trade was the Spanish colonial captain general and his minions, who yearly pocketed hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes for overlooking the nominally illegal importation of African slaves, since the importation of African slaves to Cuba had been made officially illegal by a treaty between Spain and Great Britain in 1817. Whatever may have been the interest of any given slaveholder in purchasing a slave—an issue that was elided by the framing of the question as Spanish governors versus Creole slaveholders—the continued importation of African slaves was presented by its pro-slavery, pro-annexation critics as an artificial weight on the value of plantation holdings and slaves on the islands. “A Negro who could have been purchased for \$500 eight years ago is at present time to be had for \$300,” reported Kimball.²⁸

Kimball, writing in 1851, did not choose “eight years” as a random parameter over which to illustrate the decline in the value of property and slaves. For 1843 had marked the beginning of a series of revolts and revolt scares often collectively referred to as “La Escalera,” a reference to the ladders to which slaves were strapped while being tortured. In the view of slaveholders, the turmoil had demonstrated the perfidy of the British consul, David Turnbull (an abolitionist who was thought to have encouraged the slaves), as well as the inadequacy of the island’s Spanish government, which had empirically demon-

strated that it was not up to the task of maintaining pro-slavery order on the island.²⁹ In the aftermath of La Escalera, many Creole planters came to believe that independence from Spain and annexation to the United States would offer them the best protection from the threat of slave revolt. Indeed, they became convinced—and not without reason—that the island’s Spanish governors were using the threat of a revolt among the slaves to restrain their owners’ aspirations for independence. The government had let it be known among the planters that in the event of any military effort to gain independence, the Spanish might emancipate the slaves and arm them against their masters.³⁰ One Creole supporter of annexation termed the threat of a government-sponsored slave revolt as “the *most urgent cause*, if not the *principal*, which compels the Cubans to shake off the Spanish yoke and place themselves under the protection of the United States, where the Negroes *are not* an obstacle to the liberty or the political rights of the Americans; where the Negroes *are not* an instrument in the hands of the government to terrify and subjugate its citizens; where the Negroes *are not* an inexhaustible mine of taxes and contributions.”³¹

It took defenders of slavery little energy to connect the dots in the archipelago of fear. If it happened in Haiti, it could happen in Cuba, and if it happened in Cuba, it could happen in the Homeland; they repeated this *ad nauseam* as they gave hectoring speeches, trying to prod the complacency they saw all around them into agitated concern.³² In the propaganda of the late 1840s and early 1850s, the idea that Spain was using Cuba’s slaves to hold her citizens hostage was generally a minor-key theme in a larger rant about Spanish misrule. It was highlighted as an elementary aspect, but not treated as an exhaustive account of Spanish misrule—“the most urgent,” but not the “principal” dimension of Creole suffering. For, in those years, the argument that African slaves were the cause of Creole slavery generally was made by way of a discussion of the balance of payments.

IF A certain way of looking at a map of the Americas was characteristic of annexationism, that way of seeing was elevated to a pure form in the trade table. Indeed, what is interesting about James D. B. DeBow’s article on the “West Indies,” which argued that Spanish rule in the Americas was characterized by “rapacity, extortion, and blood,” is the fact that it contained very little gore and no maps at all—only columns and columns of commodities, prices,

and taxes. The tabulations had headings such as “Commerce of Cuba with all Nations,” “Articles of Import,” “Exports of Cuba,” “Values of Imports and Exports—Cuba,” “Tariff of Duties Adopted March 1, 1846,” “Cost and Expenses of Sugar Plantation.” They went on and on, at an average of almost one table per page in the fifteen or so pages DeBow devoted to Cuba.³³ These tables clarify what men like DeBow meant when they talked about Cuban “slavery.” They were referring to the fact that a half-million white Cubans annually paid \$12 million in taxes; that their foreign visitors were required to buy passports and pay bribes in order to move about the island; that Spanish ships were guaranteed unfair advantage in the export trade; that American exports were dutied into oblivion in favor of their inferior Spanish counterparts; that sugar planters in Cuba were staggering beneath the dual burden of high taxes and overpriced imports; that, in the words of the summary statement John Thrasher appended to his own succession of “self-evident” tables, “a moderate calculation demonstrates that the increased value of trade which would accrue to the merchants by a change to a liberal fiscal system in Cuba would not be less than *twenty-five millions of dollars*, or nearly one fifth of their present export trade.”³⁴ Cuba, in the optics of annexation, became visible as a set of forgone opportunities. In the trade tables, that is to say, space was reconstituted as a series of commercial flows.

And it was measured in dollars. Though DeBow included a short disquisition on “Spanish coins, weights, and measures,” and though he surely knew that one of the foremost existing U.S. commercial interests in Cuba was the ownership of merchant banks that managed planters’ foreign exchange, he represented everything—from the price that a Cuban sugar planter paid for a bushel of wheat to the duty paid on a ship of 300 tons in the port of Havana—in dollars and in the English imperial weights and measures used by the United States. This representational homogenization, which was standard practice among all of the expansionists, assimilated Cuban trade into American terms, wordlessly forwarding DeBow’s vision of a Cuba “unnaturally and arbitrarily separated” from the U.S. South.³⁵

The rendering of unnatural spatial separation in dollars, bushels, hogsheads, and imperial tons had a temporal correlate. For upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the dollar valuation of (lost) trade with Cuba allowed annexationists to do more than simply trace out some recent events in the eco-

conomic history of Cuba: it allowed them to represent the economy as a form of history itself. This remarkable work was accomplished through simple conditional statements that transformed the information provided by the trade table into a sort of natural history of the economy. In three pages forecasting the effects of the annexation of Cuba to the United States, for example, Richard Kimball used a dozen or so connective *woulds*, *coulds*, and *shoulds* to illustrate the distance (usually measured in dollars) between the present condition of things and the natural course of events (that is, free trade).³⁶ First traveling forward in time to estimate the business that “would” be done under a given set of circumstances, then coming back to the present and translating those (wholly hypothetical) sums into present liabilities and unemployed workers, Kimball used dollar values to measure the distance between present conditions and what he took to be the natural curve of economic development. Every day that the Spanish imposts remained in place represented a day lived behind the natural curve of historical development.

As useful as it was in revealing the path of historical progress, the trade table could also measure the course of historical decline. As DeBow put it when introducing a table headed “Exports from Hayti—1789, 1801–1841”: “The following table shows more than all language can the decline and fall of Hayti.” Similar tables illustrated the historical “decline” of the British and French West Indies as registered by post-emancipation reductions in the amount of sugar exported to the world market. The “decline” of Jamaica since emancipation was such that, DeBow coyly allowed, he had been given to understand by a correspondent that “with a single steamer, carrying one thousand men and one large gun incalculable mischief might be done ere the Queen’s troops could be brought under arms, or militia assembled. *But with five thousand men, the island, in spite of the most gallant defense must surrender.*”³⁷

As his gimlet-eyed glance at the strategic situation in Jamaica suggests, DeBow saw emancipation as less an accomplished historical fact than an ongoing “experiment,” wherever it occurred. It was a human-engineered intervention in a larger structure of causes and effects that had observable results—calculable results.³⁸ In Haiti and in the British and French West Indies, DeBow saw the revealed principles of the natural history of “the African” under conditions of emancipation. “The African,” he wrote, “has been the same in all ages

and all circumstances, with the identical characteristics in the cane fields of Cuba as four thousand years ago on the streets of Thebes!" Under conditions of slavery, "they have flourished . . . and become civilized and useful"; emancipated, "they degenerate back to barbarism." Which was another way of saying, at least in part, that "they" didn't work hard enough: "they simply cultivate what they require for present support"; their desires are "gross and sensual, satisfy these and [they] will bask in the sun and doze away life in stupid insensibility."³⁹ In the neat, seemingly objective columns of his trade tables, DeBow found a tool that converted the economic effects of a series of decisions made by freedpeople about how to organize their lives and priorities after emancipation into a set of assertions about race and history.

In this natural history of emancipation, Haiti served as the organizing metaphor. As DeBow himself put it, "Hereafter when we speak of Hayti we shall refer, with full particulars to all movements on behalf of the African—Sierra Leone and Liberia, colonization, and abolition."⁴⁰ In a formulation that later came to override all other framings of the questions (at least among pro-slavery Southerners), DeBow cast Cuba at the juncture of two possible histories. On the one side, there was Haiti, represented through images of Negroes turned "wild beasts" and "monsters," sugar plantations gone to ruin, and exports declined to nil. On the other, there was the Natural Order of Things, Negro slaves "engaged in raising the peculiar products for which they only seem to be fitted." For DeBow, the history of slavery provided a map of the surface features of the progress of a deeper sort of history: "I am so fashioned . . . as to decide, beyond one question, the propriety of the existence of slavery from the fact that it *has* existed *in* certain people from the remotest periods of time, not only without resistance but with ready acquiescence."⁴¹ Pro-slavery imperialism, DeBow was arguing, was right on the face of it. Like confidence in the capacity of money to represent value, or faith in the prescriptive authority of biblical prophecy, belief in DeBow's version of pro-slavery imperialism had the wonderful feature of calling itself into real material being.

Perhaps it was an unspoken fear among annexationists that their prophetic pro-slavery might turn out to have no more substance than an unbacked bill or a deathbed conversion that led them to seek a final proof of the revealed truth of their visionary schemes in the uncontestable materiality of the Mississippi River itself. In the words of one such exegete, Senator Andrew Butler:

Shall the great Mississippi, after mingling with its own the waters of the Missouri, the Ohio, and thousand other tributary streams—after impelling onward along its majestic course productions of all kinds, wealth, commerce, and population, so many signs of the mighty approach of a new, great, and enterprising civilization—shall the Mississippi, I say, while expanding its waters in the wide gulf, announce to the democracy of the world that the advantages and the glory of American institutions will not pass forward—that the Queen of the Antilles, fertile, and great, and capable of presenting similar development of productions and well-being, will stand in the way as a check to the powerful impetus?

The answer to that version of the question was, of course, clear enough: “Why, sir, you might as well attempt to stop the progress of the Mississippi with a bundle of hay, as to stop the progress of American influence on this continent.” Or, in a formulation with a bit more metaphorical consistency—perhaps drawn from the ongoing effort to use nets to stabilize the banks at the river’s mouth: “As well you might attempt to turn the angry wave of the Mississippi by stretching wickerwork across it.”⁴² For the promoters of annexation, the irresistible force of the Mississippi symbolized the gathered power of the emergent tendencies of historical development—white man’s republicanism, free trade, and institutionalized slavery—which made it both crucial and inevitable that Americans, and particularly Southerners, would turn their attention to taking over Cuba.

As useful as it was in providing a seemingly natural figure for the free-trade, pro-slavery, imperialism-as-history ideology of annexation, the Mississippi of which these men spoke was not, strictly speaking, a force of nature alone. Though endlessly proclaimed by the Valley’s mercantile boosters, the Mississippi’s “natural advantages” were actually produced out of the interface of the environment with human aspiration and activity. William L. Hodge made that much clear when he contemplated the marvelous commercial bounty arriving every day on the levee in New Orleans. In addition to cotton, sugar, and molasses, Hodge’s list included flour, pork, bacon and hams, beef, tobacco, whisky, corn, oats, wheat, lard, butter, lead, shot, hemp, castor oil, linseed and lard oil, hides, bagging, bale rope, apples, potatoes, onions, flaxseed, cheese, coal, hay, lumber, staves, furs and peltries of all kinds, soap, candles, beeswax,

beans, peas, beer, ale, feathers, honey, lime, white lead, glass, and so on. Hodge's vision of the domain of New Orleans stretched northward to the headwaters of the Mississippi, westward along the Missouri, and eastward along the Ohio—a commercial empire of tangled tributaries draining the vast wealth of the interior of the continent and funneling it toward New Orleans, where it could be shipped along the coast and exported to Europe. It was an empire of flatboats, steamboats, and of course “immense exchange operations,” representing in its enormous sunk costs, inflexible transportation infrastructure, and centralized mouth-of-the-river financial sector an ossified version of the boomtime slavery and cotton economy of the early 1830s.

Even as Hodge forecast that it would be only a few years before New Orleans overtook New York as a commercial center, he realized that the Mississippi system was losing trade to the canals and railroads that “joined the West to the Atlantic board.” But these “artificial” channels could never rival “natural” ones, he insisted. They would freeze more easily in the winter than waters which naturally ebbed and flowed, and, besides, they were subject to taxes and tolls that did not exist on the Mississippi.⁴³ By the early 1850s, opinion among the mercantile class in New Orleans was not so sanguine. Between the trading season of 1847–1848 and that of 1850–1851, receipts of Western goods in the port of New Orleans dropped precipitously: bacon by a third, flour and beef by a quarter, lard by almost a half, corn and pork by almost two-thirds. Wharfage rates along the levee dropped by a third in the same period. And it wasn't only the Western trade. Cotton from Tennessee and Alabama was going by rail to Charleston and Savannah. “The New Orleans trade to Northern Alabama is almost entirely gone and East Tennessee is rapidly going. But a short time ago all the cotton in the Tennessee Valley came to New Orleans,” lamented the New Orleans *Commercial Bulletin* in March 1851. The “completion of the Memphis and Charleston railroad will take from the commerce of New Orleans at least 300,000 bales of cotton,” forecast the *Daily Delta* in June, within days of the sale of the newspaper to support the venture to Cuba that was being organized in New Orleans by General Narciso López.⁴⁴

The reoriented flow of Western goods—and cotton!—eastward rather than southward represented a shift in the nation's commercial geography as profound as it was potentially ominous for the mercantile and financial sectors in New Orleans. Recounted most famously by Mark Twain in his elegiac *Life on*

the Mississippi, this shift has often been represented as a technological one—from the steamboat to the railroad—which it surely was. But in addition to being a technological fact, this reorientation of transportation and trade—this reorganization of the spatial relation of east and west, north and south—was a financial fact. Taken together, New York banks were capitalized at a level four times greater than that of their New Orleans counterparts. New York merchants could thus extend credit at lower rates and for longer terms than those in New Orleans—a huge advantage in agricultural economies dependent on yearly outlays of credit.⁴⁵ And another relevant fact, known to anyone who has ever pored over the rate tables in the post office trying to get a certain package to a certain place for a certain price: the calculation of haulage is always a matter of dollars and cents, as well as of miles and means. In the words of Matthew Maury, “The mere statement of distance to be saved does not enable one to judge correctly as to the relative merits of . . . two routes. Time and expense are the true arguments to consider.” In addition to capital solidified in the form of railroads and canals, it was capital in its liquid form—advances and loans—that was determining the flows of goods and payments which were transforming the commercial space of the United States by bringing the West closer to the East.⁴⁶

Seen in this light, the expansionist program of the early 1850s was an effort to find a revitalizing (spatial) fix for the problems facing an economy that was overinvested in land, slaves, and steamboats. It would allow the South once more to assert dominion over the commerce of the West and to revitalize the Mississippi as a north-to-south axis of trade and prosperity. The *New Orleans Crescent* was an enthusiastic supporter: “The trade between Cuba and the West would be increased ten-fold. Just think, when the duty of ten dollars on each barrel of flour is taken off how much greater will be the consumption. The independence of Cuba will be felt on the threshing floors of Minnesota.” And that was only the beginning of the story. In an article in *DeBow’s Review*, Samuel Walker offered a luminous vision of the future: “What wealth will float upon our waters! What a bright gem will ‘The Queen on the Antilles’ be in the coronet of the South, and how proudly will she wear it. A splendid prospect of commercial eminence open to the South!” The Gulf of Mexico would be the century’s Mediterranean: “All that and more, too, than the Mediterranean is to Europe, Africa, and Asia, this sea is to America and the world.” And New

Orleans: “the Alexandria, as Havana would be the Constantinople of our empire—far mightier and more extensive than the Roman.” “It is not too much to say that if we hold Cuba in the next fifty years we will hold the destiny of the richest and most increased commerce that ever dazzled the cupidity of man. And with that commerce we can make the public opinion of the world.”⁴⁷ With Cuban markets open to the vast produce of the Mississippi Valley, with the wealth of the Pacific and the Amazon meeting the markets of the Atlantic in the Gulf of Mexico, with slavery proven ascendant over abolition, with free trade triumphant over colonial despotism, with the Queen of the Antilles rightfully subordinated to “King Progress,” with Castilians yielding to Anglo-Saxons, and with New Orleans merchants and factors presiding over it all, the Mississippi might have another run.

Taken together, these visions of Mississippian empire provide a map to a future that never came to pass. It envisioned a “free” Cuba—detached from Spain, protected from Great Britain, possibly annexed by the United States—that would gather in, distribute, and multiply the wealth of Pacific, the Atlantic, the Mississippi, and the Amazon in a vortex of unimaginable riches. Such a Cuba would ensure the precedence of American destiny over European history on the North American continent. A free Cuba would advance the cause of slavery in the Americas, sealing its triumph over the threat of British abolition and the counterhistory represented by the revolution in Haiti, thrusting U.S. slaveholders to the leading edge of progress in the “commercial history of the world” and securing its Southern frontier against abolitionist encirclement.⁴⁸ And a free Cuba would revitalize the Mississippi Valley’s great commercial artery and its imperial city, drawing the trade unnaturally diverted to the north and east by commercial artifice back to its natural pathway toward the sea. These Mississippi dreamers imagined a wholesale reconfiguration of commercial and political space, a realignment of the map in the image of the emergent historical principles of white man’s republicanism, free trade, and pro-slavery values, and the *imperium* of New Orleans. Cuba was the key to unlocking it all.

Given the ideologies of space and time that framed the thinking of nineteenth-century expansionists, it should come as no surprise that the question they posed about Cuba was not *if* but *when*. Or, more to the point, *how*. John Quincy Adams wrote that “Cuba, forcibly disjointed from its own un-

natural connection with Spain and incapable of self-support, can gravitate only towards the North America union, which by the same laws of nature cannot cast her from its bosom.” Similarly, John C. Calhoun assured one of the members of the Club de la Havana that “as the pear, when ripe, falls by the law of gravity into the lap of the husbandman, so will Cuba eventually drop into the lap of the Union.” Still, they apparently remained agnostic about the question of whether anyone should shake the tree, or how hard it should be shaken.⁴⁹

Even among the broad spectrum of Americans and expatriate Cubans who agreed that Cuba would (and should) soon be liberated from Spanish rule, there were serious differences of opinion between those who thought the goal should be Cuban independence and those who supported Cuba’s annexation to the United States. Within the latter group, furthermore, there were deep divisions over what were seen by most as mutually antagonistic paths toward an agreed-upon endpoint. While some favored acquiring Cuba through purchase or other diplomatic means—an *idée fixe* and official policy of almost every American president from George Washington to Abraham Lincoln—others favored military action, either by U.S. forces as a logical and necessary response to British military action in the hemisphere or by extranational renegades like Narciso López, who would unsettle politics on the island and invade it under a “free flag.” The latter scenario was less a representation of any existing national sovereignty than a hope of conjuring one into being.

Though there were any number of permutations of the politics of annexationism, through the 1840s and 1850s the basic framing of the question pitted the federal government against the filibusters. In varying degrees, presidents Polk, Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan all tried to maintain stable diplomatic relations with Spain, most of them in the hope that by so doing they could gain the island by purchasing it for something around the \$100 million proposed by then secretary of state James Buchanan in 1848. What one historian termed the “inglorious effort” to purchase the island, however, was beset by the tragicomic character of American diplomacy (one American minister to Spain, North Carolinian Romulus Saunders, spoke neither Spanish nor French; another, Louisianan Pierre Soulé, killed the French ambassador in a duel on the way to his mission, and openly conspired with republican revolutionaries once he had arrived) and by the apparently unbelievable or at least unacceptable fact that no one in the Spanish government seemed very inter-

ested in selling Cuba to the United States. (The possible exception was the Queen Mother, who had made a lot of bad investments, needed money, and was rumored by Soulé to have a more-than-passing fondness for a certain . . . Soulé.)⁵⁰ All of this was a source of apparently unendurable gall to the coalition of American merchant capitalists, slaveholders, and frustrated Cuban expatriates who, by 1850, had come to focus their hopes on simply doing the job themselves. While, over the years, there had been a whole history of backstage collusions, tricks, and betrayals between the federal government and the filibusters (most notably President Polk's decision to retail his advance knowledge of López's 1848 conspiracy to the Spanish as a gesture of goodwill in advance of an anticipated purchase), the basic issue framing the question was this: it was a federal crime to invade Cuba from the United States.

The Neutrality Act of 1818 made it illegal to raise a private army in New Orleans or New York and then invade Cuba. It represented an effort by the United States government to consolidate its control of the territory over which it claimed sovereignty. Rather than chasing after the various frontier land speculators and Indian haters and putting out the fires they had started, and rather than being dragged into wars with the other imperial powers of the Americas over causes that were particular to one region or one class of citizens, the government in 1818 had legislated a spatial uniformity of foreign policy. Thereafter it became a crime "within the territory or jurisdiction" of the United States for any person to "begin or set on foot, or provide or prepare the means for, any military expedition or enterprise, to be carried on from thence against the territory or dominions of any foreign prince or state, or of any colony, district, or people, with whom the United States are at peace."⁵¹ One did not have to agree with the foreign policy of the United States, but to organize contrary to its dictates within the United States became a crime.

By outlawing the organization of military expeditions against countries with which the United States was at peace, the U.S. government hoped to make it possible for *the* nation to have *a* foreign policy—the latter lending a new sort of solidity and coherence to the former. The Neutrality Act, that is, asserted that diplomacy was the arena where *nations*, rather than ethnic groups or religions or classes, confronted one another. And in maintaining that "the nation" was the subject of diplomacy, the act stipulated that the foreign policy of the United States operated uniformly across the length and breadth of its territo-

rial sovereignty. No class or region within the United States could pursue an independent foreign policy by force of arms. Over the course of the late 1840s and early 1850s, this homogenization of the national space in the image of international relations was increasingly out of step with the arguments being put forward by annexationists, who envisioned space (and national greatness) through the prism of class interest and political economy, rather than national sovereignty and diplomacy. Thus it was that the filibusters kept finding themselves in court.

In the end, it was the spatial character of the Neutrality Act that provided the filibusters with an opening to challenge (or evade) it. Their strategy was to exploit the fact that the act defined allegiance in territorial terms rather than personal ones, and they would accomplish this by doing—or at least pretending to do—their organizing offshore. López's 1850 attack on the city of Cárdenas (the fourth of his five efforts to "liberate" Cuba from Spanish control) provided both the consummate expression and—when the invasion failed and its organizers were hauled before a federal judge in New Orleans—the legal precedent for filibuster readings of the Neutrality Act. Though it was an open secret that the hundreds of Kentuckians who began to gather in New Orleans in April 1850 were on their way to Cuba, the story they told was that they were on their way to California, and when they boarded the *Georgiana* they did so with tickets stamped for Chagres—the point of debarkation for the Panamanian crossover to the Pacific. The *Georgiana* then traveled downriver to Balize—the town at the mouth of the Mississippi that marked the outer reach of the territorial boundary of the United States—where she was loaded with muskets and ammunition, and from there to an island off the coast of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, where López would finally take command. The *Susan Lord*, which carried a regiment of Louisianans, followed a similar course, departing New Orleans for Chagres, and changing course only after the mission's proto-commander had theatrically opened a letter from López, upon which were written directions that it remain sealed until the ship had reached twenty-six degrees north by eighty-seven degrees west, at which point the men were given their orders and their arms, and the "free flag of Cuba" was run up the mast.⁵²

As with the other missions under López's command, the legalistic precision

of the plan was marred in execution by navigational haphazardness and disension in the ranks. The rendezvous off the coast of Mexico was delayed for several days because the *Georgiana* could not fight through the prevailing winds to the appointed island. Short of provisions, long on time to think, and disillusioned with the inscrutability of a plan to invade Cuba which was seemingly being sidetracked by the commanders' inability to secure a beachhead on an undefended island in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico, the crew began to plot to take the *Georgiana* by force of arms and sail her back to New Orleans. López's just-in-time arrival on the scene helped to restore enough of a sense of purpose and military discipline to get most of the men back into their ranks, and the mission back on its way to Cuba aboard López's ship, the *Creole*, though several dozen deserters remained behind on the island of Contoy. Many of these last had apparently been involved in a too-clever-by-half double-cross of their filibuster commanders. Knowing that the ship was eventually bound for Cuba, they had nonetheless assumed that she was actually traveling by way of Chagres, where they had planned to jump ship and continue on to California.

After several days at sea, the *Creole* ran aground on the way into the harbor at Cárdenas, spoiling whatever element of surprise remained after several weeks of seemingly aimless cruising around the Gulf; but the men nonetheless disembarked. They fought a brief skirmish, took several Spanish officials hostage, retreated in the face of a superior Spanish force arriving to reinforce the village, and reboarded the *Creole*, only to run aground again on the way out of the harbor. They then threw overboard much of their baggage, including arms and ammunition, in an effort to refloat the boat, and, having done so, promptly refused López's command to attempt another landing, at Mantua. They voted instead to head directly for Key West, and the relative safety of the territorial sovereignty of the United States.⁵³

THE CÁRDENAS conspiracy trials took place in Federal District Court in New Orleans during December 1850 and January 1851. In addition to López, the indictment named fifteen co-conspirators, including Laurent Sigur, the annexationist editor of the *Daily Delta*; John O'Sullivan, the tirelessly expansionist editor of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* and inven-

tor of the phrase “manifest destiny”; John Quitman, the sitting governor of Mississippi; and John Henderson, López’s lawyer and an ardent annexationist in his own right. Henderson’s case was the first tried.

Henderson’s defense was a mixture of litigious constitutionalism, tactical misremembering, and outright extralegal intimidation. The last of these was perhaps most obvious to the citizens of New Orleans who made up the jury. They were surely aware that the grand jury proceedings that had led to the indictments in the case had been accompanied by several days of raucous street celebrations, enthusiastically received speeches by López about his cause, receptions with “mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters of patriotic men,” marches by the Masons and the Sons of Temperance, collective renditions of the “Star Spangled Banner,” and many, many toasts (except among the aforementioned Sons, of course). Through their control of the streets, López’s supporters asserted that there was something out of place in the federal prosecution of a man who was increasingly portrayed in local newspapers and toasted at local saloons as a hero. While few disputed that New Orleans was formally under the dominion of the United States, the fact that federal sovereignty had to be exercised over an attenuated administrative structure and through the agency of men—especially jurymen, but also court officers, customs officials, and marshals—who were unsympathetic to the prosecution threatened to reduce the expansive claims of the Neutrality Act to what the historian Tom Chaffin has called “a paper sovereignty.”⁵⁴

But whatever the seemingly foreordained outcome, a trial was still necessary; indeed, it was perhaps relished by the defendant, who used it as an opportunity to posture, preen, parse, and prevaricate before the assembled and admiring local and national press. Henderson’s case was a set of variations—some brazenly disingenuous, some hairsplittingly precious—on a theme: the inability of federal sovereignty asserted by the Neutrality Act to assert itself over the inner recesses of the human head. It was, that is, a refutation of the Neutrality Act’s putative spatial authority from the standpoint of phenomenological psychology—the idea that the question of the independent existence of anything should be subordinated to considerations of human awareness of things.

Hazy memories were the first line of defense. The harbormaster at Lafayette, who had seen the *Creole* loaded, remembered the label on the barrels

of pork that were carried on board, but was vague about whether or not he had seen any arms (or even any people) coming onto the ship. Laurent Sigur averred that he could not remember where it was that López was always telling people he was going—even in public speeches for which Sigur himself had served as the translator.⁵⁵ The mysteries of recollection, however, were a temporary refuge for the participants in an event as richly reported and as essentially dependent on publicity as a filibustering expedition to Cuba, and the facts in question were more or less agreed upon. To wit: that the *Creole* had sailed from New Orleans with men, arms, ammunition, and General López on board; that she had joined the *Georgiana* and the *Susan Lord* somewhere in the Gulf; and that the “organization” of López’s followers for “a military expedition to Cuba, there to commence a revolution,” had indeed occurred—though *where* it had occurred remained in dispute.⁵⁶

The central element of Henderson’s defense was a highly abstract and legalistic parsing of the terms of the Neutrality Act—a strategy designed to complicate the question of what could be said to have occurred when and (crucially under the terms of the act) where. “What *is* a military expedition or enterprise?” “What is ‘carrying on’ such an expedition . . . from the United States?” “What shall be said to constitute its ‘beginning’ or ‘setting on foot’?” “How could four men begin a plan simultaneously? . . . The word ‘begin’ means to originate, and the same idea could not originate in four minds at the same time.”⁵⁷ And so on. The point, of course, was to muddy the issue of the relationship between the intention and the actuation of the event in question, to the point that whatever it was that had happened could be supposed to have happened outside the “territory or jurisdiction of the United States.”

Put another way, the strategy was to transmogrify the question of action into one of intention. How could it be said for certain what the men who had left New Orleans aboard the *Creole*, the *Georgiana*, and the *Susan Lord* thought about where they were going and what they were doing? How, indeed, could it be said that even men who had boarded those boats knowing there was a chance they would be commissioned as officers, organized as soldiers, or invade Cuba had actually been “organized” as “an expedition,” rather than simply being a group of loosely affiliated people who might or might not have been thinking the same things about Cuba at the same time? And how could it be said for certain that any of the intersubjective headwork that would actually

constitute “organizing” or “setting on foot” had occurred in New Orleans, rather than on Contoy—especially given that some aboard those ships had apparently really intended to go to California? How could it be said that money provided to people who ultimately invaded Cuba was actually a “means” to that invasion, rather than to some other end?⁵⁸ Or, as John Quitman, another of those indicted as a co-conspirator, asked in a letter to a friend, what was the problem with lending a little money to some “personal friends” who might (or might not) have been planning to invade Cuba at the time? How could a man be held responsible for what his erstwhile money went on to do in the future?⁵⁹ While it must have been tedious to listen to this heady admixture of spatial frame-shifting, pious phenomenology, and financial Pilatism, it was apparently enough to raise a reasonable doubt of Henderson’s guilt, at least in the federal district of New Orleans. After failing to gain a conviction in three separate trials, the government finally gave up on *United States v. John Henderson*.

As Henderson was probing the mysteries of consciousness in New Orleans, several hundred miles north, in Jackson, Mississippi, another of the Cárdenas conspirators—John Quitman—was working his way through a knotty series of questions about federal power and states’ “rights.” At the time of his indictment in the federal district court, Quitman was the governor of Mississippi. And he was not just any governor: during the tumultuous debates over the Compromise of 1850, he had been among the most vociferous proponents of Southern secession; he had, indeed, considered leading the Mississippi militia to fight the federal government in Santa Fe.⁶⁰ For Quitman, the order to appear in court posed a dilemma in the following terms: “As a citizen, it was plain and clear I must yield to the law, however oppressive and unjust in my case, but as chief magistrate of a sovereign state, I had also in charge her dignity, her honor, her sovereignty, which I could not permit to be violated in my person.” Quitman and his supporters ascribed great meaning to the delivery of his body to the courthouse in New Orleans: it meant that federal sovereignty, the uniform jurisdictional space asserted by the Neutrality Act, trumped states’ rights—the idea that the United States was not a single political space, but an uneven patchwork of sovereign states. Though many of his friends advised him to resist and thus “precipitate a collision between the federal and state authorities,” Quitman decided in February 1851 to resign his position as governor of Mississippi and face the court in New Orleans.⁶¹

Like López, Quitman was treated as a hero in New Orleans: serenaded in the streets, invited to fine dinner parties with the city's leading men, surrounded (at least according to his own account) by "roguish young ladies" at a masked ball, and summoned for a private audience with Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale, who was then performing in the city.⁶² When, in the aftermath of the third hung jury in Henderson's case, the U.S. attorney in New Orleans entered writs of *nolle prosequi* against all of those charged in connection with the attack on Cárdenas (indicating that the government would not seek to try the case a fourth time), Quitman promised his supporters an "exposé" of the entire affair. In the event, however, he was a bit less than forthcoming, failing to mention what he had known for months: that even as they were standing trial in New Orleans, López, Henderson, Sigur, and others were planning another assault on Cuba.

I 2

The Material Limits of “Manifest Destiny”

Cuba is already ours. I feel it in my fingers' ends.

—James Buchanan, Letter to John H. Clayton, April 12, 1849

After this, the Expedition cannot be said to have had any military existence.

—Colonel Louis Schlesinger, “Personal Narrative of Louis Schlesinger
of Adventures in Cuba and Ceuta”

ON THURSDAY the twenty-first of August 1851, somewhere in the mountains of western Cuba, during a break in the rain, General Narciso López ate his horse. “Roasted.” With “some corn and wild plantains.” When he had left New Orleans aboard the steamboat *Pampero*, three weeks earlier, thousands of supporters had turned out to cheer him and his small army of American adventurers, Cuban expatriates, and European revolutionaries as they began a mission that many believed would determine the future of New Orleans, the Mississippi River Valley, the United States, and even the world. On the first day of September, thousands more, though not supporters this time, would watch the general die. On the orders of the Cuba’s Spanish colonial captain general, López would be bound to a chair in the middle of a square in Havana and garroted: an adjustable metal collar would be placed around his neck and gradually constricted. As it closed, the collar would occlude and perhaps crush his windpipe, and drive the base of his tongue upward into his throat. The closing off of his air supply and the rising level of carbon dioxide in his blood would cause him to experience a sensation of intense anxiety before he lost

consciousness, his heart racing in a desperate effort to reoxygenate his blood. The blockage of his jugular vein would close off the drainage of blood from his head, causing his face to turn blue and swell and his eyes to swim forward out of their sockets. It would take the general several agonizing minutes to die.¹

These things can be taken too far, of course, but if you were looking for a way to exemplify Marx's famous proposition that history happens twice—the first time as tragedy, the second as farce—it would be hard to find a story more apt than that of Narciso López's effort to realize the Jeffersonian dream of a Mississippian empire by invading Cuba in 1851. For in the summer of that year, Americans heard the electrifying news that the Creoles in Puerto Príncipe (today Camagüey, in the central part of the island) were in revolt. Amid the din of "conflicting accounts from the interior of Cuba" which "kept the public mind divided between hope and fear," López turned his energies to collecting enough young men, arms, ammunition, and money to support him on what would turn out to be his final mission.²

The process by which López and his supporters transformed a set of abstract propositions about the natural course of Cuban history into the terrible materiality of an expedition aiming to actualize that history by force of arms began with a bond issue (the great dream-realizing machine of the Revolutionary generation). In contrast to the Spanish government he was planning to overthrow, López had the distinct disadvantage of lacking a tax base on which he could rely for funds. And so, to fund his expeditions, his supporters sold the future in the form of obligations offered "on behalf of the people of Cuba, by whatever designation of nationality, or form of body politic they shall hereafter assume." The bonds were guaranteed (at 6 percent interest) by the authority of "General Narciso López, Chief of 'the Patriotic Junta for the Promotion of the Political Interests of Cuba' . . . and the contemplated head of the Provisional Government," and were payable in "the public lands and public property of Cuba . . . and the fiscal resources of the people and the government of Cuba." The certificates were embossed with an engraving of the coat of arms of the provisional government, flanked by the flag of the United States and the "free flag of Cuba," and they generally sold at anywhere between ten and (it was rumored among supporters) forty cents on the dollar.³ Through the bond issue, belief in the possibility of success was converted into a condi-

tion of possibility for the attempt: the ideology of “manifest destiny” was transformed into the materiality of a real invasion through the magic of fictitious capital—money paid in advance for a stake in something that did not yet exist.

All told, López, his supporters, and his successors sold millions of dollars (face value) of this moonshine, much of it to hardcore supporters like John Henderson, who had already paid out almost \$20,000 at the time of the bungled Cárdenas invasion, and who was apparently, as ever, unrepentant. “I am under the *extremest* burdens from my endeavors on the former occasion. Indeed, I find my cash advance for the first experiment was *over half* of all cash advanced to the enterprise,” he wrote to John Quitman in the fall of 1850. “I *feel* it incumbent on us who have once failed to retrieve ourselves from so much opprobrium and reproach as defeat has cast upon us. . . . With unabated zeal, therefore, I present the project to your consideration for further pecuniary assistance.”⁴ Henderson’s response to the defeat at Cárdenas, which might (to a lesser man—a less *confident* man) have made the project of filibusterizing Cuba seem a bit implausible, was to believe even harder, and to challenge his friends to do the same. Indeed, he suggested that it was not just the lost chance of a few thousand dollars of clear profit that needed to be redeemed by further investment, but also the reputations of the men who had been involved in the enterprise. In a very compressed form and at a very high rate of promised return, Henderson’s synthesis of personal credibility and expeditionary creditworthiness forecast the terms of the pitch that would be made to thousands of would-be filibusters all over the country (but especially in New Orleans) in the summer of 1851.

The process of building faith in the possibility of success—enough faith to raise an army of young men who would serve under López in another attempt on Cuba—began with the annexationist press. Almost as soon as the revolt in Puerto Príncipe began, hyperbolic stories began to appear in John O’Sullivan’s New York *Sun* and Laurence Sigur’s New Orleans *Delta*: “The revolution of Cuba has changed its chrysalis for a full grown fly. The first blood has been spilled. Cuba, some think, has had her Lexington. . . . The Spanish troops are scattered all over the island and cannot with facility be concentrated. P.S.—4 P.M.—Letters from Principe state that the troops are deserting in squads to the insurgents. Two steamers leave tomorrow with reinforce-

ments. A rumor is about town that Trinidad will rise tomorrow." Although there was plenty of news coming out of Cuba which indicated that the rebellion in Príncipe had been put down almost immediately, these were generally discounted in the annexationist press as Spanish misinformation was spread in the hope of discouraging American intervention.⁵

The process by which information about a rumored conspiracy took material form as a recruiting effort for an actual conspiracy was far murkier. One of López's filibusters later recalled rumors of a shadowy, well-connected annexationist junta that "consisted in part of wealthy exiled Cubans and the remainder of some of our most prominent and influential men, whose names if made public would startle the public." Secretly funneling millions of dollars into the conspiracy, "this Junta had its secret agents all over the country. . . . These were quietly and industriously engaged in gathering and selecting men of known strength, courage, and intelligence for the enterprise." Into Southern cities like New Orleans—or was it Jacksonville?²—"men and munitions were being daily and quietly transferred . . . under the command of an experienced and skillful General who had already acquired a wide and enduring fame in the revolutionary struggles of Central America and whose very name was a guarantee of success." As it surfaced, news of the expedition contributed to a curious mixture of stagey secrecy and brazen attempts to organize an illegal expedition in plain sight of the federal government. Dark insinuations about spies, conspiracies, and the hidden purposes of the powerful gradually unfolded into practical instructions about how to join, hints about who was in charge, and bold predictions of certain victory.⁶

The now-you-see-it-now-you-don't tone of the coverage in annexationist papers like the *Delta* reflected the particular dilemma faced by expedition organizers: they needed broad-based support for their mission if it was to succeed, but they could not simply go around cold-calling donors and soldiers, because that was illegal. Mounting a coded recruitment campaign in the newspapers was a risky strategy, leaving the expedition vulnerable to the Spanish spies who were allegedly tracking its progress and to the federal agents who were supposed to be guarding the ports. But it was also an extremely effective way to get the word out that a plan was afoot and that the details were available to those who would seek them out.⁷ Indeed, the play of surface and depth framing these ostensibly informational articles was an important aspect of

their allure. Continually calling attention to what they were withholding, they tempted their target readers to try to guess more, hailing them as men resourceful enough, discerning enough, inquiring enough—manly enough—to follow the text’s riddles into the shadowy world that was apparently so close at hand. They promised the uninitiated and the disenfranchised a chance to peer into the hidden workings of things—the secret schemes of great men, the backstory of tomorrow’s news. To men who worked on the margins of the cotton economy—the leftovers and lower-order functionaries of the great work of the day like the clerks, bricklayers, druggists, farmers, butchers, confectioners, and boatmen who eventually joined López’s army and went to Cuba—these articles must have seemed like an invitation to help make the history they would otherwise just be reading about.⁸

So galvanic was the news from Cuba and so titillating the intelligence of the fitting-out of an expedition, that the annexationist press was able to frame the terms of debate over the Cuba question, and in the process siphon off for its own purposes a portion of the energy used in arguing against the invasion. No matter how frequently and convincingly newspapers like the Louisiana *Courier* or the New Orleans Spanish-language daily *La Union* presented the case that the news of a revolution in Cuba was at best exaggerated and at worst pure hokum; no matter how passionately and eloquently they argued that invading Cuba would make the eventual annexation of the island less rather than more likely, and at the same time make the prospect of a slave revolt there more rather than less likely; no matter how forcefully they insisted that an invasion would cause a war with Great Britain which would devastate the commercial economy of the Mississippi Valley, or that it was against the laws of the nation, of nature, of God, and so on—they had still been drawn into a public conversation about Cuba. By reporting about it right alongside accounts of the ships coming and going along the levee in New Orleans, the latest drunken brawl on St. Louis Street, the falling price of cotton on the Exchange, and the advertisements describing runaway slaves, the newspapers had tacitly acceded to the proposition that Cuba was a part of the here and now in New Orleans. They had unwittingly, perhaps even unavoidably, participated in making the idea of invading Cuba thinkable.⁹

When the timeless propositions of expansionist thinkers like DeBow and Kimball were reframed as the issues of the moment by the newspapers, the last

steps in the process of transforming a set of tendentious arguments about Cuba (the imagined vessel of the unfolding history of free trade, slaveholding, and white man's republicanism) into an invasion of Cuba (the real place) was accomplished by word of mouth. "Cuba, Cuba, Cuba was the topic of newspapers, the Exchange, the street corners, and the barrooms," remembered one of those who was caught up in the excitement.¹⁰ Anyone with a modicum of the blend of curiosity and wit the nineteenth century called "enterprise"—anyone, that is, among the readers of the *Delta*—would have been able to pick up clues from reading and hearing about the articles, and follow them to a meeting with those who had already been "initiated" (many of whom were, after all, parading around town waving the "free flag of Cuba," making orations, and firing off cannons).¹¹ Such readers would perhaps have been caught up in the excitement, and cheered with the rest; as many as 5,000 could have crowded into the glass-covered atrium at Banks' Arcade, just south of the New Orleans slave market, where the "Declaration of Independence of the Island of Cuba," authored by the Puerto Príncipe rebels, was read.¹² Then, if they could make a show of their sincerity and trustworthiness, they would finally have been able to encounter firsthand the hidden promise—alluded to but never directly stated—that teased their curiosity in the newspapers and rumors: the pitch.

Although the ritual character of the pitch—an unwritten understanding produced out of a conversation in which the simple broaching of the topic was a signal that what followed was private, a conversation between an aspirant and initiate, a meeting of eyes and pressing of hands between men—ensured that it left no direct imprint on the historical record, we can get a sense of how it went from the accounts of some of those who later betrayed its confidence. Thomas Wilson alleged that the men recruited by López in New Orleans in the summer of 1851 had been promised \$4,000 (in bonds payable by the revolutionary government of Cuba), had been told that two-thirds of the island was already in arms, and had been assured that, in battle, one American was equal to ten Spaniards. James St. Levi, who, admittedly, was sitting in a jail in Havana and writing to the Spanish captain general to appeal for clemency, remembered that "the emissaries of N. López" had assured him there were "five-thousand Cuban patriots ready to take up arms in favor of the cause of liberty"; and "that if five hundred Americans would go with him as a bodyguard

to allow him to land in safety they should receive from two to four thousand dollars each; and that if they did so they would assist an oppressed people.”¹³

A fuller version of the pitch was recorded by Henry Burtnett, who was calling himself Duncan Smith and attempting to penetrate López’s organization in order to sell information about the general’s plans to the Spanish. After casting about for information on Cuba in a way that was neither too subtle to be noticed nor too eager to arouse suspicion, he was introduced to Frederick Freeman, who presented Burtnett with a bargain that, if Burtnett hadn’t been the imposter and Freeman the intended victim, we might say looked like a classic con: “Freeman stated that he had an estate in Trinidad de Cuba, which was unjustly withheld from him by a gentleman in Cuba . . . that in the present state of excitement in the island he did not wish to expose himself there, and wanted an active businessman with means to prosecute his claim.” After a series of trust-building conversations in which Freeman “alluded” to the possibility of a change of government on the island and in which Burtnett, matching Freeman confidence for confidence, spoke of “an anticipated revolution on the island,” the ostensible terms of the conversation were laid aside in favor of what both men had already known was at stake. Freeman “admitted to me that an expedition was preparing to sail in a few days and that I could materially assist it.”¹⁴

That was the bait. And this was the hook: after revealing themselves to Burtnett, López’s organizers drew him further and further into their confidence; they familiarized him with their invasion plans, their stores of guns and ammunition, and told him of 14,000 supporters on the island who were “already enrolled and under recognized leaders”; they showed him letters from the island, “enjoining upon López not to wait for the expedition but to come if only attended by a body guard and they would flock to his standard”; they told him the story of a woman in Puerto Príncipe who had sent her jewelry to support the invasion, and the story of five Spanish soldiers who had walked into a bar in Havana “and asked the proprietor (a Catalan) for something as strong as Genl. López,” and who had beaten the barman within an inch of his life when he handed them a straw; all of this “to prove the feeling of the native Cubans.” And, finally, they told Burtnett “that several leading and influential men at the South were engaged with them and had advanced large sums of their money on their bonds, some of them having sold as high as 40 cents on the dollar.”¹⁵

The pitch came as a series of images that testified to the faith those already involved in the conspiracy were ready to place in one another and in the prospective recruit to whom they were being revealed. The ritual recitation of all of that faith, all of that confidence, was at once a promise of the ultimate success of the endeavor and a prompt to join in making success certain—in redeeming the belief in the possibility of success that was being freely shared out among the conspirators. When recruiters revealed the confidence placed in them by their supporters (whether that confidence was measured in enlisted soldiers, donated jewels, or discounted notes), they were presenting Burnett with supposedly reliable evidence of their own solidly grounded confidence of success, as a way of enhancing *his* feeling of confidence in joining them—all of this in confidence, of course. Putting this a bit more directly, one could say that Burnett was being asked for his aid in a pyramid scheme whose goal was to imagine the invasion of Cuba into real, material existence.

The inner mysteries of the human heart are such that the last step in the process by which the idea of invading Cuba was made material—in the shape of a human being ready to sacrifice everything in order to become an instrument of war—lies just outside the historian's optical field. There were plenty of reasons men might have volunteered to put their lives in jeopardy in the service of General Narciso López. Many must have believed in the justice of the republican cause; among the officers and soldiers were Germans and Hungarians who had fought against European monarchy in 1848, and many young Americans who had come of age hearing legends of the revolutionary generation. Among them, as well, were American veterans of the Mexican War, men of whom J. D. B. DeBow wrote in 1850, "Where are these disbanded soldiers and chieftans who have won more glories than the Roman legions in Britain or in Gaul? Is it not to expect much, that the peaceful pursuits of life can content them soon again?" How long could they be expected to forgo the "intoxicants" of battle?¹⁶ To these images of soldiers committed to liberty (for white men, at least) and addicted to "glory," contemporary observers added a list of more "sordid considerations," by which they meant the desire for gain—the dreams of clerks become planters, of foot soldiers made into founding fathers, of men without connections or prospects invited to the table for a wholesale looting of a defeated neighbor.¹⁷

Yet the motivations that frame the diary of Marion Taylor, who went as a

young man with López to Cárdenas, seem at once more banal and more profound than the motives suggested by the traditional calculus of interests and ideals. No doubt Taylor was interested in advancement—he recorded his disappointment at not receiving an officer's commission—and interested in furthering the "liberty" of which he freely spoke. He was a young man in a society awash in titular prefixes and talk of liberty, and those broader cultural phenomena gave him a way to talk about his own desires. But even more than concern for rank or republicanism, what comes through in Taylor's diary is a fascination with death—he had spent a day in New Orleans visiting a graveyard, "found it very beautiful," and concluded that "one would almost wish to die that he might be buried there"—and a desire to see things he had thus far merely heard about, particularly the ocean. "It was a magnificent night to behold," he wrote on his second day out of New Orleans, "the vessels sailing upon the beautiful waters of the gulf. Our bark ploughed the waters as a thing of life. Often I had read and heard of the grandness of the ocean, but it must be apprehended to be appreciated, but I am too sick to write." Or: "I took a stroll along the seashore, and for the first time saw and heard the restless waves of the sea. It was a glorious moment in my life. How poor and feeble are the descriptions of the grandeur of the ocean. The sublime emotions that it awakens in one's mind admit of no description."¹⁸

These outpourings, these yearnings, were no less preformatted by the standard Romantic themes of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture (the idea of the cemetery as refuge, and aesthetic theories of the sublime) than talk of "sons of Washington" fighting for "the liberty of oppressed Cuba." Taylor, like those with whom he went into battle, was interpellated as a young man and a soldier by the pat terms through which he understood and gave meaning to his actions. Even so (or perhaps especially so), his self-construction captures something important about what would lead a young man to volunteer to fight and perhaps die with López—motivations that might otherwise go unnoticed.¹⁹ Taylor was eager to see and feel things for himself, to pierce through the clichés and twice-told tales and to experience the register of the real on his own body and with his own senses (no matter that this was the greatest cliché of them all). Somewhere in the shadowy gearwork of his mind, it came to seem to him, as it came to seem to hundreds of others like him, that their own complicated quests were pointing them along a course toward Cuba. There,

hundreds of miles from home, as they waded ashore—shoulder to shoulder in their blue shirts and gray trousers, steady beneath their packs, eyes narrowed and fixed forward, wind in their faces, hands firm on their weapons—they would make history out of their dreams.

LÓPEZ EMBARKED on his final mission at four o'clock in the morning on August 3, 1851, a few hours ahead of a party of federal agents, who, the general had been warned, had been sent to impound his ship, the *Pampero*. Even at that early hour, thousands of New Orleans residents crowded onto the levee to watch and cheer the filibusters on their way. López, arriving with his staff, was greeted with wild cheers by his men and the crowd, and boarded the ship with (in the words of Louis Schlesinger, his Hungarian aide-de-camp) "his accustomed calmness and energy." But as López surely knew, things had already started to go wrong. The *Pampero*, which had been purchased for López at the cost of Laurence Sigur's stake in the *Daily Delta*, was a comparatively large ship (four hundred tons), but not large enough to hold all of those who wanted to accompany the general to Cuba. Hundreds would have to be left behind at New Orleans to await the purchase of another boat that would enable them to reinforce the invading army. Perhaps even more troubling to López that morning was the fact that the *Pampero*, which had long been plying the packet trade between New Orleans and Galveston and was known to be one of the fastest ships in the Gulf, had arrived in New Orleans ailing: her machinery needed repairs that the general, operating under the threat of federal seizure, did not have time to make.²⁰ Even before the *Pampero* left the dock, López confronted the materiality of absolute space—the irreducible difficulty of using a boat to move a large load across a long distance.

At Balize, the *Pampero* was loaded with arms and ammunition that had been shipped downriver separately in mock deference to the Neutrality Act, and repairs were attempted. A hundred more men were put off the ship, to clear space for "some of his principal Cuban friends in the country, and also a good provision of arms, ammunition, rifles, extra arms for the people of Cuba, etc." Those "friends" were waiting for the *Pampero* at the mouth of the St. Johns River, on the eastern coast of Florida. As the expeditionaries lay by at Balize, they saw the *Cincinnati*, which they knew carried news of their departure sent by the Spanish consul in New Orleans, head out into the Gulf ahead of them.

“She inspired us with but little uneasiness,” Louis Schlesinger later wrote, “being a poor and slow old boat, unable at her best without a fair wind, to make more than five or six miles an hour.” And indeed, two days on, the *Pampero* overtook the *Cincinnati*, rendering the news carried by the latter boat obsolete before it had even been delivered.²¹ In the battle over intelligence—the contest to control the flow of information over space—López had won what proved to be a short-lived first victory.

Though fast enough to overtake the *Cincinnati*, the *Pampero*, which had been known as a “fifteen-knot vessel,” was, even after a second round of repairs, making only eight or nine knots per hour on its journey to Cuba by way of the mouth of the St. Johns. And she was running out of coal. The general had been assured that the *Pampero* was “coaled for sixteen days’ sailing,” but five days out of New Orleans he was told by his captain that there was coal enough in the hold for only three more days. Whatever the cause—a mistake by an agent entrusted with the purchase, a too-hurried coaling under pressure to leave at New Orleans, the machinery’s inefficiency (López’s later defenders were quick to come up with explanations that lay outside the general’s control, for, as we will see, there were detractors)—the plan to go all the way to the mouth of the St. Johns would have to be abandoned in deference to the news headed for Cuba aboard the wheezing *Cincinnati*.²²

The general decided—“promptly resolved,” in the words of his aide-de-camp—to land at Key West, where he hoped to receive news from Cuba and hire a pilot who knew the coast (López’s intended pilot had been captured and executed by the Spanish before he could reach New Orleans). While at Key West, the general decided that once the *Pampero* had landed his forces in Cuba, it would sail north to Savannah, recoal, pick up the men and heavy armaments waiting at the mouth of the St. Johns, and then return to Cuba to reinforce the landing party. Among the many well-wishers and admirers who came aboard the *Pampero* were some with news from Cuba, reporting that the Spanish troops were mainly in the central part of the country—where the uprising had begun and where López planned to attack—and that new insurgencies were being reported in the west.²³

The news from Cuba had an electrifying effect on the *Pampero*. The initial enthusiasm of the troops—which had given way to talk about turning back, after a stifling week aboard the overcrowded *Pampero*—was rekindled, and

some among the officers ordered up champagne to toast the boon companions who had brought them such good tidings. López, under the influence of the news (though not the champagne, which he reportedly did not touch), began to rework his invasion plans. Rather than attacking in the Central District, where he now believed the Spanish forces were concentrated, he would land at Bahía Honda, about fifty miles west of Havana. A western landing would, at best, allow him to join forces with the rebels he had heard about at Key West, and, at worst, allow him to retreat into the mountains and await reinforcement from the men he had left on the dock in New Orleans. Though López was unable to find a pilot who knew the coast of Cuba, the *Pampero* set off for Bahía Honda at ten o'clock on the evening of August 10.²⁴

Twelve hours later, the ship arrived in the coastal waters of Cuba—and in plain sight of the harbor at Havana, so close that the men aboard the *Pampero* could see the sentinels posted on duty atop the high-walled Castle Morro. Again, there were various explanations. The stoppage of the engine in the middle of the night might have allowed the boat to be taken off course by the currents in the Gulf, or perhaps the captain's compass had given false readings, due to the proximity of so many iron weapons.²⁵ Retreating under the power of anthracite coal brought especially for the purpose of firing the engine without creating a trail of smoke, the *Pampero* turned once more into the Gulf. But whatever element of surprise López had carried with him out of New Orleans was now lost. Imperialist ideology and visionary schemes notwithstanding, he still had to get his men and their weapons from point A to point B if that was where he planned to attack. The intransigent materiality of absolute space was winnowing his chances of victory.

Still needing a pilot to guide him along the coast of the island he had come to liberate, López ordered his captain to overhaul a small schooner they spotted along the coast. The captain of the schooner was taken aboard, threatened with death, given a certificate that would assure the Spanish he had acted under compulsion, and told to steer the *Pampero* for Bahía Honda. As it headed west, the ship suffered a further series of mishaps—entering a bay where two Spanish ships were anchored, attempting a landing under cover of darkness at the site of another Spanish fort. Some aboard the ship attributed this series of near-disasters to "Fortune" or "Providence." Others, especially after a final grounding a mile out from the shore at Morrillo, began to suspect the pilot.

Some of the men proposed shooting him on the spot. “The poor fellow was frightened half out of his wits,” Louis Schlesinger recalled, “and, indeed, in the act of landing in the first boat, one of the men in the boat with him jokingly did fire his pistol over his head with pretended aim at him.” This bit of rough play marked the close of the first act of López’s on-the-fly effort to acquire essential information—local knowledge sufficient to reshape his memories of the island’s contours into an image that would aid him in crossing the terrain.

And yet, insinuations about the foolishness of his plan and intimations of his onrushing death aside, it is worth trying, for a moment, to see the general through the eyes of his devoted aide-de-camp that afternoon on the beach at Morrillo. As López came ashore in the waning light, he knelt to kiss the soil of his “beloved Cuba.” “He was dressed in a white jacket and pantaloons, the former buttoning to his throat, with standing collar embroidered with a single star. He wore a red General’s sash around his waist, but no arms. Over his shoulder was slung a spy-glass in a leather case. . . . His countenance was all aglow with subdued enthusiasm. In spite of his gray mustache and beard, he looked almost a young man again.” López gathered his men and prepared to lead the main body of his troops up the road to Las Pozas to commandeer some ox carts, which a company of men left behind under the command of Colonel William Crittenden would use to haul up the expedition’s baggage: powder, cartridges, extra muskets, maps, liberationist proclamations, flags, the officer’s suitcases, and the general’s “personal effects”—all critical to the operation’s success, but, taken together, too much for the small party to carry across the difficult ground that lay ahead of them. As López and his men started up the path to Las Pozas the following morning, they could see the *Pampero* silhouetted against the sky behind them, reloaded and headed for the United States with the news that the expedition had landed.²⁶

As they trekked inland, the environment began to degrade the already tenuous military discipline of López’s men. Tormented by mosquitoes and miserable in the withering heat, the column heading toward Las Pozas was soon strung out and separated by large stretches of road. Several of the men “actually threw away their muskets to lighten their march under the oppressive heat.” A couple of others fell out, “thinking to rejoin us in the cool of the evening,” and were never seen again. Quite a few picked unripe mangoes they found along the path and—despite the general’s warning that doing so would

make them ill—ate them as they stumbled along.²⁷ Whereas his men experienced the effects of the environment on their bodies as exhaustion and hunger, and measured their progress across the landscape in hours between breaks or good meals, López and his aides saw only the indiscipline and insubordination of ill-trained soldiers, evident in the distance between the ranks and their slow progress toward Las Pozas.

Yet as a general whose authority over his men had not even a pretense of representing some power greater than itself, López had little recourse to the traditional tools for instilling a sense of purpose in the minds and bodies of his soldiers. The only motivation he could draw on was their urge to survive. When López's second-in-command, the Hungarian general János Prágay, ordered a man shot on the spot for breaking into a house along the road (a big issue for an army of "liberators" who were insistently being identified as "pirates" by their Spanish foes), Prágay was forced to defend himself against soldiers under his command, who were incensed that a "d—d foreigner" would lay hands on an American—no notice apparently being taken of the fact that both the Hungarian general and the American foot soldier were foreigners in Cuba.²⁸ The prospective character of López's authority left him no better option in this case (and many others like it) than to arrange for an apology and its acceptance. Until he acquired a more solidly territorialized sovereignty, neither López nor his men could be sure that what they currently saw as punishment for misconduct or mutiny might not shortly thereafter be seen as unlawful assault or even murder by a court that actually had jurisdiction.

López's column crested the ridge overlooking Las Pozas at about two o'clock on the afternoon of August 12. Before them were about fifty houses strung along the downward slope of the road from Morrillo, deserted except for the owners of the village's two stores, and "a few Negroes." Far from showing any willingness to join with the filibusters in overthrowing their Spanish oppressors, the people of Las Pozas had fled when they heard rumors of the approach of hundreds of armed American invaders—as would most of the inhabitants along the route traveled by the filibusters over the next two weeks or so.²⁹ Nevertheless, the general issued a proclamation "assuring the people that we had come only as their friends and auxiliaries against their oppressors." He then requisitioned a few carts, which he sent with a small party back to Colonel Crittenden with orders to come with his men under cover of

darkness and in the cool of the night. Within what López's aide-de-camp remembered as about fifteen minutes, however, a "peasant" coming from the coast brought the alarming news that a division of Spanish troops under the command of General Manuel Enna had already landed at Bahía Honda and were on their way toward Las Pozas by a route which joined the road from Morrillo about halfway along—a route that would soon place them between the two elements of López's divided army. Although this was later disputed, López's aide-de-camp recalled that the general sent Crittenden another order to come immediately, abandoning whatever ammunition and baggage they could not carry on their backs. The general intended to march his men into the mountains and get them into better military order before facing the Spanish in battle.³⁰

Dawn broke with no sign of Crittenden. Fearing the worst, López began immediately to drill and exercise his men in the middle of the road, in a desperate attempt to instill some military discipline before they faced the Spanish. At about eight o'clock on the morning of August 13, they came under fire. López at once ordered his Cuban company to attack the Spanish position, which overlooked the entrance to the village from a hill on the left. Reading the account of the battle written by Schlesinger, one gets a sense of the landscape at Las Pozas and of the way panic and alarm gradually resolved into the sharp focus of military strategy: "The eminence on the left of the road was occupied by the Cuban company, resting on the house from which they had so handsomely driven the enemy, and screened from a flank attack by [a] thick wood. . . . Across the road a cart was overturned, as a slight obstruction; and beyond it, on the right, on the other side of [a] fence were the rest of our men, in companies on the eminences forming the ridge [at the entrance of the town]."³¹ Schlesinger referred to what followed as, quite simply, "carnage"—a word whose etymology suggests the rendering of human beings into meat. We can imagine the rising heat of the August sun, the sulfurous smoke drifting across the field, the dry, dusty smell of the baked ground, the roar of hundreds of muskets, the commands of the officers urging their men into order, the shrieks of the wounded, and the debasement of the dead as they lay on the field at Las Pozas soiled with the sticky mess of their own blood. In a little over half an hour, thirty or thirty-five of López's 280 men lay dead or wounded on the field; around them were 180 dead Spanish soldiers from a force that had

initially numbered close to eight hundred. As his men rifled the coats and packs of the Spanish dead, searching for cartridges they could beat down to fit their own smaller-bore weapons, it must have seemed for a moment as if López had won a decisive victory.

Having retreated along the road from Morrillo, the Spanish remained between López and Crittenden, even as the general unsuccessfully urged his men along that road to rout their foes, rendezvous with Crittenden, and seal their victory. "The word *coward* which I used rather intemperately," remembered Schlesinger, "came pretty near producing a mutiny and costing me my own life on the spot." In the absence of a full-scale mission (again according to Schlesinger), a message containing orders to join López at Las Pozas by midnight was sent along an isolated footpath to the coast. When the five filibusters sent with the message returned with the news that the woods were thick with Spanish soldiers and that they had not been able to get through to the coast, and when a company of men from the coastal party came into Las Pozas from the woods shortly afterward with the news that they had been separated from Crittenden in an engagement with a much larger Spanish force, López began to prepare his men to march into the mountains. There he hoped to join with the rebels he had heard about in Key West and wait for reinforcements from the United States. When he left Las Pozas on the morning of August 14, López left behind several of his men who had been wounded the previous day—among them General Prágay, who, Schlesinger later heard, cut his own throat as the Spanish entered the village that afternoon.³²

Because the maps López had brought with him from New Orleans had been in the baggage left with Crittenden on the coast, and because he did not know the terrain, he navigated with a compass and the help of "Negro guides" provided by Creole planters who claimed to support López (at least when he and his small army were on their doorsteps) but were reluctant to join in the fighting themselves. From the same sources, López received the fragments of intelligence which, for several days, he would chase in a series of rapid marches and forced countermarches which left his troops exhausted and bitterly disillusioned—"disanimated," in the words of Schlesinger. One day, they were led along a narrow footpath leading in the direction of Bahia Honda in search of an elusive local governor they had hoped to take captive. The next they were marched back, fleeing a rumor that the Spanish had assembled 1,200 men, 200

horses, and a battery of cannons in a nearby town. The day after that, they were urged across torrents, gulleys, and ravines to the top of a mountain in the middle of the night.

López, at the head of the column—huddling with his “Negro guide” and his officers, trying “to find some embodied force of patriot insurgents according to the representations that had been made to him in the United States”—began to seem dangerously out of touch to his men, who had barely slept or eaten for several days. “Nearly every day he would assure the men that ere night-fall we would join the patriots . . . whom he said numbered four thousand strong,” remembered one. López’s men had seen the country people—who were supposedly waiting only for their landing to fly to their aid—fly instead into the woods; and they had been attacked by the Spanish soldiers, who they had been told, would likely break ranks and join them. Now, they were throwing down their weapons in the heat—twenty guns left by the side of the road one day, fifty the next—openly questioning the general’s leadership, and, increasingly, disappearing into the woods. “It was,” Schlesinger later wrote, “the most shocking march for troops that I have ever witnessed or heard of.”³³

The rumors López was hearing from those he met along the way convinced him that his best chance lay on the other side of the mountains, at San Cristóbal, where he had been told the people “were ready to rise,” and at Piñar del Río, where they were said to be already in rebellion. The road he and his men followed toward Piñar del Río took them past the Cafetal de Frías, a coffee plantation that had belonged to López before his flight from Cuba in 1849. Within a very short time of the filibusters’ arrival at the plantation, it became clear that the plantation was surrounded by the same Spanish forces from which López had been running. General Enna’s cavalry took up a position in the field downhill and to the right of the little grove of mango trees where the filibusters had been preparing to cook their first meal in days. Falling back into the woods and firing from cover, the filibusters were able to rout Enna’s cavalry, which, as Schlesinger remembered it, broke ranks and fled the field, overrunning and dispersing the division of infantrymen the Spanish general had stationed behind them in reserve.³⁴

Later, even some of López’s supporters would wonder if he had “by the error or treachery of his guide” been led into a trap at Cafetal de Frías. Whatever the actual fact, the possibility that this was the case signals something im-

portant about the general's situation in Cuba. Though he was enormously effective in his role as expatriate freedom fighter in the United States, and though he was cheered in the streets, toasted in the barrooms, and lauded in the newspapers in New Orleans, López was out of place in Cuba: unable to land except with the aid of a pilot he could not trust; guided on his pro-slavery crusade by a slave who was the only one who seemed to know the way; reliant on the eyes and ears of "countrymen" who fled before his blundering advance; increasingly desperate in his quest to find the gathering body of patriots whom even he must have begun to suspect had never existed. Turning his face once again toward the mountains "to try the effect of our presence in calling out the rising of the people," López, in his dress whites with the red sash and the little embroidered star on the collar, must have seemed increasingly preposterous to his weary men. Separated from the maps, the trade tables, and the newspaper polemics through which he had come to know the country he had fled, López struggled to gain his bearings on the real terrain where he had landed his men and gone to war. Yet he once more rallied his troops: "Now a shake of the hand, now a friendly tap on the shoulder, now an encouraging smile or nod, with occasionally such a word of cheer as his little English (which was next to none at all) enabled him to use."³⁵

Though neither he nor his men knew it at the time, as López walked among his men, he was already dead. Crittenden had, as the general suspected, been engaged by Enna's forces as they retreated from Las Pozas. He and his troops, according to the accounts they subsequently provided, fought valiantly, but had been forced by the superior numbers of the Spanish to retreat to the beach at Morrillo, where they took to the boats in which they had landed and set out in a desperate attempt to row themselves home to the United States. After two days at sea, they were overhauled by a Spanish warship and taken to Havana. They were interrogated, their confessions were taken, and, after being allowed to write last letters home, they were, to a man, executed by a firing squad on the beach at Atares on the morning of August 16.³⁶

WHILE COLONEL Crittenden's capture was a grievous blow to the filibusters' chances in Cuba, López had still managed to face down the Spanish forces under General Enna at both Las Pozas and Cafetal de Frías without the men or supplies he had left with Crittenden on the beach at Morrillo. The colonel's

capture did not, in itself, spell the defeat of the general's forces. Rather, their defeat was ensured by the *story* of the colonel's capture. Even as López and his men fought their way along the path toward San Cristóbal and the rebellion that the general had assured them was right over the next mountain, news of Crittenden's capture and execution was spreading around them and across the island. Indeed, the first news that many received of the invasion was the news of the executions at Atares—a fact that, as Schlesinger later put it, “presented the whole enterprise to the people of Cuba at its very first flush, as a failure, as a thing crushed and overwhelmed in disaster at its very outset.” While López might have mastered the tactical space of the Cuban landscape in the battles he had fought—dominating the ridge at the entrance to Las Pozas and the tree line at Cafetal de Frías—the Spanish remained in control of the larger strategic space. The coastal packets and overland stages, the railroads and the telegraphs, were still in the domain of the Spanish, who thus controlled the flow of information. While the bodies of hundreds of dead Spanish soldiers which might have given much-needed credibility to López's mission lay concealed on remote battlefields, the Spanish—with their greater mastery of space and the physical flow of information across it—were able to substantiate their claim that the general was a hopeless interloper.³⁷

The news of López's landing and Crittenden's defeat was subject to a similar set of remixings and compressions as it made its way across the Gulf. Though the events had unfolded over a period of three days, and though much time had since passed and many men had died, the reports that would frame the American response to the 1851 expedition did not arrive in New Orleans until the twentieth of August. That day came the news of López's landing. As it began to spread through the city, it was quickly overwhelmed by the news of Crittenden's capture and execution. The latter report arrived on the morning of the twenty-first aboard a steamship that had recently been christened (in what must have seemed, on that morning, a bitter joke) *Empire City*.³⁸ López's partisans in New Orleans responded to the news by gathering in the streets and destroying Spanish-owned property in the city: the fruit stands, which were rumored to have raised the price of their medicinal wares during the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1848; cigar stores and coffeehouses frequented by Spanish spies; the house of the Spanish consul, whose furniture was dragged into the street and burned.³⁹

The greatest fury, however, was reserved for the looting of the offices of the Spanish-language paper *La Union* and the anti-annexationist *True Delta*, both of which had continually raised questions about the accuracy of annexationist accounts of the situation on the island in the weeks leading up to the invasion. By disputing the idea that Crittenden and his men had been "massacred" rather than simply "executed," these papers had allegedly dampened any remaining enthusiasm for a mission to Cuba to reinforce López.⁴⁰ The condition of possibility for López's mission had, from the outset, been its own believability; and as López's supporters dragged *La Union's* presses out into the street and scattered its printing type in the gutter, they vented their rage on the machines that had finally ruptured that enabling pretense. No mission to rescue López would be mounted from the Mississippi's erstwhile empire city.

It was on the morning of August 21, the morning that the news of Crittenden's execution arrived in New Orleans, that López and his men roasted the general's horse and ate what would be the last meal of their mission. As they had retreated from the field at Cafetal de Frías, a tropical storm had poured down upon the bedraggled filibusters, many of them, after several days in the mountains, now walking barefoot, some of them with painful, stinking wounds that had gone undressed since Las Pozas. The rain continued for days, increasing in severity, soaking what little powder the men had left to the point of uselessness, and further demoralizing the beaten little army. Schlesinger described the ordeal:

The cold during the nights was intense. We had no shelter and but little clothing against it. The only slight degree of comfort from it we could get was from standing huddled closely together, like sheep in a storm. The General had no other clothing than white linen; and who can ever imagine the thoughts that filled his noble and manly heart through those long hours in which I stood, for much of the time, pressed up against his breast for mutual warmth! Under foot the rain poured over the rough slope in miniature torrents. None could lie down. Some sat on stumps or stones, but most of us stood.

Shivering and disconsolate, a group of the men and some of the officers approached López on the twenty-second, "telling him that their hardships could

not be endured any longer, and that the people did not rise, and no bodies of patriots were found in arms, and called on him to *take them back to the United States*.” López attempted to rally them by once again assuring them “the time could not be far when reinforcements would arrive from the United States and he still expected to unite with the friendly bands of the people of the Island, according to the assurances he had received at Key West, but promised to lead them out of the mountains to search for food the following day.”⁴¹

As the rain broke and the filibusters began the walk out of the mountains, they were surprised by a company of Spanish cavalry, who drove them over the edge of a ravine into the woods below, tracked those they could find through the underbrush, and killed them one by one. “After this,” wrote Schlesinger, “the Expedition cannot be said to have had any military existence.” He and several survivors stayed out in the woods for several days, subsisting on the fibrous pulp they cut from inside small palm trees, and subsiding into what the general’s devoted aide-de-camp later termed “inanition.”⁴² On August 24, the captain general in Havana issued a proclamation announcing that the “pirates” had been defeated and declaring that quarter would be given to any of López’s men who surrendered within four days. “Copies of this document were spread like raindrops,” wrote one of López’s later partisans, and the filibusters began to come out of the hills to surrender. Whatever vain hopes they might have had of re-forming their army had been destroyed by the image of Spanish omniscience and spatial mastery conveyed by the sheer density of the postings. López himself was taken up on August 28, in circumstances that were later the subject of fierce disagreement.⁴³

López was executed at seven in the morning on September 1, 1851. An engraving of the event shows him wearing the same white suit in which he had landed, seated in a chair with a cross in his hands as the iron band was placed around his neck. Before him, remembered one witness, were assembled those of his men who had been captured in the preceding days, 2,000 Spanish cavalrymen, 3,000 infantrymen, and as many as 20,000 spectators. Great care had been taken in arraying the troops around the square: the regiment of Gallica at the front, with their banner displayed; the artillery on the right, next to the engineers; other forces on the left. The carefully choreographed execution of López was to provide onlookers (and those who would, in the coming weeks, gaze through their eyes via accounts in letters and newspaper stories) with a

visual and spatial metonym of the power of the Spanish regime in Cuba. López attempted unsuccessfully to make a short speech, before the executioner twisted the screw home and converted the old general into a piece of Spanish propaganda.⁴⁴

The executions of Crittenden and López—and, still more, the images of those executions that filtered back to the United States—posed a substantial challenge to the ideology of expansion. That ideology had made it seem as if revolutionizing Cuba and annexing it to the United States would be the easiest thing in the world—simply a matter of geography, part of the emergent history of republicanism and free trade, the destiny of the white race, the uncoiling of natural history, the unfolding of God's will, and so on. The bright worldmaking promises of Mississippi imperialism had made it seem as if space and time themselves demanded an invasion of Cuba; they sought to bring themselves into being through insistently proclaiming their own believability. In the end, however, for these promises to be realized, they had to be given material form in real human bodies, deployed on unfamiliar ground, and engaged in a contest of wounding and exhibiting. López's inglorious surrender—indeed, his entire failed filibuster career—marked a rupture in the received history of the United States, the South, and the Mississippi Valley: a rupture in the idea of manifest destiny that was no less difficult for the philosophers of filibusterism to repair for being the bungled work of a quixotic old fool.

Repairing the expansionist script required reenlisting those bodies to their original cause by writing (and disseminating) a history of López's last mission that somehow explained its failure without calling into question the inevitable achievement of the larger purpose of which he was a part. Believers needed to reassert, against all available evidence, that the general had spoken justly when, with his last breath, he reportedly addressed the thousands of Cubans assembled for his execution with the words, "My fate will not change your destinies."⁴⁵

Much of the heavy lifting involved in that project—refashioning the expansionist account of what was supposed to happen out of the splintered remains of what had actually happened—was done by the aide-de-camp, Louis Schlesinger, in a series of articles published in the *Democratic Review* over the course of 1852. Schlesinger's strategy—a time-honored one among defeated military

men—was to emphasize the contingency of what had gone wrong, assign the blame to others, assess what should have been done instead, and conclude that, but for a few key mistakes made along the way and some very bad luck, the venture would surely have been a success. According to Schlesinger, blame for the failure of the mission lay, variously, with the U.S. government, which had forced the *Pampero* to leave New Orleans in a hurry without coaling properly and thus bollixed the rendezvous at the mouth of the St. Johns; with Crittenden, who had dallied at a roadhouse along the road to Las Pozas rather than following López's direct order to come immediately, and who, by getting himself killed, had compromised the image of the mission in the eyes of the Creole forces so critical to its success; with the untrained soldiers, who had shown none of the discipline necessary to military success as they had ragtagged across the countryside, leaving a trail of abandoned weapons and exhausted deserters strung out along the road behind them (for every wavering Creole Cuban and Spanish soldier to see); with the "cowards" who had failed to capitalize on their victories at Las Pozas and Cafetal de Frías by mounting a final charge against the defeated Spanish army; with the Cuban patriots, who never rose and were nowhere to be found when López went looking for them; with the bad intelligence received at Key West, which caused López to misjudge the position of the Spanish army and overestimate the degree of support there would be for a landing in the western part of the island; and, finally, with the rain. At various moments in his narrative, Schlesinger assigned to each of these factors unique responsibility for the failure of the mission, and—remarkably, even brazenly under the circumstances—suggested that in their absence the mission "would infallibly have succeeded."⁴⁶

But rather than following this litany of factors through to the seemingly obvious conclusion that the mission's failure was overdetermined by catastrophic shortcomings in virtually every area of military science—leadership, tactics, intelligence, operations, supply, and so on—Schlesinger repeatedly emphasized how close, at any given moment, the mission had been to success. In remarkable run-on sentences full of logic-herniating conditional imponderables ("who can say what would have happened if . . ."), Schlesinger emphasized the contingency of everything that had happened, while nevertheless maintaining the likelihood of what would have happened if what actually happened had not and what should have happened had. A relatively mild version

of his effort went something like this (a moral drawn from the battle of Las Pozas): "If any one of these *ifs* had occurred, as they all *ought to have occurred*, how different might, how different probably would have been the turn and result of the whole enterprise!" A fuller sense of the framing logic of Schlesinger's narrative is conveyed by a sampling of his account of the unrealized victory at Cafetal de Frías: "Oh that we had fifty horses and willing riders to pursue them with! Oh that, without horses, our own men could but have been made to pursue!" Yet Schlesinger did not simply view this hypothetical troop of cavalry as the key to victory at Cafetal de Frías; he saw them as the key to *everything*. "Who knows how many of the enemy would have laid down their arms, then to have assuredly joined us? All the fatal effect before produced by the capture and massacre of Crittenden would have been counteracted and compensated. Many of the countrypeople . . . would have been encouraged and enabled to rise and join us. Creoles . . . would have been released from the coercion and fear which forced them to dissemble their real desires and intentions. . . . Desertion from the [Spanish] troops, too, would have been in all probability rapid and abundant."⁴⁷ Well, yeah, I guess, probably maybe so. In fairness, though, Schlesinger had a difficult job to do: in addition to trying to mend the story of inevitable conquest with a few threads of manifest probability, he was trying to defend the reputation of his dearly departed but still furiously embattled chief.

IN THE United States, the passage of López the soldier into the afterlife of López the symbol was framed by letters written by Colonel Crittenden's men as they sat aboard the warship *Esperanza* in Havana harbor waiting to die. "Deceived by false visions, I embarked in the expedition for Cuba," wrote a soldier named Honoré Vienne. "*López, the Scoundrel*, has deceived us," wrote another of Crittenden's men, Gilman Cook. "I was deceived by López. He as well as the public press assured me that the island was in a state of prosperous revolution," wrote Crittenden himself.⁴⁸ Even as López thrashed through the last days of his search for the patriots in the mountainous jungles of central Cuba, a searching postmortem had begun. To the charges made by Crittenden's men, widely reprinted and circulated in newspapers and pamphlets, were soon added others. López, according to C. N. Horwell, who had been with him up until the very end, was a "cheat" and a "base fraud" who had coldly left

“the disabled of [his] army to care for themselves” after the battle at Las Pozas. He was a “*soidisant*” general who had “deceived” his men and fought only “tremblingly” at Las Pozas, before abandoning Crittenden in headlong retreat.⁴⁹

Taking a page from Crittenden, those who questioned the general’s bravery and probity quickly homed in on the intelligence from Cuba that had been used to whip up fervor for the invasion in July. “New Orleans papers, there is your work! There is the result of your divagations, of your iniquitous falsehoods, of your placards with large black letters, and your detestable extras. There you have scattered the blood that will be scattered against you in the future. . . . This blood must flow, drop by drop, upon your heads—this blood will torment you in your sleep, for they have lost their lives when you were in security in your houses.” And according to López’s critics, the misleading reports of imminent revolution on the island that led several hundred credulous young men to untimely ends were not simply the result of faulty intelligence. They were instead part of a deliberate effort to deceive the American public—“a cruel artifice practiced by the unseen heads of the scheme,” according to the *True Delta*’s obituary for Crittenden.⁵⁰

These accusations of shadowy conspiracies and dark purposes soon coalesced into a story that told of cynicism and greed behind the headlines. According to Thomas Wilson’s pamphlet entitled “An Authentic Narrative of the Piratical Descents upon Cuba,” the motive behind the entire expedition was the recovery of losses sustained by the investors in Cuban bonds in the fiasco at Cárdenas. “The silly purchasers of Cuban bonds could not put up with their first loss,” Wilson wrote in 1851, “and the want of money on the part of the chiefs of the plot instead of keeping them back urged them on.” In order to sustain their speculation, Wilson alleged, the masterminds behind the invasion sent emissaries to Cuba to provide accounts of events on the islands “of a nature to excite the plebeians to the utmost”—a purpose they achieved through a series of “fabricated” stories about events at Príncipe, which made a “pitiful got-up-for-the-occasion outbreak” brought off by “a handful of fools” seem like a reenactment of the American Revolution. The invasion—in the words of one of its soldiers, whose epistolary exposé was reprinted as an appendix to one of the many pamphlets issued in its aftermath—had been “a great humbug.”⁵¹ The accusations that the 1851 invasion had been,

at bottom, a put-up job engineered by a hidden party of speculators drew credence from the actual fact that the leaders of the scheme *had* spent a lot of other people's money on their bungled invasion; from the association of López's earlier invasions with a cabal of "fraudulent bankrupts" and "speculators" who had supposedly made millions by purchasing worthless Mexican land grants in the 1840s and having them registered as proper titles after 1848; and, perhaps most interestingly, from a set of insistently repeated images of the general as an adept in the dark arts practiced on the edges of the commercial economy.⁵²

López, as a young man, had been a gambler—though according to his posthumous nemesis Wilson, not a very good one. López, the story went, had "married a rich and beautiful Cuban lady, whose fortune he dissipated at the gambling table before her beauty was the least impaired." In later years, "the gambling reduced him to a very low shift of borrowing from everybody of his acquaintance who would make him a loan, and his last years in Cuba witnessed him an associate of the lowest characters in society." The legend of López's gaming was elevated to a sort of common sense when crowds in Havana celebrated the general's capture by marching through the city with effigies of López in his dress-white uniform "with a game-cock under his left arm and a package of cards in his right hand." López, said his detractors, had rolled together hundreds of thousands of dollars of bad debt, along with the brave dreams of a hundred young men who had made the "error of confiding in his promises," in a reckless, speculative, fraudulent scheme to invade Cuba.⁵³ As the president of the United States, Millard Fillmore, put it in one of the many paragraphs he devoted to the invasion in his December 1851 State of the Union address: "Money was advanced by individuals, probably in considerable amounts, to purchase Cuban bonds . . . sold, doubtless, at a very large discount. . . . Payment, it is evident, was only to be obtained by a process of bloodshed, war, and revolution. . . . These originators of the invasion of Cuba seem to have determined with coolness and system upon an undertaking which should disgrace their country, violate its laws, and put to hazard the lives of ill-informed and deluded men."⁵⁴ López and his supporters, that is, worked a confidence game in which the lives of the young men under his command became the stakes in the biggest (and ultimately, when he lost, deadliest) bet of his life.

These images of López as a retailer of false confidences and speculator in human lives were countered by the general's defenders in a set of articles and pamphlets that emphasized López's probity in business and overall good judgment. Schlesinger itemized several of the requisitions that López had made on Cuban farmers and shopkeepers, and pointedly noted that he had given receipts (payable by the provisional government) for the food he took.⁵⁵ Writing under the eccentrically spelled pseudonym "A Flibustiero," another of López's supporters framed the entire mission as an effort to "redeem long-talked-of promises."⁵⁶ By far the most persistent in this regard was Ambrosio Gonzales, a leading figure among annexationist exiles, who likewise noted that López had paid for every meal he ate on the island (except for the horse—he already owned that). But in the account he published in 1852, entitled "Manifesto on Cuban Affairs Addressed to the People of the United States," Gonzales framed his narrative around the larger question of "speculation."⁵⁷

Gonzales, by a logic that might in another context be labeled the fallacy of financial origins, argued that those who had invested in the López mission had earned their money in honorable pursuits and therefore could not have been employing that same money to "speculate." John Henderson, who had invested the "earnings of a life of usefulness and integrity," was a case in point. "From the west, where he was born," Henderson had "rowed his passage to New Orleans in a flat-boat and by dint of his industry and perseverance, rose to eminence at the bar, and to the honorable distinction of Senator from Congress from his adopted state of Mississippi. Of such materials speculators cannot be made." The money invested in the mission and the men it represented, Gonzales was saying, were as good as gold: true in their origins and not readily convertible to a baser coin. And in any case, he argued, if these men really had been intending to speculate, they never would have paid thirty or forty cents on the dollar for the long-shot bonds they bought. They would have paid ten cents on the dollar, at best, if they had been speculating.⁵⁸

Gonzales, however, did not deny that a great confidence game had been played in the Gulf—he denied only that López and his supporters were to blame for it. Indeed, his argument agreed with that of virtually all of the general's other defenders: it was López who had been misled—"deceived by exaggerated reports from the island, by the misinformed correspondents of the American newspapers, and, above all, by emissaries of the Spanish govern-

ment, among whom are said to be some infamous Cubans." Deceived especially by the letter he had received at Key West which gave him a false sense of the state of things on the island and caused him to rush headlong into a Spanish trap—a letter that was, in the words of the pseudonymous *Filibustero*, the work of "a well-known speculator."⁵⁹ It was, Gonzales concluded, "palpable that General López had been foully decoyed. Too great a confidence in others, the result of his generous nature, was alike fatal to him and to the success of his expedition."⁶⁰ López, in this exculpatory tale, was not the con man, but the mark.

If these arguments over who had scammed whom were a way of engaging with the complex and ultimately unanswerable question of the balance of commercial interest and political commitment behind the invasion, by refracting it through a much-simplified morality tale about the character of its leader, the legend of López's capture served as a similar vehicle for a set of arguments about the vexed triangular relationship of the general, his men, and the erstwhile patriots of the island of Cuba. López, as the various versions had it, had been undone in one of several possible ways: (1) he had been betrayed by the Creole owner of a house in which he and several of his men had stopped to rest and had been captured, unarmed and asleep, by a "Spanish scout" named Jose Antonio Castañeda, who was leading a party of peasants; (2) he had been discovered, disconsolate and alone, though well-armed with a brace of pistols, sitting on a roadside rock, by a Cuban "countryman" named Jose Antonio Castañeda; (3) he had surrendered, along with some of his men, to a band of Catalans or Spaniards motivated by the reward offered by the government for his capture; or (4) he had surrendered in similar circumstances "not to a Cuban, thank God, as has been falsely reported, but to Castaneda, a native of Palma, one of the Canary Islands."⁶¹

This puzzle of conflicting stories not only beckoned toward a potentially infinite regression into the Castañeda question; it also reflected a deadly serious argument about what moral was to be drawn from the failure of the 1851 expedition by those who might, in 1852, be planning another one. If López had maintained the loyalty of his men to the very end and, indeed, marched himself into the arms of a search party, sacrificing himself to ensure that his men would qualify for the proffered amnesty, should not another mission be arranged beneath his standard? If he had been abandoned by his men and had

proven, though armed, too cowardly “to blow his brains out,” what was the use of his legacy? If he had been betrayed and bound over to the Spanish by his own countrymen, what did this say about the integrity of the island’s erstwhile “patriots”? But what if he had been captured not by a Cuban, but by a Canarian—by a man, in fact, whom the general was said to have once “generously saved from the galleys . . . and who repaid the kindness by hunting him down with bloodhounds”?⁶² What then?

It was, of course, the future as much as the past that was at stake in the ceaseless working over of the old general’s legacy. On the one hand, there was the effort to close the breach between the historical purpose that had been vested in him and the ignominy of his defeat; those who took this approach tried to make López’s failure seem merely adventitious—the misfortune of a single man on a single mission. On the other hand, there was the effort to turn the dead general into an emblem of the difficulty of his mission and any other like it, and thus to compromise the credibility of any hypothetical further mission. Though the general’s detractors surely had evidence and logic on their side, when they entered the field of arguments over López—what he had done, not done, should have done, and so on—they ended up playing a game they could not possibly win. Their arguments depended on historical specifics that were ill-suited to doing battle with the counterfactual probabilities mobilized by the general’s defenders. They could never really say once and for all that the invasion would not have turned out differently if it had been prosecuted differently. And what was more important, they had chosen the wrong ground on which to fight. No matter how they defamed the old general’s reputation and deconstructed his failures, they had been drawn into a contest over defining the specific failures of the 1851 mission, rather than taking the opportunity to assert a broader set of arguments about what would be wrong about *any* invasion of Cuba. Outside the circle of López’s supporters, his reputation did not long survive his execution. His cause, however, continued under the standard of another man—the man, in fact, whose allegations had started the devastating run on the general’s reputation: Colonel William Crittenden.

THE APOTHEOSIS of Colonel Crittenden began with the first letters describing his execution. These were, of course, the letters that transmitted discouraging reports of dead Americans—some of the first information about

the invasion to come back from Cuba—thus forecasting (and, some would say, ensuring) the failure of the mission. But embedded within them was a set of fragmentary morals which annexationist propagandists in the United States quickly set about reworking into a usable legend of the 1851 invasion. As with the abortive legend of López, the Crittenden story had at its heart the brave last words spoken by a man facing death—words that were somehow, amid the roll of the surf, the frenzy of the assembled crowd, and the successive volleys of the firing squad, audible even to those who stood at a distance. The fifty or so men executed with Crittenden were to be shot in groups of six, kneeling, with their backs to the firing squad. But “when the moment of execution came, many, Colonel Crittenden and Captain Victor Kerr among them, refused to kneel with their backs to the executioners. “NO,’ said the chivalrous Crittenden,” in a speech that was uniformly rendered in boldface as it was endlessly reprinted and circulated by American newspapermen and annexationist pamphleteers, “AN AMERICAN KNEELS ONLY TO HIS GOD AND ALWAYS FACES HIS ENEMY.”⁶³

Crittenden’s claim to be “an American” as he stood there on the beach at Atares was, of course, a contested one. Under the Neutrality Act—which Crittenden, as a federal customs commissioner in the Port of New Orleans (who also happened to be the nephew of U.S. attorney general John J. Crittenden), had repeatedly helped the filibusters evade—the 1851 invasion had no claim to being an “American” expedition. Indeed, in an April 1851 proclamation, the president of the United States, Millard Fillmore, had declared that filibusters were “adventurers for plunder and robbery” who had “forfeit[ed] their claim to the protection of this Government or any interference on their behalf, no matter to what extremities they may be reduced in consequence of their illegal conduct.” By that proclamation, and by the Spanish law under which they were sentenced to death, Crittenden and his men were not “Americans.” They were “pirates”—men without recourse to the diplomatic conventions and international treaties that governed the trial and execution of the subjects of one state by the government of another. In a bit of diplomatic symbolism that was widely reviled by expansionists, the American consul in Havana refused to intercede on the filibusters’ behalf or even to make an application to Cuba’s captain general to be allowed to see them.⁶⁴

In contrast to the argument that Crittenden had placed himself beyond the

protection of the U.S. government by participating in an illegal invasion of Cuba, the account of the colonel's execution that was circulated through the annexationist press treated his Americanism as a property of his body—evident on the (brave) face of it. This was the view expressed in one of the first letters to reach the United States: "They marched down the ship's gangway, one by one, stripped to trowsers and shirt, some without the latter covering, bare headed, hands tightly bound behind their backs. . . . I saw their pale faces and firm steps as they descended from their trial to death. Many were very young, and some had the forms as they no doubt had the souls, of heroes." The most widely reproduced account was similarly admiring: "I never saw men—and could scarcely have supposed it possible—conduct themselves at such an awful moment with the fortitude these men displayed under such trying circumstances. . . . They died bravely, those gallant and unfortunate young men. . . . A finer looking set of young men I never saw; they made not a single complaint, not a murmur, against their sentence. . . . Not a muscle was seen to move." The Americanness of these men, the annexationists were arguing, was unquestionable—inalienable. It was a sort of moral fiber and self-control evident in their every bodily action, which stood in bold contrast to the way the Cubans "danced, raved, shouted, and capered about like so many idiots" in celebrating their capture. It quickly became almost impossible—even for those who, like Schlesinger, blamed Crittenden for the mission's failure—to refer to the memory of the colonel without first using some combination of the words "brave," "gallant," and "noble."⁶⁵

The sad fact, according to the promoters of the posthumous legend of Crittenden, was that the colonel and his soldiers had not only been abandoned by their government in life; they had also been desecrated by their captors in death, "their mutilated remains dragged by a savage populace." Though the first accounts back from the island differed about whether the mob had been composed of "the outpouring of Spain, the mule of Europe," or "the very vilest rabble and Negroes," it was the latter description that soon came to prevail. "The troops were ordered to retire; and some hundreds of the very vilest rabble and Negroes, hired for the purposes, commenced stripping the dead bodies, mutilating their limbs, tearing out their eyes, cutting of their noses and fingers, and some of the poor fellows (privates) these wretches brought to the city on sticks, and paraded them under the very walls of the palace."⁶⁶ That

image cast a spell over all subsequent discussion of the Cuba question among American expansionists. Henceforth when they spoke of "the blood of Crittenden" or of "a band of our gallant countrymen . . . murdered under the circumstances of so much ruthlessness and barbarity—whose blood cried out aloud from the ground, even now, for vengeance," it was understood that they were invoking an image of the conflict in Cuba which counterpoised the pale (white) bravery of Americans to the "black-hearted" brutality of the Spanish soldiers, the "black instincts" of their troops, and, above all, the bestial barbarity of their black slaves.⁶⁷ They were—as Crittenden replaced López as the struggle's emblematic hero, and the furtherance of the history of "slavery" replaced that of "liberty" as its dominant principle—talking about Haiti.

It was a significant element of the legend that the "Negroes" who smeared the bodies of those beautiful white boys all over the beach at Atares did not act on their own account. They were "hired for the purpose"—agents of a history that was not their own. That history, it became increasingly clear to pro-slavery annexationists in the mid-1850s, was the history of Atlantic anti-slavery, particularly as represented by the new captain general of Cuba, the Marqués Juan de la Pezuela. Pezuela, who became captain general in the fall of 1853, was a well-known abolitionist, and his appointment was seen in the United States as red-letter evidence that it was the policy of Spanish government that if Cuba was not to be "Spanish," it would be "African." Incendiary rumors that the Spanish had made plans to emancipate and arm the slaves in case of an American invasion were mixed with and made credible by news reports from the island. In December 1853, Pezuela promulgated a series of liberal reforms which, taken together, seemed to pro-slavery observers in the United States to portend something close to an anti-slavery apocalypse in Cuba—"Africanization," they called it.⁶⁸

Though the African trade to Cuba had been legally closed in 1817, hundreds of thousands of Africans had been imported in the meantime, an open secret on which the slave and sugar economy in Cuba depended for its survival.⁶⁹ Pezuela set about resolving the peculiar situation of these legally non-existent slaves by actually enforcing the law, gaining the previously absent legal authority to go onto the planters' estates and take a census of their slaves to determine who had been imported when; he emancipated those who were legally free and allowed them to remain on the island. Pezuela further decreed

that he would encourage the ex-slaves' assimilation into the rest of the island's population by allowing black women to marry white men, and black men to arm themselves and join the militia. As if this were not enough, it was rumored that Pezuela was actually importing thousands more Africans, not as slaves, but as "apprentices"—who would have the status of any other term-bonded laborer as soon as they were landed in Cuba.⁷⁰

The response among the expatriates and expansionists was, in a word, anaphylactic. Sensitized by prior contact with the idea of black rule in Cuba, they went into a sputtering, hyperventilating, eyes-rolled-back-in-the-head sort of rage, choking out article after article which might as well have been composed solely out of seven or eight words: "emancipation," "ferocious," "savage," "barbarian," "incendiary," "wilderness," "Haiti," "Jamaica." As in: "Witness the miserable experiment made by the English and French in the West Indies. Twenty-five years ago where we saw cultivation bringing forth wealth and refinement with all the elegance of polished life, we see vagrant labor stalking though a desolate land with hungry and brutal ferocity. This experiment of West Indian emancipation is worth a thousand theories." Or: "Shall [the United States] consent to have under the sway of England, obedient to her whisper, at sixty miles from her Southern border, on the path of her coasting trade, across the isthmian routes that commanded her Pacific and her eastern commerce a colony . . . of wild, untutored, and ferocious Africans—the rallying tribes for Jamaica and Santo Domingo?" Or: "The phrase Africanization . . . plainly conveys . . . without periphrasis, the complex ideas of emancipation, confiscation, pillage, murder, devastation, and barbarism."⁷¹

These outpourings were framed by much the same version of pro-slavery-as-history that had characterized earlier discussions of the Cuba question. Cuba was seen as posed between "Southern civilization" and "sickly philanthropy," the wisdom of the first proved by the evident course of historical development, the fallacy of the second registered through a set of images of time running backward—slaves returning to unchecked savagery, the fruitful landscape to an uncultivated wilderness. Indeed, it is hard not to see in these statements a reflection of the anxiety that characterized the daily lives of Mississippi Valley slaveholders (as well as those elsewhere in the hemisphere). Their terrible world-historical fear of the repetition of the Haitian Revolution—of the idea that maybe they were grievously mistaken about the course of his-

tory—was daily rekindled by their direct experience of the resistant behavior of their slaves and the fearful darkness of the caliginous swamps and dusky forests which lay at the margins of their fields and farms.

In the lives of the slaveholders, these everyday exposures to the possibility of resistance and revolt among their slaves were local and continual, but they were perhaps fearful enough to require displacement into another form so as to be properly managed (in a psychological if not always a practical sense). For as Valley slaveholders foamed on about "Africanization" and black revolt, they refused to believe, or at least to say that they believed, that slaves—slaves like their slaves—could plan something like the Haitian Revolution.⁷² Rather, they projected an apparently more comfortable history of imperial rivalry onto the hemispheric history of black revolt. It was not so much the slaves' own ideas of right and revolution that were at stake in the events called slave revolts, as the ideas and actions of the (white, European) rivals of the United States: the virulent democratizing revolutionizing of the misguided French; the cynical, incendiary slave importing and free-person arming of the puny Spanish; and especially the abolitionist philanthropy of the sickly, feminized English. As they surfaced, the fears and anxieties of life under the threat of black revolt were reworked into a historical narrative in which the motive force of change—whether for better or for worse—was always white.

Whatever the etiology of these fears, in 1854 they resurfaced in the Mississippi Valley in a rash of annexationism and filibusterizing. The Louisiana legislature, acting on a message from the governor, passed a resolution condemning Spanish policy in Cuba, "the manifest object and effect of which must be the abolition of slavery in the colony, and the sacrifice of the white race, with its arts, commerce, and civilization to a barbarous and inferior race," and declaring that "the time has arrived when the federal government should adopt the most decisive and energetic measures to thwart and defeat a policy conceived in hatred to this republic and calculated to retard her progress and prosperity." This resolution was presented to the U.S. Senate by Louisiana's John Slidell, along with a resolution calling for the suspension of the Neutrality Act. Meanwhile, Mississippi's former governor John Quitman was selling bonds and enlisting men at a furious rate for what promised to be the biggest, best-financed, and best-armed filibuster mission yet. By the end of 1854, Quitman was said to have raised \$1 million and secured the promises of 50,000 young

men for his invasion—the marvelous promise of which was to be announced on the island through the distribution of *Apuntes biográficos del Mayor General Juan Antonio Quitman*, a fawning biography published in New Orleans in 1855, and designed to introduce the people of Cuba to their would-be liberator and governor.⁷³

The fearsome final struggle between slavery and freedom in the Americas seemed set to commence in Cuba. At stake, according to pro-slavery expansionists, was whether the South would be allowed to achieve the “safety . . . found only in the extension of its peculiar institutions . . . towards the equator,” or whether it would be belted into stasis by abolitionized—Africanized—Haiti, Jamaica, and Cuba.⁷⁴ These questions about space were also questions about time: slavery, among the expansionists, was seen as a progressive force, the one true path of social development. Yet the path of right was embattled by those who would drag the world back into the past: theorists of human equality, who despite the experimental verification that slaveholders everywhere saw around them (slaves were slaves, so they must have been meant to be slaves and therefore should stay slaves), were unwilling to cede the future to slavery.

But the battle was never rejoined—not in Cuba at least. Historians have provided various explanations for the passing of the “Africanization scare”—explanations that, taken together, make its ending seem a foregone conclusion. Pezuela was recalled to Spain, and the reforms he had proposed were never implemented. Quitman was called to the White House for a private meeting with President Franklin Pierce, after which his commitment to the invasion plan seemed to waver. (Apparently, his sense of obligation to those who had bought the millions of dollars of bonds he had sold wavered as well: no final accounting of the money he raised was ever made.) The Ostend Manifesto—which made it clear that the official policy of the United States was no longer to “purchase” but henceforth to “detach” Cuba from Spain, via U.S. military intervention, if necessary—was leaked to the press. While the possibility of a U.S. invasion may have diminished some of the panic animating Quitman’s plan, it outraged not only those who opposed expansion, but even expansionists who were dedicated to a more subtle solution. And the nation was convulsed by the conflict over slavery in Kansas. Whatever the relative weight of

these various factors, among Mississippi Valley slaveholders the problem of Cuba went from acute to chronic, at least for a time.

As long as there were slaveholders in the South, of course, imperializing Cuba remained an active possibility, active enough that Abraham Lincoln rejected a last-minute proposal to avoid secession and Civil War (made, ironically, by filibuster Crittenden's uncle, John J. Crittenden) on the grounds that "a year will not pass till we shall have to take Cuba as a condition on which they will stay in the union."⁷⁵ By that time, however, the "Southern dream of Caribbean empire" had changed its shape. By the eve of the Civil War, the ambition of advancing the cause of slaveholding, white man's republicanism, and free trade by invading Cuba would come to seem a fairly modest one, even quaint. What about Nicaragua? the slaveholding imperialists of the Mississippi Valley would ask. What about Mexico? Underlying this spatial shift in the imperialist imaginary was a corresponding shift in the sort of history that imperialists hope to make—a shift spurred by a crisis within the political economy of slavery, race, and sex in the United States, a crisis which made open Caribbean lands rather than open Caribbean markets seem like its proper "fix."

I3

“The Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny”

The filibuster is the true philanthropist.

—George Fitzhugh, “The Conservative Principle; or, Social Evils and Their Remedies”

ON NOVEMBER 10, 1857, the president of Nicaragua was arrested on the street in New Orleans. Or at least that was who he claimed to be. In reality, he was thirty-three-year-old William Walker, a shape-shifter who had been a doctor in Nashville, a newspaper editor in New Orleans, a lawyer in San Francisco, a filibuster in Sonora—and a president in Nicaragua. As recently as 1855, at the end of his failed effort to “liberate” Sonora from Mexico, he had been the owner of “but one boot, a piece of another,” and, as Marx might have put it, his own white skin.¹ But by 1857 he had gained a reputation throughout the Americas as a soldier of fortune. He had conquered Nicaragua, and been deposed by force of arms. Now, having faced a predictably farcical set of legal proceedings in relation to his repeated violation of the Neutrality Law, he was preparing to return to Nicaragua, reclaim his presidency, and, incidentally, advance the cause of slavery, the white race, and world history as a whole.

Walker had first arrived in Nicaragua as a soldier of fortune in June 1855. Though his 1854 mission to Sonora had been nothing less than a total organizational and operational failure—hence the one boot—it had apparently gained Walker a reputation for bravery, not to say brutality. On that basis, he was invited by a representative of one side in the ongoing civil war in Nicaragua to raise a group of men to join the fight in Central America, for pay and for the promise of land grants at the end of the battle. In June 1855, Walker

sailed for Nicaragua along with fifty-eight men (destined to be forever known, at least by themselves and their supporters, as the "Fifty-six Immortals"—one of them having been court-martialed for cowardice and another apparently just gone missing by the time they got around to choosing a name). In Nicaragua, Walker proved himself to be a military leader of extraordinary savagery: willing, by his own account, to execute prisoners of war in retaliation for the actions of his adversaries; driving his own unpaid and ill-prepared men into battle under threat of death; and, most famously, ordering, upon his retreat from the great city of Granada, that it be razed and that a standard bearing the words "Here stood Granada" be placed at its gate.

The civil war that Walker joined was part of a larger struggle throughout all of Central America to determine the character of the postcolonial political economy. The struggle pitted Liberals—who had brought Walker and his mercenaries to Nicaragua, and who favored the secularization of law and education, the privatization of the corporate landholdings of the Catholic Church and various Indian tribes, and the imposition of a market in land and labor—against a Conservative alliance of landholding oligarchs, powerful clerics, and Indians, whose way of life was threatened by the onrushing privatization of their lands and the turn toward commercial agriculture.² Seen in light of the hemispheric history of the expropriation of native lands, privatization of the land market, and promotion of commercial agriculture for an international market, the struggle that Walker joined in Nicaragua was not unlike the capitalist transformation of the Mississippi Valley, which he had witnessed in the 1840s. Indeed, the similarities were great enough to convince Walker and his supporters that taking over Nicaragua was simply an extension of the historical mission—the historical progress—of the white race.

At the strategic center of the war in Nicaragua was Lake Nicaragua, the enormous lake in the center of the country, twelve miles inland from the Pacific on the western side and connected by river to the Atlantic on the east—an isthmus that goods and people might one day be able to cross without having to be taken off ships and conveyed across dry land.³ It was the isthmus that made it possible for whoever controlled Nicaragua to make money off the seas on either side. For it was there that international maritime traffic had to cross through sovereign space, where it would be subject to tolls and taxes. Controlling the land between the seas gave whoever governed Nicaragua a primary

stake in the global economy of the nineteenth century. Under the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850, which effectively abrogated the Monroe Doctrine in deference to British power in the Caribbean, the United States and Great Britain had agreed that the development of any transit routes across Nicaragua would be a joint project, and the Nicaraguan government had granted a canal-building concession to the Accessory Transit Company, headed by American Cornelius Vanderbilt and backed by British capital.⁴ Very quickly the Nicaraguan transit began to compete with the Panamanian crossing as the busiest route across the isthmus. By 1853, 20,000 people a year were passing through Nicaragua on their way between the Atlantic and the Pacific.

There was, that is to say, a lot at stake in determining who controlled the transit. Controlling Lake Nicaragua would give one side or the other in the civil war the ability to move east-west across the country and resupply an army on either side, and, perhaps just as important, the ability to collect taxes on the business of the Accessory Transit Company. Between the two imperial powers contending for dominance in Central America, the stakes were similar; and throughout the war in Nicaragua, the United States and Great Britain maintained a naval presence at the eastern inlet to the transit. The British claimed they were there to protect the Musquito Indians' sovereign rights over the settlement of Greytown, which lay at the mouth of the San Juan River on the Atlantic coast and thus provided a potentially lucrative site for collecting duties that were otherwise being claimed by Nicaragua. The Americans claimed they were there to ensure the ability of American citizens and goods to cross the isthmus without being molested by, say, Musquito Indians or the British. And between the companies headed by Vanderbilt and rival steamboat magnate George Law, the contest was over who could move as much revenue as possible out of Nicaragua by gaining concessions on favorable terms from whatever combination of governments held power along the length of the transit.⁵

Though Walker had joined the battle on the side of the Liberals, his 400-page memoir entitled *The War in Nicaragua* betrays no hint whatsoever of what made a Liberal different from a Conservative, nor any real knowledge of the prior history of the struggle in which he was engaged.⁶ Indeed, Walker, again by his own account, seems to have viewed himself as the military occupier of the territory controlled by his erstwhile Liberal allies, whose purposes

he distrusted, whose orders he countermanded, whose correspondence he spied on, and whose leaders he undermined and, in one case, executed. He fought at the head of what he called the "falange," a unit composed of American and European mercenaries, which was periodically reinforced from San Francisco with the help of the Accessory Transit Company's Western agents, Charles Morgan and Cornelius Garrison. Indeed, when Vanderbilt indulged in an extended holiday in Europe, Morgan and Garrison managed to buy enough shares of the company to gain control of it; for a time, it appeared that the agent of manifest destiny and the commercial secretaries of the steamboat magnate had combined to pull off one of the greatest land grabs of all time. Victorious in the field, Walker formed a unification government with his Conservative rival Patricio Rivas; and when he was able to draw the latter into conspiring against him (by, well, conspiring against *him*), he declared Rivas a traitor and called for an election. In June 1856, eighteen months after his bootless surrender to the U.S. Army in California, William Walker was elected president of Nicaragua.⁷

In the brief time he was president, Walker effectively internationalized the land market in Nicaragua by expanding the Liberal policy of breaking up large holdings; the set of policies he instituted were unabashedly designed to transfer property from the inhabitants of Nicaragua to immigrants from the United States. He promised large grants of state-held property (including the confiscated properties of Walker's enemies) to immigrants from the United States; a wholesale re-registration of land titles under procedures published in English as well as Spanish; and the recognition of contracts made in English as legally binding. "The general tendency of these several decrees was the same," he later explained. "They were intended to place a large proportion of the land of the country in the hands of the white race." Walker, that is to say, intended to expand the Liberal program of regionally based expropriation and capitalist transformation into a hemispheric (read: U.S.) looting of Nicaragua. Finally, Walker (re)legalized slavery in Nicaragua and reopened the African slave trade, opening an international market in flesh, sinew, and bone to underwrite markets in Nicaraguan lands and exportable commodities (gold, silver, bananas, coffee, indigo, and cochineal)—markets that he hoped to create.⁸

Practically and ideologically dependent on immigration from the United States to underwrite his "reforms," Walker did little to conceal his disdain for

Nicaraguans—white and Indian alike. A typical official pronouncement from the Walker government went something like: “You will have no stability in any of the Central American States until you have infused a large amount of North American blood into their veins.”⁹ Statements like that were profoundly disconcerting to the neighboring Conservative governments of El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, all of which were soon either indirectly supporting or actually conducting military operations against Walker’s Nicaragua.¹⁰

Walker’s other great goal in Nicaragua was to get money out of the transit. Indeed, it might be said that by internationalizing (that is, whitening and Americanizing) the land market, Walker was hoping to recruit to Nicaragua a group of white landholders who would support him as he sought to consolidate control over the transit—a money-producing bottleneck in the global economy. Upon his return from Europe, Vanderbilt discovered that he had been bilked out of control of the Accessory Transit Company, and reportedly wrote to Morgan and Garrison threatening his revenge in the following terms: “The law is too slow, gentlemen, I will ruin you.” This he attempted to do by dumping the stock he held in the company onto the market all at once, and, when the bottom dropped out of the price, buying it all back again. Walker and his commercial co-conspirators responded by ordering an audit of the company’s books; and on “discovering” that the company had been remiss in its contractual obligation to Nicaragua, they declared it in default, and nationalized its assets under the control of Morgan and Garrison.

Vanderbilt retaliated with a concerted campaign on Wall Street that made it impossible for the so-called government of Nicaragua to borrow money in New York. He attempted to shut down all maritime traffic to and from Nicaragua, in one instance by convincing the British Navy to guide a ship of filibusters fired up for battle in Nicaragua to what must have been a somewhat anticlimactic landing on the coast of Panama; and he supplied a private army, which he then offered to Costa Rica for use against Walker. Walker’s gambit of internationalizing the land market in order to nationalize the transit met what seems a fitting end: it was snuffed out by a private army paid for by Cornelius Vanderbilt, captained by a British mercenary, and fighting under the flag of Costa Rica. Having lost control of Lake Nicaragua and the San Juan River, Walker surrendered on May 1, 1857, to a U.S. Navy ship waiting just off the

western coast of Nicaragua. He was taken from there to Panama, across the isthmus, and thence to New Orleans, where he landed on May 27.¹¹

He received a hero's welcome. Walker was borne from the gangplank of his ship to a carriage that conveyed him to the St. Charles Hotel. There, beneath a rotunda better known for slave auctions than for visits by deposed heads of state, he gave a long speech, and then, when the crowd clamored for it, another. Two nights later he spoke for two hours at the base of Canal Street, where a platform festooned with Nicaraguan and American flags had been erected.¹² Walker's star quickly waned outside the hard core of his Deep-South circle of supporters. His image was undermined by stories of his cruelty and his indifference to his own men, whom he had left behind in Nicaragua and who had begun to wash up in Northern ports in the most pitiable condition; and by his continual jousting with the federal government, to which he had developed a bad habit of surrendering in moments of extremity. But he remained a hero in the Mississippi Valley. After 1857 he was based in New Orleans, where he lived between trips around the South to raise money for his next (and after that, his last) mission to Nicaragua.

BEYOND THE fact of the city's geographic proximity and maritime position, it made sense for Walker to go to New Orleans. Walker was aware of the city's support for López's 1851 invasion of Cuba. Indeed, Walker had a Mass said "for the soul of López" on the eve of the Battle of Granada.¹³ Nicaragua, however, was not Cuba, and Walker's project was different from López's in several crucial respects. For slaveholders and their allies in the Mississippi Valley, López's project represented a way of reconciling the often-contradictory interests of planters and merchants. The conquest of Cuba would, on the one hand, rejuvenate the mercantile economy of the Mississippi Valley, restoring to New Orleans's merchants and shippers the global commercial position they thought God had foreordained in the downward flow of the river. And on the other hand, it would provide Valley planters with a firewall against the contagion of what you or I might call Emancipation, but they called "barbarism" and "race war."

For someone accustomed to this way of thinking, supporting Walker might make perfect sense: controlling the isthmus would deliver the trade of the Pacific to the port of New Orleans; and reestablishing slavery in Central America

would provide the South with a bulwark against the progress of hemispheric abolition. Walker's game, however, was deeper than that, as were the sources of his attraction to his supporters. For in addition to appealing to Valley merchants and slaveholders, Walker directed his appeal to the Mississippi Valley's large (and ever-increasing) population of nonslaveholding white men. And in so doing, he promised to both elevate these men to a social station befitting their precious skin, and to cleanse the South of a nonwhite population (40 percent of *the* population, actually) whose very existence raised troubling questions about the relationship between the Southern social order and its principal ideological justification—between slavery and white supremacy.

It has become a habit of mind to identify "the South" with slavery and white supremacy, as if the three terms mapped the same territory and might be used interchangeably. This habit has a long history and much to do with the fact that under the U.S. Constitution, which apportioned political representation by population and by state, struggles over slavery, freedom, and economy within the United States took the form of struggles for control of various states. Thus, countless nineteenth-century political commentators could refer to "the slaveholding states" and be understood, even though the majority of the whites in the "slave states" did not own slaves and even though nearly half the people in those states were, in fact, slaves.¹⁴ The emergence of sectionalism as the dominant idiom for contesting the slavery question reorganized, insistently though almost invisibly, discussions of political economy (slavery versus free labor) and constitutionalism (states' rights versus federal powers) into a rigid biregionalism.

From the very beginning, this state-by-state spatialization of the politics of slavery went hand in hand with a certain version of the racialization of the politics of slavery: the argument that slavery and white supremacy were two sides of the same coin—that white supremacy was either the ideological justification for slavery or, in the alternative formulation, that white supremacy was the underlying cause of slavery. And no doubt there is much truth to the identification of slavery with white supremacy; white-supremacist ideologies provided powerful idioms of identification between nonslaveholding whites and their slaveholding neighbors. Nonslaveholders were members of "the ruling race." They were invited to share in the leadership of society by voting and serving on juries, entitled to a share of the privileges of enjoying their so-

ciety's stock of slaves through rituals of humiliation and violation (intimidating the men, degrading the women, patronizing the elders, soliciting the children, and so on). As long as they did not go so far as to diminish the value held by actual slaveholders, nonslaveholding white men were baited by a hope that they might one day accede to a full share in slavery—that they might one day be men in full.¹⁵ Indeed, as the historian Stephanie McCurry has argued, it was the stake that these men had in patriarchy and household order that, finally, enabled society to think of them as being “masters” of their own households, just as slaveholders were masters of theirs.¹⁶

Yet the very identification of these men by the term “nonslaveholders” marked them as somehow incomplete—men defined by what they were not, rather than what they were. They were certainly not slaveholders, and perhaps not proper Southerners . . . or proper men. As at other moments of crisis—particularly the South Carolina Nullification crisis of 1831 (the refusal of the state of South Carolina to enforce the federal tariff, a problem that was eventually resolved only with Andrew Jackson's threat to use the United States Army to invade the Palmetto State) and the Virginia slave emancipation debates of 1832—by the late 1850s several strains of thought that fed the ideological identification of “the South” with slavery and slaveholding were beginning to produce rogue strains that threatened to metastasize into a real threat to slaveholding power. If the geographic dimensions of politics of slavery in the 1850s (the fight over the West, which culminated in the state-for-state Compromise of 1850; the fight over Kansas and the doctrine of “popular sovereignty” for territories becoming states; the Kansas-Nebraska Act) made it inevitable that the defenders of slavery would come to think of their struggle in increasingly sectional terms, it also provided a frame that called attention to variation within the supposedly uniform space of “the slaveholding South.” Indeed, the late 1850s, the high point of sectional thinking, produced an acute awareness of differences *within* the South—of regional differences, class differences, and an emergent contradiction between the privileges of race and those of slavery, a contradiction that could not be solved within the confines of the existing political economy of slavery. This unevenness within the South led slaveholders and nonslaveholders alike to seek solutions outside the boundaries of their region and of the United States (and thus outside the boundaries of standard historical accounts). They looked first to Nicaragua

and the filibuster government established there by William Walker in 1856, and then to Africa and the reopening of the Atlantic slave trade.

ONE OF the things that struck visitors to “the South” was the fact that white men were always talking about slaves and cotton. Joseph Ingraham termed the two together “the ever harped upon, never worn out subject of conversation.” The conversations about slaves and the products of their labor were a powerful medium of slaveholding sociability in the antebellum South. Talking about slaves and cotton, white men made and remade connections to one another, shared out and acquired practically useful knowledge, sorted themselves into hierarchies of insight and expertise, and tracked their own progress through time. In addition to being a vehicle of sociability, however, the cotton-and-slaves conversation was a way of imagining and tracking the social history of the South. When the Scottish traveler James Stirling suggested in 1857 that cotton and Negroes were “the law and the prophets to the men of the South,” he was suggesting that the foundational commodities on which the Southern social order was based were both the limiting condition and the leading indicators of the course of Southern history—the law and the prophets. This never-ending, ever-changing conversation was a way for white men to measure the progress of their political economy. Their sense of economic time—of proper and improper development, of beckoning possibility and cautionary warning—was indexed through the comparison of the prices of cotton and slaves.¹⁷

The central proposition around which these ritualized reckonings of the state of the South were framed was that the price of slaves should be roughly 10,000 times the price per pound of cotton. But in the late 1850s, the price of slaves seemed to cut loose from all other prices in a cycle of speculation that observers termed “the Negro fever.” Newspaper articles entitled “HIGH PRICES FOR NEGROES” or “BIGGEST SALE YET” codified the slaveholders’ commonplace “high-priced slaves and low-priced cotton” into news, and recirculated them as material to be incorporated in a still-wider set of conversations about the slave market. Slave prices were “raging far above their legitimate level,” wrote one moralist of the market. “The very Negro who, as a prime laborer would have brought \$400 in 1828 would now, with thirty years on him, sell for \$800,” declared South Carolina senator James Henry Ham-

mond. The price of slaves in relation to the prices of other goods was said to have doubled since the 1840s and quadrupled since the closing of the African trade. Slave prices were 25 percent higher "with cotton at ten and one-half cents than they were two or three years ago, when it was worth fifteen or sixteen cents."¹⁸

Though generally indexed in the Southern press through reference to the prices paid for slaves at estate sales, "the Negro fever" was understood by all to be inseparable from the interstate slave trade, which tied Lower-South cotton planters interested in expanding their stake in the boomtime economy to Upper-South planters who were increasingly referred to simply as "slave farmers." And the slave market of the late 1850s was particularly overheated. The combination of relatively high cotton prices and fears about the future of the institution (particularly in the Upper South) combined to convince Deep-South planters that they needed to get their hands on as many slaves as they could in order to insulate themselves from whatever political misfortunes might befall the institution as a whole.¹⁹ While prices for all sorts of slaves were rising in the late 1850s, the prices slaveholders were willing to pay for women and children seemed particularly high to nineteenth-century observers. Deep-South slaveholders were hedging their bets on the future of the slave trade by buying people whose youth and generative capacity could help them lessen their dependence on the slave market.

But if the "Negro fever" resulted from the efforts of Deep-South slaveholders to insulate themselves from any misfortune that might befall the slave market, theirs was a solution that had embedded within it another set of problems. High slave prices posed substantial barriers for nonslaveholders hoping to make their way upward in Southern society, further increasing class stratification between whites in an already stratified society. In the late 1850s, Deep-South slaveholders were riding the slaves-cotton-slaves-cotton cycle to new levels of prosperity—success that was visible everywhere one looked in the Mississippi Valley: in the shops filled with vain fancies, in the gargantuan mansions being built along the banks of the river, in the open-secret concubines slaveholders bought to provide for their own comforts. But at the very same moment, nonslaveholders were finding it harder and harder to gain a full stake in Southern society. Given the increasing political tension over slavery at a national level, this narrowing of the institution's material base of support in

the South was seen as dangerous by many defenders of slavery. A Louisiana newspaper editor declared in 1859 that “the minute you put it out of the power of the common farmers to purchase a Negro man or woman to help him in his farm or his wife in the house you make him an abolitionist at once.”²⁰ The efforts of Deep-South slaveholders to insulate their own class privilege—by buying ever more slaves to plant ever more cotton and, crucially, bear ever more slave children who would do the same on and on into an indefinite future—threatened the social reproduction of the system as a whole.

Thus it was that nonslaveholders came to be seen as “a problem” in the era of the “Negro Fever.”²¹ Among slaveholders, this problem was often alluded to with the utmost delicacy. A reference to “a weakening of the strength of the foundation” of the social order, or to a want of “entire integrity in the social constitution at the South,” was all that was needed in order to summon up a whole host of anxieties. As the pro-slavery sentimentalist Edward Pollard wrote in 1859, “The cause of the poor white population cries to Heaven for justice. We see a people who are devoted to their country, who must be intrusted with the defense of the institution of slavery if ever it be assailed by violence. . . . We see, I say, such a people treated with the most ungrateful and insulting consideration by their country, debarred from its social system, deprived of all share in the benefits of slavery, condemned to poverty, and even forced to bear the airs of superiority in black and beastly slaves!”²² Although few slaveholders had the bad judgment to come right out and say so, there were grave doubts circulating through the South about the loyalty of non-slaveholders to the existing order, especially after 1857, the year that marked the publication of what the slave trade reopener Leonidas Spratt referred to as “Helper’s infamous book.”

THE REFERENCE was to Hinton Rowan Helper’s tract *The Impending Crisis of the South*, which, simply put, was a racist abolitionist colonizationist industrialist regionalist call to arms addressed to the nonslaveholding white men of the South. Helper’s method, in keeping with a long tradition of Adam Smith–inspired critiques of slavery, was to use statistical analysis of land prices, trade statistics, population and mortality, book publishing, and so on to index what Helper saw as the systematic underachievement of the Southern economy in relation to that of the North, and thus to provide a detailed accounting (almost

\$4 billion, he figured) of the costs of slavery to the people of the South.²³ Helper proposed that the slaveholders of the South pay reparations for the historical damage they had done to the Southern economy, and that the money be used, in part, to send their erstwhile slaves to Africa ("back" to Africa, he would have said). Helper, that is, sought to take control of the term "the South" by detaching it from its insistent identification with the institution of slavery and the interests of slaveholders, and to return it to its rightful exclusive owners: nonslaveholding white men.²⁴

That alone might have been enough to alarm pro-slavery Southerners, but Helper went much further. Reversing the pro-slavery argument that black slavery was the predicate of white freedom, he insinuated, suggested, and finally came right out and said that nonslaveholding whites were themselves in danger of being enslaved by slaveholders. He referred to nonslaveholders as being held in a "second degree of slavery," deluded by a "freedom" that was in fact only "nominal." He said that the slaveholders' design was to "enslave all working classes irrespective of color," and demanded of nonslaveholders: "Will you be freemen or will you be slaves?"²⁵ The South, Helper argued, could be a society defined by slaveholding or a society defined by white supremacy; it could be a society where rich whites held dominion over poor whites even to the point of enslaving them, or a society from which the source of white inequality—black slaves—was forcibly excised. It could not be both.

And then he started to talk to nonslaveholders about their wives and daughters, about white women working outdoors in the fields. "That any respectable man—any man with a heart or soul in his composition—can look upon these poor toiling white women without feeling indignant at the accursed system of slavery which has entailed upon them the miseries of poverty, ignorance and degradation, we shall not do ourselves the violence to believe. . . . In their behalf, chiefly, we have written and compiled this book."²⁶ For Helper, the debasement of these white women to the condition of slaves was a singularly disturbing image that held the key to understanding the condition of the South as a whole. A region "so great and glorious by her nature" had sunk into "infamy and degradation"; it was a region exploited, defiled, and prostituted by slaveholders, whom Helper elsewhere referred to as "abandoned wretches, who, on many occasions during infancy, sucked in the corrupt milk of slavery from the breasts of their fathers' sable concubines."²⁷ At moments like these,

Helper laid aside the tone of engaged sociological analysis that characterized so much of his work, and produced instead a bestiary of Southern society: nonslaveholding white womanhood degraded; slaveholding power corrupted by the infantile profligacy of unchecked mastery; and, at the center of the story, nonslaveholding white men, impotent and bewildered—unmanned by their poverty, their ignorance, and their blind allegiance to the degenerate rule of slaveholders. The “problem” of nonslaveholders in a slaveholding society, it turned out, was at once a problem of what it meant to be white, to be a master, and to be a man.

Hinton Helper was far from the only Southerner to characterize “the impending crisis of the South” as the problem of white men unmade by slavery. Slaveholding moralists like Edward Pollard—a slave trade reopener and pro-slavery imperialist widely read throughout the South—also professed great concern. They, however, did not perceive the problem as a contradiction between the reality of the class character of the slaveholding regime and the capacious promises white supremacy used to justify its existence; rather, in their view it was a temporary unevenness in the distribution of privileges of whiteness that might be redressed through reforming the system of slavery. As Pollard (and many others) saw it, the problem of underprivileged whites was really, at bottom, a problem of overprivileged slaves. Indeed, it was a commonplace within one strain of pro-slavery political economy that skilled slaves were taking jobs away from nonslaveholding white men.²⁸

As a way to illustrate this proposition, Pollard provided a set of images of racial disorder: slaves living careless, lazy, and impudent lives, treating white freemen with “superciliousness” and “speaking insultingly” of them; a “very gentlemanly dining-room servant” walking around with his head held too high; “some poor ‘cracker’ dressed in striped cotton, and going through the streets . . . gazing at the shop windows with scared curiosity, made sport of by the sleek dandified Negroes who lounge on the street . . . who parade their superiority, rub their well-stuffed black skin, and thank God they are not as he.” These overheated fantasies about overbearing black men did singular work for Pollard. They thematized what was actually a feature of the triangular class relationships that defined the antebellum social structure—slaveholders, nonslaveholders, and slaves—as a problem of social order, of overprivileged slaves acting out. They presented, that is to say, Helper’s conflict between

slaveholders and nonslaveholders as a conflict between nonslaveholders and slaves, thus covering over the breach in the idea that slavery was the guarantor of white equality.²⁹

Having thus framed the problem, Pollard framed its resolution with a story, which, though it was characteristic of the man in the way it couched poisonous stereotypes in the idiom of jocosely paternalism, was remarkable (even for Pollard) for the way it worked together images of sexual and racial disorder and of their resolution through violence. Though he detested the spectacle of a black man talking down to a white one, it apparently served Pollard well enough as a literary device. By framing his comments as the story of Pompey ("a Guinea Negro"), Pollard used the figure of the faithful slave to forward his own views of the proper way for white men to respond to the overinflated slaves who were supposedly lounging around all over the South. Pollard's story, in its entirety, went like this:

Pompey had married a "genteel" slavewoman, a maid to an old lady of one of the first families of Carolina, and lived very unhappily with his fine mate, because she could not understand "black folks's ways." It appears that Pompey frequently had recourse to the black art to inspire his wife with more affection for him; and having in his hearing dropped the remark, jokingly, one day, that a good whipping made a mistress love her lord the more, I was surprised to hear Pompey speak up suddenly, and with solemn emphasis, "Mass'r Ed'rd, I bleve dar *is* sumthin' in dat. When de 'ooman get *ambitious*"—he meant high-notioned and passionate—"de debble is sot up against you, and no use to honey dat chile; you just beat him out, and he bound to come out 'fore the breath come out, anyhow." I am inclined to recommend Pompey's treatment for all "ambitious" Negroes, male or female.³⁰

This twisted tale proposes a theory of the benefits of patriarchal rage (black and white). Pollard's Old-World joke about lordship and bondage provides the occasion for African Pompey's story of the benefits of beating his wife to within an inch of her life; and then the two stories are analogically connected through the comparison of violence within slaveholding households to violence within enslaved households to violence between whites and blacks. It

poses the problem of social and sexual disorder as interlocking problems to be addressed through the violent assertion of white male authority.

Pollard framed his defense of nonslaveholding whiteness as a sort of missionary philanthropy (*blanco-phia*), yet his distaste for the nonslaveholders looking longingly at his possessions seems obvious from the way he wrote about them. Why, then, did he mount such a full-mouthed defense of people with whom he evidently had so little in common beyond the shared color of their skin? Although this was clearly a question that haunted slaveholders—who were so parsimonious with their nonslaveholding neighbors when it came time to apportion representation or taxation, or to define the public good—it was not one that was generally posed as clearly as in Pollard’s admission that he felt he had to defend whiteness from his slaves and his slaves from whiteness, because if he did not his slaves might be “inoculated with white notions.”³¹ By being able to act just a little bit white, that is, they might demystify whiteness, becoming immune to the chimera of color and, by implication, the power of men like Pollard himself. Behind the bombastic defender of nonslaveholding white men from preening gentleman slaves, we can glimpse a slaveholder who was, for all his sentimentality and complacent sense of the divine ordination of his leading role in the Great Scheme of Things, scared of his own slaves—of their abilities, of their courage, and of their resistance.

Pollard’s anxiety reflected a deeper set of contradictions facing the political economy of slavery in the 1850s. At a moment when nonslaveholders were finding it increasingly difficult to move into the master class, they were also finding themselves in competition for work with skilled slaves, who were increasingly being employed as lower-order functionaries in the cotton economy—as gin wrights, draymen, stevedores, and so on. Indeed, like the commonplace image of an Irish laborer put out in the summer sun to do work that was deemed too dangerous for any (valuable) slave to do (such as digging canals and laying rails), the boomtime development of the Southern economy was blurring distinctions between white and black even as it was intensifying class difference among erstwhile members of the master race. Faced with this situation, the defenders of slavery—for whom it was an article of faith that wage labor was simply a subset (particularly degraded) of the larger category of labor—did not have recourse to the fiction that signing a contract made a man free. They had no available intellectual apparatus for distinguishing be-

tween the commodification of labor power and the commodification of the laborer, for to do so would have been to countenance the idea that the relation between master and slave and that between capitalist and laborer represented differences of kind rather than simply of degree.

In his book *Black Diamonds*, Pollard proposed two ways to forestall the social disorder he saw prefigured in the degraded condition of poor whites: the first entailed supporting William Walker, who had, at the time Pollard wrote, installed himself as the president of Nicaragua; and the second consisted of reopening the Atlantic slave trade to the United States. Each in its way was a large-scale analogy of his argument that the violent assertion of white-male authority was the solution to almost any problem. Thus, for Pollard and many others, each policy suggested a solution to the problem of reconciling the class distinction between slaveholders and slaves with the broad, leveling promise of white-supremacist sloganeering—the promise on which that society depended for justification. Neither of these movements has figured very prominently in accounts of the politics of slavery on the eve of secession; and it is true that neither was a movement that unified the entire South. Both were seen as somewhat extreme even within the pro-slavery South, and were most popular in the Deep South (especially Mississippi and Louisiana, but also Alabama and South Carolina); and neither was ultimately pursued by the Confederacy, for which maintaining good relations with Great Britain was of paramount concern. But for a time in the late 1850s, in the Mississippi Valley, these were seen as the two most important issues in pro-slavery politics.

BY ANY standard other than that of Freudian analysis, William Walker was an unlikely standard bearer for the Mississippi Valley's pro-slavery crusade, or, really, for any crusade at all. As a child, he had been effeminate and unpopular, called "honey" and "missy" by the other boys at school. He was, moreover, morbidly attached to his invalid mother, at whose bedside he spent hours reading aloud from the romances of Sir Walter Scott. As an adult, he stood scarcely over five feet four inches tall and was thought to weigh only a bit more than a hundred pounds. He was beardless and had a complexion so fair as to seem unhealthy, in an age in which energy and vigor were thought to be evident on the face of things. He had only one love in his short life, a young woman named Helen Martin, whom he courted in New Orleans while he was

editing the *Crescent*. She was esteemed by many to be a very great beauty, but had been a deaf-mute from birth. Walker learned sign language to press his case, but was deprived of ever consummating his love by the young woman's untimely death. He was withdrawn to the point of shyness, uncomfortable in any company other than that of a few close friends, one of whom Walker memorialized in the following terms: "A boy in appearance, with a slight figure, and a face almost feminine in its delicacy and beauty, he had the heart of a lion. . . . To Walker he was invaluable; for they had been together in many a trying hour, and the fellowship of danger and difficulty had established a sort of freemasonry between them."³² Walker (so the legend went) was like his best friend—a beautiful boy making his way through a man's world, with the heart of a lion concealed in his breast.

Walker's life was a sort of white-supremacist fairy tale. His early life of incomplete, ineffectual masculinity offered a parable of whiteness overcoming the limitations inherent in its unlikely vessel, of a boy made man through imperialism and slavery, of manifest destiny's homunculus become a dictator in Central America. As the historian Amy Greenberg has pointed out, Walker's unprepossessing appearance and his withdrawn ways in the company of men were continually alluded to when observers discussed the improbability of his emergence as a decisive military leader and tyrannical ruler. Walker was an unconvincing man who somehow managed to become an exemplar of a particularly carnivorous strain of white manhood.³³ The narrative arc of the story of William Walker, that is to say, was the tale of an incomplete man—girlish as a child, shy and slight as a man, delicate in features, small in stature, virginal in love, and retiring in company—being made complete through imperialism. Indeed, when he searched for a way to convey his relationship to the war in Nicaragua, the metaphor that Walker seized upon was a metaphor of sexual consummation. Just as the "fine cells" and "traits of character which define the offspring have their origins in the moment of conception," Walker noted, the "character" of his revolution might be best understood by those who "did not despise the small events" with which it commenced.³⁴

In addition to being notable for the way it framed the barely veiled sexual imagery which filled his narrative of the war in Nicaragua, this metaphor contained a remarkable play on the character of fatherhood. For Walker's comparison of his own halting first steps in making war to what we can only imag-

ine was a fumbling acquaintance with the business of conception (the small event he apparently worked so hard not to despise) was ultimately worked out in the idea that William Walker was the father who had brought himself into the world—the child who was the father of the man, the overeager initiate who sired a dictator. The wars in Sonora and Nicaragua were scenes of this self-birthing, and their bloody story was told in Walker's book *The War in Nicaragua*, in which he addressed his own history through a third-person narrative of the experiences of his literary and historical avatar, "Walker."³⁵ *The War in Nicaragua*, then, represented a self-conscious act of literary self-creation, one that brought into being a new character, "Walker," and then used his story to further the cause of both his creator, William Walker, and the war in which he had made his name. Indeed, it was by selling (in both a commercial and a dramatic sense) the story of this man "Walker" that William Walker hoped to revitalize his own base of support in the United States, as he planned what would turn out to be his last mission to reclaim his presidency. *The War in Nicaragua* was a piece of agitprop designed to convince Southerners that the solutions to their problems lay in Nicaragua, and that they might, like "Walker," be made whole by going there to find them.

As involuted as Walker's imagery of fatherhood was, the use of sexual metaphors to describe the business of filibustering, warmaking, and imperial subordination was so overdetermined as to make any direct assignment of literary paternity impossible. In the literary culture of antebellum America, as Greenberg and others have argued, the imagery of sexual conquest provided a primary register for the propagation of ideas about the necessity (and the ease) of invading other states. The association of sexual and imperial conquest was, for instance, suggested by the bare act of referring to Cuba as the "Queen of the Antilles," and further outlined by the description of her "beautiful limbs" in chains, or of such a "pure and lovely bride" forcibly wed to the "old man" Spain, or the admonition to "lash" her to the United States. It was fully exposed in statements like the following: "Cuba admires Uncle Sam and he loves her. Who shall forbid these bans? Matches are made in heaven, and why not this? Who can object if he throws his arms around the Queen of the Antilles, as she sits, like Cleopatra's burning throne, upon the silver waves, breathing her spicy, tropic breath, and pouting her rosy sugared lips? Who can object? None. She is of age—take her, Uncle Sam!"³⁶ And as the chains, ropes, and

dual-use verb “to take” itself suggested, lurking behind the construction of the imperial encounter as a romance there was always a hint (and often much more than a hint) of sexual violence.

In a context where filibustering was so relentlessly connected with sexual self-assertion, the failure to filibuster was easily associated with a whole array of masculine shortcomings. The Louisianan Pierre Soulé described calls for an invasion of Cuba as the “throbbings” of Americans, and doubted that these urges could be for very long “encircled within the narrow limits” of the Republic. Called upon, in his role as minister of the United States to Spain, to contain his expansionism, Soulé described himself as trapped in a state of “languid impotence” and “striving in vain to discharge” his duty to himself and the annexationist cause. Soulé’s partner in crime (literally), the Mississippian John Henderson, described the Pierce administration’s enforcement of the Neutrality Act as an element of government’s “eternal tendency to augmentation.” “The captivating bauble,” he continued, “is ever being fondled and nursed into extension, and under pleas of necessity, the public good, or the bolder warrant of undisguised usurpation, its dimensions are enlarged, till, like the frog in the fable, its end is explosion. . . . Vigilance and integrity may do much to postpone the catastrophe, but the cantankerous evil is never cured.”³⁷ *Coitus reservatus*, impotence, infantile and immature sexuality: among the believers, opposition to filibustering was seen as a sort of masculine inadequacy; a lack of self-control, unready when the moment called for action, overeager when it called for restraint; an incomplete mastery of the primary technology of masculine self-assertion and social reproduction.

These were failings that “Walker” saw everywhere around him in Nicaragua. The military leaders of the Liberal Party, for instance, turned out to provide a sort of exemplary rank of various masculine failings. Of Francisco Castellón, the man who had invited him to Nicaragua, Walker wrote: “It did not require many minutes to see that he was not the man to control a revolutionary movement or to conduct it to a successful issue. There was a certain indecision, not merely in his words and features, but even in his walk and the general motions of his body.” Of Trinidad Muñoz, a general in the Liberal army: “[He] began to talk in a most ridiculous manner . . . exposing his ignorance in every sentence, and showing the weakness of his character.” Of a certain Espinosa, a tax commissioner in the Liberals’ provisional government:

"an old man . . . with a Don Quixote cast of features and the dark lusterless eye, full of melancholy, so characteristic of his race." And so on: Walker's description of Nicaraguan men is a catalog of enfeebled wills, uncontrolled passions, and ridiculous hats.³⁸ Nothing good or enduring could be expected from the "issue" of their actions.

The mincing, overcompensating unmanliness that "Walker" detected in his counterparts in the Nicaraguan army was a symptom of what antebellum expansionists generally termed a broader racial incapacity. Among the expansionists, the Central American republics in particular were seen as fractious, undisciplined, and unsuccessful.³⁹ This apparent degeneracy of the form of governance—Federal, Republican—that was so lustily proclaimed elsewhere as being providentially ordained and universally desirable required explanation, which was readily available in the form of racial theory. The Central American republics were inhabited by Indians and Negroes and governed by the "mongrel" offspring of the union of European and Indian. They were, that is to say, racially degenerate, incapable of self-government in both the sexual and political sense, "enfeebled" and "semi-barbarous." "The effete and decadent descendents of the early Spanish colonists" was the way that one of Walker's admirers described them, before concluding that they were "impotent" to slow the strides of "the blue-eyed race" toward dominance in Central America. Indeed, the war itself was seen by these soldiers of fortune as itself being dispositive evidence of the savage inability of "these people to govern themselves."⁴⁰

Warmaking, according to Walker and his supporters, was the particular province of Anglo-Saxons. "Filibustering," one wrote, "is the moral necessity of all the Anglo-Norman breed. It is the necessity of all progressive races."⁴¹ To this way of thinking, the number of dead bodies that could be produced by a group of American mercenaries armed with Minié rifles, when they faced an army of Nicaraguans equipped with smooth-bore weapons that had approximately one-sixth the effective range of the weapons on the other side, was a primary metric of historical progress. The numbers of dead on the field after Walker's first battle, wrote his embedded publicist William Wells, evoked "dread and respect" among the opposing soldiers whose previous battles had been so bloodless as to become a "by-word and laughingstock among military men."

What made Walker's army better, in his own telling, was its energy and discipline, its vigor and self-control, each element broken down further into a thousand synonyms and then recomposed into its metaphorical master trope. What made his army superior was its *confidence*. It could be seen from the "looks" of these men that "they bore with firmness the blows of adverse fate. There was no hesitation in their march or their movements." And "Walker" at their head, "cool, firm, and self-possessed," his conduct marked by "the steady perseverance and patience" characteristic of success in all great enterprises. Over and over again, "Walker" and his army were described as acting in a manner that was at once decisive and deliberate, focused and relentless, their inner purpose manifest in their outward action.⁴²

In the fantasy life of nineteenth-century white supremacy and imperialism, every story that contrasted American vigor and self-determination to Latin enervation and loss of self-control was also a story about smoldering sexual possibility. As "Walker" and his men landed in El Realejo and "passed up the streets to the quarters assigned them, the women, with their best dresses and most pleasing smiles, stood at the doors and windows saluting with much natural grace the strangers who had come to find a home in their midst." Not too far up the path from this suggestive tableau of Nicaraguan women displayed in the windows like goods in a shop, the young American men had the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the native women. "Every now and then the market-women with fruit baskets on their heads would gayly greet the soldiers . . . and [there was] much wondering at the strange figures of the men from California. Nor were the Americans less amused at the new faces and forms they met on the road; and such of them as spoke any Spanish, would waste all the terms of endearment they could muster on the girls, who seemed pleased with the compliments of the men from the land of gold." Soon, however, one vision drove all other thoughts from their minds, as they topped a hill and looked out upon a scene so beautiful, so magnificent, so ecstatic that the column "seemed to halt for a moment, involuntarily, and though the order was to march in silence an exclamation of surprise and pleasure escaped the lips of all." Before them was the "tall graceful cone" of the island volcano Ometepe, in the middle of Lake Nicaragua. As Walker put it, the form of the volcano told of "history as if written in a book. . . . The appearance of the volcano was so much that of a person enjoying a siesta the beholder would not have been

surprised to see it waken at any moment and throw the lava from its burning sides."⁴³

That Walker would close out a story of roadside seduction with an ecstatic experience of the landscape made a certain amount of sense, for the most pervasive sign of the necessity of an "infusion" of Anglo-Saxon vigor was not masculine fecklessness or feminine concupiscence; it was the condition of agriculture. Like every other portion of the Americas that U.S. expansionists wanted to take over, Nicaragua was "one of the earth's most beautiful gardens," which had gone undeveloped by its ineffectual stewards. The discussion of the failings of Nicaraguan agriculturalists, which could go on for page after outraged page, was, of course, a way of talking about race—about Anglo-Saxon energy and Latin lassitude.⁴⁴ But it was also a way of talking about the proper relation of a society to the marketplace, as it was registered in the landscape. For it was declining trade statistics, as much as images of weed-tangled fields and moldering haciendas, which imperialist Americans used to represent the inadequacy—the unworthiness—of Nicaraguans to inhabit their own country.⁴⁵ And it was only with the energy and vigor of white leadership—and the labor of black slaves—that all of this tropical luxuriance could be brought to fruition.

The traffic between images of available women and fertile lands was as continual as it was inevitable. "The hero of Industry was here," wrote one propagandist, "and the rich earth, in generous recompense for his toil, gave back a thousand-fold the seed which he had sown in her genial bosom."⁴⁶ Working back and forth between agricultural, sexual, and commercial metaphors, this single sentence proposed an account in which American imperialism in Nicaragua was defined by vigorous husbandry, grateful consent, and unimaginable returns. As all the able-bodied Nicaraguan men were rhetorically shunted off-stage, their American replacements took up the husbandry of the land and protection of the women—or was it the other way around?

All of this imagery of inadequate men and available women, of Anglo-Saxon men assuming the prerogative of Latin ones, and of sticky, honeyed fertility in the air might be laughable if Walker and his cronies had not been so deadly serious about it—if it had not been included in books and articles that were part of a concerted campaign to bring war once again to Nicaragua. But with the insistent consciousness-raising of a late-night infomercial, the prag-

matic intentions of these metaphor-encrusted images were decoded in the sales pitch that lay behind them: “Inducements are now offered, such as are seldom held out”; “Now what can you do?”; “It behooves you to secure your portion of the prize”; “What is now needed and solicited by General Walker is peaceful emigrants to avail themselves of the mineral and agricultural resources of the State. . . . Farmers, mechanics, artisans, tradesmen, and all engaged in industrial pursuits will be jealously fostered and protected by the Government”; “It is then to this new country that the attention of the world is invited.”⁴⁷

These mixed and matched metaphors of martial confidence, sexual continence, and agricultural competence, which forwarded the proposition that each in its own way was a question of vigor and self-control, that there was a proper way—an Anglo-Saxon way—to kill a man, make love to a woman, or plant a field, culminated in a very concrete proposition designed to appeal to a very specific portion of the population of the United States. Walker needed white bodies. He needed them to pay the Accessory Transit Company for their passage; he needed them to vote for him in the elections he would require if his government was ever to be recognized by the United States; he needed them to help him fight his wars and fill his coffers; he needed them if he was ever going to get Costa Rica and Honduras and Guatemala and El Salvador and Cornelius Vanderbilt out of Nicaragua, if he was ever going to be able to complete whatever grand scheme it was that had taken him to Nicaragua in the first place. He needed taxpayers, voters, and soldiers, and he was prepared to pay for them: 250 acres per settler; 100 extra for families; full title after six months’ possession and improvement; no selling out to “any foreign government” (present company excepted); liberty from public service “except when the public safety shall otherwise demand.”⁴⁸ In Nicaragua under Walker, the Southern dream of an empire of commercial flows, which had been dominant in the propaganda surrounding the invasion of Cuba, blossomed into a full-fledged program of territorial aggrandizement.

WALKER’S PITCH was made in his newspaper, *El Nicaragüense*, a paper printed in Nicaragua. It provided detailed accounts of Walker’s battles, and close analysis of the evidence of his extraordinary character and capacities (the paper was responsible for the sobriquet “the Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny” and the legend that Walker’s invasion fulfilled some sort of Indian prophecy of

deliverance by a “grey-eyed man”). Published in English as well as Spanish, articles from *El Nicaragüense* made their way into the press in the United States in a series of endlessly reproduced excerpts which, in addition to providing a ready-made English-language account of Walker’s progress, catalogued in extraordinary detail the agricultural and mineral wealth waiting to be tapped by those who followed him to Nicaragua. Entire columns of the newspapers were devoted to lists of plants that grew in Nicaragua and to unsparing criticism of the prevailing practice of Central American miners, who, if *El Nicaragüense* was to be believed, had barely begun using their primitive tools to mine the country’s rich reserves. One issue included an accounting of the business of a (fictional) coffee plantation that suggested that a Central American planter of even modest accomplishment could clear a forest and plant a crop that in three years would provide a “princely annual fortune which endures for a lifetime” —here estimated at \$600,000 per annum.⁴⁹ This was the American dream as packaged and sold by William Walker: transplanted to Nicaragua, translated into Spanish and then back again into English, packaged in an ostensibly neutral newspaper article, and shipped home to an audience eager to subscribe to a simulacrum of its own most outrageous fantasies (thought to be a god, living like a prince . . .).

Walker pitched his revolution to those for whom the promise of a grant of 250 acres of unimproved land and a dream of bigger things was sufficient to get them to risk their lives. They were, according to one who traveled among them, “mostly of the class found about the wharves of Southern cities, with here and there a Northern bank cashier who had suddenly changed his vocation.” The type of man drawn to Walker, wrote another, was much like his leader: “some individual who has speculated through half a dozen different professions, and failed in them all . . . ; has become strongly convinced of the injustice of the world towards him; is strongly impressed with the idea that the world owes him a fat living.”⁵⁰ These were men who had been circulated through the commercial economy of the 1850s and been washed up on its hard shoals without anything but their own sense of having been done wrong—their own sense that they deserved something better. They were incomplete and aggrieved white men in search of a stake in the future, for which they could exchange their own race-and-sex-based sense of entitlement. This is not to say that all the business about the need for the “regeneration” of the “worn-

out society” of Central America at the hands of “the robust children of the North,” and the necessity, the inevitability, of American dominion in Nicaragua, of William Walker’s dominion in Nicaragua, was insincere or merely strategic.⁵¹ It is, rather, to say that regeneration through whiteness had a material aspect that made its progress visible on the landscape. Regeneration through whiteness, it turned out, looked a lot like one of those formerly marginal white men who had recently come into some land driving black slaves out into the field to clear it of trees and plant it in cotton. Walker’s hoped-for harvest of whiteness was to be germinated in slavery: “the permanent presence of the white race in the region” depended on “African slavery.”⁵²

Though the association of the filibuster president with the cause of slavery—of manifest destiny and slaveholding society—seems so natural as to require no further explanation, in this case it was actually a marriage of convenience. Indeed, it could be argued (if never really proven beyond the shadow of a doubt) that it was a marriage arranged and paid for by Pierre Soulé. The U.S. senator from Louisiana and one-time filibuster foreign minister to Spain, Soulé traveled to Nicaragua to meet with Walker a month before the decree legalizing slavery and reopening the slave trade, and subsequently arranged to float a \$500,000 bond for Walker, serviced by the Bank of Louisiana and secured by a million dollars’ worth of the public lands of Nicaragua.⁵³ For William Walker had not started out as a defender of slavery; in fact, he had a long and well-documented history of what historians have invariably referred to as “moderate” opposition to slavery (meaning that he was much more worried about the effects of slavery on white laborers forced to work next to slaves than about the effects on enslaved people themselves). And so it is hard to see the William Walker who traveled from San Francisco to Nicaragua in 1855 as anything other than someone who was trying to do what every other U.S. entrepreneur in Nicaragua was trying to do: control the transit by controlling Nicaragua.

In the light of Walker’s own history and the bailout organized by Soulé, his legalization of slavery and the reopening of the slave trade seem almost wholly adventitious—maneuvers calculated to extract support for his flagging operation from the only group of Americans desperate enough to gamble on the chance of his success: pro-slavery Southerners. As one of his supporters put it in a hortatory article in *DeBow’s Review*, “This magnificent country, General

Walker has taken possession of in the name of the white race and now offers to you and your slaves, at a time when you have not a friend on the face of the earth. What will you do for him?”⁵⁴ Indeed, it could be said that many of the 400 or so pages of Walker’s book *The War in Nicaragua* were devoted to taking his career as an opportunistic filibuster, a soldier of fortune, and reworking it into the story of a committed defender of slavery—a man of destiny.

Walker had a lot of material to work with as he reverse-engineered his own chaotic career into a destiny that was written in black and white. As easy as it was for American expansionists to imagine the dominion of the white race over the tropics, it was very difficult for them to imagine all of those energetic and vigorous white men trailing out into the fields to redress, with the sweat of their own brows, the developmental lags evident in the trade tables. No matter how “luxuriant” the landscape, they argued, the “climate renders Negro labor, alone, absolutely necessary for its cultivation—and the development of its rich agricultural resources.”⁵⁵ Or as Walker himself put it, “The introduction of Negro slavery constitutes the speediest and most efficient means for enabling the white race to establish itself permanently in Central America.”⁵⁶

Step by step, this dependency of white people on the supposedly unique capacity of Negroes to do what whites did not want to do themselves—this racism that was at once comfortable, providential, scientific, and desperately focused on the exigencies of production and the bottom line—was unfolded into a theory of history as racial destiny. For Walker, the prevailing racial system in the one-time Spanish colonies was legible only in terms of black and white. All the imaginary parsings of black blood and white blood, all the racial blendings of sixteenths and thirty-seconds, were for Walker evidence only of “mongrelism”—racial degeneracy—in contrast to the (also wholly imaginary but nevertheless ideologically salient) “purity” of the races in the United States. “With the Negro-slave as his companion,” Walker wrote, “the white man would become fixed to the soil; and they together would destroy the power of the mixed race which is the bane of the country.”⁵⁷

According to this version of history, the energy and vigor of pure white was more a condition of the mind than the body, the ability to organize the undisciplined physical capacities of others—lesser others—in concerted response to the exigencies of a given situation. Explaining the racial aspect of his theory of the proper organization of labor, Walker drew upon his racial theory

of martial masculinity. "No avocation of life requires so much intelligence, so much knowledge of the laws of life, and so much resolution and self-denial in adhering to them as that of the soldier. The great difference between a veteran and a raw recruit is that one knows how to take care of himself and the others do not. But you can never make a veteran of the Negro."⁵⁸

Walker's characterization of individual Africans as incapable of intellectual development, as perpetual novitiates to the ways of civilization and development, was echoed in his time-locked notion of the (non)history of the continent of Africa: "If we look at Africa in the light of universal history, we see her for more than five thousand years a mere waif on the waters of the world, fulfilling no part in its destinies and aiding in no manner the progress of general civilization. Sunk in the depravities of fetichism and reeking with the blood of human sacrifices, she seemed a satire on man. . . . But America was discovered and the European found the African as a useful auxiliary in subduing the new continent to the uses and purposes of civilization."⁵⁹ For Walker, the history of imperial conquest and that of economic development were part of the same "universal history" and "divine economy." The military and economic history he was making in Nicaragua represented a set of objective correlates—material realities implanted in Nicaragua by force of arms—along the pathway of the epochal course of the races, their respective capacities, and the proper array in society: the unfolding history of white racial dominance and black slavery.

And the measure of the progress of this history was the condition of the landscape, or at least the trade statistics which stood for it in the minds of Walker's American audience: the fee-simple landholding, the cleared forests, the plowed fields, and a devotion to staple-crop production for an international export economy. For Walker, slavery was that system which allowed "the intellect of society" (read: the white men whose capacities were hemmed in by the character of slaveholding power in the United States) to "push boldly forward in the pursuit of new forms of civilization" (see your trade tables).⁶⁰ Without slavery, the landscape would decline into a "desert" or a "ruin," and time—here indexed by the supposed "progress" of the subject races under conditions of forced labor—would begin to run backward.⁶¹

What is interesting about Walker's story of the commingled destinies of three continents is that he coupled his parable of white imperialism and black

slavery with a set of not-so-subtle warnings about the risk of white degeneracy without slavery:

A strong, haughty race, bred to liberty in its northern island home, is sent forth with the mission to place America under the rule of free laws; but whence are these men, imbued with love of liberty and equality, to derive the counterpoise which shall prevent their liberty from degenerating into license and their equality into anarchy or despotism? How are they, when transplanted from the rugged climate where freedom thrives to retain their precious birthright in the soft, tropical air which woos to luxury and repose? Is it not for this that the African was reserved? And is it not thus that one race secures for itself liberty with order, while it bestows on the other comfort and Christianity?⁶²

In order to tailor his story for sale in the South—something, incidentally, he was quite open about trying to do—Walker drew upon the idea, current in pro-slavery conservatism, that in a society without slaves, white men, in their guises as capital and labor, would be drawn into a polarizing conflict that would result in the subordination of one class of the white race to the other—capital to labor (anarchy) or labor to capital (despotism, also known as white slavery). But he reframed this familiar story by carrying it to the tropics. Rather than simply mounting a critique of the North from the vantage point of the South, or of free labor from the standpoint of slavery, Walker was also mounting a critique of degenerate whiteness from the standpoint of regenerate whiteness.

According to Walker, the war in Nicaragua was not simply a fight over the spatial extent of New World slavery in which the shifting boundary between "slavery" and "freedom" might be moved back and forth across a map (he referred to the struggle over the Kansas-Nebraska Act as "contest for abstractions" and a "fight for shadows"). It was a fight that was *internal* to the South and to whiteness itself. "It involves," Walker wrote in *DeBow's Review* in 1857, "the question whether you will permit yourselves to be hemmed in on the South as you already are on the North and on the West—whether you will remain quiet and idle while impassible barriers are being built on the only side left open for your superabundant energy and enterprise." "If there be yet vigor

in the South,” he wrote in *The War in Nicaragua*, “let her cast off the lethargy which enthralles her and prepare anew for the conflict.”⁶³

For Walker, the fight for slavery in Nicaragua was a conflict between white “languor” and “indifference” on the one hand, and white “exertion” and “courage” on the other.⁶⁴ Nicaragua was a place where wounded white men might, in victory, repair themselves and become once again whole, their personal and racial destiny completed by the addition of a black slave; or where, in defeat, they might sink back into the somnolent condition of the lesser races. The question, wrote one of Walker’s supporters, was simply whether the “scores” of underemployed white men in the South, “wasting their lives in idleness and without a prospect for the future,” would rise to the opportunity to come into their own, or whether they would shrink from the challenge due to “sheer niggardliness”—a phrase that must have been carefully chosen to incite as much indignation as possible. The question was whether these degenerate white men would have slaves or become slaves.

I4

The Ignominious Effort to Reopen the Slave Trade

Every slave that comes . . . may be said to bring his master with him.

—Leonidas Spratt, “Report on the Slave Trade”

ON THE MORNING of May 11, 1858, William Walker, who “happened” to be in Montgomery, Alabama, was invited to attend the Southern Commercial Convention that was meeting in the city. Walker entered the hall, where he was introduced as “a distinguished foreigner . . . General William Walker of Nicaragua.” He was welcomed by the delegates and took his seat among them, to listen to a much-anticipated debate on the reopening of the Atlantic slave trade.¹ If Walker, who was himself a supporter of reopening the slave trade, represented the vanguard of pro-slavery imperialism’s insatiable quest for new territory, the slave trade movement represented the rearguard action aimed at making sure that territory would be transformed in the image of the plantation social order of the Deep South: staple-crop agriculture for the global market; the equivalence of white manhood and mastery; and household patriarchy.

The idea of reopening the Atlantic trade had been around for quite a while before it was debated in Montgomery; as early as 1839, it had been suggested in the *Louisiana Courier*. By the late 1850s, support for the idea was especially pronounced in the Mississippi Valley and South Carolina, the latter state being home to Leonidas Spratt, who had rekindled the discussion with a set of newspaper articles in the Charleston *Mercury* and had earned the dubious moniker “the philosopher of the African slave trade” from Horace Greeley.² Though the idea of reopening the trade never made it to the floor of a Southern con-

vention before 1858, delegates attempted to introduce it every year from 1855 on.³ In 1859, after the majority of those at the Vicksburg convention judged any final decision on the slave trade “inexpedient” as long as the Southern states remained in the Union, Louisiana’s James D. B. DeBow (the editor of *DeBow’s Review*, which served the reopeners as a sort of official organ throughout the late 1850s) joined forces with many of the self-declared “most respectable citizens of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana” to form the African Labor Supply Association, an organization whose euphemistic title could hardly conceal its malignant purpose.

As the question took shape over the course of the 1850s, supporters of the trade took a variety of positions regarding the legality of the action they proposed. Some hoped to work through the U.S. Congress to repeal the acts that had closed the African trade in 1808. Many others concluded that the laws outlawing the trade were themselves unconstitutional, basing their view on a set of preciously legalistic arguments dealing with the vague constitutional directives to Congress governing authority to outlaw the slave trade, and with the difficulties of defining as “piracy” the practice of legally buying and selling slaves in foreign countries that had yet to ban trafficking. Some of these supporters proposed trying to convince the Supreme Court of these propositions (not as farfetched an idea as it sounds, when the Supreme Court in question was the one which had decided the *Dred Scott* case); others proposed simply “nullifying” the “unconstitutional” laws by starting to import slaves, selling them in Southern markets, and relying on Southern juries to refuse to countenance any charges of piracy. Finally, a fourth group proposed the idea of bringing Africans to the United States as “apprentices,” thus using a fiction of the forms of “consent” that defined the “contract freedom” of the wage labor economy of the North to get Africans across the borders of the United States. These “apprentices” would then be put to work doing exactly the same things that slaves had always done. The proposal was thus a strangely mirrored image of the filibuster fiction that the soldiers of fortune who departed from U.S. ports had not yet decided where they were going or what they were going to do when they left the territorial sovereignty of the United States.⁴

The complexity of the arguments about the legality of the slave trade reflected the complicated relationship of the idea to sectional politics. Many of

those who supported the reopening of the trade did so as part of a larger commitment to pro-slavery disunionism, and used the issue as a sectional wedge to push the politics of secession forward. But many others saw reopening as an issue which was related to but not subordinate to the larger set of sectional issues; quite a few, indeed, professed to believe that reopening the trade offered the best chance to put the South on a par with the North and thus make it possible to keep the Union together. A rough division on these grounds might be made between reopeners in South Carolina—where the idea of nullification was particularly popular (and, indeed, where several boatloads of Africans were openly landed in the late 1850s, making judicial nullification an active politics on the eve of the Civil War)—and those in the Mississippi Valley, where the idea of “apprenticeship” emerged at the center of the debate.⁵ In August 1857, the New Orleans *Daily Delta* had urged the Louisiana legislature to import “apprentices” from Africa for terms of up to twenty years. These “apprentices” would be paid \$3.50 per month, from which the costs of their transportation from Africa and living expenses would be deducted, and at the end of their term they would be provided \$500 to pay for their own return to Africa. The state legislatures in Mississippi and Louisiana considered bills to authorize New Orleans slave dealer James Brigham to import 2,500 of these “apprentices” from Africa in 1857 and 1858, employing their own versions of similar bills that were introduced and defeated in those years, though only very narrowly in states like South Carolina and Texas. It was in Louisiana that the reopeners came the closest in 1858, as the “apprenticeship” bill easily gained a majority in the lower house, only to be defeated in the Senate when those opposed to the measure repeatedly undermined the necessary quorum by running out of the hall until they had time to organize enough votes to defeat the measure.⁶ Indeed, in the late 1850s, the merchant capitalists of New Orleans were already (“notoriously,” as the British ambassador put it) involved in the slave trade. In 1857 and 1858, somewhere between fifteen and twenty-eight ships either owned or outfitted in New Orleans were identified or interdicted as they attempted to carry slaves from West Africa to the Americas, principally to Cuba, but also to Brazil. An untold (and presumably larger) number made the voyage unobserved and unimpeded. The “apprenticeship” proposal was designed to extend the benefits of the ongoing trade in African

people beyond the city, its merchants, its bankers, and its shippers—to the slaveholders and nonslaveholding whites of the state of Louisiana and the Mississippi Valley in general.⁷

Most of those who have written about the reopening movement have, understandably, tried to locate its history within the larger history of disunionism—the story of North and South. Some have argued that the movement was not integral to “Southern” politics, because it did not galvanize supporters of slavery across the South in the same way that the election of Abraham Lincoln ultimately did; others have argued that a straight line of historical development can be drawn between the reopening movement and the subsequent politics of secession.⁸ They have retrofitted the wide array of arguments made by the reopeners to tell a single anachronistic story: they have made the reopening movement into the prehistory of the division between North and South. In the process, they have overwritten the history of Southern political economy with that of sectional politics, and left largely unconsidered the question of what supporters of the slave trade made of the category of the South—its internal economy and social relations, its imagined geography, its relation to the rest of world history—beyond the question of its relation to the North. As comforting as it may be to imagine that the politics of the slave trade question were ultimately framed by the choice between union and disunion, and were thus always somehow reducible to a part of the national story—even if only in negation—the reopening movement had at its heart a vision of the importance of the slave trade to pro-slavery empire which was both smaller and larger than the sectional question. Smaller because it was fundamentally concerned with Southern households, class relations, and the intraregional economies of the South; larger because it opened out into a consideration of the role of slavery and white supremacy (pro-slavery empire) in world history.

The premise of all the arguments made by the reopeners was that slavery could not be separated from the slave trade—not by national boundaries, not by legal categories, not by philosophical niceties. To support the one was to support the other; to condemn one was to condemn the other. “If the trade is wrong so be the condition which results from it,” declared Leonidas Spratt at the Montgomery convention.⁹ With all the acuity of a man who has poked out one of his eyes with a stick in order to see more clearly, Spratt then characterized the trade as only one among a number of methods of transporting “popu-

lation” or “labor” and especially “cheap labor” to the United States. Or as William Yancey put it with willfully obtuse phenomenology, in a speech which followed Spratt’s, the difference between the labor supply of the South and that of the North was simply that “one comes under the head of importation, the other under the head of immigration.”¹⁰ The bogus use of the category of “labor” to blur the distinction between slave labor and wage labor—between importation and immigration—had a long history in pro-slavery ideology. By the late 1850s, the assertion that workers in the U.S. North or in Great Britain were “wage slaves” or “white slaves,” and comparison of their wretched living conditions to the (supposedly) easy lives lived by black slaves in the Americas, was a standard way to show up industrial capitalist notions of “freedom,” abolitionist hypocrisy, the inevitable degradation of whites without slaves, and so on. But when it was combined with the idea of reopening the slave trade, this relatively static version of historical time—the essence of slavery compared to the essence of free labor—unfolded into a dynamic reworking of time and space: a millennial vision of a pro-slavery future.

AFTER PASSAGE of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the prevailing doctrine of “popular sovereignty” turned the contest for control over the U.S. Congress into a contest over the distribution of bodies in space. Under the constitutional provision allowing for the closing of the trade, the reopeners argued, this contest was being waged on unequal terms. The law against the African trade, argued reopening supporter Thomas Walton (to give only a single instance), was “holding down the energies of the South and preventing their onward march to the establishment of more slave states; every day while this state of things is made to cramp the development of the Southern people, there is a system of things prevailing that tends to promote the development of the North. The immigration from Europe, not being able to find a corresponding immigration from Africa, is forced to organize the new States which the emigrants establish as Free States, and these emigrants are compelled to array themselves on the side of the Northern people.”¹¹ Again and again the reopeners used the category of “labor” for making comparisons between the immigration of Europeans to the North and the importation of Africans to the South: each group was subjected to a “Middle Passage,” though the sufferings of the Europeans (in whom no one but themselves had a fiduciary interest)

were adjudged more severe; immigration agents were portrayed as “white slave traders” (by the erstwhile proponent of white slavery, George Fitzhugh, no less); each system needed “labor” as a foundation for its geographic expansion and future prosperity, but only the North was being allowed to import enough people to spread west.¹²

The reopeners imagined the contest over the future of slavery as one that would be decided by the distribution of black and white bodies (or perhaps more accurately, African and European bodies) over space. Politics, in this formulation, was the vehicle by which economy might finally constitute space in its own image. By controlling the terms of economic growth—the growth of “slave” or “free” states—one could control the inflow of pro- or anti-slavery whites. By controlling the inflow of whites, one could control the terms of economic growth, and so on, until a territory finally reached a sort of tipping point where its political economy would become forever “slave” or “free.” But, according to the reopeners, slavery was being constrained in its spread by the artificial conditions imposed on its growth by the closing of the African trade in 1808. As Spratt put it, “Ten thousand Southern masters have made a noble effort to rescue Kansas, and have failed, but so would not have failed ten thousand slaves. Ten thousand of the rudest Africans that have ever set their feet upon our shores . . . would have swept the free soil party from that land.” “There is not an abolition emissary there,” he continued, “who would not have purchased a slave if offered at \$150.” And if Kansas could have been colonized by the slave market, why not Arizona, New Mexico, and California? Why not Nebraska, Utah, and Oregon? Why not, Spratt concluded, New England? Spratt was surely working the crowd for a laugh by the time he got to the end of his list, but he was also drawing a very clear link between the future of slavery and the future of the slave trade. The African slave trade had the power to make even abolitionists—to say nothing of nonslaveholders—into supporters of slavery, and to turn even the most distant territories of the United States into regions of the South. The future of slavery, he was arguing, would be made in the slave market.

Behind these expansive designs, a substitution was taking place: the notion of “the South” as a region defined by its relation to the world economy, with its people governed by the laws of supply and demand, was supplanting the

notion of “the South” as a region within the United States of America, and governed by the laws made by the United States Congress. That is, the spatial parameters of political economy were supplanting those of national sovereignty. As William Yancey put it at the Montgomery convention, “If it is right to buy slaves in Virginia and carry them to New Orleans, why is it not right to buy them in Cuba, Brazil, or Africa and carry them there?” He did not want “to be compelled to go to Virginia to buy slaves for \$1500 each” when he could “get them in Cuba for \$600 each or upon the coast of Guinea for one-sixth of that sum.”¹³ In addition to dramatizing the deleterious effect of federal governance on the natural course of Southern development—that is, using the figure of the slave trade to make an argument about sectionalism—Yancey was making an argument that situated “the South” in a geography that was defined by race and political economy, rather than by national sovereignty. He was re-imagining space and time as they would be reconstituted by a free market in slaves.

Not all slaveholders were as convinced as Yancey of the desirability of a slave market without limits. They decried the reopeners’ proposals as unconstitutional, un-Christian, and unwise. Speaking on the morning that Walker visited the Montgomery convention, Henry Pryor of Virginia argued that as long as the South was still in the Union, it was bound to abide by the laws of the United States—laws that outlawed the importation of foreign slaves. To do otherwise would “shock the moral sentiments of Christendom.” Lest his listeners (a set defined by their fervid support of slavery and sectionalism) think he was going soft on the slave question, Pryor leavened his stated concern about the opinions of those outside the South with a good deal of Negrophobia, using the figure of African barbarism as a way to imply the barbarism of an undertaking its proponents insisted on associating with the course of civilization. “Just imagine what an absurd figure your field hand would make in your parlor or kitchen” when displaced in the field by a “horde of barbarians from Africa.” He was not, he declared, “willing to assert the rights of the South upon the proposition to kidnap cannibals from Africa, or buy slaves of the King of Dahomey.”¹⁴ With his imagery of upwardly mobile slaves borne into Southern homes on a tide of African imports, and of Southern slaveholders lowering themselves to the level of Africans (whether cannibals or kings),

Pryor was reversing the polarity of the white-supremacist arguments in favor of reopening the trade. Far from elevating white men, he was saying, reopening the trade would further degrade them.

Much of this debate took the form of a discussion of the slave market. At question was not whether buying and selling human beings was moral or wise (as had been the case at the beginning of the nineteenth century, even among many supporters of slavery), for the domestic slave trade was taken as a given on both sides of the debate. The question, rather, was about the role of the slave market in shaping the future of the South—about buying and selling people as a way of controlling and constituting time and space. Most simply, this took the shape of a discussion of slave prices. Those in favor of reopening the trade argued that by importing Africans and thus lowering the price of slaves, nonslaveholding white men would be able to realize their proper position as members in full standing of the master class. As Edward Pollard urged the resumption of the trade and tried to convey its existential importance to Southern society, he returned to the story of the degraded nonslaveholder he had supposedly seen being mocked by his neighbors' supercilious slaves, but he changed the ending: "He would no longer be a miserable, non-descript cumberer of the soil, scratching from the land here and there for a subsistence, living from hand to mouth, or trespassing along the borders of the possessions of the large proprietors. He would be a proprietor himself, and in the great work of developing the riches of the soil of the South, from which he had been heretofore excluded, vistas of enterprise and wealth would open to him that would enliven his heart and transform him into another man."¹⁵ These newly minted men and the black slaves who had made them would provide the energy and the labor—the former being mostly of the intellectual sort, and the latter being somehow associated with lassitude in spite of its manifestly strenuous character—that would settle, improve, and plant the "immense" tracts of uncultivated land which lacked only African slaves to bring them up to their proper stage of, well, for want of a better word, civilization. As the Louisiana "apprenticeship" proposal put it: "With a vast quantity of wilderness land in the cotton States yet to settle, subdue, and improve; with its numerous swamps to drain, and poor uplands to improve and enrich, it places the cotton-growing industry, enterprise and interest of the South in an unequal, unjust, and unnatural position, to prohibit the importation of Negro laborers adapted to the

work of such a climate.”¹⁶ Reopening the African slave trade would allow for the material transformation of Southern space in the image of the natural course of progress.

Those who opposed reopening the trade likewise saw an outline of the future in the prices of slaves, only they thought high prices, not low, pointed the path to progress. As Mississippi senator Henry Foote argued in a speech made at the Vicksburg convention in 1859—a speech that was so wildly unpopular it resulted in repeated interruptions, numerous threats of violence, and eventually the senator’s untimely withdrawal from the convention—low slave prices would do little to deepen the roots of slaveholding power, because rich slaveholders would simply use their superior resources to buy up all the imported Africans. Furthermore, he argued, lower prices in the slave market would not change the course of history, at least not for the better: “Would you be willing,” he asked the convention, “to shoulder your musket in vindication of slaveholding rights—would you be willing to fight for them and risk your domestic peace and happiness if your slaves were only worth five dollars apiece? Why every man sees that that is an absurdity. *Therefore the system depends on keeping the prices high.*”¹⁷

Just as conversations about the price of cotton were always conversations about the price of slaves, conversations about the price of slaves were always conversations about the internal slave trade. Indeed, among opponents of reopening the trade as well as supporters, trade in slaves was integral to their understanding of “the South” and the relation of its regions to one another. Emblematized by William Yancey’s tacit suggestion that nothing could be more normal than selling a slave from Virginia to New Orleans, the massive movement of slaves from the Upper South to the Lower had been a defining feature of the political economy of slavery from at least the 1820s. More than two-thirds of a million people were traded through the interstate slave trade in the four decades before the Civil War (a million and a half more were sold locally in the same period). The interstate slave trade had been one of the things that lent validity to the idea of a political economy of slavery which bound “the South” together with a set of shared interests. By the late 1850s, however, there was a sense—especially acute in the Mississippi Valley—that the slave market was in crisis.¹⁸

As much as they liked to talk about “prices in *the* slave market” and “*the*

South,” slaveholders knew that just as the “Negro fever” had intensified class stratification among Southern whites, it had exacerbated the divergence in the fortunes and interests of the regions of “the South.” High boomtime prices in the Mississippi Valley vastly outstripped the returns that Virginia and other Upper-South slaveholders could expect to get from agriculture during most of the antebellum period, and tens of thousands of slaves a year were being sold through the internal trade every year. “The South,” that is to say, was increasingly seen as being composed of two interlocked economies: a Deep-South economy that imported slaves and produced a staple crop, and an Upper-South economy that produced and exported slaves—the two being joined together by the internal trade. As with any market-structured transaction, there was a double-faced character to the political economy of the slave trade. On the one hand, it knit the divergent economies of the Upper and Lower South into a system of mutual dependence; on the other, it counterpoised them as adversaries in a competition over the price of slaves. The very trade that made it possible to speak of “a political economy of slavery” that stretched from Maryland and Virginia to Mississippi and Louisiana had, concealed within it, a mechanism of economic differentiation that pitted the interests of the sections against one another, once the question of the African trade had been raised. “For several years the State Revenue of the country has been paid by the sale of her slaves,” wrote one central Virginia editor. “Open the Slave Trade and what will our Negroes be worth?”¹⁹ Thus it was that Henry Pryor—asserting a vision of interregional solidarity based on a shared mode of production, and uncomplicated by the complexities of the differential effects of the thriving slave market at the center of the South—labeled the reopening of the slave trade “divisive” to the interests of the region.²⁰

From the perspective of slaveholders in the Deep South, the question of comparative disadvantage in the slave market posed a still more troubling problem: the fear that their own seemingly insatiable dependence on Upper-South slaves to sate the endless cycle of consumption and production—a cycle represented by the commonplace that their only goal in life was to “buy Negroes to raise cotton and raise cotton to buy Negroes”—was attenuating the hold of slavery in the Upper South. In a way, the role played by the slave trade in Southern pro-slavery political economy came full circle in the era of the “Negro Fever.” The Jeffersonian idea that the internal trade would spread

slaves so widely across the landscape as to make their emancipation possible (as ludicrous as it had seemed in the 1820s and 1830s, when the slave trade was producing fear of rebellion in the Lower South) reemerged in the work of pro-slavery writers as the major challenge facing the political economy of slavery: the fear that the Upper South was being drained of slaves. The aggregate demand of Mississippi Valley cotton planters, according to the reckoning of Virginian Edmund Ruffin, was vastly greater than the rate of natural increase of Virginia slaves. Any expansionary vision—any visionary expansion—of the domain of slavery toward the west (Texas, Arkansas, Kansas) or south (Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua) might have the paradoxical result of allowing a corresponding advance of free labor into the South.²¹

For Mississippi Valley supporters of reopening the trade (and their co-religionists elsewhere in the Deep South), the solution to the problem of the “slave drain” was simple enough: import slaves from Africa. With slaves from Africa flowing into the Valley, concerns about the declining slave population of Virginia would cease to be a limiting factor in slavery’s expansion. The course of slavery’s expansion would be freed from any dependence on the natural increase of slaves currently residing in the United States. “With slaves sufficient for the work of pioneer advancement, we will open the institution of domestic slavery to the whole broad plain from the Mississippi to the Pacific,” enthused Leonidas Spratt.²² For Louisiana’s Edward Deloney, the reopening of the slave trade was the first step on the path to hemispheric dominance. Soon would follow the “acquisition of Cuba” and “the regeneration of Haiti”; then “the great eye of the South” would fix its attention upon Central America, “a vast extent of territory yet in the luxuriance of its native growth—a soil yet untilled, as fertile as God’s earth can be, that will yield in abundance all the tropical and staple productions that can add wealth and luxury to mankind, but with a climate that renders Negro labor, alone, absolutely necessary for its cultivation.”²³ Reopening the slave trade would be the first cause in a chain of events that would transform untamed territory into productive land, redeem time with improvement, and thus trace out the natural course over space and time of the history of slavery (or, perhaps more accurately, history *as* slavery).

There is much to be said about this pro-slavery version of time. Perhaps the most obvious point is that those on either side of the debate over the reopening

of the trade conceived of the future of slavery and the shape of the South—the time and the space of pro-slavery history—in terms that were rooted in the slave market. Opponents of reopening the trade, particularly in the Upper South, were quite open about their fear that the importation of African slaves would lower the value of their slaves—a value that depended largely on the prices that buyers in the Lower South were willing to pay for them. Proponents of the trade argued that the internal slave trade was draining the Upper South of slaves, and that an infusion of African slaves was the only way to ensure that the natural course of slavery’s expansion could continue. But whichever course was being advocated—the transatlantic trade that the free traders supported or the interstate trade that protectionists defended—each side in the debate treated the slave market as the factory of slavery’s future. These were, that is to say, resolutely forward-looking and unabashedly commercial visions of the history and future of slavery: they relied on the slave market as their prime engine of spatial and temporal transformation.

EMBEDDED WITHIN this vision of the slave market as the first cause of the future of the South was a remarkable set of arguments about the social reproduction of the slaveholding regime. It was axiomatic among defenders of slavery that the promotion of black bondage was the best—perhaps the only—defense of white patriarchy. As Mississippian Henry Hughes, who would become a leader in the reopening movement in the late 1850s, put it in his 1854 pro-slavery *Treatise on Sociology*, if the racial and social orders in society were not isomorphic, if those who thought and led were not all of one race and those who toiled and followed were not of another, then the sexual order was bound to be threatened: “Political amalgamation is sexual amalgamation: one is a cause of the other. There must be either caste or co-sovereignty: this is the alternative to that. For power to rule is power to marry, and the power to repeal or annul discriminating laws.” Or, later, on the same theme: “Economic amalgamation is sexual amalgamation. One makes the other.”²⁴ Among the reopeners, a fuller elaboration of the relationship between the reopening of the slave trade and the advancement of white patriarchy went something like this: “This supply will spread over [the cotton] states incalculable wealth, and afford every poor and industrious citizen the best chance for making a fortune. The African labor supply will take from the wash-tub, bake-oven, and scrub-

broom, thousands of our tired and toiling wives, sisters, and daughters, and advance into their workplaces stout and willing Negro wenches, to whom a civilized kitchen would be a Christian school, and the pone they bake a fore-taste of a better bread.”²⁵ The slave trade was the vehicle for a full-spectrum fantasy of slaveholding dominance, the promise of white patriarchy and pro-slavery empire embodied in African slaves. All white men might become masters; all white women—*their* white women—might become ladies; Africans might be civilized; and “the South” would fracture the seemingly fixed limits of pro-slavery geography and rework them into an empire of unimaginable riches. This pro-slavery vision of empire and expansion, that is to say, was rooted in the capacity of slaves to bring white patriarchy into being one household at a time. As Leonidas Spratt put it with remarkable clarity, “Every slave that comes, therefore, may be said to bring his master with him.”²⁶

For the reopeners, the “natural increase” of the slaveholding population in the United States was not sufficient to fund their expansive vision of pro-slavery empire; Leonidas Spratt, remember, referred to the condition of slavery as one which resulted from the slave trade, rather than, say, birth.²⁷ Slaves could not reproduce themselves fast enough to do all the things that white people needed them to do: clear millions of uncultivated acres of land in the Deep South and plant it with cotton; underwrite with their labor and their low prices the spread of Southern social institutions, from the Mississippi Valley to the Pacific Ocean and the Mason-Dixon Line to the Equator; transform every nonslaveholding white man into a master and every white woman into a lady. Reopening the slave trade was a way to detach the imperatives of the social reproduction of this vision of pro-slavery empire from its messy reliance on enslaved people’s biological reproduction. As James D. B. DeBow put it, slaveholders could continue to “await with folded arms that coming of population and labor which will be the result of natural increase.” Or they could reopen the slave trade. The image of a slaveholder standing around with his arms crossed waiting for “his people” to reproduce a legacy for his children—redolent of slaveholders’ everyday experience of prurient and frustrated dependence as it must have been—suggests that the reopening movement was addressing a set of core anxieties among slaveholders about their ability to oversee the reproduction of their social privilege. It was a way to liberate white men from their dependence on black women by extracting the process

of social reproduction from its embeddedness within black families and putting it directly under the control of white slaveholders.²⁸

Seen in this light, reopening the trade was a reworking of the privileges of white patriarchy, a globalization of the Salic privilege which allowed slaveholders to claim other men's offspring as their own (and, just as important, *for* their own). It was likewise an elaboration of slaveholding misogyny which allowed slaveholders to imagine a world without black women by locating the first cause of white privilege in Africa—that continent which would make black women unnecessary in the Americas.²⁹ Just as William Walker offered dispossessed white men a chance to make their way upward without being born into the right family, married to the right woman, working in the right profession, or making the right move at the right time, the slave trade offered slaveholders a chance to reproduce themselves over time, free of any apparent dependence on the root mechanism of social reproduction. Each method of increase was, in its own way, a technology by which white men could reproduce themselves, a machine by which the physical potential—land and labor—of another society could be extracted and grafted onto underemployed white men to produce a particularly durable strain of imperial whiteness.

Among the most important of the physical processes by which black slaves produced white slaveholders were, of course, planting, tending, picking, packing, and shipping cotton. Proponents of the slave trade often represented the exigency of their cause by making a connection between the reopening of the slave trade and continued domination of the world market in cotton. The reopeners estimated that the South in the 1850s was supplying about four-fifths of the world's cotton—the bulk (about five-sixths) of its crop being shipped every year to Great Britain.³⁰ Reopeners like Louisiana's Edward Deloney went to great lengths to estimate the vulnerability of the cotton market to penetration by other producers; they did so by projecting the world demand for cotton, and then subtracting the "estimated crop" produced in the United States and the rest of the world. The result was a staggering "shortfall": 1,320,000 bales of cotton gone unplanted, unpicked, unpacked, unshipped, and unsold for want of the slaves to do it. Deloney then divided the unknowable by the unknown—the number of bales of "shortfall" by the number of bales he had calculated each slave could produce, itself conjectured by dividing the number of bales known to be produced by the number of slaves estimated to be working in cotton—to show that the South needed at least 350,000 more

slaves, at a rate of $3\frac{1}{2}$ bales of cotton per head, to meet the world demand for cotton. The number of slaves needed to meet the world demand for cotton, he concluded, could be found only in Africa.³¹

The importance of the slave trade, however, was not simply to be measured in fictional cotton and fractional slaves. In the minds of the reopeners, the trade was the key to global domination. The argument followed the course of the cotton economy, extracting an implication of Southern influence wherever capitalists outside the South extracted a profit. The cotton that imported slaves would produce was the very same cotton that would be paid for by notes drawn on Northern and British bankers, shipped on Northern and British ships, unloaded by workers in Northern and British port cities, drayed to mills by Northern and British horses, milled by Northern and British workingmen in factories owned by Northern and British industrialists, and, finally, sold by Northern and British merchants to Northern and British consumers.³² This was a profoundly patriarchal and anti-democratic movement, but it was not an anti-commercial one. Indeed, it saw markets—especially those in slaves and cotton—as the mechanism of historical change. For George Fitzhugh, routinely identified as one of the most conservative thinkers in the history of the United States, the slave trade was a tool which could connect the destinies of Africa, Europe, and the United States in a circuit of human bodies, staple crops, and cheap consumer goods that was almost endless in its self-amplifying cycle of beneficial consequences:

Extend and increase the institution by renewing the foreign slave trade, and the price of slave products, of all of the necessaries, and many of the comforts and luxuries of life would decline rapidly. The market for Northern products would be increased and extended, and their prices would rise. The mercantile interest, the shipping interest, the manufacturing interest, nay, every interest at the North, would feel its revivifying influence. But the white laborers of the North would benefit the most. They would have constant employment at high wages, because the labor market would not be overcrowded; and they would find the expenses of living continually diminishing.

The reopeners, as well as many other Southerners, believed that cotton gave slaveholders power over free men. If the supply of cotton dried up and the

looms had to be shut down, opponents of slavery from Massachusetts to Manchester would reap the discontent they had sown among Southern slaves in a harvest of white starvation and working-class revolt.³³

It was a settled fact among the reopeners that British opposition to the re-opening of the slave trade was a clever front for a plot to emancipate British industrialists from their reliance on American cotton. If the high (projected) demand for cotton was not met by American sources, then the fledgling cotton economies of India and Egypt would be allowed time to develop into genuine competitors to American cotton, and the power of the South in the world would be correspondingly diminished. Indeed, the reopeners argued—with some justification—that even as the British opposed American slavery, they were actively introducing other sorts of bonded labor to the culture of cotton in their colonies in India and Africa.³⁴ This construction of the slave trade question as *the* determining question for the future of slavery depended on a set of totally unproven (and mostly fallacious) assertions about the character of the cotton market: the idea that demand was so high that increased supply would not result in lower prices, the idea that Southern monopoly could be maintained into an indefinite future, the idea that the South could actually add acres to cotton production rather than being obliged to replace those already exhausted by cotton mono-cropping. Nevertheless, the argument was enough to convince many that the South stood at a momentous juncture as it considered the reopening of the slave trade. Reopening the trade would consolidate its control over both the cotton economy and the future of slavery; failing to do so would compromise its monopoly position, reduce the value of its primary export, and make its political position in the nation and the world even more precarious than it already was.

As the reopeners sought to map the terrain of this epochal battle between slavery and freedom over the future of civilization, they used a set of terms that were almost schizophrenic in their metaphorical inconsistency and in their oscillation between assertions of overweening self-confidence and desperate self-loathing. On the one hand, the reopeners expressed the brash conviction that the South could use its control of cotton to lead the world around by the nose, to further the course of civilization by reopening the trade and by using its fruits to “hide the nakedness of the savages”; they also uttered smug assertions about the propensity of misguided philanthropy to drag the “garden

spots” of the world backward to a state of untamed barbarism. On the other hand, they deployed a set of more disquieting images—of *Southern* vulnerability and backwardness.³⁵

Perhaps most predictable was the discourse of Southern economic underperformance. The theme of economic underperformance was an old one in Southern political economy and, over time, had been ascribed to various causes: the cavalier mentality of planters who cared more for good living than good husbandry, the ecological restriction of cotton and sugar culture to particular latitudes, the single-minded obsession with cotton culture to the detriment of all other forms of industry. In the discussion of reopening the trade, however, these points were laid aside in favor of arguments and “evidence” that suggested the South was ripe for a sort of internal colonization (by imported African slaves). Most simply, there were the trade tables that magically transformed Southern cotton production into underperformance by comparing it to a wholly hypothetical account of the projected worldwide demand for cotton. But in order to make the case that the solution to inadequate cotton production was importing more slaves (when, in fact, a plausible case could be made that the problem was that Southern cotton planters had too many slaves in relation to the fertility of their soil—hence the mania for geographic expansion), the reopeners had to argue that there was additional land suitable for cotton cultivation *within* the existing limits of the South, and that it was not being properly employed. Millions of acres of land in Louisiana alone, Edward Deloney argued, “a vast extent of Southern soil of the highest fertility and most admirably adapted to the production of every valuable species of agricultural commodity, yet remains . . . an useless waste for want of that kind of labor which alone can be useful for its cultivation.” Three million bales had gone unplanted and unpicked, for want of the labor to till land that “the order of Providence” had set aside as the most perfect land on earth for the cultivation of cotton. This was good land, *God’s* land—land that, without slaves from Africa, Edmund Ruffin argued, had no future but that of “a desert and a ruin . . . a desolate waste” subject to “colonizing” by “a laboring class of foreigners and Yankees.”³⁶

The emphasis on the South’s wasted fertility unfolded almost naturally into a set of images of social and sexual disorder. Slaveholders employed virtually every available metaphor of weakness and vulnerability to convey the exi-

gency of their situation in the late 1850s. Slavery was sleeping: "It must start [awake] from its repose," declared Spratt at Vicksburg, "and take the moral strength of an aggressive attitude"; it was "slumbering," the Mississippi re-opener Thomas Walton argued, too long the "passive subject of foreign sentiment," its energies "held down," "clogged," "cramped," and prevented "from their onward march"; "we should leave off our siestas and post-meridian naps, and employ ourselves in profitable vocations," wrote Hinton Helper, employing the metaphorical register of pro-slavery imperialism to criticize slaveholders. But it was not simply that slaveholders had been caught napping like some enervated African or Latin awaiting an infusion of Anglo-Saxon energy; their lassitude had made them childish and womanish. The South was "supine," "dependent," and "helpless as a sick babe," wrote James D. B. DeBow. "She must determine that she will no longer be the prey of rogues in ruffles and rascals in palaces. We have not had the manliness to throw off our dependence." The South had been turned out and "dishonored" like a common strumpet, wrote Edward Pollard; had been made the "miserable mistress of the North," rather than taking her rightful place as "bride of the world," wrote Leonidas Spratt—100,000 African slaves presumably being the dowry he imagined for his Southern bride. This South, indeed, this lazy, dependent, lascivious, sold-out South, had become slavish: slaveholders, wrote DeBow, had declined into a state of "vassalage" to the North; they were "servants," "hewers of wood and drawers of water." Slavery had been embarrassed and objectified, but it had never spoken for itself until finally emboldened to call for the slave trade: "Slavery never yet has spoken and it is time it should speak. When it does its first utterance will be: 'We must be free—free to expand according to our own nature—free of the touch of any hostile hand upon us.'"³⁷ Or in the words of *DeBow's Review*, which brazenly—outrageously—compared the supposed plight of cotton planters to the enslaved wet nurses whose own children were taken from their breast so that their masters' children might be comforted: "The South thus stands in the attitude of feeding from her own bosom a vast population of merchants, shop owners, capitalists, and others, who without the claims of her progeny, drink up the life-blood of her trade."³⁸

Much of this assemblage of metaphors of enervated, childish, womanish, slavish, slave-womanish planters would have been familiar to anyone who had even a glancing acquaintance with the imperialist propaganda of "manifest

destiny.” The tools developed to measure the exigency of the projection of Southern power into Latin America—the trade table that converted foreign demand into domestic shortcoming, the land survey that converted unimproved land into evidence of barbarism, the notion of history that equated the absence of slaves with the absence of civilization, the notion of social and sexual order that organized all of the above into a characterization of rightly white manhood—all of these worked well enough when they were applied to Nicaragua or Mexico or Cuba. But the reopeners were being drawn, by the metaphorical gravity of the terms of the discussion of pro-slavery imperialism, into characterizing the course of Southern history as a process of self-colonization. And when applied to the South, these images—these metrics of historical development and providential destiny—took on an almost millennial exigency.

AS THE reopeners saw it, their cause was to write “a history of the future”—to make manifest in the world the destiny whose course they had derived from their study of the past. Human societies, wrote George Fitzhugh in a long, digressive essay in support of the reopening of the trade, are “at all times and places, regulated by laws as universal and as similar as those which control the affairs of bees.” Slavery was a divinely ordained institution, which had been present in every great civilization since the beginning of time; it was “natural,” “normal,” necessary,” “inevitable.” And it required a slave trade—“a trade,” again in the words of Fitzhugh, “which is as old, as natural, and irresistible as the tides of the ocean.” The epochal history of slavery attained its nineteenth-century manifestation in the institution of African slavery, which had produced innumerable benefits for mankind as a whole, introducing heathen Africans to Christianity and slave labor in the Americas—a regime that, through its discipline, was uniquely suited for channeling their feral energy into a productive contribution to civilization. Indeed, the labor of slaves in the cotton fields of the South had produced the raw material of white freedom, clothing the naked in fustian and employing the wretched in mills.³⁹

But the workings of pro-slavery eschatology were complicated by the counterhistory proposed by abolition. In the view of slaveholders, abolitionist history had destroyed “the whole worth and value of the garden spots of the earth” in Haiti and Jamaica, rendering land that had once been turned to the

good of civilization and the advancement of mankind back into a “wilderness” dominated by “barbarians.” They feared it as a history that “looks forward to the social and political equality of the Negro with the white man, at whatever the sacrifice of life and the industrial interests of the world, amidst rape, rapine, conflagration, robbery, and murder.” The fight over slavery, wrote the pseudonymous “Python” in *DeBow’s Review*, was a fight between two opposed sets of values: on the one hand, a social order founded “on the basis of the altar, home, family circle, the Bible,” and the “preservation of the white race unadulterated”; on the other, “concubinage,” race mixing, and the bloody anarchy of a democracy that ignored the natural order of slaveholding society.⁴⁰

For the reopeners, the fight over the slave trade took place on the edge of history’s end times. It was a fight waged between history as God had intended to be—slavery, hierarchy, order—and history based on the “counterfeit” philosophy of anti-slavery and democracy. As Leonidas Spratt described it to the 1859 Southern Commercial Convention at Vicksburg, “This land seem[s] destined to become a battle-ground not only of the sections but the field of final contest for the great contending social systems of the world.”⁴¹ And at stake was nothing less than the constitution of the entire social order. For the reopeners, the idea that every white man should be a master was not simply a response to doubts about the loyalty of nonslaveholders or an element in a larger struggle between the regionally bounded economies of the North and South, although there was surely an element of each in their vision. George Fitzhugh put it this way: “As new fetters were imposed on the now idle, savage, cannibal Negro, the white laborer would find his chain less galling, and gradually dropping from his limbs. The reverse action, under the lead of abolition, is now going forward. They are removing the fetters from the Negro to impose them on the white man.”⁴² For whites, Fitzhugh suggested, the debate over the slave trade was a struggle between alternative versions of social order: freedom (what you or I would call “slavery”) and slavery (what you or I would call “freedom”). Every member of “the ruling race” a slaveholder, every African a slave, every laborer the master of his own destiny: for Fitzhugh and the reopeners, the trade—the global extension of the American slave market—promised a set of benefits which asymptotically approached that end-of-strife, end-of-disorder, end-of-time condition they called “Freedom.”

Indeed, among the reopeners, the slave trade question organized and colonized their accounts of other social relations—between blacks and whites certainly, but also between men and women, between parents and children, and so on. Leonidas Spratt saw the struggle over the slave trade as part of a larger struggle between a slave-based social order and social and sexual anarchy, a fight that remained no less exigent in its immediate manifestation for his certainty that the forces of slavery would prevail:

And I have perfect confidence that when France shall reel again into the delirium of liberty—when the peerage of England shall have yielded to the masses—when Democracy at the North shall hold its carnival—when all that is pure and noble shall be dragged down—when all that is ignoble and vile shall have been mounted to the surface—when women shall have taken the place and habilments of men, and men shall have taken the place and habilments of women—when free love unions and phalansteries shall pervade the land—when the sexes shall consort without the restraints of marriage, and when youths and maidens, drunk at noon day and half naked shall reel about the marketplace—the South will stand secure and erect as she stands now—the slave will be restrained by power; the master by the trusts of a superior position; she will move with a measured dignity of power and progress as conspicuous as it is now. . . . Why, then, shall we not demand the repeal of these restrictions?²⁴³

According to this vision, slavery (and hence the slave trade) was a sort of axial rod that ensured social order and historical progress. Remove it and society and history would collapse into a nightmare of social and sexual overturnings. Indeed, the sexual and social imagery of this statement is so conflated as to be indistinguishable: racial, social, and sexual order, for the reopeners, were of a piece. Without slaves—without slaves from Africa—many white men would remain incompletely realized vessels for the historical purpose that was vested in them; without slaves, their sacred whiteness, their destined power, their phallic privilege would remain vulnerable to the most perverted notion of social and sexual order. The slave trade, the reopeners were arguing, was the

guarantee of slaveholding household order as a principle of historical development: white supremacy, slavery, and patriarchy. History was hanging in the balance.

Slaveholders lived in a world defined by contradictory extremes: by the millennial combat of Christ and Antichrist, made material in the daily choices planters made between the paths of salvation and damnation; by the boom-and-bust cycle of the cotton economy (yearly recapitulated in their struggle to get their cotton sold at the right time for the right price), on which their magniloquent account of their own historical importance depended; by their daily struggles with slaves whom they had been taught to see as servile and yet to fear as savage; by the objective reliance of their own fantasies of the dominion of the ruling race on its unreliable subjects—women, children, and slaves. The millennial terms of the slave trade debate reflected the existential desperation of slaveholding lives locked into a never-ending oscillation of dominance and dependences.

If the galling presence of these contradictory images of destiny and decline—the unfolded implications of a social order premised on using people as things to produce other things—was a slaveholding perennial, the idea of reopening the slave trade was a dynamic response to the concrete forms such images took in the late 1850s: to the “slave drain” through which slaveholders traded the long-term political safety of their institution for the more immediate promises of profit in the markets for slaves and cotton; to the “Negro fever” that was making it impossible for white men to turn themselves into proper masters and undermining the foundational identification of slavery and white supremacy; to the separate relations to slave and free labor—to Africa and Europe—out of which the very idea of an “internal slave trade” had grown up along the sovereign frontier of the United States. Reopening the Atlantic trade was a working-out on a global scale of the contradictions of the era of the interstate slave trade—a spatial reordering of the relationship of Southern slaveholders to the world market that would allow them to once more define every man as a master, to extend over space without compromising their future, to reconstitute space in the image of political economy rather than contested sovereignty. It represented slaveholders’ effort to liberate themselves from their own history—the social relations that had produced their power but that also defined its limitations—and to re-create the world in the

image of an illusory promise of dominance without dependence: pro-slavery “freedom.”

THOUGH THEY had many adherents in common, William Walker and the reopeners proposed versions of pro-slavery empire that were not identical. Walker’s vision of pro-slavery empire was more immediately expansionary than that of the reopeners. Whereas they argued that there were “millions” of acres of undeveloped land within the boundaries of “the South,” Walker looked to Central America for land upon which to plant his mushroom aristocracy of self-made masters. Whereas the reopeners looked to import slaves from Africa to spur the regeneration of the nonslaveholding white men of the South, he looked to export those same nonslaveholding white men in order to spur the regeneration of Central America. Some of Walker’s most vigorous supporters in the Mississippi Valley, such as senators Albert Gallatin Brown and Henry Foote of Mississippi, were opponents of the idea of reopening the slave trade. Brown believed it would simply augment the power of the planter class to push poor white people off their land; Foote thought the idea of reopening the trade “treasonable” and “utopian,” and the prospect of importing 100,000 or 200,000 “Negroes-demi-savages” to the Mississippi Valley simply terrifying.⁴⁴ Likewise, though both movements had deep roots in the Mississippi Valley, each had its own network of supporters outside the Valley. Walker was popular throughout the South, and, at least until his dispute with Vanderbilt and his turn toward pro-slavery, was especially popular with merchant capitalists in San Francisco and New York, who had much to gain from the Americanization of the Nicaraguan isthmus. The reopening movement was popular across the Deep South, but much less so in the Upper South (to say nothing of the North, Great Britain, or Africa).

But to most people, the two movements seemed to imply and reinforce each other. Many of those who took an active role in one were connected, as well, to the other.⁴⁵ More than that, the ideas seemed naturally to unfold into each other. George Fitzhugh might start out talking about the slave trade, only to end up declaring that “the filibuster is the true philanthropist” and citing Moses, Joshua, Hercules, Saint Patrick, Caesar, and Alexander the Great as the filibustering forebears of William Walker.⁴⁶ For their part, the filibusters knew that proposing to open new territory to slavery without solving the “slave

drain” problem would compromise their support throughout the South; and so, pro-slavery supporters of Walker—as well as organizations like the Knights of the Golden Circle, which proposed a circum-Caribbean Southern empire—were almost automatically drawn into supporting the reopening of the slave trade.⁴⁷ But more than their practical symbiosis, these projects shared a common vision of race, sex, slavery, space, and time—a vision that outlines what the world and the future looked like to slaveholders and other white men in the Mississippi Valley on the eve of the Civil War.

Both the invasion of Nicaragua and the effort to reopen the slave trade represented an imperial vision of the future of slavery, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Each in its own way proposed a reorientation of space through a global projection of “the South,” and characterized its vision as one of white male regeneration. It was a vision in which the subject races of the world were made useful through their subordination to the energy and foresight of white slaveholders; in which class relations were made concomitant with the natural division of the races; in which the patriarchal authority of white men was vitalized through the linkage of their households to the larger global political economy of slavery; in which the plantation served as the vehicle for converting territory to land and time into progress; in which the global network of mercantile capitalism served as a sort of gear-work that would enable slaveholders to project political power over enemies who sought to stymie them by controlling their access to land and labor; in which white men could make themselves into masters by invading other countries and stealing their land and people—imperial parthenogenesis.

Taken together, the expansionist movement and the effort to reopen the slave trade outlined a sort of global whitemanism, a leviathan vision of white men at the head of a social body whose labor and reproduction were fed upward through interlocking circulatory networks that extracted life and energy from its blood-stained conquest of the rest of the world: the networks of domestic patriarchy, racial slavery, American empire. Both were movements shaped by the existing political economy of slavery—its increasing class stratification among whites, its slave-draining internal trade, its self-consuming devotion to cotton mono-cropping, its dependence on unwilling slaves. But they represented themselves as radical breaks with the constraints of history. As destiny.

In the end, however, it never came to that. William Walker set out from New Orleans for his last mission in June 1860. His plan was to invade Ruatan, a small island off the coast of Honduras, whose inhabitants were rumored to be on the verge of insurrection over a planned transfer of the island from British to Honduran sovereignty. From there, he would mount another attack on Nicaragua. Knowing that Walker was lying in wait, however, the British and Hondurans conspired to delay the transfer of power. Walker was caught in a paradox: he could not invade an island held by the British in order to demand continued British rule on the island. Short of supplies, he remained adrift in the Gulf. The filibuster president finally hit upon the idea of invading Honduras instead of Ruatan (or Nicaragua, for that matter). After establishing a beachhead in the town of Truxillo, he was persuaded to surrender to the British Navy rather than to the Honduran forces, which refused to recognize a right to invade Honduras based upon—as Walker put it—the moral claims of “a people desirous of living in Central America under the ancient laws and customs of the realm, claiming with them common interests under institutions derived from the code of Alfred.” He was, to his surprise, immediately turned over to the government of Honduras, and executed on the morning of September 12, 1860.⁴⁸

The slave trade proposal came to a similar end. At the Democratic convention held in Charleston in 1860, supporters of the slave trade effectively demolished the Democratic Party. They thus ensured the election of Abraham Lincoln, and the secession of slaveholding states, when the delegations of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Florida walked out over the party’s refusal to include a statement guaranteeing the rights of citizens to hold “all descriptions of property” recognized by the states and supporting the protection of those rights “upon the high seas.” The politics of the Confederacy, however, shunted the program of the reopeners to the side: the war put a strategic premium both on the support of Upper-South states like Virginia for the Confederacy and on the hope of gaining diplomatic recognition from Britain and France, which were thought to be susceptible to a pro-cotton, anti-slave trade pitch from the Confederacy (and were thought, in the case of the British, to be ready to join the war on the side of the Union in the event of a reopening of the African trade). In April 1861, the Confederate States of America adopted a constitution that outlawed “the importation of African Negroes from any

foreign country other than the slaveholding states of the United States of America.”⁴⁹ Most of those who had supported reopening cast their lot with the Confederacy, although a hard core of reopeners remained convinced that, in the words of Leonidas Spratt, the Confederate constitution had diverted slavery’s global and historical “destiny” from its proper course.⁵⁰

The victory of the United States of America over the Confederate States of America began the reconstruction of the history of the Civil War as a national story, one whose temporal and spatial parameters were contained within the limits of the United States. Filibustering Nicaragua—not to mention Cuba or Mexico or the rest of Central America—and reopening the slave trade both came to seem distractions from the True Course of History: the secession of the eleven states that became “the South” by fighting a Civil War in the region’s name. But to many of those who did not know the course that events would take—especially those in the Lower Mississippi Valley, where Walker and the reopeners found their deepest and most enduring supporters—pro-slavery imperialism, whether focused on the forcible acquisition of land or that of labor (or both), represented a powerful way of thinking about space and time. Their vision was one of pushing time forward by controlling the flow of people over space: landless white men made masters of a pro-slavery empire in Nicaragua; uncivilized Africans transformed into instruments of civilization through free trade in their bodies and the cotton that was extracted from them; white family and white freedom made sacrosanct in commercial human sacrifice; a bright-white future pulled from the bloody entrails of the global slave market, the imperial plantation, and the Atlantic cotton trade. It should perhaps give us a moment of pause that the vision of political economy espoused by the filibusters and the reopeners—with its foursquare acceptance of the notion that “freedom” was a quantity to be forcibly extracted from the suffering bodies of those who entered its economy from the positions of greatest vulnerability, that “freedom” was a social relation bearing the vicious stamp of slavery on its underbelly—seems to describe our own world better than the notion to which it was opposed: the idea that “freedom” is the natural and inevitable condition of mankind.

NOTES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Notes

Introduction

1. James T. Lloyd, *Lloyd's Steamboat Directory, and Disasters on the Western Waters* (Cincinnati: James T. Lloyd, 1856), 189–191. See also “The Explosion of the *Anglo-Norman*,” *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, 3rd ser., 21:1 (January, 1851), 50–54.

2. Lloyd, *Lloyd's Steamboat Directory*, 193.

3. E. W. Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi; or, Gould's History of River Navigation* (St. Louis, 1889), 462, 464–465.

4. The image is drawn from Walter Benjamin, “Theses on History,” in Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255: “Historical materialism wishes to retain the image of the past which unexpectedly appears to a man singled out at a moment of danger.”

5. Thomas Jefferson used a version of this phrase several times: “We shall divert through our own Country a branch of commerce which the European States have thought worthy of the most important struggles and sacrifices, and in the event of peace on terms which have been contemplated by some powers we shall form to the American union a barrier against the dangerous extension of the British Province of Canada and add to the Empire of liberty an extensive and fertile Country thereby converting dangerous Enemies into valuable friends” (Jefferson to George Rogers Clark, December 25, 1780). “We should have such an empire for liberty as she has never surveyed since the creation: & I am persuaded no constitution was ever before so well calculated as ours for extensive empire & self government” (Jefferson to James Madison, April 27, 1809). I have chosen the second usage because the preposition “for” seems to convey a more active sense of the role of imperialism in fostering “liberty.” The book that began my own journey to the phrase (and

this book) is the brilliant study by Wai-Chee Dimock, *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). See also the recent summary statement in Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

6. Andrew Kennedy, “Speech of Mr. Kennedy, of Indiana, on the Oregon Question, Delivered in the House of Representatives, January 10, 1846” (Washington: Union Office, 1846), 7.

7. See, generally, Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

8. Estwick Evans, *A Pedestrian Tour of Four Thousand Miles*, in *Early Western Travels, 1748–1846*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1904; orig. pub. 1818), vol. 8, 257.

9. Louis C. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History* (New York: Dover, 1993; orig. pub. 1949), 33–34; Adam I. Kane, *The Western River Steamboat* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 131–132; Paul F. Paskoff, *Troubled Waters: Steamboat Disasters, River Improvements, and American Public Policy, 1801–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 29; Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 71, 140–143; J. S. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America* (London: Fisher and Sons, 1842), vol. 1, 314–315.

10. An average steamboat ran on 1,000 horsepower; the five-mile canal complex at Lowell produced about 10,000 horsepower. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 651. See also J. W. Sprague, “Obstruction to the Navigation of Rivers Caused by the Piers of Rivers,” *Scientific American* 2:1 (1860), 262.

11. “The Commercial Growth and Greatness of the West,” *Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine* 17 (1847), 502.

12. *Ibid.*, 501.

13. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America*, vol. 1, 343.

14. This usage follows Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

15. *Williamson v. Norton* (1852), Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2427, plaintiff’s brief to the Supreme Court, in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

16. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 218.

17. Quoted *ibid.*, 357.

18. My analysis of the “falling rate of profit” and the possibilities of spatial and temporal “fixes” to that rate is derived from David Harvey, *Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 2006).

19. See William Sewell, Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). See also Walter Johnson, “On Agency,”

Journal of Social History 37:1 (Fall 2003), 113–124; Walter Johnson, “Agency: A Ghost Story,” in Richard Follett, Eric Foner, and Walter Johnson, *Slavery’s Ghost: The Problem of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 8–30.

20. My point of departure for much of what follows is the once flourishing but now sterile field of Southern agricultural history. See Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1929); Lewis Cecil Gray, assisted by Esther Katherine Thompson, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution, 1933); Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Vintage, 1967); John Hebron Moore, *Agriculture in Ante-Bellum Mississippi* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971; orig. pub. 1958); John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest: Mississippi, 1770–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); and especially Mart A. Stewart, “*What Nature Suffers to Groe*”: *Life, Labor, and Landscape on the Georgia Coast, 1680–1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002). The present-day barrenness of this particular field is due in large measure to the combination of dry indifference (Gray) and alkaline racism (Phillips) that sometimes characterized its practitioners’ views of enslaved people. Important examples suggesting that agricultural history and the history of enslaved people might be more suitably hybridized can be found in Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985); Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993); Stephen Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002); and Susan Eva O’Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). See also Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

21. Extraregional sources for replanting the “oldfield” of Southern agricultural history can be found in William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); Richard White, *The Organic Machine* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Joyce E. Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,

2001); Jason W. Moore, “*The Modern World-System as Environmental History? Ecology and the Rise of Capitalism*,” *Theory and Society* 32 (2003), 307–377; and Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London: Verso, 2003).

22. James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1857), 172.

23. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London, 1776), bk. 2, ch. 5, para. 14.

24. Edward Russell, Journal, January 31 and February 4, 1854, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA. See, generally, Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Vintage, 1965).

25. “Speech by J. D. B. DeBow,” *DeBow’s Review* 2:5 (May 1852), 556; “Cotton and Its Prospects,” *American Cotton Planter* 1:8 (August 1853), 227; “Railroad Prospects and Progress,” *DeBow’s Review* 2:5 (May 1852), 504–505. See also “Excessive Slave Population: The Remedy,” *DeBow’s Review* 12:2 (February 1852), 182–185. Many of the articles in *DeBow’s* were unsigned.

26. My interpretation of the pro-slavery imperialism of the 1850s amplifies an account first given by W. E. B. Du Bois in his book *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; orig. pub. 1896), 108.

27. On early American imperial interest in Cuba, see Robert L. Paquette, *Sugar Is Made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 183–205. On the Narciso López raid in 1851, see Robert May, *Manifest Destiny’s Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 20–35. See also Tom Chaffin, *Fatal Glory: Narciso López and the First Clandestine U.S. War against Cuba* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); and Charles H. Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny: The Lives and Times of the Filibusters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

28. For an early effort to open up the boundaries of the conversation in the way I am trying to do here, see David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976). Though Potter is in many ways the most internationally minded of the historians who study the “coming of the Civil War,” he nevertheless treats the politics of pro-slavery imperialism in Cuba and Nicaragua as residual forms of an earlier politics of “Manifest Destiny,” rather than as emergent visions of pro-slavery futurity. Similarly, he treats the effort to reopen the trade as “a maneuver on the eve of conflict”—i.e., as being essentially defined in relation to something that happened afterward, a gesture of prolepsis that is similarly present in the title of his book.

29. “Late Southern Convention at Montgomery,” *DeBow’s Review* 25:6 (June 1858), 574–606; “The Late Southern Convention,” *DeBow’s Review* 27:1 (July 1859), 94–102; “Southern Convention at Vicksburg,” *DeBow’s Review* 27:2 (August 1859), 205–220. See

also Herbert Wender, *Southern Commercial Conventions, 1837–1859* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1930).

30. On the internal politics of secession and Confederate aftermath, see Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

31. Elizabeth Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), traces the development of the concept of “disunion”—from a political slur levied against opponents, to a political position in and of itself.

32. See, for example, the best existing account of the Civil War era: James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), which treats pro-slavery globalism in a series of narrative sidebars set alongside the conventionally continental narrative markers: the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, etc.

33. For the perspective offered here, see W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), esp. 188–191. See also Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 125–186. Sinha treats pro-slavery expansionism as a forward-looking (not to say visionary) movement, although she makes less of its relations to the tensions *within* “the South” than I am attempting to do here.

1. Jeffersonian Visions and Nightmares in Louisiana

1. There is a large literature on the “untold story” of the 1811 revolt. Most recent is Daniel Rasmussen, *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America’s Largest Slave Revolt* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2012). The first book published on the subject was Albert Thrasher, *On to New Orleans: Louisiana’s Heroic 1811 Slave Revolt* (San Francisco: Cypress Press, 1996). See also Junius P. Rodriguez, “Rebellion on the River Road: The Ideology and Influence of Louisiana’s German Coast Slave Insurrection of 1811,” in *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America*, ed. John R. McKivigan and Stanley Harrold (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999); as well as Junius P. Rodriguez, “Ripe for Revolt: Louisiana and the Tradition of Slave Insurrection, 1803–1865” (Ph.D. diss., Department of History, Auburn University, 1992). Also see Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Nathan A. Buman, “‘To Kill Whites’: The 1811 Louisiana Slave Insurrection” (Master’s thesis, Louisiana State University, 2008).

2. The description of flags and drums is reminiscent of the Stono Rebellion of 1739.

“They were less than exhausted and more than a ragged band of enslaved men, some exhausted but exhilarated from their night’s labors, two drummers announcing their progression and a flag bearer at their head.” See Peter Hoffer, *Cry Liberty: The Great Stono River Slave Rebellion of 1739* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 103.

3. *Louisiana Gazette and New Orleans Daily Advertiser*, January 17, 1811, reprinted in the *Richmond Enquirer*, February 22, 1811.

4. “Letter from Z.,” *Louisiana Gazette*, January 17, 1811. Deslondes has often been identified as a Haitian slave, but appears in the records of his owner, Madame Deslondes, as having been in Louisiana before 1793, suggesting that he was most likely Creole. He was a hired driver on the Andry plantation.

5. “Letter from Z.,” *Louisiana Gazette*, January 17, 1811.

6. *Ibid.*; Joe Gray Taylor, *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Historical Association, 1963), 212.

7. Letter from Charles Perret to M. Fontaine, *Moniteur de la Louisiane*, January 17, 1811. A translated version also appears in the primary source compilation *Slavery*, ed. Stanley Engerman, Seymour Drescher, and Robert Paquette (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 324–326.

8. Letter of Manuel Andry to Governor William C. C. Claiborne, January 11, 1811. Andry also argued, “We must make a GREAT EXAMPLE.” Reprinted in the primary-source compilation C. E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States, Vol. 9: The Territory of Orleans* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940), 915–916. Another description of events can be found in Letter of Wade Hampton to the Secretary of War, January 16, 1811, reprinted in *Territorial Papers, Vol. 9*, 917–919.

9. David J. Kastor, *The Nation’s Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 130. One observer wrote that four convicted slaves were “hung for the sake of their heads, which decorate our levee—They look like crows sitting on long poles.” Kastor addresses the rebellion on pages 127–131.

10. *Le Moniteur de la Louisiane*, January 24, 1811, reported that sixty-six slaves had been killed or executed upriver, seventeen were missing, and sixteen had been conveyed to New Orleans to be tried there. The city court archive, however, contains the records of (according to my search) twenty-nine slaves in connection with the insurrection. Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library.

11. *Territory v. Raimond*, City Court Case 235, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library; *Territory v. Theodore*, City Court Case 192, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library; *Territory v. André*, City Court Case 207, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library; *Territory v. Jean*, City Court Case 187, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library.

12. The phrase “insignia of the regime” is drawn from Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 19.

There is a rural road in Southampton County, Virginia, called Blackhead Signpost Road to this day, site of a decapitated slave's head in the aftermath of Nat Turner's revolt.

13. *Territory v. Caesar*, City Court Case 194, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library; *Territory v. Jessamin*, City Court Case 191, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library; *Territory v. Hector*, City Court Case 195, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library; *Territory v. Lindor*, City Court Case 233, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library; *Territory v. Louis*, City Court Case 190, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library; *Territory v. Daniel Garret*, City Court Case 188, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library; *Territory v. Gilbert*, City Court Case 193, Louisiana Collection, New Orleans Public Library.

14. Quoted in Robert L. Paquette, "Revolutionary Saint Domingue in the Making of Territorial Louisiana," in *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1997), 218.

15. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingan Revolution*, rev. 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 45–46. Also see the emergent standard account: Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

16. Thomas Jefferson to Robert Livingstone, April 18, 1802, The Thomas Jefferson Papers, Series 1: General Correspondence, 1651–1827, online at hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib011277.

17. Sonthonax had already freed slaves in the North Province in August 1793, with de facto emancipation spreading for the rest of the year. The French National Convention pronounced abolition across the colonies in February 1794 (although Napoleon reinstated slavery in 1802).

18. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; orig. pub. 1896), 50; Henry Adams, *A History of the United States during the First Administration of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Library of America, 1986; orig. pub. 1899), 311. Also see Michael Zuckerman, "The Power of Blackness: Thomas Jefferson and the Revolution on St. Domingue," in Zuckerman, *Almost Chosen People: Oblique Biographies in the American Grain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

19. See Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), passim.

20. Jefferson to Madison, April 27, 1809, *Jefferson Writings*, 12:277, quoted in James E. Lewis, *The Louisiana Purchase: Jefferson's Noble Bargain?* (Chapel Hill: Thomas Jefferson Foundation, 2003), 84.

21. Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 1–39, has an interesting treat-

ment of Jefferson's racial ideology. The third chapter (81–111) looks at the psychological effects of the Haitian Revolution.

22. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 164–165.

23. Thomas Jefferson to John Lithgow, January 4, 1805, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert E. Bergh (Washington, DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 1903–1904), 11:55–56.

24. Madison to Lafayette, March 20, 1785, in *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. William T. Hutchinson et al., 17 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962–1977; Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977–1991), 8:250–251.

25. Andrew Jackson to James Monroe, December 13, 1814, reprinted in *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, ed. Harold D. Moser et al., 39 microfilm reels (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1986), Reel 5.

26. Recent work on the Burr conspiracy includes Buckner F. Melton, *Aaron Burr: Conspiracy to Treason* (New York: Wiley, 2002); David O. Stewart, *American Emperor: Aaron Burr's Challenge to Jefferson's America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011); Joseph Wheelan, *Jefferson's Vendetta: The Pursuit of Aaron Burr and the Judiciary* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2004); R. Kent Newmyer, *The Treason Trial of Aaron Burr: Law, Politics, and the Character Wars of the New Nation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For an older secondary account, see Walter Flavius McCaleb, *The Aaron Burr Conspiracy: A History Largely from Original and Hitherto Unused Sources* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1903).

27. "Bayou Sara Planter," *Louisiana Gazette*, January 31, 1811. On the Patriot War, see Robert A. Taylor, "Prelude to Manifest Destiny: The United States and West Florida, 1810–1811," *Gulf Coast Historical Review*, Spring 1992, 20–35; and Andrew McMichael, "The Kemper 'Rebellion': Filibustering and Resident Anglo-American Loyalty in Spanish West Florida," *Louisiana History* 43:2 (2002), 133–165; James G. Cusick, *The Other War of 1812: The Patriot War and the American Invasion of Spanish East Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003). See also Gregory A. Waselkov, *A Conquering Spirit: Fort Mims and the Redstick War of 1813–1814* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006); Frank L. Owsley, *Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands: The Creek War and the Battle of New Orleans, 1812–1815* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1981); Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733–1816* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jane Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999). For a survey of Spain in North America, see David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

28. See Robert V. Remini, *The Battle of New Orleans: Andrew Jackson and America's First Military Victory* (New York: Viking, 1999); Marie-Jeanne Rossignol, *The Nationalist Ferment: The Origins of U.S. Foreign Policy, 1789–1812* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004); Winston Groom, *Patriotic Fire: Andrew Jackson and Jean Lafitte at the Battle of*

New Orleans (New York: Vintage, 2007); Benton Rain Patterson, *The Generals: Andrew Jackson, Sir Edward Pakenham, and the Road to the Battle of New Orleans* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). The recent work by Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), exclusively concerns the northern frontier. Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), touches on the battle on pages 695–696.

29. Spain received, in return, a declaration that Spanish Texas was thenceforth not to be considered part of the territory acquired by the United States in 1803, a matter that had been in dispute from the time of the Louisiana Purchase. This provision of the treaty was called into question—or, really, ignored—by those who supported the annexation of Texas to the United States in the 1840s. They referred to the matter of Texas as a matter of “re-annexation,” or restoring what they believed the original terms of the Louisiana Purchase to have been. This movement culminated in the U.S.-Mexico War (1846–1848).

30. “Treaty with the Chickasaw,” avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/nt006.asp.

31. Shelby to Andrew Jackson, June 27, 1818, Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, quoted in Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 169.

32. Andrew Jackson, “Talk of the President of the United States, Through the secretary of war and General Coffee to the Chickasaw delegation at Franklin, Ten. On the 23rd August, 1830,” *Niles’ Weekly Register*, September 18, 1830, 68.

33. Amanda Paige, *Chickasaw Removal* (Ada, OK: Chickasaw Press, 2010), 121. See also James R. Atkinson, *Splendid Land, Splendid People: The Chickasaw Indians to Removal* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003).

34. Address of Andrew Jackson to the Chiefs and Warriors of the Choctaw Nation, October 10, 1820, *American State Papers: Indian Affairs* (New York: Gales and Seaton, 1834), 235–236, quoted in Frederick E. Hoxie, “What Was Taney Thinking: American Indian Citizenship in the Era of Dred Scott,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* (2007), 337.

35. *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of His Diary from 1795 to 1848*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1875), vol. 7, 90. See also Richard White, “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: *A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press), 102.

36. Donna L. Akers, *Living in the Land of Death: The Choctaw Nation, 1830–1860* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004), 91.

37. George W. Harkins, “To the American People” (December 1831). anpa.ualr.edu/trailOfTears/letters/1831DecemberGeorgeWHarkinstotheAmericanPeople.htm.

38. See Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

39. Quoted in Paquette, “Revolutionary Saint Domingue in the Making of Territorial Louisiana,” 212.

40. “Memorial to Congress by Permanent Committee of the Natchez District,” October 23, 1797, reprinted in Carter, *Territorial Papers of the United States*, vol. 5, 10–11.

41. Everett S. Brown, ed., “Documents: The Senate Debate on the Breckinridge Bill for the Government of Louisiana, 1804,” *American Historical Review* 22:2 (January 1917), 354.

42. On all this, see Rothman, *Slave Country*.

43. U.S. Census, 1820, 1840, 1860.

44. Thomas Jefferson to St. George Tucker, August 28, 1797, reprinted in Julian P. Boyd et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 29 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950–2011), 519. Jefferson’s formulation of a slave revolt as an act of child murder was rendered even more complicated by the fact that, in his case, he was imagining that some of his enslaved children would be the vehicles by which he murdered his slaveholding children.

45. See James Dormon, “The Persistent Specter: Slave Rebellion in Territorial Louisiana,” *Louisiana History* 18 (1977), 389–402; Junius Rodriguez, “Always ‘En Garde’: The Effects of Slave Insurrection upon the Louisiana Mentality, 1811–1815,” *Louisiana History* 33 (1992), 399–416; Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti’s Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Edward Bartlett Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2009).

46. Brown, ed., “Documents: The Senate Debate on the Breckinridge Bill,” 345.

47. It is indicative of the complexity of that revolutionary moment that it is difficult to know what to call them. They have often been referred to as “refugees,” because they had left Haiti for Cuba during the Haitian Revolution, only to be expelled from Cuba in 1809 when Napoleon’s invasion of Spain made their supposed Frenchness suspect to that island’s colonial government. “Refugee,” however, seems an inapposite term for (at the very least) the 3,000 of these travelers who had been legally emancipated in Haiti, but would be enslaved in Louisiana. Indeed, as Rebecca Scott has recently pointed out, using the word “slaves” to describe this group of people overwrites their Haitian emancipation with their subsequent (re)enslavement in Cuba and Louisiana. Rebecca J. Scott, “Paper Thin: Freedom and Re-enslavement in the Diaspora of the Haitian Revolution,” *Law and History Review*, 29 (November 2011). See also Nathalie Dessens, *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans: Migrations and Influences* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007); and Paul A. LaChance, “The 1809 Immigration of Saint-Domingue Refugees to New Orleans: Reception, Integration, and Impact,” in *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History: New Orleans and Urban Louisiana*, ed. Samuel C. Shepherd, Jr., vol. 14, pt. A (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2005), 349–376.

48. Letter of Claiborne to Madison, July 12, 1804, in *Official Letter Books of W. C. C. Claiborne, 1801–1816*, ed. Dunbar Rowland (Jackson: Mississippi State Department of Archives and History, 1917), vol. 2, 244–246.

49. Rothman, *Slave Country*, 210.

50. Andrew Jackson to James Monroe, December 13, 1814, in *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, ed. Harold D. Moser et al., 39 microfilm reels (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1986), Reel 5.

51. The word “fulfilled” is taken from Adam Rothman’s *Slave Country*, specifically the chapter entitled “Fulfilling the Slave Country,” 165–216.

52. On this point see Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789–1837* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 57.

53. State of the Union Address, delivered December 4, 1832. Reprinted many places and a staple of nineteenth-century agricultural journals. See *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States* (Washington, DC: Duff Green, 1832), 16–17.

54. Gideon Fitz to Commissioner of Public Lands, August 16, 1834. E 509 Correspondence, Letters from Surveyor General of Public Lands South of Tennessee, 1831–1842, Records of the General Land Office, National Archives, Washington, DC.

55. Gideon Fitz to Commissioner of Public Lands, August 16, 1834. E 509 Correspondence, Letters from Surveyor General of Public Lands South of Tennessee, 1831–1842, Records of the General Land Office, National Archives, Washington, DC.

56. Gideon Fitz to Benjamin Griffin, October 11, 1831. E 509 Correspondence, Letters from Surveyor General of Public Lands South of Tennessee, 1831–1842, Records of the General Land Office, National Archives, Washington, DC.

57. Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business*, 58, 96–97.

58. Edward Tiffin to Josiah Meigs, October 9, 1817, quoted in Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business*, 101.

59. Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business*, 260–261, 258.

60. On surveys and governance, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

61. Joseph Glover Baldwin, *The Flush Times in Alabama and Mississippi: A Series of Sketches*, 7th ed. (New York: D. Appleton, 1854), 83.

62. *Ibid.*, 84.

63. Gideon Fitz to George Graham, July 5, 1830, quoted in Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business*, 212.

64. Arthur Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic* (London, 1851), 105.

65. Levi Woodbury to Commissioner, December 1, 1835, quoted in Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business*, 218.

66. Letter of Gideon Fitz to Elijah Hayward, January 16, 1831, reprinted in *House Executive Documents*, 24th Congress, 1st Session, vol. 5, doc. no. 211, 52–54.

67. Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business*, 93.

68. *Ibid.*, 126, 230.

69. On the history of the domestic slave trade generally, see Frederic Bancroft, *Slave-*

Trading in the Old South (Baltimore: J. H. Furst, 1931); Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Stephen Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).

70. The categories are from a circular issued by the Richmond firm of Dickinson and Hill, August 25, 1850, in the William A. J. Finney Papers at Duke University, Durham, NC.

71. For family members trading in shares of an intact estate, see bill of sale dated June 28, 1851, Hickman-Bryan Papers, Western Historical Collection, University of Missouri, Columbia. A more common way of abstracting the value from an enslaved person's body without moving it, and one practiced throughout the period of American slavery, was mortgage; see Richard H. Kilbourne, *Debt, Investment and Slaves: Credit Relations in East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, 1825–1885* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 58–73; Thomas Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 122–127.

72. On money and the antebellum economy generally, see Bray Hammond, *Banks and Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); Peter Temin, *The Jacksonian Economy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969); and Naomi Lamoreaux, *Insider Lending: Banks, Personal Connections, and Economic Development in Industrial New England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Edward J. Balleisen, *Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). See also Bruce Mann, *Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). On the South, see Harold Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers: Financing and Marketing the Cotton Crop of the South, 1800–1925* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968); Larry Schweikart, *Banking the American South from the Age of Jackson to Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); and Kilbourne, *Debt, Investment, and Slaves*.

73. For a cotton-boom-era celebration of specie, see William M. Gouge, *A History of Paper Money and Banking in the United States* (Philadelphia: T. W. Ustick, 1833).

74. On banknotes (and their failings), see Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters*.

75. On questions about the legal negotiability of promissory notes in various state courts (notably those in Mississippi and Alabama), which were eventually resolved in favor of negotiability by the United States Supreme Court in *Swift v. Tyson* (1842), and on the drama of A, B, C, and D, see Morton J. Horwitz, *The Transformation of American Law,*

1780–1860 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 212–226. On the practice of note trading in general, see Balleisen, *Navigating Failure*, 26–32.

76. See Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaw, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 1–146; Daniel Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); James Taylor Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path: The Mississippi Choctaw from Prehistory to Removal* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

2. The Panic of 1835

1. In 1830 there were 2,169 slaves in Madison County, and by 1835 there were 4,904. Exactly comparable figures for the white population are not available, but in 1830 there were 2,781 whites in the county and in 1840 there were 3,986. See Laurence Shore, “Making Mississippi Safe for Slavery: The Insurrectionary Panic of 1835,” in *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies*, ed. Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 100, 122. The events in Madison County are also considered in Clement Eaton, *Freedom of Thought in the Old South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1940), 95–117; Davidson Burns McKibben, “Negro Slave Insurrections in Mississippi, 1800–1865,” *Journal of Negro History* 34:2 (1949), 73–94; Edwin A. Miles, “The Mississippi Slave Insurrection Scare of 1835,” *Journal of Negro History* 42:2 (1957), 48–60; James Lal Penick, Jr., *The Great Western Land Pirate: John A. Murrell in Legend and History* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981), 106–157; and Christopher Morris, “An Event in Community Organization: The Mississippi Slave Insurrection Scare of 1835,” *Journal of Social History* 22:1 (1988), 98–113. Also see the chapter “Insurrectionary Scares” in Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). On the insurrection and the broader climate of fear in the South, see Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 481–504. On the effects of the scare elsewhere in the South, see Daniel S. Dupre, *Transforming the Cotton Frontier: Madison County, Alabama, 1800–1840* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 224–237. See also Joshua Rothman, “The Hazards of the Flush Times: Gambling, Mob Violence, and the Anxieties of America’s Market Revolution,” *Journal of American History* 95:3 (December 2008), 651–677.

2. Thomas Shackelford, ed., *Proceedings of the Citizens of Madison County, Mississippi, at Livingston, in July 1835, in Relation to the Trial and Punishment of Several Individuals Implicated in a Contemplated Insurrection in this State* (Jackson, 1836), reprinted in H. R. Howard, *A History of Virgil A. Stewart and His Adventure* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1836).

3. Shackelford, ed., *Proceedings*, 223–224.

4. *Ibid.*, 225–226.

5. *Ibid.*, 229–230.

6. *Ibid.*, 231.

7. On fence laws and grazing rights, see Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 60–63. The word “skulking” is loaded with sinister racial connotations and was used specifically to describe Indians in colonial America, particularly with regard to their practice of a stigmatized “skulking way of war.” See Patrick M. Malone, *The Skulking Way of War: Technology and Tactics among the New England Indians* (New York: Madison Books, 2000); and John Grenier, *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier, 1607–1814* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). See also Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 39–71; Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 71–96.

8. Shackelford, ed., *Proceedings*, 240–241.

9. *Ibid.*, 244–245.

10. *Ibid.*, 246–248.

11. *Ibid.*, 248–252.

12. *Ibid.*, 252–255.

13. On the notion of “marginal,” see Shore, “Making Mississippi Safe for Slavery,” 96–127; for “outside of social networks,” see Morris, “An Event in Community Organization,” 93–113. Morris’s smart, useful article makes the argument that those who were condemned to death lived outside the immediate neighborhood of those who first accused them; for example, Cotton, who lived in Livingston, was questioned there and let go before he was accused at Beatie’s Bluff in the series of events which led him to the gallows. I’d argue that it was less what they did not know about those whom they accused, than what they thought they *did* know, that animated the committees. We need a more supple understanding of space than that provided by the register of where people had their residence, if we are to understand how these men first came to the attention of those who eventually put them to death.

14. This formulation raises the possibility (not fully worked out here) that enslaved people were co-creators of notions of marginality which defined certain white men as outsiders.

15. There were, of course, a good many white men in Mississippi who apparently preferred the company of their slaves to that of their wives, but those who were slaveholders had the money (and consequently the space) to make sure that no one saw them sneaking into the slave quarters.

16. Henry S. Foote, *Casket of Reminiscences* (Washington, DC, 1874), 253–255. Foote later claimed that he had thought the “proceedings” to be a sham and had been trying to save Donovan’s life—but that because he was too scared to say so openly, he framed his

question in a way that would not tip his hand. If this was indeed the case, Foote stayed scared for quite some time, for in 1836 he was one of the main sponsors of a dinner commemorating the events of the previous year.

17. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 70–108; Maggie Montesinos Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); and Walter Johnson, “Time and Revolution in African America: Temporality and the History of Atlantic Slavery,” *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* 3:3 (2001), 96; and Walter Johnson, “White Lies: Human Property and Domestic Slavery Aboard the Slave Ship *Creole*,” *Atlantic Studies* 5:2 (August 2008), 237–264.

18. Augustus Q. Walton, *A History of the Detection, Conviction, and Designs of John A. Murrell, the Great Western Land Pirate* (Athens, TN: George White, 1835), Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library.

19. Penick, *The Great Western Land Pirate*.

20. On the basis of no evidence whatsoever, historians are divided about this question.

21. Howard, *A History of Virgil A. Stewart*.

22. Penick, *The Great Western Land Pirate*, 26; Walton, *A History of the Detection*, 9.

23. Walton, *A History of the Detection*, 18. Randolph, which no longer exists, was notorious as a criminal hideout.

24. Walton, *A History of the Detection*, 32–37, 14.

25. *Ibid.*, 37, 18.

26. *Ibid.*, 43–44.

27. *Ibid.*, 17.

28. On capitalist accumulation as the circuit Money-Commodity-Money (where the object of purchasing something is to sell it rather than to use it), see the fourth chapter of Karl Marx’s *Capital*, vol. 1, entitled “General Formula for Capital.” Stewart compared selling and counterfeiting when he restated Murrell’s ethics of political economy in the following terms: “It is just as honorable for them to gain property by their superior powers as it is for a long-faced hypocrite to take advantage of the necessities of his fellow beings.” Walton, *A History of the Detection*, 10.

29. *Roquet v. Richardson*, Case 2252 (1832), 8, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans (hereafter cited as UNO).

30. *Ibid.*, 8–10.

31. *Roquet v. Richardson*, in *Louisiana Reports* (old series), vol. 3, 452–453.

32. *Owen v. Brown*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4927, 1–3, 36–37, 47–48, 49–50, 52, 68, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans (hereafter cited as UNO).

33. *Harbor v. Steamboat “Chieftan,”* Louisiana Supreme Court Case 5837, 1, 9, 49–54; *Reynolds v. Batson*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4291, 93; *Hurst v. Wallace*, Louisiana

Supreme Court Case 2402, 7; *Marciaq v. Clark and “H. M. Wright,”* Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4645, 25–26, 45–47. See also *Eliza Burk (f.w.c) v. Clark and Lock*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3111; and *Beverly v. Captain Markin and Steamboat “Empire,”* Louisiana Supreme Court Case 6323. All of the above cases are in the Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

34. Quoted in Judith K. Schafer, *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans, 1846–1862* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 90; see also 91–95.

35. Walton, *A History of the Detection*, 25, 32.

36. John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, ed. F. N. Boney (Savannah: Library of Georgia, 1991), 43–45.

37. Walton, *A History of the Detection*, 13.

38. The characterization of Murrell as a “trickster” is from Penick, *The Great Western Land Pirate*, 42–48.

39. Walton, *A History of the Detection*, 27–28, 42.

40. *Ibid.*, 33, 1.

41. On the importance of West Indian Emancipation to the subsequent history of slavery in the United States, see Edward Bartlett Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

42. Penick, *The Great Western Land Pirate*, 147–149; Howard, *The History of Virgil A. Stewart*, 166.

43. On the turbulence of the period and the broader fallout of the insurrection scare, see David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828–1861: Toward the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3–32; John Findlay, *People of Chance: Gambling in American Society, from Jamestown to Las Vegas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 64–70; Ann Fabian, *Card Sharps and Bucket Shops: Gambling in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 26–38; Joshua Rothman, “The Hazards of the Flush Times: Gambling, Mob Violence, and the Anxieties of America’s Market Revolution,” *Journal of American History* 95:3 (December 2008), 651–677.

44. These are all included in Howard, *The History of Virgil A. Stewart*, 94–214.

45. Herbert Quick and Edward Quick, *Mississippi Steamboat: A History of Steamboating on the Mississippi and Its Tributaries* (New York: Henry Holt, 1926), 64. See also Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988; orig. pub. 1883), 143–144.

46. Mrs. Matilda Charlotte Houstoun, *Hesperos; or, Travels in the West* (London: J. W. Parker, 1850), 31–32.

47. Thomas Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968; orig. pub. 1838), vol. 2, 187–188; Mrs. Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 49; Mrs. Frances Milton

Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1901; orig. pub. 1832), 28.

3. The Steamboat Sublime

1. See Thompson Westcott, *The Life of John Fitch, the Inventor of the Steamboat* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1857). See also Andrea Sutcliffe, *Steam: The Untold Story of America's First Great Invention* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Additional recent secondary sources on steamboats include Robert Gudmestad, *Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011); Carl A. Brasseaux and Keith P. Fontenot, *Steamboats on Louisiana's Bayous: A History and Directory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Michael Gillespie, *Come Hell or High Water: A Lively History of Steamboating on the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers* (Stoddard, WI: Heritage Press, 2001); Adam I. Kane, *The Western River Steamboat* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004); Paul F. Paskoff, *Troubled Waters: Steamboat Disasters, River Improvements, and American Public Policy, 1821–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); Jacques D. Bagur, *A History of Navigation on Cypress Bayou and the Lakes* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2001).

2. Louis C. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1993; orig. pub. 1949), 5–14. See Maurice G. Baxter, *The Steamboat Monopoly: Gibbons v. Ogden, 1824* (New York: Knopf, 1972); Thomas H. Cox, *Gibbons v. Ogden, Law, and Society in the Early Republic* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009); Herbert Alan Johnson, *Gibbons v. Ogden: John Marshall, Steamboats, and the Commerce Clause* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2010). See also Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

3. Late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German philosophy was instrumental in the development of the aesthetics of the sublime, notably Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) and *Critique of Judgment* (1790); as well as Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (1818). Also see G. W. F. Hegel's lectures on the aesthetics of fine art, compiled in Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). An interesting description of the aesthetics of the sublime in an American context can be found in Paul E. Johnson, *Sam Patch, the Famous Jumper* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 79–125. See also John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

4. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 449.
5. Edmund Flagg, *The Far West; or, A Tour Beyond the Mountains* (1838), in *Travels in the Far West, 1836–1841*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1906), vol. 1, 47.
6. Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988; orig. pub. 1883), 1.
7. Robert Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi; or, The Emigrant's and Traveller's Guide to the West* (Philadelphia: H. S. Tanner, 1832), 267.
8. Thomas Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968; orig. pub. 1838), vol. 2, 233, 194 (see also 184); J. S. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America* (London: Fisher and Sons, 1842), vol. 1, 326, 407.
9. E. W. Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi; or, Gould's History of River Navigation* (St. Louis, 1889), 70, 71 (I have transposed the sentences of the quotation about canoes and causes). See also Mrs. Matilda Charlotte Houstoun, *Hesperos; or, Travels in the West* (London: J. W. Parker, 1850), 4, 31, 66. See, generally, Wai-Chee Dimock, *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).
10. Robert H. Gudmestad, *Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 78–79; Thomas Barnett, relaying the experience of Dave Barnett, in *Indian Pioneer History Collection*, vol. 13, ed. Grant Foreman (Alexandria, VA: U.S. Works Progress Administration and Alexander Street Press, 2005), 453–455.
11. Buckingham, *Slave States of America*, vol. 1, 430. See also Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America*, vol. 2, 232.
12. Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 9; Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 50; George Armroyd, *A Connected View of the Whole Internal Navigation of the United States* (1830), quoted in Kane, *The Western River Steamboat*, 14.
13. Flagg, *The Far West*, vol. 1, 64; on time speeding up, see also Arthur Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic* (London, 1851), 176. See also Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 22, 27.
14. James H. Lanman, "American Steam Navigation," *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review* 4 (1841), quoted in Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 27.
15. Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 532.
16. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 21; Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 9. If you have not read *The Railway Journey*, run—don't walk—to your library or bookstore, get it, and read it; it is an amazing, brilliant book. After that, read Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1962; orig. pub. 1934).

17. Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 48. See also Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 21.

18. *St. Louis Republican*, May 9, 1844, quoted in Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 532.

19. Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 541.

20. Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 48, 321.

21. Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 121. See also “The Commercial Growth and Greatness of the West,” *Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine* 17 (New York: Freeman Hunt, 1847), 500: “The application of steam power to navigation forms the brightest era in the history of the country. It is that which has contributed more than any other event or cause to the rapid growth of our population, and the almost miraculous development of our resources.”

22. Baptiste Dureau, *Les Etats-Unis en 1850: Notes et Souvenirs* (Paris, 1899), quoted in Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 29.

23. “Progress of the West,” published in May 1827, reprinted in Timothy Flint, *Western Monthly Review*, 3 vols. (Cincinnati: E. H. Flint, 1828), vol. 1, 26. See also Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 71: “The introduction of the steamboat on the western waters . . . contributed more than any single cause, perhaps more than all other causes which have grown out of human skill combined, to advance the prosperity of the West. . . . The amount of produce raised for consumption, and for export is great; and the people are therefore not only able but liberally disposed to purchase foreign products. They do, in fact, live more freely and purchase more amply than the farmers of any other country.”

24. Buckingham, *Slave States of America*, vol. 1, 430.

25. Peirce Lewis calls New Orleans “the impossible but inevitable city”; see Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape*, 2nd ed. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 19. See also Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); and Lawrence N. Powell, *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

26. Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 279–281.

27. *Ibid.*, 264–265. See also Dell Upton, “The Master Street of the World: The Levee,” in *Streets: Critical Perspectives on Public Space*, ed. Zeynep Çelik, Diane Favro, and Richard Ingersoll, 277–288 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

28. Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 264.

29. *Ibid.*, 266.

30. See Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses: The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of New World Society, 1727–1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Judith Kelleher Schafer, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011); Jennifer Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Uni-

versity Press, 2009); Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Monique Gillory, “Some Enchanted Evening on the Auction Block: The Cultural Legacy of the New Orleans Quadroon Balls” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1999).

31. See Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28:1 (Winter 1989), 1–34.

32. Flagg, *The Far West*, vol. 1, 64.

33. Mrs. Frances Milton Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1901; orig. pub. 1832), 8. See also Charles Mackay, *Life and Liberty in America; or, Sketches of a Tour in the United States and Canada, 1857–1858* (New York: Harper, 1859), 171. On black river workers in particular, see Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*.

34. Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 7.

35. Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 265.

36. Buckingham, *Slave States of America*, vol. 1, 471–472. Buckingham, in this passage, wrote of a landing at night along the Alabama River, not the Mississippi.

37. Along these lines, also see Mrs. Trollope’s statement that, along the Mississippi, “the lurid glare of a burning forest was almost constantly visible after sunset, and when the wind so willed the smoke arising from it floated in heavy vapors overhead.” Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, 30.

38. Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 91.

39. Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America*, vol. 2, 205; Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 66; Lewis, *New Orleans*, 175–177; Lawrence H. Larsen, “New Orleans and the River Trade: Reinterpreting the Role of the Business Community,” in *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History: New Orleans and Urban Louisiana*, ed. Samuel C. Shepherd, Jr., vol. 14, pt. A (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2005), 438–451; see also Thomas Ruys Smith, *Southern Queen: New Orleans in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

40. Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 220. “New Orleans and Yellow Fever are as inseparably connected as ham and chicken,” wrote Hamilton in *Men and Manners in America*, vol. 2, 212.

41. George D. Green, *Finance and Economic Development in the Old South: Louisiana Banking, 1804–1861* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 14.

42. Buckingham, *Slave States of America*, vol. 1, 331 (see also 352–358); Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 220; Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America*, vol. 2, 201–216; Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 262–268; Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America* (London: J. Murray, 1849), vol. 2, 159–164.

43. Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (Baltimore: J. H. Furst, 1931); Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside*

the *Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Calvin Schermerhorn, *Money over Mastery, Family over Freedom: Slavery in the Antebellum Upper South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011). See also David L. Lightner, *Slavery and the Commerce Power: How the Struggle against the Interstate Slave Trade Led to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

44. Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 2–3, passim.

45. Richard H. Kilbourne, Jr., *Debt, Investment, and Slaves: Credit Relations in East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995).

46. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 216–218; Kane, *The Western River Steamboat*, 10, 24–26.

47. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 222–225, 255.

48. *Ibid.*, 227–228.

49. Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 209–210; Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 324; Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 228–229; Kane, *The Western River Steamboat*, 27.

50. Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 2; see also 169. See also Kelman, *A River and Its City*.

51. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 236.

52. Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 92.

53. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 236.

54. On the Red River Raft, see Carl N. Tyson, *The Red River in Southwestern History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981). See also Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 323–330; Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States*, vol. 2, 171; Buckingham, *Slave States of America*, vol. 1, 318–322. As the historian Paul Paskoff has shown, the issue of federal funding of river works was one of the defining features of the larger debate over “internal improvements,” particularly during the 1840s. What is striking about these debates is that they initially pitted Southern Democratic opponents of federally funded internal improvements *against* western partisans of the internal waterways: in 1846, both William Yancey of Alabama and Jefferson Davis of Mississippi threatened secession if the federal government used U.S. Treasury funds to support snag removal on the Western rivers. “I fear not the West. . . . Let empire take its way there,” said Yancey in 1846. By then, however, Yancey’s position was a residual one. The emergent pro-Southern, pro-slavery, pro-commerce, pro-expansion, pro-steamboat position was closer to the one expressed by John C. Calhoun in a speech supporting federal funding for the improvement of internal waterways at the first Southern Commercial Convention in 1845: “The invention of Fulton has . . . converted the Mississippi, with all its great tributaries, into an inland sea. . . . It is manifest that it is far beyond the power of individual or separate states to supervise it.” As we will see, the political geography of the Mississippi River was shifting: from an east-

west axis to one that ran north to south. As far as the proponents of direct federal funding were concerned, however, the imagined alignment of South and West was a geography of frustration: no direct federal funding of improvements on the Western rivers was made between 1844 and 1866.

Much of the work on the lower Mississippi was done under the auspices of the Louisiana Board of Public Works, which was founded in 1833. Partly funded by the federal donation of swampland within the borders of the state (which could then be cleared, drained, and sold to the credit of the state), the board dredged the river channel, cleared snags, and built levees along the length of the river. At its height, around 1856, the board had a yearly budget of close to a half-million dollars a year, employed three snag boats and two dredge boats, and owned as many as 100 slaves. Additionally, at various points in its history, the board made prison-labor contracts with the state penitentiary (for the labor of all black prisoners) and the parish prison in Baton Rouge (for year-long indentures of all those taken up as suspected runaways). See Paskoff, *Troubled Waters*.

55. Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). See also Ari Kelman, “Forests and Other River Perils,” in *Transforming New Orleans and Its Environs: Centuries of Change*, ed. Craig E. Colten (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 45–63; Craig E. Colten, *An Unnatural City: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); and David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (New York: Norton, 2006).

56. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 264–266.

57. Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 210. See also Ranson v. Labranche, 16 La. Ann 121. Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 1.

58. James Hall, *The West: Its Commerce and Navigation* (Cincinnati: H. W. Derby, 1848), 10–11.

59. Kane, *The Western River Steamboat*, 61–63. See also Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 63–65.

60. Quoted in Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 128.

61. See Kane, *The Western River Steamboat*, 93.

62. *Ibid.*, 51–53, 59, 61, 63–64, 93–94, 97. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 72–82.

63. Archer B. Hulbert, *The Paths of Inland Commerce* (Teddington, UK: Echo Library, 2009; orig. pub. 1920), 73.

64. Kane, *The Western River Steamboat*, 90–93. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 648.

65. See Joan W. Gandy and Thomas H. Gandy, *The Mississippi Steamboat Era in Historic Photographs: Natchez to New Orleans, 1870–1920* (New York: Dover, 1987), 39–47.

66. George Fitch, quoted in Frederick Way, Jr., *The Log of the “Betsy Ann”* (New York: Robert McBride, 1933), 26; *Steam Engines: Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury, Trans-*

mitting, in *Obedience to a Resolution of the House, of the 29th of June Last, Information in Relation to Steam Engines, &c.* (Washington: Thomas Allen, 1838); Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 121–133. Hunter suggests the empirical process by which the changeover to high-pressure occurred: engineers looking for more power gradually began to disconnect their condensers and simply run their “low-pressure” engines hotter and harder. See also Kane, *The Western River Steamboat*, 44–50, 68–71.

67. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 121–133. Kane, *The Western River Steamboat*, 68–71.

68. J. V. Merrick, “On the Steamboats of the Western Waters of the United States,” *Journal of the Franklin Institute* 53:5 (May 1852), 344.

69. Kane, *The Western River Steamboat*, 70. See also Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 264–266.

70. Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 47–55; Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 241–242. See also George Byron Merrick, *Old Times on the Mississippi: The Recollections of a Steamboat Pilot, from 1854 to 1863* (Cleveland: A. H. Clark, 1909).

4. Limits to Capital

1. Estwick Evans, *A Pedestrious Tour of Four Thousand Miles* (1818), in *Early Western Travels, 1748–1846*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1904), vol. 8, 257.

2. “The Commercial Growth and Greatness of the West,” *Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine* 17 (1847), 502.

3. *Ibid.*, 501.

4. Louis C. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History* (New York: Dover, 1993; orig. pub. 1949), 218.

5. U.S. Senate, Executive Document 42, 32nd Congress, 1st Session, p. 114.

6. My analysis of the “falling rate of profit,” the possibilities of spatial and temporal “fixes” to this decline, and the title of this chapter are all derived from David Harvey, *Limits to Capital*, new ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

7. Quoted in Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 307, 310, 354, 363.

8. James Hall, *The West: Its Commerce and Navigation* (Cincinnati: H. W. Derby, 1848), 135. See also Robert Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi; or, The Emigrant’s and Traveller’s Guide to the West* (Philadelphia: H. S. Tanner, 1832), 267.

9. E. W. Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi; or, Gould’s History of River Navigation* (St. Louis, 1889), 52–53; Arthur Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic* (London, 1851), 173.

10. *Beverly v. Captain Markin and Owners of Steamboat “Empire,”* Louisiana Supreme Court Case 6323, 17, 19–20, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans (hereafter cited as UNO).

11. Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America* (London, 1848), vol. 2, 190–191.
12. Mrs. Matilda Charlotte Houstoun, *Hesperos; or, Travels in the West* (London: J. W. Parker, 1850), 22.
13. Hall, *The West*, 135.
14. *Lobdell v. Steamboat "James Monroe,"* Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3316, 1, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.
15. Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 167, 180; Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 12–13.
16. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 335. On postal service in the nineteenth century, see David M. Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System, from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). On steamboats and mail in particular, see Robert Gudmestad, *Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 20.
17. Lyell, *A Second Visit*, vol. 2, 156. See also Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988; orig. pub. 1883), 20–24, where he describes days in the river towns as divided around the arrival and departure of the packets.
18. Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 176.
19. *Spalding v. Captain Tyler and Steamboat "Missouri,"* Louisiana Supreme Court Case 5628, 3, 7, 9, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.
20. Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (New York, 1838), vol. 2, 5.
21. Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 186.
22. *Ibid.*, 189. Compare that to John Lobdell's description of the *James Madison*: "She had the appearance of an old crazy boat." *Lobdell v. Steamboat "James Monroe,"* Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3316, 1, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO. See also Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 396–399.
23. Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 86–87. See also Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 405–407.
24. *St. Louis Republican*, May 9, 1844, quoted in Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 51, 48. See also "Great Steamboat Race," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel and Gazette*, June 11, 1847; "The Steamboat Race," Worcester, MA, *National Aegis*, October 31, 1849; "The Steamboat Race," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, August 25, 1849; "Steamboat Race," Middletown, CT, *The Constitution*, June 9, 1847.
25. Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 85–86.
26. Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 319.

27. “Fulton” (pseud.), “What Constitutes an Engineer?” *Journal of the Franklin Institute* 21 (3rd ser.), 1 (January 1851), 56.

28. Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 31, 174–179. See also Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 318; Thomas Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968; orig. pub. 1838), vol. 2, 181.

29. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 272; Paul F. Paskoff, *Troubled Waters: Steamboat Disasters, River Improvements, and American Public Policy, 1801–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 1.

30. Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 2, 26–27.

31. *Lloyd’s Steamboat Directory, and Disasters on the Western Waters* (Cincinnati: James T. Lloyd, 1856), v–vi, 233, 281–295. In a couple of cases where the temptation was too great to resist (e.g., the collision of the *Rainbow* and the *American Eagle*, or the burning, subsequent resurrection, and explosion of the *Phoenix*), I have recorded the name of a steamboat listed in the section on “minor” disasters alongside the names of those treated, and indexed, in greater detail.

32. *Lloyd’s Steamboat Directory*, 229–230. See also Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 431–482.

33. *Lloyd’s Steamboat Directory*, 83, 201 (see also 105); Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 397.

34. *Lloyd’s Steamboat Directory*, 91, 228.

35. See, generally, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

36. *Lloyd’s Steamboat Directory*, 213.

37. *Ibid.*, 226–229.

38. *Ibid.*, 193, 252 (see also 75, 90–91).

39. *Ibid.*, 57–58 (see also 61).

40. *Ibid.*, 74.

41. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 368. Exceptions to shippers’ liability were made in the case of acts of God and the actions of “public enemies.”

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Lloyd’s Steamboat Directory*, 99, 201, 252, 261.

44. *Ibid.*, 99, 243, 252.

45. *Lobdell v. Steamboat “James Monroe” and Owners*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3316; *Livaudais v. Steamboat “America,”* Case 1754; *Morgan v. Fiveash*, Case 1700–2. See also *St. Lue Ricard v. Owners of Steamboat “John Linton,”* Case 4717; *Pousange v. Natchez*, Case 6250. All in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

46. *Lloyd’s Steamboat Directory*, 87, 67, 103 (see also 107, 199, 228).

47. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 282.

48. Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 178. On the explosion of the *Sultana*, see Alan Huffman, *Sultana: Surviving Civil War, Prison, and the Worst Maritime Disaster in American History* (New York: Collins, 2009); Chester D. Berry, ed., *Loss of the "Sultana" and Reminiscences of the Survivors* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005); Gene Eric Salecker, *Disaster on the Mississippi: The "Sultana" Explosion, April 27, 1865* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1996).

49. Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 122. Cunynghame continued: "This reminds me of the story of an Irishman, who heard that a steam-boat upon which he proposed taking a passage, was anything but safe; having however ascertained that she was insured, 'Ah!' exclaimed he, 'sure then she is safe enough!' and went on board with the utmost confidence."

50. *Lloyd's Steamboat Directory*, 96–97, 102.

51. Charles Mackay, *Life and Liberty in America; or, Sketches of a Tour in the United States and Canada, 1857–1858* (New York: Harper, 1859), 241.

52. This sentence, as well as this section generally and the chapter as a whole, owe a great deal to Nan Goodman, *Shifting the Blame: Literature, Law, and the Theory of Accidents in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

53. Quoted in Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 297. See also Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 172; *Lloyd's Steamboat Directory*, 69.

54. Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 2.

55. *Lloyd's Steamboat Directory*, 126–127.

56. See *Brand v. Towne and Beckwith*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2927, 18, 26; *St. Lue Ricard v. Owners of Steamboat "John Linton,"* Case 4717, 26, 28, 29, 39, 41, 47, 54, 56. Both in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

57. Lyell, *A Second Visit*, vol. 2, 153–154. See also the proposal made by Arthur Cunynghame that pilot boats be stationed at each sandbar on the river. Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 178–179.

58. Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 315.

59. *Lloyd's Steamboat Directory*, 189, 69, 74, 225.

60. *Ibid.*, 95–97, 102, 197.

61. Edmund Flagg, *The Far West; or, A Tour Beyond the Mountains* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1838), vol. 1, 70. See also R. John Brockman, *Twisted Tails, Sunken Ships: The Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Steamboat and Railroad Accident Investigation Reports, 1833–1879* (Amityville, NY: Baywood, 2005).

62. *Brand v. Towne and Beckwith*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2927, 16–17; *Sauné v. Rowné and Beckwith*, Case 2832, 5. Both in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

63. A prior law had been passed in 1838, but no provision was ever made for its enforcement. See Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 532–535; and R. John Brockman, *Ex-*

ploding Steamboats, *Senate Debates, and Technical Reports: The Convergences of Technology, Politics, and Rhetoric in the Steamboat Bill of 1838* (Amityville, NY: Baywood, 2002).

64. U.S. Congress, “An Act to Provide for the Better Security of the Lives of Passengers on Board of Vessels Propelled in Whole or in Part by Steam,” 32nd Congress, 1st Session, 2–11.

65. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

66. *Ibid.*, 47.

67. Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 140.

68. Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 176. I have transposed the two sentences in this quotation.

69. Mrs. Matilda Charlotte Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 22; Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 253–255 (“injuries were inevitable”), 648, 651. *Morgan v. Fiveash*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 1700-2, in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

70. Captain Wilson Daniels, “Steamboating on the Ohio and Mississippi before the Civil War” (1915), quoted in Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 299.

71. Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 22.

72. *Ibid.*, 22–23. Cabin passengers were entitled to receive food for the duration of the journey, which meant that running faster lowered the amount the boat owners had to pay to provision them.

73. Paskoff, *Troubled Waters*, 155.

74. Hall, *The West*, 135. See also Joel R. Poinsett, quoted in Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 103.

75. “Steamboating on Western Waters: Causes of Failure to Become Profitable,” in Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi*, 580.

76. Hall, *The West*, 135.

77. *Cincinnati Commercial*, February 4, 1854, quoted in Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 503.

78. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 503. See also Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 91–107.

5. The Runaway’s River

1. See John Bryant, “*The Confidence-Man*: Melville’s Problem Novel,” in John Bryant, ed., *A Companion to Melville Studies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 315–350; Peter J. Bellis, “Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*: An Uncharitable Interpretation,” *American Literature* 59 (December 1987), 548–569; Helen P. Trimpi, *Melville’s Confidence Men and American Politics in the 1850s* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1987); Gary Lindberg, *The Confidence-Man in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 3–47; Susan

Kuhlman, *Knave, Fool, Genius: The Confidence Man as He Appears in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 3–8, 104–129; Gustaaf Van Cromphout, “*The Confidence-Man* and the Problem of Others,” *Studies in American Fiction* 21 (Spring 1993), 37–50.

2. On character, trust, and transactions, see Bruce Mann, *Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Late Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 149–178; Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

3. Louis C. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History* (New York: Dover, 1993; orig. pub. 1949), 391, 403, 390, 417. Hunter’s description of the passengers aboard the boat occurs in two different sections of his book, which I have brought together. Mrs. Frances Milton Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1901; orig. pub. 1832), 18.

4. Mrs. Matilda Charlotte Houstoun, *Hesperos; or, Travels in the West* (London, 1850), 19, 25–26, 43–44. See also J. S. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America* (London: Fisher and Sons, 1842), vol. 1, 396; Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travels* (New York: Saunders and Otley, sold by Harper and Brothers, 1838), vol. 2, 7.

5. Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 19, 32, 33, 35.

6. *Ibid.*, 19, 26; Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travels*, vol. 2, 9. Stevenson is quoted in Adam I. Kane, *The Western River Steamboat* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 67; Robert Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi; or, The Emigrant’s and Traveller’s Guide to the West* (Philadelphia: H. S. Tanner, 1832), 326.

7. Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 44.

8. Arthur Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic* (London, 1851), 188; Thomas Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968; orig. pub. 1838), vol. 2, 466. See Patricia Cline Cohen, “Safety and Danger: Women on American Public Transportation, 1750–1850,” in *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women’s History*, ed. Dorothy O. Helly and Susan M. Reverby (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); and Patricia Cline Cohen, “Women at Large: Travel in Antebellum America,” *History Today* 44 (December 1994).

9. Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 44.

10. *Ibid.*, 12.

11. George H. Devol, *Forty Years a Gambler on the Mississippi: The Best Gambling Book Ever Published in America* (Cincinnati: Devol and Haines, 1887), 38, 46, 56–57, 59, 62, 75, 82. See also S. W. Erdnase, *Artifice, Ruse and Subterfuge at the Card Table: A Treatise on the Science and Art of Manipulating Cards* (Chicago: F. J. Crake, 1902); and Thomas Ruys Smith, ed., *Blacklegs, Cardsharps, and Confidence Men: Nineteenth-Century Mississippi Gambling Stories* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010). The most famous card

manipulator of the period was a Frenchman named Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, a magician who wrote multiple books on card sharpening. If the name looks familiar, it's because Harry Houdini (né Erik Weisz) took the name as an homage to Houdin. Houdin's famous book on card sharpening, *L'Art de gagner à tous les jeux: Tricheries des Grecs dévoilées* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1861). The book soon appeared in both English and Spanish translations, as *The Card Sharper Detected and Exposed* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1863) and *Secretos de los garitos: Arte de ganar á todos los juegos* (Valencia: P. Aguilar, 1879). For other nineteenth-century literature on the subject, see John Nevil Maskelyne, *Sharps and Flats: A Complete Revelation of the Secrets of Cheating at Games of Chance and Skill* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1894); J. H. Green, *Gambler's Tricks with Cards Exposed and Explained* (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1859); R. Kunard, *The Book of Card Tricks, for Drawing-Room and Stage Entertainments: With an Exposure of Tricks as Practised by Cardsharppers and Swindlers* (New York: Scribner's, 1888); Gerrit M. Evans, *How Gamblers Win; or, The Secrets of Advantage Playing Exposed* (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1868). As a cottage industry, publishing books about cheats dates back almost as far as the printing press. For example, see Theophilus Lucas, *The Memoirs of the Lives, Intrigues, and Comical Adventures of the Most Famous Gamesters and Celebrated Sharpers* (London: Jonas Brown, 1714); Gilbert Walker, *Mihil Mumchance: His Discoverie of the Art of Cheating in False Dyce Play, and Other Vnlawfull Games with a Discourse of the Figging Craft* (London: John Danter, 1597). For a more recent take on the subject, see Penn Gillette and Mickey D. Lynn, *How to Cheat Your Friends at Poker: The Wisdom of Dickie Richard* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005); and Alan Zola Kronzek, *Fifty-Two Ways to Cheat at Poker: How to Spot Them, Foil Them, and Defend Yourself* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

12. Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 324–325.

13. Devol, *Forty Years a Gambler*, 79–81; Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 325.

14. Devol, *Forty Years a Gambler*, passim; Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 205. See also Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America* (London, 1848), vol. 2, 223–224.

15. It is interesting, in this connection, that Devol's book concluded with an invocation of Thomas Hobbes. Devol, *Forty Years a Gambler*, 296.

16. Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America*, vol. 2, 176. See also Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*, 326; Devol, *Forty Years a Gambler*, passim.

17. Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 265.

18. Buckingham, *Slave States of America*, vol. 1, 449; Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 64. See also Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 206.

19. Buckingham, *Slave States of America*, vol. 1, 350–351.

20. Devol, *Forty Years a Gambler*, 35, 52–53, 59, 66, 76, 78.

21. *Ibid.*, 294, 296.

22. *Ibid.*, 295.

23. Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 154–164, 92; Buckingham, *Slave States of America*, vol. 1, 399–404; Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 144–145, 192–194; Lyell, *A Second Visit*, vol. 2, 160, 174.

24. Buckingham, *Slave States of America*, vol. 1, 480.

25. Lyell, *A Second Visit*, vol. 2, 217.

26. Cunynghame, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 144.

27. Lyell, *A Second Visit*, vol. 2, 160. Historians have come to regard the idea of the “social construction of race” as something of a truism. What makes these accounts in particular stand out is that they happened while people were eating, at a moment in which the idea of the separation of one body from the rest of the world was rendered incoherent by the passage of food into the mouth. It is perhaps for this reason that mealtimes are so dense with fears of racial contamination, and consequent regulation.

28. *Williamson v. Norton*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2427, testimony of Rufus Blanchard, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans (hereafter cited as UNO).

29. *Ibid.*, testimony of Lyman Cole, William B. Phillips, and Charles Deming.

30. *Ibid.*, testimony of Rufus Blanchard.

31. *Ibid.*, testimony of Alexander Martin.

32. *Ibid.*, testimony of George Duval.

33. *Ibid.*, testimony of George Duval, judgment of the Supreme Court.

34. *Ibid.*, testimony of Charles Deming, William Phillips, plaintiff’s brief to the Supreme Court.

35. *Spalding v. Captain Tyler*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 5628, testimony of Thomas Labaune and Daniel Beasley, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

36. *Ibid.*, testimony of Stephen Herrill.

37. *Ibid.*, testimony of Andrew Murphy.

38. *Ibid.*, testimony of Thomas Labaune and Stephen Herrill.

39. *Ibid.*, testimony of Daniel Beasley.

40. *Williamson v. Norton*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2427, plaintiff’s brief to the Supreme Court, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

41. Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 10.

42. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 446–456.

43. Quoted *ibid.*, 447.

44. Robert Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: The South, 1820–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); and, especially, Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*,

121, *passim*. See also Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

45. *Daret v. Gray*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4681, plaintiff's brief to the Supreme Court, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

46. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*, 121.

47. *Daret v. Gray*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4681, testimony of Captain M. Wilder, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

48. *Emmerling v. Beebe*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3642, testimony of John Eaton and Thomas Boyles, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

49. On "free papers," see Rebecca J. Scott, "Paper Thin: Freedom and Re-enslavement in the Diaspora of the Haitian Revolution," *Law and History Review* 29 (November 2011).

50. *Emmerling v. Beebe*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3642, testimony of John Eaton, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

51. Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4619, testimony of John Eaton, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

52. *Emmerling v. Beebe*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3642, testimony of John Eaton, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

53. *Marciaq v. Clark*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4645, testimony of M. H. Waters, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

54. *Strawbridge v. Turner and Woodruff*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2803, testimony of George Swaney; and *Goldenbow v. Wright*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3108, decision of the Supreme Court. Both from Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

55. *Buel v. "New York" and Captain Burge*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3689, testimony of James M. Pedes, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

56. *McMaster v. Beckwith*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2017, testimony of Solomon Lynethart (f.m.c) and James W. Behar, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

57. *Daret v. Gray*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4681, testimony of Captain M. Wilder, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO. See also Lyell, *A Second Visit*, vol. 2, 267; Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travels*, vol. 2, 6; *Spalding v. Captain Tyler*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 5628,

testimony of Langdon Logan, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

58. Henry Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave: Written by Himself” (1845), in *Puttin’ on Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 149–150.

59. John Parker, *His Promised Land: The Autobiography of John P. Parker, Former Slave and Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 36, 40.

60. William Wells Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave: Written by Himself” (1847), in *Puttin’ on Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 216.

61. Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, ed. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 53.

62. Parker, *His Promised Land*, 39.

63. *Marciaq v. Clark*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4645, testimony of M. H. Waters; *Strawbridge v. Turner and Woodruff*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2803, testimony of George Swaney; *Goldenbow v. Wright*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3108, decision of the Supreme Court. All in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

64. Parker, *His Promised Land*, 36, 38.

65. Captain J. C. Swon to James Lusk, September 11, 1847, in *Lusk v. Swon*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2852, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO. On this topic generally, see Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*.

66. *Daret v. Gray*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4681, plaintiff’s brief to the Supreme Court, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

67. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 12–13, 130–131. See also Judith K. Schafer, *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans, 1846–1862* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003).

68. *P. H. Harbor v. Steamboat “Chieftan,”* Louisiana Supreme Court Case 5827, Act of Sale dated January 3, 1844, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

69. *Daret v. Gray*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4681, testimony of Dr. Martin; *Spalding v. Captain Tyler*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 5628, Defendant’s response and testimony of G. S. Chouteau; *McMaster v. Beckwith*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2017, testimony of Solomon Lynethart (f.m.c) and James W. Behar. See also *Marciaq v. Clark*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4645; *Emmerling v. Beebe*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3642; *Buel v. “New York” and Captain Burge*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3689. All in

Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

70. Ariela Gross, “Like Master, Like Man: Constructing Whiteness through the Commercial Law of Slavery, 1800–1861,” in *Symposium: Bondage, Freedom, and the Constitution*, *Cardozo Law Review*, 18:2 (1996).

6. Dominion

1. Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, ed. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 133–134.

Although this is a book about the Mississippi Valley, I have relied on the first-person narratives of people who were enslaved elsewhere in the United States to tell some aspects of the story. Where there were substantial differences (in the case of cotton culture versus sugar culture, for example, or the distance to a nonslaveholding state from Louisiana when compared with the distance to Kentucky), of course, I have interpreted the origin of the sources very strictly. But in the case of the similarities in the condition of enslavement (hunger, labor, sexual vulnerability, etc.) and between the enslaved spaces of the South (the fields, the forests, and the interior spaces of slaveholding households), I have been guided by a notion of the geography of slavery that is separate from, indeed prior to, the state-by-state geography of slaveholding rule.

2. John Hebron Moore, *Agriculture in Ante-Bellum Mississippi* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971; orig. pub. 1958), 33–35; John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest: Mississippi, 1770–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 12–13; J. A. Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual: Being a Compilation of Facts from the Best Authorities on the Culture of Cotton* (New York: C. M. Saxton, 1857), 95. On the history of cotton more generally, see C. Wayne Smith and J. Tom Cothren, eds., *Cotton: Origin, History, Technology, and Production* (New York: J. Wiley, 1999); Joseph Bardwell, *Cotton Culture* (New York: Orange Judd, 1868); H. B. Brown, *Cotton: History, Species, Morphology, Breeding, Culture, Diseases, Marketing, and Uses* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1927); Charles William Burkett and Clarence Hamilton Poe, *Cotton: Its Culture, Marketing, Manufacture, and the Problems of the Cotton World* (New York: Doubleday, 1906); L. C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institute, 1933).

3. For a more thorough discussion of the significance of improved cotton seed, as well as a compendium of additional strains—Dean, Silk (also known as McBride), 100 Seed, Sugar-Loaf, Cluster, Banana, Boyd’s Prolific, Jethro, Lintopia, Diamond, Original Stock, 8 Locks of the Small Diamond, Belle Creole, Sub Ingri, Santa Maria, and so on—along with their various advantages, see M. W. Phillips, “The Different Varieties of Cotton Seed,” *American Cotton Planter* 3:6 (June 1855), 184–185. Hereafter cited as *ACP*.

4. Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual*, 103–117, 181, quotation on 105.
5. Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest*, 12–13.
6. *Ibid.*, 12 (quotation), 85.
7. On “pickability” see Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual*, 105, 108, 124, *passim*.
8. Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains; or, The Life of an American Slave* (Detroit: Negro University Press, 1969; orig. pub. 1859), 68; Juriah Harris, “What Constitutes Unsoundness in the Negro,” *Savannah Journal of Medicine* 2 (1858), 220; *Stackhouse v. Kendall*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 1851, 7 La. Ann. 670 (1851), testimony of William S. Clark, A. Settle, H. Stackhouse, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, University of New Orleans (hereafter cited as UNO); *Banks v. Botts*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2905, 10 La. Ann. 42 (1836), testimony of Oscar Kibble and David B. Morgan, *ibid*.
9. Anonymous, “The American Cotton Planter,” *ACP* 1:1 (January 1853), 20; James M. Chambers, “On the Treatment and Cultivation of Cotton,” *ACP* 1:7 (July 1853), 203; Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger (New York: Random House, 1984; orig. pub. 1860), 417, 498; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 131–132; Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 103; W.G.G. to Henry Marston, February 26, 1850, Henry Marston Papers/Letterbook, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University. See also An Overseer, “Plantation Management,” *ACP* 2:5 (May 1854), 151; and An Overseer, “Statement of Crop and Manuring,” *ACP* 3:7 (July 1855), 216.
10. On measuring the fertility of the soil, see Anonymous, “Cotton: Its Improved and True Culture,” *ACP* 1:2 (February 1853), 52; S., “Policy of the Planting States,” *ACP* 1:5 (May 1853), 152; Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual*, 15–16, 36, 76; Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, 133; on ratings by “hands,” see Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom* (Milwaukee: Southside Printing, 1897), 40; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 9, 186, 431; James Henry Hammond, “Report of the Committee of the Barnwell Agricultural Society, on the Culture of Cotton,” in Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual*, 26; Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest*, 127; Steven F. Miller, “Plantation Labor Organization and Slave Life on the Cotton Frontier: The Alabama Mississippi Black Belt, 1815–1840,” in *Cultivation and Culture*, ed. Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 158.
11. John Parker, *His Promised Land: The Autobiography of John P. Parker, Former Slave and Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, ed. Stuart Seely Sprague (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 30; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 116; Miller, “Plantation Labor Organization and Slave Life on the Cotton Frontier,” 158; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 75; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 36–37; J. W. Longuen, *The Rev. J. W. Longuen, as a Slave, and as a Freeman: A Narrative of Real Life* (New York: Negro University Press, 1968; orig. pub. 1859), 81–82. See also John Hebron Moore, *Andrew Brown and Cypress Lumbering in the Old Southwest* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967).

12. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 69, 116; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 183; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 59; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 150; Anonymous, “Bagasse for Fuel in the Manufacture of Sugar,” *DeBow’s Review* 8:4 (April 1850), 401–402. On wood in the Mississippi economy, see Moore, *Andrew Brown and Cypress Lumbering in the Old South*. On the era of wood (and water) in human history (at least among humans in the West), see Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1934), 107–150.

13. Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The South-west, by a Yankee* (New York: Harper, 1835), vol. 2, 86; Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (New York: Little, Brown, 1963), 63, 10; Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 158.

14. Moses Grandy, “Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America,” in *North Carolina Slave Narratives: The Lives of Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, Moses Grandy, and Thomas H. Jones*, ed. William L. Andrews (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 178.

15. Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, 139; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 17, 22; T. J. Sumner, “Analyses of the Cotton Plant and Seed,” *ACP* 1:3 (March 1853), 71.

16. Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 29.

17. Chambers, “On the Treatment and Cultivation of Cotton,” 201; R. S. Hardwick, “Hill-Side Ditching, No. 1,” *ACP* 1:1 (January 1853), 14–18; R. S. Hardwick, “Hill-Side Ditching, No. 2,” *ACP* 1:2 (February 1853), 41–45; Anonymous, “Cotton: Its Improved Culture, No. 2,” *ACP* 1:4 (April 1853), 116; Daniel Woffard, “Horizontal Culture,” *ACP* 4:5 (May 1856), 210–214. See also N. B. Cloud, “System and Rotation in Cotton Culture,” in Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 79; Moore, *Agriculture in Antebellum Mississippi*, 44; Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, 16.

18. A. W. Dillard, “Thoughts on the Culture of Cotton,” *ACP* 2:5 (May 1854), 143.

19. Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 14, 24, 34–35, 54; Anonymous, “Planting and Cultivating Cotton,” *ACP* 1:8 (August 1853), 235.

20. Anonymous, “Work for the Month,” *ACP* 3:4 (April 1855), 114.

21. Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 16–18, 25–26; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 123–124; Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, vol. 2, 701–702; Moore, *Agriculture in Antebellum Mississippi*, vol. 2, 43; Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest*, 38.

22. Chambers, “On the Treatment and Cultivation of Cotton,” 204; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 5; Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860*, vol. 2, 702.

23. Chambers, “On the Treatment and Cultivation of Cotton,” 204; Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 26.

24. Laurence Kotlikoff, “The Structure of Slave Prices in New Orleans, 1804–1862,” *Economic Inquiry* 17 (1979), 496–517; Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 25–31; John Knight to William Beall, January 27, 1844, John Knight Papers, Records of Ante-

bellum Southern Plantations on Microfilm, ed. Kenneth M. Stamp, Perkins Library, Duke University (hereafter cited as RASP). See also Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 138–144.

25. Dr. John Stainback Wilson, “The Peculiarities and Diseases of Negroes,” *ACP* 4:12 (December 1856), 559–560.

26. William Hamilton to Kitty Hamilton, November 27, 1856, William Hamilton Papers, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University; William Connor to Lemuel Connor, October 23, 1849, Lemuel Connor Papers, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, LSU; *Folse v. Kitteridge*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 6580, 15 La. Ann. 222 (1860), testimony of F. A. Williamson, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO; John Knight to William Beall, February 7, 1844, John Knight Papers, RASP. See also Samuel Cartwright, “The Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race,” *Southern Medical Reports* 2 (1850), 427; and Samuel Cartwright, “Report on the Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race,” *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* 7 (1851), 697. See also Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 358.

27. Wilson, “The Peculiarities and Diseases of Negroes,” *ACP* 4:12 (December 1856), 558.

28. Phillip Thomas to William Finney, January 24, 1859, William A. J. Finney Papers, RASP; *White v. Slatter*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 943, 5 La. Ann. 27 (1849), testimony of James Blakeny, Francis H. Jump, and Hope H. Slatter, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 184. See also Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 150–155.

29. Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 37; Susan E. O’Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 34–37.

30. Hardwick, “Hill-Side Ditching, No. 1,” 16; Jacob Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South, Part I* (Salem, MA: Salem Press, 1879), 25; J. D. Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes in 1839, 1846, and 1848* (Huddersfield, UK, 1864), 5; Peter Bruner, *A Slave’s Adventures toward Freedom, Not Fiction, but the True Story of a Struggle* (Oxford, OH, n.d.), 14; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 31, 22–23; William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave in the South* (Cincinnati, 1846), 23; John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, ed. F. N. Boney (Savannah: Library of Georgia, 1991), 21.

31. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 45; Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 30, 14, 26; Hardwick, “Hill-Side Ditching, No. 1,” 16; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 184. See also Chambers, “On the Treatment and Cultivation of Cotton,” 203. See also Anonymous, “Work for the Month,” *ACP* 3:9 (September 1855), 276.

32. W. Hustace Hubbard, *Cotton and the Cotton Market* (New York: D. Appleton, 1927),

63; T. B. Thorpe, “Cotton and Its Cultivation,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 8:45 (February 1854), quoted in Stuart Bruchey, ed., *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy, 1790–1860: Sources and Readings* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), 171–172.

33. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 126, 134–135. See also Kate E. R. Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed: Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and His Wife “Vina” after Forty Years of Slavery* (Syracuse: William T. Hamilton, 1856), 77 (cotton picking as “diligence”).

34. Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 26–33; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 125–126.

35. Slave narratives are full of detailed descriptions of the “labor process.” See, e.g., Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, 77–78, 102–103; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 14, 23–26, 43, 56, 62, 109–110, 143, 145–147, 149, 151–152, 160–161; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 69, 123–126, 134–140; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 75, 89, 96; William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green (Formerly a Slave)* (Springfield, MA, 1853), 8; Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South*, 15. See also, generally, many issues of the *American Cotton Planter*; and J. A. Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*.

36. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 159; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 215; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 70, 33–34. Hughes continued, emphasizing his knowledge of both material and means: “Wagons, plows, harrows, grubbing hoes, hames, collars, baskets, bridle bits and hoe handles were all made on the farm from material which it produced, except iron. The timber used in such implements was generally white or red oak, and was cut and thoroughly seasoned long before it was needed. . . . Horse collars were made from corn husks and from poplar bark which was stripped from the tree, in the spring, when the sap was up and it was soft and pliable, and separated into narrow strips and plaited together. . . . The baskets were made from oak timber, grown in the home forests and prepared by the slaves.” See also Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden*, 24, 29, 38; Isaac Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason as a Slave* (Worcester, MA, 1893), 21; Grandy, “Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy,” 160; Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South*, 24.

The reader who tracks these citations will find that they outline an unwritten history of slaves’ attitudes to work. They are full of layered and disorienting contradictions: images of the pride associated with “free labor,” used to describe the experience of slavery and surely intended on some level to reassure a white readership that emancipated slaves would keep working; images which reinforce dominant notions of race, skill, and exploitation; images of the slaves trying to improve their material lives—clothing and food, especially—through their labor, and even judging their labor by the standard of provision; images of the pride that these male slaves took in being placed in positions of authority over other men; images of pride in doing slave work, used by men who on other occasions raised their hands against their masters and faced death in order to resist and escape.

37. The argument is a bit eclectically shaped in Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 80–

119; Richard White, *The Organic Machine* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), esp. 47–96.

38. M. W. Phillips, “Cotton Seed,” in Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 102; Moore, *Agriculture in Antebellum Mississippi*, 153; James Henry Hammond, “Governor Hammond’s Report,” in Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 26. See also Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 135–136; Hardwick, “Hill-Side Ditching, No. 1,” 17.

39. Ingraham, *The South-west: By a Yankee*, vol. 2, 249; Chambers, “On the Treatment and Cultivation of Cotton,” 203. A further example of synecdochic dismemberment can be seen in a passage where G.D.S., a contributor to *American Cotton Planter (ACP)*, discusses the implementation of an experiment in manuring: “In early December, I started four ploughs, two large ones drawn by oxen, to turn over the sod, and two subsoilers, (manufactured by Ruggles, Nourse and Mason, after the style of the Deanston plough,) drawn by mules, and to follow in the furrow made by the turning ploughs.” Here the writer sees fit to mention both farm animals and brands of equipment, rather than the actual human laborers performing the task. The only time G.D.S. mentions these individuals is when he relays the frustrations of his overseer, saying, “The overseer complained that the hands and teams were wanted elsewhere.” G.D.S., “Fogeism in Farming: An Experiment in Subsoiling,” *ACP* 2:4 (April 1854), 116–117.

40. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1995; orig. pub. 1975), especially his notion of “docile bodies.”

41. R. S. Hardwick, “Hill-Side Ditching, No. 1,” *ACP* 1:1 (January 1853), 16; Hardwick, “Hill-Side Ditching, No. 2,” *ACP* 1:2 (February 1853), 43; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 184 (see also 370).

42. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 88.

43. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 172 (see also 196, 222); Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 61 (see also 141). See also Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest*, 77–82; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 50.

44. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 184.

45. *Ibid.*, 162; Hubbard, *Cotton and the Cotton Market*, 10; R. D. Powell, Sr., to General J. H. Cooke, August 14, 1857, in Willie Lee Rose, ed., *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 255. See also Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South*, 23.

46. Willie Lee Rose, ed., *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 254.

47. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 135–136; Grandy, “Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy,” 160; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 27–28. See also Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 10–11.

48. Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 27, 30; Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William*

Green, 13; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 41, 86; Henry Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself” (1845), in *Puttin’ on Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 65.

49. Bruner, *A Slave’s Adventures toward Freedom*, 25; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 96–97. See also Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, 49.

50. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 135 (see also 198); Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 35, 37; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 99 (see also 97); William Wells Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself” (1847), in *Puttin’ on Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 181 (see also 201); Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 455. See also Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 70; Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black, a Fugitive from Slavery* (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847), 20; see also A. K. Farrar to H. W. Drake, September 5, 1857, Alexander Farrar Papers, folder 71, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University (“Mr. McAllin was standing there by a window looking out toward the quarter listening to a noise there occasioned by Skinner’s whipping some Negroes”). On sounds and slavery, see Mark Michael Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Shane White and Graham White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discover African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech* (New York: Beacon Press, 2005).

51. For slaves’ memories of owners who expressed satisfaction at hearing the sounds of slaves being beaten, see Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, 179; and Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 121.

52. See, e.g., Alan Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

53. Wilson, “The Peculiarities and Diseases of Negroes,” *ACP* 4:6 (June 1856), 270.

54. Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 122; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 65 (see also 40, 75); Grandy, “Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy,” 161–162. See also Bruner, *A Slave’s Adventures toward Freedom*, 15.

55. Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 143, 145, 146–147, 151, 160, 149 (I have transposed the clauses in the quotations about pricked fingers and chronic stooping). See also Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 223 (see also 171); Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black*, 9; Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green*, 8. See also Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 15; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 23.

56. Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black*, 6–7, 13; Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 29; Bruner, *A Slave’s Adventures toward Freedom*, 22–23 (see also 13); Longuen, *The Rev. J. W. Longuen, as a Slave, and as a Freeman*, 96 (see also 46–47); Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 152; Moses Roper, “A Narrative of the Adventures and Escapes of Moses Roper,” in Andrews, ed., *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, 57. See also Grandy, “Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy,” 161–162; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 310, 383; Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South*, 17; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 65.

57. My intellectual engagement here is with Elaine Scarry's brilliant book *The Body in Pain: The Making and the Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), in which the use of everyday objects in torture is analyzed as an aspect of the "un-making of the world," the process by which the victim of torture is separated from all meaningful prior relations and associations through pain. For Scarry, "work" is an aspect by which the unmade world might be remade: it is the antithesis of torture, the occasion for the (re)assertion of the dominions of humanity over the material world. The examples in this paragraph (and in the history of slavery and labor generally) suggest to me that the sorts of hierarchical exploitation and disciplinary violence which have always attended work render Scarry's opposition of "work" to "torture" problematic in the extreme. This was all pointed out to me by Dawn Peterson, then a graduate student in the American Studies Program at New York University.

58. Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 25; Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South*, 17; Roper, "A Narrative of the Adventures and Escapes of Moses Roper," 46, 44, 57; Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, 358–360; Andrew Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky* (Syracuse: Daily and Weekly Star Office, 1847), 19–20; *Simon v. State*, Mississippi Supreme Court Case 8900, 37 Miss. 288 (1858), testimony of Warren Ellis, George Hartley, Benjamin King, and Henry Hartley, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. See also Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 79.

7. "The Empire of the White Man's Will"

1. John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest: Mississippi, 1770–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 146–147; Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains; or, The Life of an American Slave* (1859; Detroit: Negro University Press, 1969), 208, 215 (quotation); Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, ed. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 130–131. See also Isaac Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason as a Slave* (Worcester, MA, 1893), 24; Moses Roper, "A Narrative of the Adventures and Escapes of Moses Roper," in *North Carolina Slave Narratives: The Lives of Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, Moses Grandy, and Thomas H. Jones*, ed. William L. Andrews (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Moses Grandy, "Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America," in Andrews, ed., *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, 48, 178.

2. John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, ed. F. N. Boney (Savannah: Library of Georgia, 1991), 108; John Hebron Moore, *Agriculture in Ante-Bellum Mississippi* (1958; New York: Octagon Books, 1971), 56, 109–110; Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest*, 22 (quotation); L. C. Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institute, 1933), vol. 2, 811–816; Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger (1860; New York: Random House, 1984), 440;

J. A. Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual: Being a Compilation of Facts from the Best Authorities on the Culture of Cotton* (New York: C. M. Saxton, 1857), 76; Anonymous, "Salt as Manure," *American Cotton Planter* 1:2 (February 1853), 54–55 (hereafter cited as *ACP*), quoted in Guy Stevens Callender, "The Early Transportation and Banking Enterprises of the States in Relation to the Growth of Corporations," in *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy, 1790–1860: Sources and Readings*, ed. Stuart Bruchey (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), 96. David Christy, "Cotton Is King; or, Slavery in the Light of Political Economy," in *Cotton Is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments*, ed. E. N. Elliot (Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott and Loomis, 1860), 126–127. See also James Henry Hammond, quoted in Richard Royal Russell, "Economic Aspects of Southern Sectionalism, 1840–1862," *University of Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences* 11:1 (1923), 36: "Immense sums . . . are annually drawn from us in exchange for mules, horses, cattle, hogs sheep, and even poultry." For a full accounting of the foodstuffs (corn, pork, flour, potatoes) imported by one Louisiana plantation, see *Byre, Vance & Co. v. Grayson*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 625, 15 Ogden (La.) 457 (1860), 2–5, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans (hereafter cited as UNO). For an argument minimizing the dependence of Lower-Mississippi cotton plantations on food imported from the West (though not necessarily on food imported from regions of "the South" outside the cotton belt), see Albert Fishlow, *American Railroads and the Transformation of the Ante-Bellum Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 275–288.

3. Quoted in Bruchey, ed., *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy*, 148; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 2.

4. Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual*, 134 (referring to the South Carolina Low Country).

5. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 28.

6. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 127; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 20, 188 (penultimate quotation, referring to arrival in South Carolina); Roper, "A Narrative of the Adventures and Escapes of Moses Roper," 58; Kate E. R. Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed: Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and His Wife "Vina" after Forty Years of Slavery* (Syracuse, NY: William T. Hamilton, 1856), 119; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 427; Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black, a Fugitive from Slavery* (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847), 8; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 14. Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual*, 134 (referring to the South Carolina Low Country).

7. Some rudimentary caloric calculations based on typical rations: three and a half pounds of bacon (approximately 2,100 calories per pound of cured bacon \times 3.5 pounds) represents about 7,350 calories if consumed whole, while a peck (measuring 8 quarts, or 32 cups) of cornmeal (around 450 calories per cup) represents just over 14,000 calories, again under the assumption that it was comestible in its entirety. All told, we're looking at about 21,350 calories per week, which is just over 3,000 calories per day. This would seem fairly generous at first glance, given modern dietary guidelines, but looking a bit deeper at ex-

pected caloric output strongly suggests the exact opposite. An average-sized man in his twenties requires about 1,900 calories per day simply to cover basic metabolic functions. Heavy manual labor consumes 250 to 350 calories per hour above basal consumption; so if we assume an average of 300 calories per hour (probably a low estimate, considering labor rates under threat of the lash), the supplied diet essentially was enough to cover about four hours of heavy manual labor before the individual would go into caloric deficit. If we assume the enslaved man in question worked a ten-hour day, he would finish the workday almost 2,000 calories in debt, let alone whatever caloric expenditures were necessitated by other activities such as raising children, cleaning, dancing, and so on.

Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, in their book *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 109–115, argue that this allotment of corn and pork was heavily supplemented by other produce and estimate that the average slave diet provided 4,185 calories daily. Even if we assume that slaves' diets were supplemented at this level, an active man working long days would still almost inevitably finish the day nearly 1,000 calories to the negative, even on the basis of my conservative numbers: 1,900 basal rate + 10 hours (at 300 calories/hour) = 4,900 calories expended. To reach equilibrium, this hypothetical enslaved man would have to consume 4,185 calories, do less than eight hours of manual labor daily, and expend no additional calories above basal metabolic rate for the remainder of the day.

These are very rudimentary calculations, but the implications seem fairly clear: slaves had considerable dietary deficiencies from a caloric standpoint, to say nothing of the fact that the overwhelming number of calories supplied by bacon (up to 90 percent) come from fat. No matter how you parse or change the numbers, the sheer scale of the daily deficit is so large that it is almost impossible to imagine a scenario in which most field hands did not suffer from some level of malnutrition. I am grateful to Andrew Baker for working all of this through for me. For more on malnutrition in general, see the chapter "Malnutrition, Ecological Risks, and Slave Mortality," in Wilma A. Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Kenneth F. Kiple, *The Caribbean Slave: A Biological History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), also addresses the subject of malnutrition, with regard to Caribbean slaves.

8. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 21; Henry Bibb, "Narrative of the Life and Adventure of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself" (1847), in *Puttin' on Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 115, 119; James Burn Wallace, "Diary" (1836), 69, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University.

9. Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom* (Milwaukee: Southside Printing, 1897), 47; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 164; Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual*, 134; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 190 (see also 254).

10. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 131.

11. Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America*

(New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 151–152; John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 141–177. See also Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

12. The *American Cotton Planter* introduced a translated synopsis of Liebig's work in the following terms: "We beg our readers to study it line by line, and when they comprehend it all . . . they will find that they have a grammar of their art, a foundation on which every agriculturalist may build a rationale which will accord with practical truth." J. J. Mapes, "Chemistry and Agriculture, with Liebig's Statement," *ACP* 1:4 (April 1853), 123, together with "Liebig's Synopsis" on pages 123–125; both pieces were reproduced *in toto* from the *New York Tribune*.

13. Anonymous, "The American Cotton Planter," *ACP* 1:1 (January 1853), 20–21. Anonymous, "Compost—Stock-Yards," *ACP* 3:1 (January 1855), 21.

14. S., "Policy of the Planting States," *ACP* 1:5 (May 1853), 153; Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual*, 87 (see also 57, which cites a yield of "1500 bushels to the hand"). On manure yields by pound per cow, see Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, 52. On hauling manure, see Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 21.

15. Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual*, 57, 200; Anonymous, "Analysis of the Cotton Plant and Seed," *ACP* 1:3 (March 1853), 72, *passim*; Francis Bulkely, "Manure Is Wealth," *ACP* 1:3 (March 1853), 85, *passim* (article reprinted from *Southern Agriculturalist*); Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, 51, 152.

16. Bulkely, "Manure Is Wealth," 85.

17. *Ibid.*, 86–87. See also Anonymous, "Urine and Bones for Manure," *ACP* 3:3 (March 1855), 82; Anonymous, "Bones in the Soils," *ACP* 3:9 (September 1855), 266–267; W. S. King, "How To Make Farming Pay," *ACP* 2:6 (June 1854), 167; Anonymous, "Classification of Manures," *ACP* 4:3 (March 1856), 118.

18. M. W. Phillips, "The Cultivation of the Crop," in Turner, ed., *The Cotton Planter's Manual*, 41; Daniel Pratt to N. B. Cloud, *ACP* 1:1 (January 1853), 27. On the association of manuring with social development (and soil exhaustion with migration), see also Anonymous, "Cotton—Its Improved and True Culture," *ACP* 1:4 (April 1853), 115; J. J. Mapes, "Power of the Soil to Retain Manure," *ACP* 1:5 (May 1853), 141; M. W. Phillips to N. B. Cloud, *ACP* 1:5 (May 1853), 147; and Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth*, esp. 19–25, 156–160. See also Reverend John Bachman, "Essay on the Connexion of the Natural Sciences with Agriculture," *ACP* 3:2 (February 1855), 36; Hortensio (pseud.), "Taste in Rural Homes—Its Influence," *ACP* 3:9 (September 1855), 267–269.

19. Daniel Pratt to N. B. Cloud, *ACP* 1:1 (January 1853), 27.

20. Regarding smell and slavery, see Mark M. Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). On the broader social significance of odor, see Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*. On antebellum theories of odor, miasma, and disease, see Conevery Bolton Valenčius, *The Health of the*

Country: *How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

21. Anonymous, “Farm Embellishments—Buildings—Fences,” *ACP* 1:1 (January 1853), 30. For other examples of the fear of “miasma” in the nineteenth-century Mississippi Valley, see Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 498–499; “Views of Louisiana,” *Niles’ Weekly Register* 13 (September 13, 1817), quoted in Bruchey, *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy*, 132.

22. Dr. John Stainback Wilson, “The Peculiarities and Diseases of Negroes,” *ACP* 4:4 (April 1856), 175–176.

23. On toileting and narcissism, see Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*; on the same and liberalism, see Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London: Verso, 2003), 65–75. See also Suellen Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Todd L. Savitt, *Race and Medicine in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century America* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2007); Niklas Thode Jensen, *For the Health of the Enslaved: Slaves, Medicine and Power in the Danish West Indies, 1803–1848* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2012); Kathleen M. Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

24. Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 21; Anonymous, “Analysis of the Cotton Plant and Seed,” in Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 199; Anonymous, “A Mississippi Planter,” from J. D. B. Debow, *Industrial Resources of the Southern and Western States* (Washington, DC, and New Orleans: J. D. B. Debow, 1852), quoted in Bruchey, *Cotton and American Economic Development*, 184 (italics in the original); James Henry Hammond, “Governor Hammond’s Report,” in Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 27. See also John Stainback Wilson, “The Peculiarities and Diseases of Negroes,” *ACP* 4:5 (May 1856), 222.

25. Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 34; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 184; “Instructions by Alexander Telfair,” reprinted in Ulrich B. Phillips, *Plantation and Frontier Documents, 1649–1863*, vol. 1 (New York: A. H. Clark, 1909); and Susan Dabney Smedes, *Memorials of a Southern Planter* (Baltimore: Cushing and Bailey, 1887), quoted in Bruchey, *Cotton and American Economic Development*, 182, 212. Smedes’s point in telling the story was to record that one of her relatives likewise decided to do without meat during this period. The narrative emphasis here accords with some of her later assertions—e.g., some slaves got so “interested and excited” in their work picking cotton that they wished to “sleep at the end of their rows, that they might be up and at work in the morning earlier than their rivals”; and the enslaved women on her father’s plantation wore silk dresses made by “white mantua-makers.”

26. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 220–221; Peter Bruner, *A Slave’s Adventures toward Freedom: Not Fiction but the True Story of a Struggle* (Oxford, OH, 1918).

27. See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994).

28. Anonymous, “Will Peas Kill Hogs?” *ACP* 1:5 (May 1853), 145; Thomas Affleck,

quoted in Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest*, 53; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 147.

29. Andrew Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky* (Syracuse: Daily and Weekly Star Office, 1847), 25; Lunsford Lane, “The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N.C.” (1842), in Andrews, ed., *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, 108.

30. Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 50; Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 37–38; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 109.

31. Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 25.

32. *Ibid.*, 26–28.

33. *Ibid.*, 28–29.

34. On the way that social bonds between slaveholding families were articulated in gifts of meat, see Mrs. Isaac Hilliard, “Diary,” January 3, 5, 9, 23, and April 12, 1850, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University.

35. William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave in the South* (Cincinnati, 1846), 57; William Wells Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself” (1847), in *Puttin’ on Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky, 192; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 89; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 16; Tyre to Thomas Glen, January 9, 1837, Tyre Glen Papers, Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations on Microfilm, ed. Kenneth M. Stampp, Perkins Library, Duke University (hereafter cited as RASP). See also Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 355.

36. Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown,” 192; Roper, “A Narrative of the Adventures and Escapes of Moses Roper,” 58; Jacob Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South, Part I* (Salem, MA: Salem Press, 1879), 41; Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Antislavery Society, 1839), passim; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 54.

37. Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 16. Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown,” 192–193, 184; Jacob Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South*, 41; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 99.

38. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 138, 68; for sixteen examples of enslaved people being burned alive, mostly drawn from Southern newspapers, see Louisa Picquet, *The Octoroon; or, Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (New York, 1861), 54–59. See also Roper, “A Narrative of the Adventures and Escapes of Moses Roper,” 57; Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black*, 12; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 45–46, where a section entitled “Methods of Punishment,” which focuses on a naked slave being beaten by a circle of others in a “bull ring,” gives way directly to a section entitled “Forth of July Barbecue.”

39. M. W. Phillips, “Plantation Economy,” *ACP* 3:12 (December 1853), 377–387.

40. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 439–440.

41. See Richard Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana’s Cane*

World, 1820–1860 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 78; Follett estimates that some Louisiana sugar plantations had a 55 percent mortality rate among slave children within the first year of life. The noted agricultural reformer Thomas Affleck provided a similar estimate:

“The mortality rate of negro children is as two to one when compared with the whites, depending solely upon locality and care. Quarters are badly located; children are allowed to be filthy; are suckled hurriedly, whilst the mother is over-heated; are laid on their backs when mere infants, on a hard mattress, or a blanket only, and rocked and bumped in badly-made cradles; not a few are over-laid by the wearied mother, who sleeps so dead a sleep so as not to be aware of the injury to her infant; a vast proportion die under nine or ten days. . . . Of those born, one half die under one year; of the other half, say one-tenth die under five years; and of the remainder, a large proportion are raised.”

The numbers used by Affleck support 55 percent as being a relevant number for childhood mortality from birth to age five in Mississippi. From Thomas Affleck, “On the Hygiene of Cotton Plantations and the Management of Negro Slaves,” in *Southern Medical Reports*, ed. E. D. Fenner, vol. 2 (New Orleans: D. Davies Son, 1851), 435.

42. S. F. Patterson to R. S. Patterson, January 10, 1854, Samuel Patterson Papers, Perkins Library, Duke University; Isaac Jarratt to “Cousin Betty,” undated, Jarratt/Puryear Papers, RASP; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 213–214 (see also 30). See also Grandy, “Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy,” 168; William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, Formerly a Slave* (Springfield, MA, 1853), 4; Edward Stewart to John Gurley, December 19 and 23, 1858, John Gurley papers, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University; D. W. Breozeale to John Close, December 12, 1822, John Close Papers, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University; J. F. Smith to James Tutt, April 19, 1845, James Tutt Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Perkins Memorial Library, Duke University; A. G. Alsworth to Joseph Slemmons Copes, November 18 and December 13, 1856, Joseph Slemmons Copes Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University; Jefferson McKinney to Jephtha McKinney, April 21, 1856, Jephtha McKinney Papers, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University. See, generally, Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 89–102.

43. M. W. Phillips, “Plantation Economy,” *ACP* 1:3 (March 1853), 83.

44. J. D. Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes in 1839, 1846, and 1848* (Huddersfield, UK, 1864), 22; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 94; Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 8; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 119 (see also 79). See also Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown,” 214.

45. A. G. Alsworth to Joseph Copes, November 18 and December 13, 1856, Joseph

Slemmons Copes Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

46. The strongest statement to this effect remains Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985). See also Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Edward E. Baptist, “‘Cuffy,’ ‘Fancy Maids,’ and ‘One-Eyed Men’: Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States,” in *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 165–202; Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Jennifer M. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Follett, *The Sugar Masters*, 46–89; Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

47. “Negro children may fan about in their shirt tails during the warm weather of mid-summer; or they may even go without clothing at all, as we frequently see, and all this without injury.” Dr. John Stainback Wilson, “The Peculiarities and Diseases of Negroes,” *ACP* 4:12 (December 1856), 557.

48. Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black*, 8; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 85; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 164; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 42; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, passim; Jefferson McKinney to Jephtha McKinney, April 12, 1856, Jephtha McKinney Papers, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University.

49. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 173; Picquet, *Octoroon*, 11–15; Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 27–30. See also Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown,” 195.

50. Picquet, *Octoroon*, 7, 15; Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green*, 3–4. See also Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 220.

51. Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 23, 31, 37; Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South*, 25; Bruner, *A Slave's Adventures Toward Freedom*, 14; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 186, 431; Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual*, 26; *Coulter v. Cresswell*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2734, 7 La. Ann. 367 (1852), testimony of J. W. Boazman, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO; Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown,” 49.

52. Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 43–44; Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, 122 (see also 346–347); Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green*, 9; Ball, *Fifty*

Years in Chains, 90; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 121; Grandy, “Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy,” 166. See also Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 186, 248.

53. Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, 176; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 94–99; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 123.

54. On the use of human remains as fertilizer, see Anonymous, “Lasting Effect of Bones and Animal Matter,” *ACP* 3:5 (May 1855), 142: “We know of a field in an adjoining county that has been cropped for years, and is now in a state of high fertility. The surrounding fields are nothing like it, and with similar cultivation would by this time have been utterly impoverished. The former is the site of an old Indian burying ground, and when the country was first settled, was indented with graves within six feet of each other, all over its surface. . . . The half-decayed bones of the aborigines are to this day to be seen mingled with the soil, and, sad as it may seem, furnish food to successive crops of grain and grass.” See also Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, 150.

55. Along these lines, see Mrs. Isaac Hilliard, “Diary,” January 29–February 8, March 29, 1850, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University. The menu is suggested by her diary entries of April 3, 4, and 22, 1850. On the material life of slaveholders generally, see Erskine Clarke, *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

56. Samuel A. Cartwright, “Slavery in the Light of Ethnology,” in *Cotton Is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments*, ed. E. N. Elliot (Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott, and Loomis, 1860), 693, 694; Samuel A. Cartwright, “Natural History of the Prognathous Species of Mankind,” in Elliot, ed., *Cotton Is King*, 710, 714. On “sensory racial stereotypes,” see Mark M. Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). See also Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Elizabeth B. Clark, “The Sacred Rights of the Weak: Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America,” *Journal of American History* 82:2 (September 1995), 463–493; Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Cartwright’s emphasis on the olfactory extremity of the erotic lives of the enslaved recapitulates the nineteenth-century history by which the upper classes of the Atlantic world were coming to redefine themselves in relation to the delicacy of their olfaction, and in particular the association of sexuality with “delicate” and floral scents, rather than with animal scents such as musk and ambergris. See Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 71–88.

57. Cartwright, “Slavery in the Light of Ethnology,” 695, 698, 699, 704; Samuel A. Cartwright, “On the Caucasians and the Africans,” in Elliot, ed., *Cotton Is King*, 720–721.

58. Cartwright, “On the Caucasians and the Africans,” 719, 720–721.

59. Cartwright, “Slavery in the Light of Ethnology,” 702, 697 (I have transposed the elements of the last quotation—the material following the second set of ellipses appears

just before the rest in the original; see also 701); Cartwright, “On the Caucasians and the Africans,” 717 (see also 723–727).

60. Chancellor Harper, “Slavery in the Light of Social Ethics,” in Elliot, ed., *Cotton Is King*, 551–552.

61. See Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Sarah Knott, “A Cultural History of Sensibility in the Era of the American Revolution” (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University, 1999).

62. Harper, “Slavery in the Light of Social Ethics,” 594, 595, 562.

63. *Ibid.*, 583–584.

64. *Ibid.*, 606, 561.

65. *Ibid.*, 573–574, 589, 595, 614.

66. *Ibid.*, 575. See, similarly and *ad nauseam*, “Negro-Mania,” *DeBow’s Review* 12:5 (May 1852), 507–524, in which “humanity, both black and white” (page 514), is acknowledged even in the course of repeated analogies between “Negroes” and “donkeys” (the comparative terms being “whites” and “horses”).

67. Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

8. The Carceral Landscape

1. John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

2. Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Countrymarks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 117–120. See also Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (New York: Knopf, 2000).

3. Moses Grandy, “Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America,” in *North Carolina Slave Narratives: The Lives of Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, Moses Grandy, and Thomas H. Jones*, ed. William L. Andrews (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 171; Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, ed. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 35; Chancellor Harper, “Slavery in Light of Social Ethics,” in *Cotton Is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments*, ed. E. N. Elliot (Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott, and Loomis, 1860), 609. See also Henry Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb an American Slave, Written by Himself” (1845), in *Puttin’ on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 99; Andrew Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky* (Syracuse: Daily and Weekly Star Office, 1847), 16, 58.

4. Alonzo Snyder, Plantation Record, 28 (LSU), Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University. My analysis throughout what follows is

indebted to Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 47–96; Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

5. Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains; or, The Life of an American Slave* (1859; Detroit: Negro University Press, 1969), 90, 130; Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom* (Milwaukee: Southside Printing, 1897), 42, 44–45, 52; Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger (New York: Random House, 1984; orig. pub. 1860), 190, 296, 432; Grandy, “Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy,” 166. See also Jacob Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South, Part I* (Salem, MA: Salem Press, 1879), 39. See also Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

6. Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

7. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 55, 117, 118; Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South*, 32. See also Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 80–81; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 26.

8. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 171.

9. Bruner, *A Slave’s Adventures toward Freedom: Not Fiction but the True Story of a Struggle* (Oxford, OH, n.d.), 12; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 119; John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, ed. F. N. Boney (Savannah: Library of Georgia, 1991), 20 (see also 13). See also Kate E. R. Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed: Being a Personal Recollection of Peter Still and His Wife “Vina” after Forty Years of Slavery* (Syracuse: Wm. T. Hamilton, 1856), 199; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 262.

10. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 83; Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 28; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 166. See also Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 190–191.

11. Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 20; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 166.

12. See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 608–609.

13. See Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37:1 (Fall 2003), 113–124.

14. Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson*, 28.

15. That the limits of the prevailing order *did* exhaust the meaningfulness of enslaved resistance in the antebellum South is the argument made by Genovese in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*,

most notably on 597–598, where he argues that “day-to-day” forms of resistance ultimately reinforced slaveholding power because they failed to challenge the system of slavery *as a system*; and most untenably on 608–609 in the section entitled “Roast Pig Is a Wonderful Delicacy, Especially When Stolen,” where he argues on the basis of no evidence whatsoever that stealing food cost slaves their “self-respect.”

16. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 187–188; Isaac Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason as a Slave* (Worcester, MA, 1893), 27; Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, 188; A. K. Farrar to H. W. Drake, September 5, 1857, Farrar Papers, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University. See also Grandy, “Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy,” 175; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 450.

17. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 165; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 103–104; Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black, a Fugitive from Slavery* (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847), 22.

18. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 70; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 28; Grandy, “Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy,” 170. See also Martin R. Delany, *Blake, or, The Huts of America*, ed. Floyd J. Miller (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970; orig. pub. 1861–1862), 40; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 24; J. D. Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Run-away Slave from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes in 1839, 1846, and 1848* (Huddersfield, UK, 1864), 11.

19. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 182, 188 (see also 90, 112, 187).

20. See, e.g., Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 48, 136; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 101–113; Herbert G. Gutman, “The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: A Revised Perspective,” in Herbert G. Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, ed. Ira Berlin (New York: Pantheon, 1987), 364; Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

21. See Phillip D. Morgan and Ira Berlin, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993); Phillip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Low Country* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); John Womack, “Doing Labor History: Feelings, Work, Material Power,” *Journal of the Historical Society* 5 (September 2005), 255–296.

22. Exemplary of this materialist turn in the study of slavery are Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Anthony E. Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden*. For more on the same, see Walter Johnson, “Agency: A Ghost Story,” in Richard Follett, Eric Foner, and Walter Johnson, *Slavery’s Ghost: The Problem of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

23. Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 141, 89 (see also 17, 64–67); Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 22; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 74; Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 23; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 67; Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 28–29.

24. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 39–41; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 63. See also S. W. Todd deposition, quoted in J. Winston Coleman, “Lexington’s Slave Dealers and Their Southern Trade,” *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 12 (1938), 7; Richard Puryear to Isaac Jarratt, March 3, 1834, Jarratt/Puryear Papers, Records of Antebellum Southern Plantations on Microfilm, ed. Kenneth M. Stampp, Perkins Library, Duke University (hereafter cited as RASP); Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South*, 29; Lunsford Lane, “The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N.C.” (1842), in Andrews, ed., *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, 102. For the incompleteness (indeed, the inversion) of this disciplinary mechanism, as well as some of the conceptual background to the argument I am making, see Phillip Troutman, “Grapevine in the Slave Market: African-American Geopolitical Literacy and the 1841 Creole Revolt,” in *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 203–233.

25. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 27; Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 16, 19; Bruner, *A Slave’s Adventures toward Freedom*, 39. See also William Wells Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave,” in *Puttin’ on Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 205. See also Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 24; William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, Formerly a Slave* (Springfield, MA, 1853), 19.

26. Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown,” 205, 217; Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 30; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 101.

27. John P. Parker, *His Promised Land: The Autobiography of John P. Parker, Former Slave and Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, ed. Stuart Seely Sprague (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 138; John Knight to William Beall, May 7 and May 22, 1845, RASP; Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown,” 206; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 88; Bruner, *A Slave’s Adventures toward Freedom*, 37. See also Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 115–116; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 117–118; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 206.

28. Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 83; Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 23.

29. Parker, *His Promised Land*, 137.

30. Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 145; Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 15–16. See also Parker, *His Promised Land*, 95.

31. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 423.

32. Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 23, 43–44, 49–52, 85. See also Peter Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York:

Knopf, 1975), 271–284; Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

33. Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988; orig. pub. 1982), 52–57. See also Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 162, *passim*.

34. See, for example, Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 180–182; Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 9; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 288; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 136; Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown,” 206.

35. Roper, “A Narrative of the Adventures and Escapes of Moses Roper,” 54; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 310; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 107.

36. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 138.

37. See Lathan E. Windlay, *Runaway Slave Advertisements: A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790*, vols. 1–4 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1983).

38. Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 128; Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 24; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 133–134. See also Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 223.

39. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 223; Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 24. See Christian Pareti, *The Soft Cage: Surveillance in America from Slavery to the War on Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 13–32.

40. Bruner, *A Slave’s Adventures toward Freedom*, 36 (see also 27–28); see also Parker, *His Promised Land*, 49; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 66; Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 26.

41. Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 11.

42. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 138, 194 (see also 59, 85, 87); Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 88 (see also 18); Roper, “A Narrative of the Adventures and Escapes of Moses Roper,” 49. See also Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 82–83, 216, 234; Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South*, 38; Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, 241; Parker, *His Promised Land*, 51.

43. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 138; Stroyer, *Sketches of My Life in the South*, 15; Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 32–33.

44. William Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden, Containing a Faithful Account of His Travels for a Number of Years, Whilst a Slave in the South* (Cincinnati, 1846), 19; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 66; Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 17; Roper, “A Narrative of the Adventures and Escapes of Moses Roper,” 50. See also Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 23; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 119. On slaves who pretended to be porters in order to slip aboard steamboats, see Parker, *His Promised Land*, 35, 37.

45. Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 125, 145–147; Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 37; Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 11, 26, 34. See also

E. Sparrow to W. J. Minor, January 29, 1840, William Minor Papers, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University. (“I must decline accepting the filly you propose giving me in the place of mine found dead on your place. I decline because I have not and never had a disposition to make an owner responsible for such acts of his Negroes.”)

46. Camp, *Closer to Freedom*; Kaye, *Joining Places*; Susan E. O’Donovan, *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

47. Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 16; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 80; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 124; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 194; Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 29. See also *State v. Isham*, Case 646, 6 How. Miss. 35 (1841), testimony of Jesse Riggs and Philip Hoggat, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, hereafter cited as MDAH; Grandy, “Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy,” 175.

48. Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 32; Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden*, 58. See also Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 208; Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black*, 22.

49. Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown,” 190; Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden*, 25; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 19; Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 22; Parker, *His Promised Land*, 30; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 448; John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest: Mississippi, 1770–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 155.

50. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 138, 142, 183–197, 220–225.

51. On slaves selling game, see Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 448; and Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden*, 25.

52. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 188–189, 192–193. See also Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest*, 155.

53. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 208; Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black*, 22; A. K. Farrar to H. W. Drake, September 5, 1857, Alexander Farrar Papers, Folder 71, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University. See also Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 100; Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 39–40 (“Joe Brown . . . told us to meet him that night at Price’s Woods. . . . The place was well known to me and could be easily found”).

54. Parker, *His Promised Land*, 59 (see also 46); Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 19, 24; Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 13–14; Roper, “A Narrative of the Adventures and Escapes of Moses Roper,” 63; Grandy, “Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy,” 176, 182; Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 40; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 275; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 419, 437.

55. It has been said that slaveholders manipulated fears of apparitions and the supernatural so as to prevent slaves from escaping when the sun went down. See Gladys-Marie Fry, *Night Riders in Black Folk History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), esp. 38–81.

56. Parker, *His Promised Land*, 101, 106, 138–139 (Parker’s description of housebreak-

ing—the way he hid beneath an eave, soundlessly opened a door, crossed a creaking wooden floor—in search of a stolen baby is equally remarkable for the tactility of his account of landscape and resistance; see pp. 112–115); Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 250. See also Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 142; Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 11, 18.

57. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 254, 292–293 (see also 269, 288).

58. *Ibid.*, 6, 44; Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 9; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 77–78, 80, 85, 106; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 192; Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, 161, 207; Hayden, *Narrative of William Hayden*, 57 (see also 55, 77–78, 80).

59. Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 18; Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 254, 250 (see also 266). See also letter to “Hetty” ca. 1857, in Alexander K. Farrar Papers, Folder 71, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University.

60. Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 39; Parker, *His Promised Land*, 96.

61. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 387 (see also 431–432, 437); Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 156.

62. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 101–102 (see also 90, 180–182); Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 143; Parker, *His Promised Land*, 47. See also Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 11; Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,” 128; Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, 188–190; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 74.

63. Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 23; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 184, 102–103.

64. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 387, 389–390.

65. Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 116–117. For accounts of other fleeing slaves who were run down and killed by dogs, see Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 15, 23; Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 186.

66. Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains*, 259–260; Green, *The Life of J. D. Green*, 25.

67. Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 16; Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 33; Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green*, 9; Parker, *His Promised Land*, 33.

68. Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 80. See also Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky*, 13–14. Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 33; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 453.

69. Parker, *His Promised Land*, 69–70 (see also 109–110).

70. *Ibid.*, 70.

71. See Loic Wacquant, *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

72. *Simon v. State*, Case 8900, 37 Miss. 288 (1858), testimony of Warren Ellis, George Hartley, Benjamin King, and Henry Hartley, MDAH.

73. On antebellum justice in the South, see especially Michael Stephen Hindus, *Prison*

and Plantation: Authority in Massachusetts and South Carolina, 1767–1878 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

74. *Peter v. State*, unreported Mississippi Supreme Court Cases 616 and 834 (1838), testimony of Nicholas Lazarres and George, MDAH; *Dick, Henry, Peter, Alec, and Wright v. State*, unreported Mississippi Supreme Court Case 7640 (1854), testimony of Julius Johnson, MDAH; *John v. State*, Case 3031, 24 Miss. 569 (1852), testimony of Robert Halton and William Miles, MDAH; *State v. Isham*, Case 646, 6 How. Miss. 35 (1841), testimony of Jesse Riggs and Philip Hoggat, MDAH. See also A. K. Farrar to H. W. Drake, September 5, 1857, Alexander Farrar Papers, Folder 71, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University.

75. See Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 233–240.

76. On torture and testimony, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). “Wild zone” is from Susan Buck-Morss, *Dream-world and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), though she uses the phrase to refer to state violence, not extralegal violence.

9. The Mississippi Valley in the Time of Cotton

1. John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest: Mississippi, 1770–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), i. See also Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978); Franklee Gilbert Whartenby, “Land and Labor Productivity in United States Cotton Production, 1800–1840” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1963).

2. For a planter’s use of *Affleck’s Record*, see Pleasant Hill Plantation Record Book (Amite County, Mississippi), E. J. Capell Papers, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University; Wendell Holmes Stephenson, “A Quarter-Century of a Mississippi Plantation: Eli J. Capell of ‘Pleasant Hill,’” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 23:3 (December 1939), 355–374.

3. John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, ed. F. N. Boney (Savannah: Library of Georgia, 1991), 20; William Green, *Narrative of Events in the Life of William Green, Formerly a Slave* (Springfield, MA, 1853), 7; Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger (New York: Random House, 1984; orig. pub. 1860), 216. For the emphasis on increasing productivity on Louisiana sugar plantations, see Richard Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana’s Cane World, 1820–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 4, 13, 31, 95, 110–116.

4. J. A. Turner, *The Cotton Planter's Manual: Being a Compilation of Facts from the Best Authorities on the Culture of Cotton* (New York: C. M. Saxton, 1858), 35–36.

5. Anonymous, "Cotton and Its Prospects," *American Cotton Planter* 1:8 (August 1853), 226 (hereafter cited as *ACP*). See also John Hebron Moore, *Agriculture in Ante-Bellum Mississippi* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), 46; Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest*, 9. Historians have often interpreted statements like that one as if they refer to the inherent limits of the slave mode of production, especially its resistance to the sorts of mechanization that created productivity gains in other sectors of the antebellum economy. And perhaps slavery was inimical to mechanization, although one might point to the inherent difficulties of mechanizing an action as delicate as cotton picking or the successful mechanization of slave-based sugar plantations, facts that clearly complicate the case. In either event, it seems clear that cotton planters were thinking about increasing the returns on their investment in slaves and land—on their capital—in terms that had as much to do with productivity as with profitability.

6. Thomas Prentice Kettel, *Southern Wealth and Northern Profits, as Exhibited in Statistical Facts and Official Figures* (New York: George W. and John A. Wood, 1860), 23 (it should be noted that Kettel was a pro-slavery unionist, whose goal was to emphasize the economic importance of slave labor, and especially cotton, to the well-being of the United States as a whole); David Christy, "Cotton Is King; Or, Slavery in the Light of Political Economy," in *Cotton Is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments*, ed. E. N. Elliot (Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott and Loomis, 1860), 125.

7. Alonzo Snyder, Plantation Record, 3. Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University (hereafter cited as LSU). See also Palfrey Plantation Diary, Palfrey Papers; Joseph Mather Diary, John Jenkins Diary, John Jenkins Papers; James Monette Diary; Cotton Record Book, 1834–1836, John H. Randolph Papers; Plantation Diary, 1839–1840, Lidell (Moses and St. John R.) Family Papers; Leonidas Spyker Plantation Diary. All in Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

8. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 284. For another plantation where daily totals were posted on a blackboard, see Susan Dabney Smedes, "Memorials of a Southern Planter" (1887), in *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy, 1790–1860: Sources and Readings*, ed. Stuart Bruchey (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967), 215.

9. Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, ed. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 124, 126 (see also 75, 130, 134); Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains; or, The Life of an American Slave* (Detroit: Negro University Press, 1969; orig. pub. 1859), 130; Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black, a Fugitive from Slavery* (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847), 17; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 165 (see also 143, 146, 148, 160, 162).

10. J. D. Green, *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave from Kentucky, Containing an Account of His Three Escapes in 1839, 1846, and 1848* (Huddersfield, UK,

1864), 10; Isaac Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason as a Slave* (Worcester, MA, 1893), 23; Jacob Stroyer, *My Life in the South, Part I* (Salem, MA: Salem Press, 1879), 11, 21; William Wells Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave,” in *Puttin’ on Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 185, 187; Louis Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom* (Milwaukee: Southside Printing, 1897), 21; Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black*, 11; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 59; Henry Bibb, “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave,” in *Puttin’ on Ole Massa*, ed. Osofsky, 129.

11. Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 18 (quotation), 61–62, 102, 135; Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia*, 143, 146; W. Hustace Hubbard, *Cotton and the Cotton Market* (New York: D. Appleton, 1927), 60–61, 80–81, 101; H. H. Willis, Gaston Gage, and Vernetta B. Moore, *Cotton Classing Manual* (Clemson, SC: Textile Foundation, 1938), 19–21.

12. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 503.

13. Kettel, *Southern Wealth and Northern Profits*, 26–29; see also Hubbard, *Cotton and the Cotton Market*, 89–90.

14. Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 26, 135–136.

15. For more on the Liverpool connection, see J. F. Entz, *Exchange and Cotton Trade between England and the United States* (New York: E. B. Clayton, 1840); Thomas Ellison, *The Cotton Trade of Great Britain* (London: E. Wilson, 1886); Henry Smithers, *Liverpool, Its Commerce, Statistics, and Institutions: With a History of the Cotton Trade* (London: T. Kaye, 1825), esp. 116–158.

16. Hubbard, *Cotton and the Cotton Market*, 101, 103, 113. See also James Chambers, “On the Treatment and Cultivation of Cotton,” *ACP* 1:7 (July 1853), 204.

17. R. Abbey (“of Mississippi”), “Cotton and the Cotton Planters,” *DeBow’s Review* 3:1 (January 1847), quoted in Bruchey, ed., *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy*, 197; “Regulations for Cotton Packing,” *Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine* 36 (March 1857), quoted in Bruchey, ed., *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy*, 204–205. See also Hubbard, *Cotton and the Cotton Market*, 113; Willis, Gage, and Moore, *Cotton Classing Manual*, 25–26.

18. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1944); Robert Brenner, “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development” and “The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism,” in *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. T. H. Ashton and C. H. Philipin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 10–63, 213–327; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

19. Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Cuba and Brazil* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969); Fernand Braudel,

The Wheels of Commerce (New York: Harper and Row, 1982); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, vol. 3: 1730s–1840s (New York: Academic Press, 1989); James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Vintage, 1982); Laurence Shore, *Southern Capitalists: The Ideological Leadership of an Elite, 1832–1885* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); James Oakes, “The Peculiar Fate of the Bourgeois Critique of Slavery,” in *Slavery and the American South*, ed. Winthrop D. Jordan (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press), 29–55.

20. Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1979); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1974); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000; orig. pub. 1983), 1–184; Andre Gunder Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1–33; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). See also the essays by David Waldstreicher, Amy Dru Stanley, Stephanie Smallwood, and Walter Johnson collected under the rubric “Commodification of People,” in *Whither the Early Republic: A Forum on the Future of the Field*, ed. John Lauritz and Michael A. Morrison (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 117–158.

21. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985), 100–102.

22. Alonzo Snyder, Plantation Record, 5 (LSU); Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 273; Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 33.

23. Anonymous, “Cotton Production and Trade of the United States,” in Bruchey, ed., *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy*, 16–19.

24. Marie Fontenay, *L’Autre Monde*, quoted in Robert C. Reinders, *End of an Era: New Orleans: 1850–1860* (New Orleans: Pelican Press, 1964), 33.

25. Robert Greenhalgh Albion, *The Rise of New York Port, 1815–1860* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1984; orig. pub. 1939), 95–96.

26. Kettel, *Southern Wealth and Northern Profits*, 90; Harold D. Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers: Financing and Marketing the Cotton Crop, 1800–1925* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968), 159–161.

27. Albion, *The Rise of New York Port*, 38–54; Matthew Maury [unsigned], “A Scheme for Rebuilding Southern Commerce: Direct Trade and the South,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 5:1 (January 1839), 3. See also Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Philip S. Foner, *Business and Slavery: The New York Merchants and the Irrepressible Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941).

28. Kettel, *Southern Wealth and Northern Profits*, 89–91; James Stirling, *Letters from the*

Slave States (1857), quoted in Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers*, 135. See also M. W. Phillips, “Duty of Cotton Planters—Crops of Alabama and Mississippi,” *DeBow’s Review* 7:5 (1849), 412; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 250–251, 330–331, 417; Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest*, 232.

29. John Killick, “Risk, Speculation, and Profit in the Mercantile Sector of the Nineteenth-Century Cotton Trade: Alexander Brown and Sons, 1820–1880,” *Business History* 16:1 (January 1974), 1–16; John Killick, “The Cotton Operations of Alexander Brown and Sons in the Deep South,” *Journal of Southern History* 43:2 (May 1977), 169–194; Edwin J. Perkins, *Financing Anglo-American Trade: The House of Brown, 1800–1880* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 5–15.

30. Killick, “Risk, Speculation, and Profit,” 1–16; Killick, “The Cotton Operations of Alexander Brown and Sons,” 169–194; Perkins, *Financing Anglo-American Trade*, 5–15.

31. For full accounts of all the goods a factor might provide for a planter, see *Keane v. Brandon*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4047 (1856), 95–169, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans (hereafter cited as UNO). See also Bruchey, *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy*, 221–270; Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers*, 19–78; George D. Green, *Finance and Economic Development in the Old South: Louisiana Banking, 1804–1861* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 10–12.

32. *Financial Register*, quoted in Norman Sidney Buck, *The Development of the Organization of Anglo-American Trade, 1800–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925), 74.

33. See *Keane v. Brandon and Semple*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4047, N.O. (1856), passim, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

34. Joseph Baldwin, *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi: A Series of Sketches* (New York: D. Appleton, 1853), 94; Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers*, 115–125; Green, *Finance and Economic Development in the Old South*, 30, 107; Richard Holcombe Kilbourne, Jr., *Debt, Investment, Slaves: Credit Relations in East Feliciana Parish, 1825–1885* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 18–28. For examples of planters forced to obtain accommodating endorsers, see *Byrne, Vance, & Co. v. Grayson*, 15 Ogden (La.) 457 (1850), Louisiana Supreme Court Case 625 (Monroe), 126; *Keane v. Brandon and Semple*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4047, N.O. (1856), passim. Both cases in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

35. Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 213; George G. Henry, “Cotton, Prospect of Prices, etc.,” *ACP* 1:5 (May 1853), 160; Hubbard, *Cotton and the Cotton Market*, 24, 33–36, 80.

36. William Brandon to Henry Keane, March 27, 1850, and January 17, 1852, in *Keane v. Brandon and Semple*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4047, N.O. (1856), 24, 31–32. See also

letter of November 12, 1852, *ibid.*, 42–43; Isaac Lum to Branden, Williams, & Co., September 12, 1848, *Williams v. Lum*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 1548, N.O. (1856), 29–30 (UNO). See also Isaac Lum to Branden, Williams, & Co., January 12, 1848, *ibid.*, 24. See also *Magoffin v. Cowan, Dykes, & Spalding*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3548 (1856), 2 (UNO); Isaac Grayson to Byrne, Vance & Co., November 29, 1855, *Byrne, Vance, & Co. v. Grayson*, 15 Ogden (La.) 457 (1850), Louisiana Supreme Court case 625 (Monroe), 126 (UNO). All Louisiana Supreme Court cases in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

37. *Ward v. Warfield*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 742, N.O. (1848–1861), Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO; Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 250; Perkins, *Financing Anglo-American Trade*, 13, 89; Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers*, 106–108; Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old Southwest*, 232; Killick, “Risk, Speculation, and Profit,” 1–16; Killick, “The Cotton Operations of Alexander Brown and Sons,” 169–194.

38. Clinton and Port Hudson Railroad, Circular, 1850, Henry Marston Papers, LSU; Abbey, “Cotton and Cotton Planters,” 198; *Beal v. McKiernan*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2506, N.O., 1813–1846, 19, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO (“a great deal of the cotton at that time was exposed, and a great deal under cover”); Hubbard, *Cotton and the Cotton Market*, 100–103. See also Walter Hockayne to Charles Leverich, September 17, 1840 (cotton already purchased by a merchant was lost in a warehouse fire), Charles Leverich Papers, LSU.

39. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 214–215; Follain and Belloq to John Close, February 3, 1845, Taylor (for Toledano) to John Close, March 14, 1845, John Close Papers, LSU.

40. For lists of charges see *Magoffin v. Cowan, Dykes, and Spalding*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3548, N.O. (1856), 20–21; *Ward v. Warfield*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 742, N.O. (1846–1861), 23. Both in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

41. The locus classicus for the idea of the “fetishism of commodities” is, of course, Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, ch. 1, sec. 4. Marx, interestingly, chose to convey his argument through the example of a bolt of linen rather than a bolt of cotton, a choice that symbolizes a larger silence about slavery in *Capital*. See Walter Johnson, “The Pedestal and the Veil: Rethinking the Capitalism / Slavery Question,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 24:2 (Summer 2004), 299–308.

42. Koray Çalışkan, *Market Threads: How Farmers and Traders Create a Global Commodity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Katherine Ott, David H. Serlin, and Stephen Mihm, eds., *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Follain and Belloq to John Close, February 3, 1845, John Close Papers, UNO. See also *Beal v. McKiernan*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2506, N.O. 1813–1846, 23; *Byrne, Vance & Co. v. Grayson*, Louisiana Supreme Court

Case 625 (Monroe), 15 Ogden (La.) 457 (1860), 14–15, 129, 167. Both cases in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

43. “Virginia Commercial Convention,” *DeBow’s Review* 12:1 (January 1852), 36.

44. Anonymous, “Weighted Yearly Averages and Monthly Prices of Short-Staple Cotton at New Orleans, 1808–1860,” in Bruchey, ed., *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy*, 30 (see also 32).

45. *New Orleans Price Current, Commercial Intelligencer and Merchant’s Transcript*, January 19, 1849. For fairly thorough statistics regarding annual cotton production, see J. L. Watkins, *King Cotton: A Historical and Statistical Review, 1790–1908* (New York: James L. Watkins and Sons, 1908).

46. J. H. Leverich & Co. to Charles Leverich, March 26, 1844, Leverich Papers, LSU; Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers*, 27; Perkins, *Financing Anglo-American Trade*, 105; Hubbard, *Cotton and the Cotton Market*, 24.

47. N. B. Cloud, “The Cotton Crop,” *ACP* 1:1 (January 1853), 31–32; George G. Henry, “Cotton, Prospect of Prices, etc.,” *ACP* 1:5 (May 1853), 159–160; C. F. McKay, “The Cotton Trade, from 1825 to 1850,” in Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual*, 231–246.

48. George G. Henry, “Review of the Cotton Market,” *ACP* 1:3 (March 1853), 94–95; Henry, “Cotton, Prospect of Prices, etc.,” 159–160.

49. *Ward v. Warfield*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 742, N.O. (1846–1861), 32–34; *Flowers v. Downs*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2280, N.O. (1851), 23–24. Both cases in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO. See also Burke, Watt & Co. to Jacob Bieller, December 18, 1835, Alonzo Snyder Papers, LSU; Anonymous, “Brief Review of the Cotton Market,” *ACP* 1:2 (February 1853), 63; Taylor (for Toledano) to John Close, November 20, 1839, John Close Papers, LSU.

50. Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 83–84.

51. Lastraps and Bingime to John Close, November 27, December 22, 1835, April 6, and April 16, 1836, John Close Papers, LSU.

52. John Taylor for C. Toledano to John Close, October 30, 1837, April 12, October 1, 1838, October 17, 1839, June 20, 1840, John Close Papers, LSU; Burke, Watt & Co. to Alonzo Snyder, December 18, 1835, Alonzo Snyder Papers, LSU; Killick, “Risk, Speculation, and Profit,” 1–16; *Flowers v. Downs*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2280, N.O. (1851), 2, 23, 24, 26, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO; *Williams v. Lum*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 1548 (1856), 29, *ibid.*; Killick, “The Cotton Operations of Alexander Brown and Sons,” 169–194; Perkins, *Financing Anglo-American Trade*, 23–24, 98.

53. *Plaquemine Southern Sentinel*, June 22, 1850, quoted in Richard Follett, *The Sugar*

Masters, 36–37 (see also 28); Scott P. Marler, “Merchants and the Political Economy of Nineteenth-Century Louisiana: New Orleans and Its Hinterlands” (Ph.D. diss., Rice University, 2007), 65, 122; George H. Devol, *Forty Years a Gambler on the Mississippi: The Best Gambling Book Ever Published in America* (Cincinnati: Devol and Haines, 1887). See also Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 330–331.

54. Burke, Watt & Co. to Jacob Bieller, December 18, 1835, Alonzo Snyder Papers, LSU; C. F. McKay, “Cotton Trade of the South,” in Bruchey, ed., *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy*, 203; J. Lastraps to John Close, January 1, 1834, March 15 and March 22, 1834, February 10, 1835, John Close Papers, LSU; Taylor (for Toledano) to John Close, October 30, 1837, John Close Papers, LSU.

55. Burke, Watt & Co. to Jacob Bieller, December 18, 1835, Alonzo Snyder Papers, LSU.

56. Quoted in Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers*, 23 (see also 60); *Ward v. Warfield*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 742, N.O. (1846–1861), 16, 18; Woodman B. Magoffin to Messrs. Cowan, Dykes, and Spalding, September 10, 1850, in *Magoffin v. Cowan, Dykes & Spalding*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3584 (1856), 13; D. Y. Grayson to Messrs. Byrne, Vance & Co., November 29, 1855, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 625 (Monroe), 15 Ogden (La.) 457 (1860), 126, 170. Court cases in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

57. “Extract” dated August 9, 1836, William Minor Papers, LSU; Lastraps to John Close, March 20, December 22, 1835, John Close Papers, LSU; Toledano (form letters) to John Close, October 1, 1838, October 17, 1839, John Close Papers, LSU; Ward & Co. to Thomas Carneal, April 12, 1844, in *Ward v. Warfield*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 472, N.O. (1846–61), 43, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

58. Abbey, “Cotton and the Cotton Planters,” 188.

59. *Byrne, Vance & Co. v. Grayson*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 625 (Monroe), 15 Ogden (La.) 457 (1860), 48. E. B. Lyons to J. Lallande, December 5, 1850 in *Lyons v. Lallande*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3207 (1854), 20. Both in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

60. J. Lallande to Mrs. E. B. Lyons, November 30, 1850 in *Lyons v. Lallande*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3207, N.O. (1854), 32–33. E. B. Lyons to J. Lallande, December 5, 1850, in *Lyons v. Lallande*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3207 (1854), 22. William Flowers to S. W. Downs, May 9, 1839, in *Flowers v. Downs*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 2280, N.O. (1851), 23; *Magoffin v. Cowan, Dykes, and Spalding*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 3584, N.O. (1846–1861), 5. All in Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO.

61. *Byrne, Vance & Co. v. Grayson*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 625 (Monroe), 15 Ogden (La.) 457 (1860), 31, 162, 174; *Lyons v. Lallande*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case

3207, 20, 32–34, Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO; Taylor (for Toldedano) to John Close, September 14, 1842, John Close, LSU.

62. Henry Keane to William Brandon, October 11, 1853, in *Keane v. Brandon and Semple*, Louisiana Supreme Court Case 4047 (1856), Supreme Court of Louisiana Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Earl K. Long Library, UNO; see also 7, 10, 11, 13, 17, 51, 61, 233.

63. M. W. Phillips, “Duty of Cotton Planters,” *DeBow’s Review* 7:5 (November 1849), 412; Kettel, *Southern Wealth and Northern Profits*, 93. See also Buck, *The Development and Organisation of Anglo-American Trade*, 25, 79; Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers*, 132–133; Killick, “Risk, Speculation, and Profit,” 5–6; Killick, “The Cotton Operations of Alexander Brown and Sons,” 169–194. See also Ralph W. Haskins, “Planter and Cotton Factor in the Old South: Some Areas of Friction,” *Agricultural History* 29:1 (January 1955), 1–14; James E. Boyle, *Cotton and the New Orleans Cotton Exchange: A Century of Evolution* (Garden City, NY: Country Life Press, 1934).

64. Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom*, 331.

65. James M. Chambers, “On the Treatment and Cultivation of Cotton,” *ACP* 1:7 (July 1853), 204; Phillips, “Duty of Cotton Planters,” 411; Kettel, *Southern Wealth and Northern Profits*, 92; “Southern Commercial Convention at New Orleans, No. 4,” *DeBow’s Review* 22:6 (June 1857), 758.

66. Isaac Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 14; Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black*, 17.

67. Kilbourne, *Debt, Investment, Slaves*, xi, 5, 14, 49–74. See also Thomas D. Russell, “South Carolina’s Largest Slave Auctioneering Firm,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 68 (1992–1993), 1241; Thomas D. Russell, “Articles Sell Best Singly: The Disruption of Slave Families at Court Sales,” *Utah Law Review* (1996), 1161.

68. Brown, *Narrative of William Wells Brown*, 202; J. W. Longuen, *The Rev. J. W. Longuen, as a Slave, and as a Freeman: A Narrative of the Real Life* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968; orig. pub. 1859), 65 (see also 56, 156). See also J. D. Green, *The Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave from Kentucky*, 27; Mason, *Life of Isaac Mason*, 16; Pickard, *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, 94.

10. Capital, Cotton, and Free Trade

1. See Matthew Fontaine Maury, *The Physical Geography of the Seas* (1855), ed. John Leighly (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963). Maury is generally remembered as an oceanographer; see Charles Lee Lewis, *Matthew Fontaine Maury, the Pathfinder of the Seas* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1927); Frances Leigh Williams, *Matthew Fontaine Maury: Scientist of the Sea* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963); Chester G. Hearn, *Tracks in the Sea: Matthew Fontaine Maury and the Mapping of the*

Oceans (Camden, ME: International Marine, 2002). He makes several appearances as a free trader in Robert Greenhalgh Albion, *The Rise of New York Port* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1939), 35, 54, 120, 232, 324, 348, 359, and figures prominently as a pro-slavery imperialist in Percy A. Martin, "The Influence of the United States on the Opening of the Amazon to the World's Commerce," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 1:2 (May 1918), 146–162; and Gerald Horne, *The Deepest South: The United States, Brazil, and the African Slave Trade* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

2. Matthew Fontaine Maury, "The Maritime Interests of the South and West," *South-ern Quarterly Review* 4:8 (1843), 323.

3. See Alasdair Roberts, *America's First Great Depression: Economic Crisis and Political Disorder after the Panic of 1837* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). For contrasting interpretations, see Peter L. Rousseau, "Jacksonian Monetary Policy, Specie Flows, and the Panic of 1837," *Journal of Economic History* 62:2 (June 2002), 457–488 (emphasizing federally mandated specie flows within the United States); Peter Temin, *The Jacksonian Economy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 68–92 (emphasizing changes in the rate at which the Bank of England discounted U.S. paper); Bray Hammond, *Banks and Politics in the United States, from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

4. Augusta Convention of Merchants, *Minutes of the Proceedings of a Convention of Merchants and Others, Held in Augusta, Georgia, October 16, 1837* (Augusta, 1838), 7; Henry Bluff (pseud. of Matthew Maury), "To the Memphis Convention, Part I," *Southern Literary Messenger* 11:10 (October 1845), 577, 587; Anonymous, "Direct Trade of the South," *DeBow's Review* 14:5 (May 1853), 440; Herbert Wender, *Southern Commercial Conventions, 1837–1859* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1930), 88–90, 133–134, 175, 183, 193; A. Dudley Mann, "Southern Direct Trade with Europe," *DeBow's Review* 24:5 (May 1858), 352–354; James Lyons et al., "Southern Commercial Convention at Montgomery, Alabama," *DeBow's Review* 25:5 (May 1858), 424; Matthew Maury, "Captain Maury's Letter on American Affairs" (Richmond, 1861), reprinted in *Union Pamphlets of the Civil War, 1861–1865*, ed. Frank Friedel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 3, 6. See also U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of Israel D. Andrew on the Trade and Commerce of the British North American Colonies*, Senate Executive Document 112, 32nd Congress, 1st Session, 1853, partly reproduced in Stuart Bruchey, ed., *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy, 1790–1860: Sources and Readings* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), 73–75; David Christy, *Cotton Is King; or, Slavery in the Light of Political Economy*, in *Cotton Is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments*, ed. E. N. Elliot (Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott and Loomis, 1860), 125.

5. "Southern Commercial Convention at Savannah," *DeBow's Review* 22:1 (January 1857), 86–87. For other explicitly historical accounts see Mann, "Southern Direct Trade with Europe," 352–376; Lyons et al., "Southern Commercial Convention at Montgomery, Alabama," 424–428; Matthew Maury, "Two Letters on the Southern Steamship Line," *DeBow's Review* 22:5 (May 1857), 515; Maury, "Captain Maury's Letter on American Affairs."

6. For the pattern of trade, see Albion, *The Rise of New York Port*, 95–96; Matthew Maury (unsigned), “A Scheme for Rebuilding Southern Commerce: Direct Trade with the South,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 5:1 (January 1839), 6–12.

7. The question of low aggregate demand is an old one in the historical literature on slavery. See especially Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Vintage, 1967), 155–239. See also “Importance of an Industrial Revolution in the South: Speech of J. D. B. DeBow,” *DeBow’s Review* 12:5 (May 1852), 554.

8. Lastraps and Bingime to John Close, February 22, 1837; Taylor (for Toledano) to John Close, October 30, 1837; Adams and Whitard to John Close, August 14, 1844; Follain and Belloq to John Close, February 2, 1845. All from John Close Papers, Lower Mississippi Valley Collection, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University (hereafter cited as LSU).

9. Henry Huntington to William N. Mercer, April 4, 1837, quoted in George D. Green, *Finance and Economic Development in the Old South: Louisiana Banking, 1804–1861* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 28. See also J. D. B. DeBow, “Rail-Road Prospects and Progress,” *DeBow’s Review* 12:5 (May 1852), 502; J. D. B. DeBow, “Direct Trade of Southern States with Europe,” *DeBow’s Review* 4:2 (October 1847), 221; Harold D. Woodman, *King Cotton and His Retainers: Financing and Marketing the Cotton Crop, 1800–1925* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968), 136–138; Bruchey, ed., *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy*, 156–157.

10. Lyons et al., “Southern Commercial Convention at Savannah,” 86–87; “Importance of an Industrial Revolution in the South: Speech of J. B. D. DeBow,” 555. See also Mann, “Southern Direct Trade with Europe,” 327; Brian Schoen, *The Fragile Fabric of Union: Cotton, Federal Politics, and the Global Origins of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 262; Christy, “Cotton Is King,” 88.

11. Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: A. B. Burdick, 1857), 334; Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (New York: H. B. Price, 1860), 138.

12. “Southern Commercial Convention at New Orleans—No. 2,” *DeBow’s Review* 18:4 (April 1855), 522–525 (a “helve” is a handle). See also Robert Royal Russell, “Economic Aspects of Southern Sectionalism, 1840–1861,” *University of Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences* 2:1 (1923), 48.

13. Quoted in John Hebron Moore, *Agriculture in Ante-Bellum Mississippi* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971; orig. pub. 1958), 110; M. W. Phillips, “Plantation Economy—No. 1,” *American Cotton Planter* 1:1 (January 1853), 23. See also J. A. Turner, *The Cotton Planter’s Manual: Being a Compilation of Facts from the Best Authorities on the Culture of Cotton* (New York: C. M. Saxton, 1857), 48.

14. Quoted in Moore, *Agriculture in Ante-Bellum Mississippi*, 109.

15. Phillips, “Plantation Economy—No. 1,” 21–22.

16. “Direct Trade of the South,” 440.
17. Schoen, *The Fragile Fabric of Union*, passim. “Direct Trade of the South,” 440, 442. See also Maury, “Captain Maury’s Letter on American Affairs,” 2–5; Wender, *Southern Commercial Conventions*, 113, 135, 187.
18. Schoen, *The Fragile Fabric of Union*, 207–209 (see also 238, 262, 348); McDuffie, quoted in Christy, “Cotton Is King,” 88 (I have transposed the two elements of the quotation); James Henry Hammond, “Slavery in the Light of Political Science,” in Elliot, ed., *Cotton Is King*, 658; Augusta Convention of Merchants, *Minutes of the Proceedings of a Convention of Merchants and Others, Held in Augusta, Georgia*, 7; “Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention at Charleston” (1839), quoted in Wender, *Southern Commercial Conventions*, 37–38 (see also 12–13, 20).
19. Albion, *The Rise of New York Port*, 95–96; Maury [unsigned], “A Scheme for Rebuilding Southern Commerce,” 2–12; Matthew Maury, “Direct Foreign Trade of the South,” *DeBow’s Review* 12:2 (February 1852), 126–148; Maury, “Captain Maury’s Letter on American Affairs.”
20. “Southern Commercial Convention of New Orleans at New Orleans—No. 3,” *DeBow’s Review* 12:5 (May 1852), 633.
21. “Virginia Commercial Convention,” *DeBow’s Review* 12:1 (January 1852), 36–37; DeBow, “Rail-Road Prospects and Progress,” 502; Maury, “Direct Foreign Trade of the South,” 129, 133; “Importance of an Industrial Revolution in the South: Speech of J. D. B. DeBow,” 556 (also 558). See also Matthew Maury, “Commerce of the South and West,” *DeBow’s Review* 12:4 (April 1852), 383; “Southern Commercial Convention of New Orleans at New Orleans—No. 3,” 633. In the original, Maury wrote “Sandy Hook,” which I have replaced with “New York” to eliminate the need to include an extended account of the geography of the ports of New York and New Jersey.
22. Christy, *Cotton Is King*, 87, 94.
23. Mann, “Southern Direct Trade with Europe,” 373; C. F. McKay, “Cotton Trade of the South,” quoted in Bruchey, ed., *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy*, 203. See also Schoen, *The Fragile Fabric of Union*, 324.
24. “Southern Commercial Convention at Savannah,” *DeBow’s Review* 22:1 (January 1857), 92–93; Pike, quoted in Wender, *Southern Commercial Conventions*, 128. See also Jones, quoted in Wender, *Southern Commercial Conventions*, 191.
25. “Southern Commercial Convention at Savannah” (January 1857), 103. See also Mann, “Southern Direct Trade with Europe,” 373.
26. On railroads in the antebellum South, see Aaron Wagner Marrs, *Railroads in the Old South: Pursuing Progress in a Slave Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Ulrich B. Phillips, *A History of Transportation in the Eastern Cotton Belt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011).
27. DeBow, “Rail-Road Prospects and Progress,” 506; “Speech of James Robb, Esq. of New Orleans,” *DeBow’s Review* 12:5 (May 1852), 547–548. See also “New Orleans and At-

takapas Rail-Road,” *DeBow’s Review* 11:2 (August 1851), 214–217; “Connection of the Atlantic with the Gulf Interests of Alabama: Montgomery and Pensacola Railroad,” *DeBow’s Review* 14:6 (June 1853), 567–579; Scott P. Marler, “Merchants and the Political Economy of Nineteenth-Century Louisiana: New Orleans and Its Hinterlands (Ph.D. diss., Rice University, 2007) 55–152.

28. Marler, “Merchants and the Political Economy of Nineteenth-Century Louisiana,” 17, 53, 83, 84, 89, 93–95. Though I find Marler’s emphasis on the “backwardness” of New Orleans anachronistic for the reasons outlined in the text, his work is brilliant, pathbreaking, and comprehensive—it has been an indispensable source and counterpoint for my own thinking. See also Albert Fishlow, *American Railroads and the Transformation of the Ante-Bellum Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); Merl E. Reed, *New Orleans and the Railroad: The Struggle for Commercial Empire, 1830–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966); Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*.

29. U.S. Congress, House, *Report on the Internal Commerce of the United States*, House Executive Document No. 6, Part 2, 50th Congress, 1st Session, 1888, reproduced in Bruchey, ed., *Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy*, 175.

30. “Southern Commercial Convention at New Orleans—No. 3,” 625.

31. DeBow, “Rail-Road Prospects and Progress,” 501–502; “Memphis and Louisville Railroad,” *DeBow’s Review* 12:5 (May 1852), 551; *New Orleans News-letter and General Weekly Review*, September 14, 1850, quoted in Marler, “Merchants and the Political Economy of Nineteenth-Century Louisiana,” 56. See also “Speech of James Robb, Esq. of New Orleans,” 543–551 (on the way that divisions between the French and American communities in New Orleans, expressed through the division of the city into self-governing municipalities, hindered capital investment in railroads); Matthew Maury, “On Extending the Commerce of the South and West by Sea,” *DeBow’s Review* 12:4 (April 1852), 381–399.

32. For Maury as the visionary of 1850s pro-slavery imperialism, see editor’s introduction to Inca (pseud. of Matthew Maury), “Shall the Valleys of the Amazon and the Mississippi Reciprocate Trade,” *DeBow’s Review* 14:2 (February 1853), 137.

33. Maury (unsigned), “A Scheme for Rebuilding Southern Commerce,” 3, 4–12, 2.

34. Bluff (pseud. of Maury), “To the Memphis Convention, Part I,” 577–578.

35. *Ibid.*, 571, 581, 582, 602; Henry Bluff (pseud. of Matthew Maury), “To the Memphis Convention, Part II,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 11:11 (November 1845), 653, 655–658.

36. Bluff (pseud. of Maury), “To the Memphis Convention, Part I,” 577, 585.

37. *Ibid.*, 602.

38. M. F. Maury, “The Isthmus Line to the Pacific,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 15:5 (May 1849), 264–265. See also Francis Lieber, “The Ship Canal from the Atlantic to the Pacific,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 15:5 (May 1849), 266–267. Lieber’s contribution represents a piece of doggerel verse published as “an appropriate companion” to the article by Matthew Maury, culminating in the proposal to do away with the sobriquet “the United

States of America” in favor of “Winland” to emphasize maritime over terrestrial geography.

39. A couple of points beyond the argument at hand bear noting: (1) this version of empire emerged from the problem of “underconsumption” rather than “overproduction”—it was mercantile rather than industrial in origin; (2) Maury’s vision of the Pacific market as the ultimate fix for the U.S. economy was one of the templates for the subsequent sixty or so years of U.S. imperialism.

40. Matthew Maury, “The Panama Rail-Way and the Gulf of Mexico,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 15:8 (August 1849), 444–445, 448, 451; Maury, “Direct Foreign Trade of the South,” 136.

41. Maury, “On Extending the Commerce of the South and West by Sea,” 394–359 (I have transposed the sentences of the quotation). See also Inca (pseud. of Maury), “Shall the Valleys of the Amazon and the Mississippi Reciprocate Trade,” 137–145; Maury, “Direct Foreign Trade of the South,” 126–148; Matthew Maury, “Valley of the Amazon,” *DeBow’s Review* 14:5 (May 1853), 449–460; Matthew Maury, “Valley of the Amazon, No. II,” *DeBow’s Review* 14:6 (June 1853), 556–567; Maury, “Two Letters on the Southern Steamship Line,” 513–517.

42. For the intellectual history of nineteenth-century racism, see Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

43. Maury, “The Panama Rail-Way and the Gulf of Mexico,” 449.

44. Maury, “Direct Foreign Trade of the South,” 126, 142, 144, 147. See Gerald Horne, *The Deepest South: The United States, Brazil, and the African Slave Trade* (New York: New York University Press, 2007). For the provenance of the final argument see Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire*, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 10–54.

11. Tales of Mississippian Empire

1. On all things geographic, see D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, vol. 2: *Continental America, 1800–1867* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

2. See Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Gerald Horne, *The Deepest South: The United States, Brazil, and the African Slave Trade* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854–1867* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973).

3. See Richard White, “The Geography of American Empire,” *Raritan* 23:3 (Winter 2004), 8. I am indebted to conversations with White for the conception of “space” that frames most of what follows.

4. James D. B. DeBow, “The West Indies,” *DeBow’s Review* 5:6 (June 1848), 470; Richard Burleigh Kimball, *Cuba and the Cubans* (New York: S. Hueston, 1850), 94, 191.

5. Eliot West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to California* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000); Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

6. See David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 145–176. For an interesting example of the travails of transcontinental travel via Central America circa 1850, see David Knapp Pangborn, “A Journey from New York to San Francisco in 1850,” *American Historical Review* 9:1 (October 1903), 104–115.

7. Concerning everything to do with López, I have been greatly reliant upon and am correspondingly indebted to Tom Chaffin, *Fatal Glory: Narciso López and the First Clandestine U.S. War against Cuba* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996). I am likewise indebted to May, *The Southern Dream of Caribbean Empire*; Robert E. May, *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); and Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny’s Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Also see Herminio Portell-Vila, *Narciso López y su Epoca*, 3 vols. (Havana: Cultural, 1930–1958); *Colección de los Partes y Otros Documentos Publicados en la Gaceta Oficial de la Habana, Referentes a la Invasión de la Gavilla de Piratas Capitaneadas por el Traidor Narciso López* (Havana: Imprenta del Gobierno y Capitanía General por S.M., 1851); Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and Antebellum Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 170–196; Robert Granville Caldwell, *The López Expeditions to Cuba, 1848–1851* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1915); Anderson Chenault Quisenberry, *López’s Expeditions to Cuba, 1850 and 1851* (Louisville: J. P. Morton, 1906). See also Tom Chaffin, “‘Sons of Washington’: Narciso López, Filibustering, and U.S. Nationalism, 1848–1851,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 14 (1995), 79–106; Richard Tansey, “Southern Expansionism: Urban Interests in the Cuban Filibusters,” *Plantation Society in the Americas* 1 (1979), 227–251; Rodrigo Lazo, *Writing to Cuba: Filibustering and Cuban Exiles in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

8. Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 9–15, 22–23, 44–48, 74, 77–79. Among those involved with López were John O’Sullivan, editor of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* and original popularizer of the term “manifest destiny”; and George Law, the New York steamboat magnate, merchant banker, and patron of U.S. senator Stephen A. Douglas.

9. For estimates of the numbers killed in action, see Louis Schlesinger, “Personal Narrative of Louis Schlesinger of Adventures in Cuba and Ceuta,” *Democratic Review* 31 (1852), 257, 562.

10. Duncan Smith (pseud. of Henry Burtnett), “Narrative of Events Connected with

the Late Intended Invasion of Cuba,” ed. L. M. Perez, *Journal of Southern History* 10 (1906), 345–362; Marion Taylor, “Col. M. C. Taylor’s Diary in López’s Cárdenas Expedition, 1850,” ed. A. C. Quisenberry, *Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society* 19 (September 1921), 79–89; A Flibustiero [sic], “Life of General López, and History of the Late Attempted Revolution in Cuba” (New York: DeWitt and Davenport, 1851), 12–14.

11. May, *John A. Quitman*, 270–295; C. Stanley Urban, “The Abortive Quitman Filibustering Expedition to Cuba, 1853–1855,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 17:3 (July 1856), 175–196; William Walker, *The War in Nicaragua* (Mobile: S. H. Goetzl, 1860), 239, 250, 255.

12. New York *Herald*, September 19, 1849, quoted in Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 72; Samuel J. Walker, “Cuba and the South,” *DeBow’s Review* 17:5 (November 1854), 520, 524.

13. Alexander Jones, *Cuba in 1851* (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1851), 8; James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, June 30, 1823, quoted in Basil Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba, 1848–1855* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 24; Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 372–373, quoted in Meinig, *The Shaping of America*, 32.

14. DeBow, “The West Indies,” 456; “Letter from Asabel Smith,” *DeBow’s Review* 7:7 (December 1849), 540. See also Philip S. Foner, *A History of Cuba and Its Relations with the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1962), 31–32; Meinig, *The Shaping of America*, 155. On U.S.–European rivalry in the Caribbean, see especially Lester D. Langley, *Struggle for the American Mediterranean: United States–European Rivalry in the Gulf-Caribbean, 1776–1904* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976). Also see James E. Lewis, Jr., *The American Union and the Problem of Neighborhood: The United States and the Collapse of the Spanish Empire, 1783–1829* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Howard Jones and Donald A. Rakestraw, *Prologue to Manifest Destiny: Anglo-American Relations in the 1840s* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1997); Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815–1908* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

15. May, *John A. Quitman*, 242–244.

16. Kimball, *Cuba and the Cubans*, 192.

17. *New York Times*, October 22, 1852, quoted in Foner, *A History of Cuba*, 30. I’ve transposed the original quotation, which reads “The Cuban question is now the leading one of the time.”

18. Kimball, *Cuba and the Cubans*, 192–193. For a (not coincidentally) nearly identical account, see Jones, *Cuba in 1851*, 11. For British interest in California, see Meinig, *The Shaping of America*, 142–145; Edward Everett to Crampton, December 1, 1852, quoted in Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba*, 177. For the British side of things, see David Brown, *Palmerston: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); James Chambers, *Palmerston: “The People’s Darling”* (London: John Murray, 2004); Jasper Ridley, *Lord Palmerston* (London: Constable, 1970).

19. New Orleans *Delta*, February 26, 1854, and New Orleans *Courier*, July 1 and December 24, 1851, quoted in Foner, *A History of Cuba*, 31–32.
20. On all this, see Edward Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).
21. Anonymous, “Destiny of the Slave States,” *DeBow’s Review* 17:3 (September 1854), 280–281.
22. Kimball, *Cuba and the Cubans*, 250.
23. Edward A. Pollard, *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Homes of the South* (New York: Pudney and Russell, 1859), 108.
24. “The Late Cuba Expedition,” *DeBow’s Review* 9:2 (August 1850), 174; DeBow, “The West Indies,” 475, 476; J. S. Thrasher, “Address Delivered at the Celebration of the Third Anniversary in Honor of the Martyrs for Cuban Freedom,” pamphlet (New Orleans: Sherman, Wharton, 1854), 3.
25. Kimball, *Cuba and the Cubans*, 187–188; DeBow, “The West Indies,” 475.
26. Thrasher, “Address,” 4, 3.
27. Thrasher, “Address,” 3; “Unos Cubanos” (Havana, 1848), quoted in Caldwell, *The López Expeditions*, 26; Ambrosio José Gonzales, “Manifiesto on Cuban Affairs Addressed to the People of the United States, September 1st, 1852,” pamphlet (New Orleans: Daily Delta, 1853), 5, 8. See also Jones, *Cuba in 1851*, 19.
28. Kimball, *Cuba and the Cubans*, 183, 113.
29. See Robert Paquette, *Sugar Is Made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).
30. Foner, *A History of Cuba*, 17–19. See also Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba*, 44. On Cuban slave society in general, see Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970); Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860–1899* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). On unrest and social order, see Jean-Pierre Tardieu, “Morir o dominar”: *En torno al reglamento de esclavos de Cuba, 1841–1866* (Madrid: Iberoamericana Editorial Vervuert, 2003); Manuel Barcia Paz, *Seeds of Insurrection: Domination and Resistance on Western Cuban Plantations, 1808–1848* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008); Manuel Barcia Paz, *The Great African Slave Revolt of 1825: Cuba and the Fight for Freedom in Matanzas* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012); Gloria García Rodríguez, *Conspiraciones y revueltas: La actividad política de los negros en Cuba, 1790–1845* (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 2003); Alain Yacou, *La longue guerre des nègres marrons de Cuba, 1796–1851* (Paris: Pointe-à-Pitre, 2009); on Cuba and the United States, see Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, *Cuba y los Estados Unidos, 1805–1898* (Havana: Publicaciones de la Sociedad Cubana de Estudios Históricos e Internacionales, 1949); for a comparative approach, see Daniel E. Walker, *No More, No More: Slavery and Cultural Resistance in Havana and New Orleans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

31. Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros, “Thoughts upon the Incorporation of Cuba into the American Confederation in Contraposition to Those Published by Don José Antonio Saco” (1849), quoted in Foner, *A History of Cuba*, 18; *La Verdad* (New York), April 27, 1848, quoted in Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba*, 63.

32. See, for example, John S. Thrasher, “Cuba and Louisiana: Letter to Samuel J. Peters, Esq.” (New Orleans: Picayune Print, 1854), 5; “Letter from Asabel Smith,” 538.

33. DeBow, “The West Indies,” 455–470. See also the tables in Kimball, *Cuba and the Cubans*, 166–186, 211–231; and Thrasher, “Cuba and Louisiana,” 3–4. On DeBow’s importance in formatting the optical field that defined American and Southern interest in Cuba, see Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba*, 190.

34. DeBow, “The West Indies,” 464–470; Thrasher, “Cuba and Louisiana,” 3, 4.

35. DeBow, “The West Indies,” 467, 470.

36. Kimball, *Cuba and the Cubans*, 195–198, quotation on 196. For more accounting in the conditional, see Thrasher, “Cuba and Louisiana,” 3–4; and Cisneros, “Unos Cubanos,” quoted in Caldwell, *The López Expeditions*, 26.

37. DeBow, “The West Indies,” 498–499, 484, 485.

38. *Ibid.*, 486, 487, 488.

39. *Ibid.*, 487, 488, 489, 493–494.

40. *Ibid.*, 486, 498.

41. *Ibid.*, 486, 488.

42. Leon Fragua De Calvo, “Reply to a Pamphlet Entitled ‘Thoughts on the Annexation of Cuba to the United States, by Don Antonio Saco,’” in Kimball, *Cuba and the Cubans*, 250; Senator Andrew Butler, *Congressional Globe* 32:2, 96, quoted in Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba*, 249; “Destiny of the Slave States,” *DeBow’s Review* 17:3 (September 1854), 284.

43. William L. Hodge, “Report to the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce, in Reply to the Questions Propounded by the Honorable Secretary of the Treasury, on the Subject of the Tariff and Warehouse System,” pamphlet (New Orleans: Office of *The Daily Tropic*, 1845).

44. Tansey, “Southern Expansionism,” 229–233. New Orleans *Commercial Bulletin*, March 29, 1851, and *Daily Delta*, June 13, 1851, quoted in Tansey, “Southern Expansionism,” 230. See also Kelman, *A River and Its City*, 119–123.

45. Tansey, “Southern Expansionism,” 229–230.

46. Matthew Maury, “The Panama Rail-Way and the Gulf of Mexico,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 15:8 (August 1849), 442. For the classic account of the struggle between North and South over Western commerce, see Barrington Moore, “The American Civil War: The Last Capitalist Revolution,” in Moore, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 111–155.

47. New Orleans *Crescent*, May 20, 1854, quoted in Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 95; Samuel

Walker, “Cuba and the South,” *DeBow’s Review* 17:5 (November 1854), 524; New Orleans *Crescent*, September 1, 1849; “Destiny of the Slave States,” *DeBow’s Review* 17:3 (September 1854), 28; Maury, “The Panama Rail-Way and the Gulf of Mexico,” 443.

48. John O’Sullivan to James Buchanan, July 4, 1846, quoted in Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba*, 56.

49. Caldwell, *The López Expeditions*, 30–31; conversation reported by Abrosio Gonzales in the *Charleston Mercury*, August 25, 1851, quoted in Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 46.

50. Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba*, 11–120, 262–294; Foner, *A History of Cuba*, 10–19.

51. “An Act in Addition to the ‘Act for the Punishment of Certain Crimes against the United States’ and to Repeal the Acts Therein Mentioned,” *Annals of Congress*, 15th Congress, 1st Session, 2567–2570. For some of the backstory of why the act was passed in the first place, see Frank Lawrence Owsley, Jr., and Gene A. Smith, *Filibusters and Expansionists: Jeffersonian Manifest Destiny, 1800–1821* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997).

52. Taylor, “Col. M. C. Taylor’s Diary,” 81–83; Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 104–108, 118–119.

53. Taylor, “Col. M. C. Taylor’s Diary,” 84–86; Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 113, 127, 128–139.

54. J. F. H. Claiborne, *Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman* (New York: Harper, 1860), vol. 2, 59–61; Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 161, 167–175.

55. Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 160–161.

56. John O’Sullivan, “The Late Cuba State Trials,” *Democratic Review* 166 (April 1852), 308–309.

57. *Ibid.*, 310–311; New Orleans *Delta*, January 7, 1851, quoted in Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 177.

58. See O’Sullivan, “The Late Cuba State Trials,” 311. See also John Henderson, “Considerations on the Constitutionality of the President’s Proclamations” (New Orleans: Daily Delta, 1854).

59. May, *John A. Quitman*, 241.

60. *Ibid.*, 228–235.

61. Claiborne, *Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman*, 64–66, 77–83; May, *John A. Quitman*, 249–250.

62. May, *John A. Quitman*, 250–251.

12. The Material Limits of “Manifest Destiny”

1. Louis Schlesinger, “Personal Narrative of Louis Schlesinger of Adventures in Cuba and Ceuta,” *Democratic Review* 31 (1852), 210–213; A Flibustiero [sic], “Life of General López, and History of the Late Attempted Revolution in Cuba” (New York: DeWitt and

Davenport, 1851), 22, 27. Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 159–160.

2. Schlesinger, “Personal Narrative,” 212.

3. Bond of Provisional Government of Cuba, dated April 30, 1850, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. For discount rates, see Tom Chaffin, *Fatal Glory: Narciso López and the First Clandestine U.S. War against Cuba* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 90; Philip S. Foner, *A History of Cuba and Its Relations with the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1962), 88.

4. John W. Henderson to John A. Quitman, November 6, 1850, in J. F. H. Claiborne, *Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1860), 70.

5. Dispatches from Havana dated July 16 and July 17, 1851, in Alexander Jones, *Cuba in 1851* (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1851), 41–47. These papers quickly registered the image of Cuban freedom fighters in the minds of an American audience made wary of filibustering by the apparent indifference of the Creoles of Cárdenas (at least) to the arrival of their supposed salvation in the person of Narciso López. This rapid success later convinced some cynics that the news of the rising in Príncipe had been a put-up job designed to create a bubble of interest in Lopez’s bonds.

6. A Flibustiero, “Life of General López,” 4.

7. See Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 75–77.

8. On the occupations of López’s soldiers, see Thomas W. Wilson, “An Authentic Narrative of the Piratical Descents upon Cuba” (Havana, 1851), 41–44. On the preponderance of clerks in López’s army, see also Richard Tansey, “Southern Expansionism: Urban Interests in the Cuban Filibusters,” *Plantation Society in the Americas* 1 (1979), 233.

9. On the importance of newspapers in framing a field of political possibility, see Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978); and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

10. Schlesinger, “Personal Narrative,” 212.

11. Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 198.

12. Letter from C. N. Horwell to the *True Delta*, September 4, 1851, in Wilson, “An Authentic Narrative,” 33; on Banks’ Arcade, see Benjamin Moore Norman, *Norman’s New Orleans and Environs*, ed. Matthew J. Schott (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 156–157.

13. Wilson, “An Authentic Narrative,” 18; Declaration of James St. Levi, August 31, 1851, in Wilson, “An Authentic Narrative,” 36.

14. Duncan Smith (pseud. of Henry Burtmett), “Narrative of Events Connected with the Late Intended Invasion of Cuba (July 1851),” ed. L. M. Perez, *Journal of Southern History* 10 (1906), 348.

15. *Ibid.*, 353–354.

16. “The Late Cuba Expedition,” *DeBow’s Review* 9:2 (August 1850), 167.

17. Tansey, "Southern Expansionism," 233.
18. Marion Taylor, "Col. M. C. Taylor's Diary in López's Cárdenas Expedition, 1850," ed. A. C. Quisenberry, *Register of Kentucky State Historical Society* 19 (September 1921), 81–82.
19. Taylor, "Col. M. C. Taylor's Diary," 84, 85.
20. Schlesinger, "Personal Narrative," 213–214.
21. *Ibid.*, 214–215.
22. *Ibid.*, 217–218.
23. *Ibid.*, 218–219.
24. *Ibid.*, 218–219.
25. *Ibid.*, 219–220.
26. *Ibid.*, 223–224.
27. *Ibid.*, 352–353.
28. *Ibid.*, 353.
29. Declaration of Laine, in Wilson, "An Authentic Narrative," 38; Declaration of St. Levi, in Wilson, "An Authentic Narrative," 37.
30. Schlesinger, "Personal Narrative," 354.
31. *Ibid.*, 357.
32. *Ibid.*, 361–368.
33. Declaration of Laine, in Wilson, "An Authentic Narrative," 38; C. N. Horwell to the *True Delta*, September 4, 1851, in Wilson, "An Authentic Narrative," 32; Schlesinger, "Personal Narrative," 553–558.
34. Schlesinger, "Personal Narrative," 559–561.
35. A Flibustiero, "Life of General López," 22; Declaration of Laine, in Wilson, "An Authentic Narrative," 38; Schlesinger, "Personal Narrative," 558, 562.
36. A Flibustiero, "Life of General López," 22–24.
37. On the idea that war substantiates arguments in dead bodies, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), esp. 108–157.
38. Wilson, "An Authentic Narrative," 16.
39. Tansey, "Southern Expansionism," 241–243.
40. *Ibid.*, 241, 245–247.
41. Schlesinger, "Personal Narrative," 565–568, 571.
42. C. N. Horwell to the *True Delta*, September 4, 1851, in Wilson, "An Authentic Narrative," 34; Schlesinger, "Personal Narrative," 569, 571.
43. A Flibustiero, "Life of General López," 24–25; Wilson, "An Authentic Narrative," 24.
44. A Flibustiero, "Life of General López," 26–27.
45. As quoted in Ambrosio José Gonzales, "Manifiesto on Cuban Affairs Addressed to

the People of the United States, September 1st, 1852,” pamphlet (New Orleans: Daily Delta, 1853), 15.

46. Schlesinger, “Personal Narrative,” 356, 365, 366, 553, 561, 566, 579–590, quotation on 579.

47. *Ibid.*, 367, 561.

48. H. Vienne to My Dear and Affectionate Sisters and Brothers, August 16, 1851, and G. A. Cook to My Dear Friends, August 16, 1851, in Jones, *Cuba in 1851*, 68; William Crittenden to John J. Crittenden, August 16, 1851, quoted in Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 215.

49. C. N. Horwell to the *True Delta*, August 31, 1851, and September 4, 1851, in Wilson, “An Authentic Narrative,” 28–33.

50. *La Prensa*, August 16, 1851, translated and reprinted in Jones, *Cuba in 1851*, 62; New Orleans *True Delta*, August 25, 1851, quoted in A Flibustiero, “Life of General López,” 32.

51. Wilson, “An Authentic Narrative,” 6–10; J. Fisher to the *Louisville Courier*, August 16, 1851, in A Flibustiero, “Life of General López,” 31.

52. On the association with speculators in Mexican lands, see Chaffin, *Fatal Glory*, 84.

53. Wilson, “An Authentic Narrative,” 4; A Flibustiero, “Life of General López,” 26; C. N. Horwell to the *True Delta*, September 4, 1851, in Wilson, “An Authentic Narrative,” 34.

54. Millard Fillmore, Second Annual Message, December 2, 1851, in James D. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (Washington, DC: Published by the authority of Congress, 1897), vol. 4, 2651. Fillmore began his address with his history and condemnation of the invasion which took up, by my reckoning, just under one-fourth of the address.

55. Schlesinger, “Personal Narrative,” 554, 558.

56. A Flibustiero, “Life of General López,” 4. In the original, the word “redeem” follows the rest of the quotation; the meaning is unaltered.

57. Gonzales, “Manifiesto on Cuban Affairs,” 13.

58. *Ibid.*, 10–11.

59. *Ibid.*, 14; A Flibustiero, “Life of General López,” 21.

60. Gonzales, “Manifiesto on Cuban Affairs,” 15.
61. A Flibustiero, “Life of General López,” 25; Wilson, “An Authentic Narrative,” 24; Schlesinger, “Personal Narrative,” 575–576; Gonzales, “Manifiesto on Cuban Affairs,” 15.

62. Schlesinger, “Personal Narrative,” 575–576; Wilson, “An Authentic Narrative,” 24; A Flibustiero, “Life of General López,” 25; Gonzales, “Manifiesto on Cuban Affairs,” 15.

63. See, for instance, A Flibustiero, “Life of General López,” 24; Jones, *Cuba in 1851*, 65.

64. Millard Fillmore, Proclamation of April 25, 1851, in Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, vol. 4, 2647; A Flibustiero, “Life of General López,”

pez,” 24; Letters from Havana, dated August 16 and August 18, 1851, in Jones, *Cuba in 1851*, 59, 60, 65.

65. A Flibustiero, “Life of General López,” 24, 25; Letters from Havana dated August 16, 1851, in Jones, *Cuba in 1851*, 58, 59; Jones, *Cuba in 1851*, 65; Schlesinger, “Personal Narrative,” 256.

66. Letters from Havana dated August 16, 1851, in Jones, *Cuba in 1851*, 58, 59; A Flibustiero, “Life of General López,” 23–24.

67. Samuel Walker, “Cuba and the South,” *DeBow’s Review* 17:5 (November 1854), 522; A Flibustiero, “Life of General López,” 25.

68. Basil Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba: 1848–1855* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948) 275.

69. Laird W. Bergad, Fe Iglesias Garcia, and Maria del Carmen Barcia, *The Cuban Slave Market, 1790–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 23–72.

70. Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba*, 275–278; Foner, *A History of Cuba*, 76–82; Chester Stanley Urban, “The Ideology of Southern Imperialism: New Orleans and the Caribbean, 1845–1860,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 39 (January 1956), 59–61.

71. “Destiny of the Slave States,” *DeBow’s Review* 17:3 (September 1854), 282; Ambrosio Gonzalez, in *La Verdad*, November 20, 1853, quoted in Foner, *A History of Cuba*, 82; Louisiana Senator John Slidell speaking in the United States Senate, quoted in Chester Stanley Urban, “The Idea of Progress and Southern Imperialism: New Orleans and the Caribbean, 1845–1861” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1943), 513–514.

72. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995).

73. Urban, “The Idea of Progress,” 511–514; Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba*, 288–289.

74. Walker, “Cuba and the South,” 524.

75. Abraham Lincoln to Senator John Parker Hale, January 11, 1861, quoted in Rauch, *American Interest in Cuba*, 303.

13. “The Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny”

1. William O. Scroggs, *Filibusters and Financiers: The Story of William Walker and His Associates* (New York: Macmillan, 1916); Charles H. Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny: The Lives and Times of the Filibusters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 207. The literature on Walker is large and uneven. See Laurence Green, *The Filibuster: The Career of William Walker* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1937); Albert Z. Carr, *The World and William Walker* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); Frederic Rosengarten, Jr., *Freebooters Must Die! The Life and Death of William Walker, the Most Notorious Filibuster of the Nineteenth Century* (Wayne, PA: Haverford House, 1976); and especially Amy S. Greenberg, “The Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny: Character, Appearance, and Filibustering,”

Journal of the Early Republic 20:4 (Winter 2000), 673–699; and Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). See also E. Bradford Burns, *Patriarch and Folk: The Emergence of Nicaragua, 1798–1858* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 194–203; Aims McGuinness, “Searching for ‘Latin America’: Race and Sovereignty in the Americas in the 1850s,” in *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*, ed. Nancy P. Appelbaum, Anne S. Macpherson, and Karin Alejandra Roseblatt (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 87–107; Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua under U.S. Imperial Rule* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 21–41. For contemporary accounts (other than Walker’s own), see James Carson Jamison, *With Walker in Nicaragua; or, Reminiscences of an Officer of the American Phalanx* (Columbia, MO: E. W. Stephens, 1909). The most thorough account of William Walker is Alejandro Bolaños-Geyer, *William Walker: The Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny*, 5 vols. (Lake Saint Louis, MO: Alejandro Bolaños-Geyer, 1988–1991).

2. James Dunkerley, *Power on the Isthmus: A Political History of Modern Central America* (London: Verso, 1988), 3–20. See also Frances Kinloch Tijerno, *Nicaragua: Identidad y cultura política, 1821–1858* (Managua: Banco Central de Nicaragua, 1999); Gregorio Selser, *Nicaragua de Walker a Somoza* (Mexico City: Mex-Sur Editorial, 1984); Francisco Ortega Arancibia, *Cuarenta años de historia de Nicaragua, 1838–1878*, 3rd ed. (Managua: Fondo de Promoción Cultural, Banco de América, 1975); Virgilio Rodríguez Beteta, *Trascendencia nacional e internacional de la guerra de Centro América contra Walker y sus filibusteros* (Guatemala: Editorial del Ejército, 1976); Iván Molina Jiménez, *La campaña nacional, 1856–1857: Una visión desde el siglo XXI* (Alajuela: Museo Histórico Cultural Juan Santamaría, 2000); Gustavo Alemán Bolaños, *Centenario de la guerra nacional de Nicaragua contra Walker, Costa Rica, Guatemala, El Salvador y Honduras en la contienda* (Guatemala, 1956); Lorenzo Montúfar, *Walker en Centro-América* (Guatemala: La Unión, 1887); Joaquín Bernardo Calvo, *La campaña nacional contra los filibusteros en 1856 y 1857* (San Jose, Costa Rica: Tipografía Nacional, 1909); Dr. Miguel Ángel Álvarez, *Los filibusteros en Nicaragua, 1855–1856–1857* (Managua: Editorial La Prensa, 1944). For primary sources, see Angelita García Peña, *Documentos para la historia de la guerra nacional contra los filibusteros en Nicaragua* (San Salvador: Editorial Ahora, 1958). See also Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream*.

3. Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny*, 237–240.

4. For more on Vanderbilt’s role, see Stephen Dando-Collins, *Tycoon’s War: How Cornelius Vanderbilt Invaded a Country to Overthrow America’s Most Famous Military Adventurer* (New York: Da Capo, 2009).

5. Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny*, 231–233, 241–249.

6. William Walker, *The War in Nicaragua* (New York: S. H. Goetzel, 1860).

7. Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny*, 345.

8. Walker, *The War in Nicaragua*, 252. Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus*, 18–19.

9. From a request for official correspondence between the new government in Nicara-

gua and the United States, entered in the Congressional Record and quoted in Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny*, 340.

10. For an example of the Costa Rican perspective, see Rafael Obregón, *Costa Rica y la guerra contra los filibusteros* (Alajuela, Costa Rica: Museo Histórico Cultural Juan Santamaría, 1991); and *Costa Rica y la guerra del 56: La campaña del Tránsito, 1856–1857* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1976). The war had a profound cultural impact on the region and is usually referred to simply as the National War. For an example of cultural production rooted in memories of the conflict, see the poetry collection José Roberto Cea, *La guerra nacional* (San Salvador, El Salvador: Canoa Editores, 1992).

11. Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny*, 359–407; Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus*, 12.

12. Scroggs, *Filibusters and Financiers*, 316–317; Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny*, 407–408.

13. Walker, *The War in Nicaragua*, 250.

14. Just for the sake of example, see “Proceedings of the Southern Convention Held at Vicksburg,” *DeBow’s Review* 27:1 (July 1859), 96.

15. The classic statement is Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).

16. Stephanie M. McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Lowcountry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), viii, 5–35.

17. Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The South-west, by a Yankee* (New York: Harper and Row, 1835), vol. 2, 86; James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1857), 179.

18. See Edmund Ruffin, “The Effects of the High Prices of Slaves,” *DeBow’s Review* 26:6 (June 1859), 647–657; Ronald T. Takaki, *A Pro-slavery Crusade: The Agitation to Reopen the African Slave Trade* (New York: Free Press, 1971), 35–37; Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (Baltimore: J. H. Furst, 1931), 339–364, quotations from 342, 351, 352, 364.

19. See Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South*, 357; for comparison of slave prices to cotton prices, see Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), 177.

20. Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1939), 86–90; New Orleans *Crescent*, September 17, 1859, quoted in Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 88.

21. See, for instance, George Fitzhugh, “The Conservative Principles; or, Social Evils and Their Remedies,” *DeBow’s Review* 22:5 (May 1857), 451; “Late Southern Convention at Montgomery,” *DeBow’s Review* 24:6 (June 1858), 500; Edmund Ruffin, “The Effects of the High Prices of Slaves, Considered in Reference to the Interests of Agriculture, of Individuals, and of the Commonwealth of Virginia,” *DeBow’s Review* 26:6 (June 1859), 650.

22. Edward Deloney, “The South Demands More Negro Labor: To the People of Lou-

isiana,” *DeBow’s Review* 25:5 (November 1858), 502; “Southern Convention at Vicksburg,” *DeBow’s Review* 27:2 (August 1859), 208; Charter of the Knights of the Golden Circle, quoted in William H. Bell, “Knights of the Golden Circle: Its Organization and Activities in Texas Prior to the Civil War” (M.A. thesis, Texas A&M University, 1965), 213; Edward Pollard, *Black Diamonds Gathered in the Darkey Houses of the South* (1859; New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 53.

23. Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: Burdick Brothers, 1857), 130. For the larger discussion, see James Oakes, “The Peculiar Fate of the Bourgeois Critique of Slavery,” in *Slavery and the American South*, ed. Winthrop D. Jordan (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 29–56.

24. See especially the long quotation from George M. Weston in Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South*, 164: “I do not recollect to ever have seen or heard non-slaveholding whites referred to by Southern ‘gentlemen’ as constituting any part of what thing they call ‘the South.’ When the rights of the South or its wrongs or its policy or its interests or its institutions are spoken of reference is always intended to the rights, wrongs, policy, interests, and institutions of the three-hundred and forty-seven thousand slaveholders.”

25. Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South*, 32–33, 43, 118, 121. See generally 41–44, 118–128.

26. *Ibid.*, 300 (see also 128).

27. *Ibid.*, 77, 169. The second quotation is in the singular (“abandoned wretch . . .”) in the original.

28. See, for instance, “Functions of the Slave,” *DeBow’s Review* 26:4 (April 1859), 477. On pro-slavery thought generally, see Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

29. Pollard, *Black Diamonds*, 56–57. The classic statement of the complexities of this triangular social formation is Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976), 7–24.

30. Pollard, *Black Diamonds*, 59.

31. *Ibid.*, 58. For other violent, frustrated slaveholders, see Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); and Kenneth A. Lockridge, *On the Sources of Patriarchal Rage: The Commonplace Books of William Byrd and Thomas Jefferson and the Gendering of Power in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1992). Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

32. William Wells, *Walker’s Expedition to Nicaragua: A History of the Central American War* (New York: Springer and Townsend, 1856), 199; Scroggs, *Filibusters and Financiers*, 9–14, 32; Walker, *The War in Nicaragua*, 53.

33. Greenberg, “The Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny,” 673–699.

34. Walker, *The War in Nicaragua*, 33–34.

35. See Brady Harrison, *Agent of Empire: William Walker and the Imperial Self in American Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005). See also the chapter entitled “The Inversion of the Frontier Hero: William Walker and John Brown, 1855–1860,” in Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), esp. 242–261.

36. Narciso López, quoted in Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny*, 61; John Hill Wheeler, quoted in Greenberg, “The Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny,” 683, doggerel verse quoted in Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny*, 132; and Louisville *Daily Courier*, February 19, 1859, quoted in Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854–1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 7. See, generally, Greenberg, “The Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny,” 682–687. In this context it is not surprising that when John Quitman set up an office in New Orleans to raise money for his abortive attempt to take over Cuba, he rented a house on Rampart Street—tucked in among the apartments where the Valley’s leading men visited their light-skinned concubines. See Robert E. May, *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 190.

37. Soulé, quoted in Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny*, 120, 143; John Henderson, “Considerations on the Constitutionality of the President’s Proclamation” (New Orleans, 1854), 1. The “exploding frog” is from Aesop’s fable of a frog who tried to show his son (or his friends, depending on the version) that he could puff himself up to be as big as an ox. The moral being that “self-conceit leads to self-destruction.”

38. Walker, *The War in Nicaragua*, 39, 40, 44 (see also 36, 43, 72, 179).

39. See, for example, “The Problem of Misgovernment in Central America,” *DeBow’s Review* 23:6 (December 1857), 608–624. See, generally, Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

40. Wells, *Walker’s Expedition to Nicaragua*, 17, 18, 13, 46.

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