



RIVER *of* DARK DREAMS

SLAVERY AND EMPIRE
IN THE COTTON KINGDOM

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THE BELKNAP PRESS OF
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts

London, England

2013

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-

nomic, 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 revivified 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 steam-boats 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 sectionalist 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. Comitantly, 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-

sissippi 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

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 barkeeper 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 Cunynghame, 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 cloaking 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 La-baune, 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). "*Goddamn 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 Belize (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).⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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.”⁷⁰ 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,

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 Pedestrious 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, *An'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 Prospects,” *American Cotton Planter* 2:5 (May 1852), 504–505. See also “Excessive Slave Population: The Press,” *DeBow’s Review* 2:5 (May 1852), 504–505. Many of the articles in *DeBow’s Remedy*, *DeBow’s Review* 12:2 (February 1852), 182–185. Many of the articles in *DeBow’s Review* 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 “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.

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 Disaster in American History* (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 Counterfeitors: 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 Cunyngham, *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. Hellelly 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 Cardsharps 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 Discouerie 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; Cunyngham, *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. Cunyngham, *A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic*, 265.

18. Buckingham, *Slave States of America*, vol. 1, 449; Houstoun, *Hesperos*, 64. See also Cunyngham, *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 Beasly, 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 Beasly.
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: Press, 1972); and, especially, Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*, Oxford University Press, 1972).

- 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,

