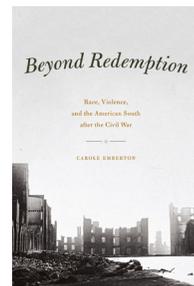
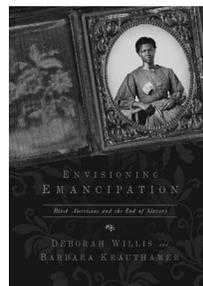
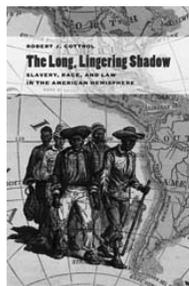
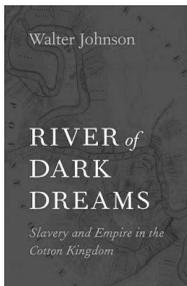


*Review Essay*

## **“No Backward Step”: Slavery and Freedom in Multiple Contexts**

**Sharita Jacobs Thompson**



**RIVER OF DARK DREAMS: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom.** By Walter Johnson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2013.

**THE LONG, LINGERING SHADOW: Slavery, Race, and Law in the American Hemisphere.** By Robert J. Cottrol. Athens: The University of Georgia Press. 2013.

**ENVISIONING EMANCIPATION: Black Americans and the End of Slavery.** By Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 2013.

**BEYOND REDEMPTION: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War.** By Carole Emberton. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2013.

For over a century, there has been a plethora of studies that consider slavery and emancipation. In the midst of the Civil War sesquicentennial, scholars are challenging old assumptions and grappling with new theories concerning the “peculiar institution.” Even Hollywood entered into the debate with its adaptation of Solomon Northup’s personal account of kidnapping and enslavement in *12 Years a Slave* (2013). This essay considers four recent studies on the subject matter. Two of the works are grounded in the United States’ system of slavery, with one venturing a comparative approach that contrasts the system in North America with primarily Spanish-speaking nations to its south. Through photographs, another study considers the long process of emancipation in the United States. The last illustrates how the language of redemption was appropriated by—for often vastly different reasons—Radical Republicans, southern white supremacists, and freed people.

In *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*, Walter Johnson commences with a quote from W. E. B. DuBois. It states, “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.” While this an appropriate introduction to Johnson’s work, it is also relevant to the other three studies under review in this essay.

The notion of an inability to take a “backward step” once the course has been charted can be used to discuss the rise of the Cotton Kingdom that fueled an international market in a single crop. It can also extend to the racial structures that grew out of slave societies in the United States and Latin America. The idea that slavery “must either die or conquer a nation” can be applied to emancipation and its photographic representations. Additionally, it can capture the determination of southern white supremacists that resisted the destruction of an institution that had gripped the nation for almost two hundred and fifty years.

In *River of Dark Dreams*, Walter Johnson traces the rise of the Mississippi Valley Cotton Kingdom. The Mississippi Valley, in Thomas Jefferson’s imaginings, was to be a place for white yeoman farmers who headed households that practiced self-sufficiency. These white yeoman farmers would occupy a vast land mass far removed from cities. This reality would force them to provide for themselves and their families. They would eschew the debtor-creditor relationship and their distance from factories would prevent a dependence on wage labor. In order to make way for this isolated white man’s utopia, the federal government engaged in actions that subjugated and removed Native Americans from their newly acquired territory. By doing so, Jefferson’s vision of producing the landscape where white men were “masters of their own destiny” could become a reality. In this “empire of liberty,” white men would reproduce families opposed to a commodity for the national or international marketplace.

However, Jefferson’s vision never took hold in the Mississippi Valley. Speculators descended upon the territory and purchased land meant for first-time buyers. This effectively transformed Jefferson’s ideal of an “empire for liberty.”

In its place was the reality of a “Cotton Kingdom” dominated by wealthy planters, populated with enslaved laborers, bustling with steam engines, and contributing to a national and international capitalist market.

Johnson’s work commences by asking some pointed 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 the field in Mississippi, measured in pounds per day, was keyed to the standard 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 powerful sectionalist accounts of political economy in the nineteenth century: the Confederate States of America?” He goes on to question, “how did the regionalist account of political economy come to seek its resolution in globalism?” Johnson also ponders why cotton planters sought a deeper entanglement with the despised merchants. And, finally, he interrogates his sources to determine “how did the defenders of the Mississippi Valley’s Cotton Kingdom become free traders—and then imperialists?” (Johnson, 12)

Johnson uses legal records, letters, and slave narratives (among other primary source documents) to navigate his readers through the answers to these questions with great detail, particularly in the latter part of his work. However, the first half of this work is consumed with the ways in which “the Cotton Kingdom was built out of sun, water, and soil; animal energy, human labor, and mother’s wit; grain, flesh, and cotton; pain, hunger, and fatigue; blood, milk, semen, and shit” (9). This, largely, is an examination of how enslaved people were at the core of shaping the Mississippi Valley into the Cotton Kingdom, and how those enslaved people and the mono crop that they produced were a critical part in the industrialization of the United States.

In regard to Jefferson’s vision of enslaved Africans in the Mississippi Valley, Johnson states: “And in his moments of darkest pragmatism, Jefferson had imagined the Valley as a destination for the surplus population of black slaves whom he had increasingly come to see as an insurrectionary threat to American liberty—a vast dumping ground over which a dangerous slave population might be spread so thinly that it would eventually disappear into the fruitful harvest of republican liberty” (47). Indeed, enslaved Africans were transported into the Mississippi Valley as part of a domestic slave trade, primarily from the country’s upper south. By the 1830s, a large number of enslaved people were brought in and played a crucial role in the production of the region’s staple crop.

Johnson’s discourse on the treatment of enslaved people is most detailed. He considers their grueling journey from the upper south to the region as well as how this caused traders to develop a system of communication and recordkeeping, which ultimately helped assess the physical condition of and affix a price to enslaved laborers. This work also vividly recounts the abject torture heaped

upon enslaved people. It illustrates how the lash and excrement were employed as forms of punishment and how rape was used to increase human property holdings. Johnson even ties the punishment of enslaved people, who lived and labored in the Mississippi Valley, intimately to the global economy. For instance, he examines the relationship between cotton prices in Liverpool and the number of lashes visited upon enslaved people who failed to meet certain production quotas.

He examines the booming economy of the 1850s and its affect on Mississippi Valley planters. Johnson concludes that high prices for cotton translated into high prices for enslaved people being traded from the upper south. In turn, the high price of enslaved people diminished the prospect of non-slaveholding whites to purchase their own slaves. In order to avoid any potential of a rebellion among these non-slaveholding white farmers, wealthy planters attempted to placate them with the prospect of opening new avenues for land acquisition and schemes that promised to keep the cotton produced in the Mississippi Valley competitive on the world market. Regional slaveholders first attempted to wrestle control of Cuba from the Spanish. Then, they supported William Walker in his conquest of Nicaragua in an effort to connect the “Mississippi Valley’s economy to the emerging economies of the Pacific” (15). Once they exhausted those remedies, they turned to the federal government and lobbied for the reopening of the external slave trade.

In his approach to this quagmire, Johnson effectively moves beyond examining the coming of the Civil War as a strictly sectional crisis between north and south. He implores his readers to examine slavery as more than a nationally bounded institution. In examining secession, he suggests that we think more critically about what those behind the move to leave the Union in order to preserve slavery and the culture—steeped in white supremacy—birthed by it, thought that they were seceding to.

Robert J. Cottrol is the Harold Paul Green Research Professor of Law and a professor of history and sociology at George Washington University. He draws on all these disciplines to engage discourse of a comparative nature that considers how laws played a pivotal role in creating and sustaining racial hierarchies in the United States, Brazil, and Spanish-speaking Latin America. Cottrol argues that, in his pioneering work *Slave and Citizen* (1947), sociologist Frank Tannebaum was correct in his assertion that a comparative analysis is necessary to inform us about other societies, as well as our own. Particularly, this work contends that it is necessary to examine slavery in Spain, Portugal, and Latin America to fully understand the “peculiar institution” and its long-lasting residual effects.

Cottrol covers a wide range of topics and an expansive timeline. He moves from the emerging system of slavery in the New World into contemporary legal and moral debates concerning racial discrimination and remedial policies. This study is topically ambitious. Cottrol examines slavery, emancipation, scientific racism, immigration policies, racial classifications, and legal processes. In the text, he grapples with the overarching question of “why did slavery bequeath to

the people of the United States a system of racial exclusion more rigid than those found in Latin America?" (Cottrol, 8). Cottrol suggests that the main difference was "an ideology of freedom and egalitarianism" that clashed with the institution of slavery in ways that were absent in other societies (8).

Cottrol's treatment of the laws that governed slavery and the enslaved are enlightening. He argues that policies of exclusion codified in the United States are grounded in the country's system of slavery. However, he does recognize that "the physical conditions under which slaves lived, toiled, and died and the legal regimes that governed masters, slaves, and free people of African descent would vary greatly in different times and places."<sup>1</sup> According to Cottrol, this is most noticeable during the United States' colonial period. In some colonies, whites could kill enslaved people without any legal ramifications. In others, enslaved people possessed some modicum of rights seen through their ability to sue for their freedom. There were colonies, during specific periods, which did not maintain legal and social distinctions between African and European indentured servants. However, they would eventually codify laws that made a clear distinction between the statuses of those same racial groups.

On the other hand, while institutionalized slavery was operating in Latin America its enslaved population often benefited from laws that sought to protect them. These laws protected enslaved peoples' lives, their familial rights, provided them with opportunities for self-purchase, and recognized their freedom by extending citizenship. For instance, the *Las Siete Partidas* described slavery as an evil system. In 1789, the Spanish Crown borrowed from these codes to create a new set of *Codigo Negro* to govern its Empire. Embodied in these new codes was the right for enslaved people to keep money earned through labor performed during free time. It also gave them the ability to use those funds to purchase their freedom.

This work is most instructive when it parts with the Tannebaum thesis. Cottrol contends that some criticisms of his theories are valid. For instance, he concedes that his racial democracy thesis largely grew out of a comparison of the stark differences of the Jim Crow era in the United States and Latin America. Cottrol suggests that this view diminishes the "racism, racial exclusion, and racial hierarchy that have been part—indeed, a strong part—of the social history of Latin America" (5). However, he does conclude that the aforementioned issues took on a different form in those countries as opposed to the United States. Actually, he points to historian Alejandro de la Fuente, who argues that Latin America subscribed to an "ideology of racial democracy" and avoided instituting policies that mirrored the rigid segregationist laws that were persistent in the United States. This did not mean that there was an absence of racially discriminatory behavior in Latin America. It simply suggests that laws did not sanction those behaviors.

Thus, Cottrol offers some interesting insight in his examination of the post emancipation Afro-American experience in the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba and the Dominican Republic. In Brazil, the text offers an examination of a nation that shares, like the United

States, a long history of maintaining slavery. It participated in bringing the largest number of enslaved people into its territory. As a result, Brazil still has one of the largest populations of African descendants.

Uruguay and Argentina both experienced an influx of white Europeans in the twentieth century. The idea was to create white nations with small indigenous populations and peoples of African descent. Eventually, competition with “superior” European immigrants, they believed, would force the latter two into extinction. These countries were somewhat successful in that endeavor. In Cuba and Colombia the presence of people of African descent is noticeable. Although these nations attempted a similar scheme of whitening its population, they were far less successful than Argentina and Uruguay. However, Cuba and Colombia continued to struggle with racial biases toward Afro-Cubans and Afro-Colombians. Conversely, Afro-Peruvians were largely ignored as the nation struggled with the division between indigenous Peruvians and those Spanish-speaking Peruvians who settled in the country later. Costa Rica offers another perspective concerning racial as well as ethnic exclusion. Its Afro-Costa Rican population is largely located in or near Limon. Many of them arrived to labor on the railroads and the banana plantations. The fact that they were black and English-speaking people poses an interesting conundrum for Spanish-speaking Costa Rica.

With that said, Cottrol recognizes the lingering effects of racial stratifications created by slavery. He suggests that the decades of the modern Civil Rights movement was a watershed period for the United States. It ushered in laws that sought to remedy almost 250 years of racial discrimination heaped upon its black citizens. Conversely, the notion that racial discrimination was absent from the post-emancipation period in Latin America significantly stifled widespread movements that called for racial equality. That would change drastically, as activists in Latin America illustrate how racism and racial inequality continued to plague their respective nations. In the end, Cottrol’s well-written book provides the reader with a nuanced perspective on complicated subjects. He masterfully tackles the varying contours of racial exploitation, exclusionary laws and practices, and attempts at reforming said laws and practices. In doing so, he significantly adds to the historiography on comparative slavery, emancipation, and civil rights.

*Envisioning Emancipation* examines slavery and emancipation through the lenses of photographs. The authors are Deborah Willis professor and Chairperson of the department of photography and imaging at the Tisch school of Arts, and Barbara Krauthamer, assistant professor of history at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. These scholars brought their disciplines to bear on this project, pouring through over 1000 photographs, and assembling more than 150 of them to explore the idea of what freedom looked like. These photographs—which are grounded by historical context—explore a long trajectory, vividly illustrating black life from the antebellum period to the end of the 1930s.

In 1839, Frenchman Louis J. M. Daguerre introduced the daguerreotype to the United States. The relatively inexpensive portraits made them accessible to

white Americans. However, free and enslaved black people seldom possessed the funds to purchase these renderings. Therefore, they were often photographed for the expressed purpose of serving as scientific subjects or for the purpose of being identified as someone’s property.

One of the first images in the book is attached to a notice offering a \$50 reward for a female fugitive named Dolly. The woman was described as “thirty years of age, light complexion—hesitates somewhat when spoken to, and is not a very healthy woman—but rather good looking, with a fine set of teeth” (Willis and Krauthamer, 1). She was a house servant and her owner suspected that she had been “enticed” and taken off by a white man. The authors pondered why, in the midst of the Civil War, Dolly’s owner Louis Manigault would have her photographed. Although we may never know the answer to that question, photographs such as the one of Dolly motivated Willis and Krauthamer to delve deeper into the connection between photographic representations and the long struggle for freedom.

Willis and Krauthamer assembled images that illustrate the scientific racism that sought to legitimize white supremacy. Those same images sexually exploited black women’s bodies, a situation that rendered them helpless to the scientist and photographer behind the camera. For instance, while visiting physician and educator Robert Wilson Gibbs in Columbia, South Carolina, Harvard trained zoologist Louis Agassiz took the opportunity “examine” the enslaved men and women residing on multiple area plantations. A major part of his research was photographs. The images captured by the photographer reveal bare-chest men and women glaring directly into the camera. The authors conclude that “the women’s exposed bodies are not presented as objects of sensual desire but as evidence of their debased condition—though, in the context of black women’s enslavement, the line between the two motives was never sharply drawn” (4). What we do know is that Delia and Drana, the black women captured in these photographs, were powerless to resist such exploitation.

In addition, Willis and Krauthamer probe the very nature of these “subjects” glaring into the camera and, by extension, into the eyes of white men. Of course, this defied southern etiquette. However, the authors assert that these men and women are posed for the purpose of illustrating “racial difference and inferiority” (7). Agassiz appropriated these photographs and other “evidence” to support his theory of polygenesis. He labeled the photographs and specified “each subject’s name, ethnic group and country of origin, as well as the name of their owner” (4). This further recognized them as research specimens, as opposed to human beings.

In many instances, this work suggests that photographers and slaveholders worked in tandem to cast an image of slavery as anything but cruel and degrading. Proslavery advocates use these images to assert notions of difference that made institutionalized slavery a necessary evil. Conversely, anti-slavery advocates appropriated these photographs to illustrate the horrors of slavery. Throughout the war, abolitionists circulated photographs of small children with one image

depicting the downtrodden enslaved children who arrived in the North unkempt with tattered clothing, and the other image depicting them after breaking the shackles of bondage living as clean and orderly free people. One of the most telling features of these photographs is the image of children who phenotypically appear to be white. The images primarily capture the mixed race population of New Orleans. One in particular is of Rebecca Huger, an eleven-year-old emancipated slave. Rebecca, who was owned by her father, served as a household slave. She was the “special attendant of a girl a little older than herself” (53). The caption reads: “Oh! How I Love The Old Flag.” While these photographs represent elements of slavery, they also offer a visual representation of what freedom looked like.

By the 1860s, images of black people emphasized racial features, class attitudes, gender roles, and personal achievements. In the postwar period, black Union veterans posed for photographs in uniform. This represented the plight of soldiers who risked their lives to preserve the Union, but continued to struggle for recognition as citizens. There were also images of churches, schools, all-black towns, and Emancipation Day celebrations. Most telling are photographs of family units, where formerly enslaved men and women posed with their freeborn offspring. There are also photographs of notable figures like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Charlotte Forten, and Susie King Taylor. Figures such as Truth, according to the authors, strategically used photographs “for crafting a public and marketable image that could help support her political activism” (16).

Interestingly, images of black women posing with white families proliferated before and after the war. During the antebellum period, white families used black female house servants in family portraits as a symbol of class status. They also served as a steady hand for white children posing for portraits. In sum, white southerners used these images to convey the notion of a mammy figure, the black female household servant who cared more for her master’s children than her own. They made sure that she was dressed well to counter abolitionists’ arguments about the maltreatment of enslaved people. This pattern largely continued uninterrupted in the postwar period. Black women continued to function as visual “props” for white families dependent on their presence to help establish their socio-economic status in southern society.

These images also illustrated a postwar south struggling to reshape the contours of slavery into something that closely mimicked it. There are photographs of black men performing hard labor on chain gangs. We also see a photograph of twenty-two-year-old James Keaton with a noose around his neck and surrounded by white men representing the county. Keaton was executed minutes after the image was captured for murdering a white service station owner.

In the end, African Americans often invested in photographs to symbolize their status as freed people. They posed in their work clothes to symbolize their status as free laborers. They gathered their family members for portraits to symbolize their ability to have and maintain familial relationships. They posed

in their Sunday's best on the way to church to symbolize their ability to worship freely. And, they posed at small and large gatherings to symbolize their right to assemble. In an interview with the *Columbus Free Press*, Krauthamer sums it up best when she answers the question "what does freedom look like?" She states, "Freedom for black Americans really looked like a sense of perseverance and dignity, and a commitment to family and community, even in the most trying circumstances." Even as black codes and Jim Crow threatened to disarm them of their newly acquired citizenship rights, black people became even more interested in articulating and demonstrating their humanity through photographs.

In *Beyond Redemption*, Carole Emberton examines the abject violence that engulfed the postwar south. She couches that violence in the language of redemption. Emberton provides readers with a familiar narrative of southern Democrats who labeled themselves Redeemers and used violence to wrest political power from Republicans and freed people. However, she moves beyond that narrative and emphasizes how Radical Republicans and newly freed people appropriated the language of redemption for their own purposes. Radical Republicans used the idea of redemption to craft postwar policies that they hoped would atone for slavery and provide a sense of redemption for Union soldiers. The idea of redemption also shaped black people's postwar lives as they created their own ideas concerning protection (from the south's brutal violence), citizenship claims, property rights, and compensation for labor. Principally, they wanted redemption from that peculiar institution that sought to control all facets of their lives.

White southerners strove for redemption through violence and argued that it was necessary to confront the corruption that plagued the south as a result of Emancipation and Reconstruction where Radical Republicans and freed people wielded political power. These Democrats moved beyond the notion of redemption as strictly political and embraced it as a moral and spiritual imperative. They acted out their agenda by organizing paramilitary groups like the KKK, Red Shirts, and the White League.

Freed people responded to this violence by demanding the right to self-defense through the acquisition of arms. In addition, they also agitated for recognition for their military service and by extension loyalty to the Union. Finally, they wanted to exercise their citizenship rights through enfranchisement. However, the voting booth was often one of the most contested spaces in the south. Even as federal troops were in place for protection, people arrived at the voting booth armed to the teeth. Gun manufacturers seized upon the south, fulfilling their desire for weapons. Companies such as Colt, Smith and Wesson, Springfield, and Winchester proliferated during the war and were now in search of a new and thriving market to pedal their goods. A south still embroiled in an internal conflict was just the place to engage in business.

Emberton examines the interconnectedness of citizenship and one's right to protection. White southerners imagined a south where black people sought revenge and suggested the inevitability of a race war. So, they acquired arms for

the expressed purpose of protecting their families and property. Ironically, white southerners were largely responsible for the violence that ran rampant and often unchecked in the south. However, they blamed the violent culture they almost exclusively created on the south's black population.

Southern white supremacists were not alone in sounding the alarm concerning a potential uprising among black southerners. While they used that so-called fear to invoke their own violent ways, Republicans were also interested in controlling freed people, for they too believed that freed people posed a threat. International issues such as the uprising in black Jamaica, where five hundred people died in October of 1865, brought to the forefront old questions and concerns about the emancipation of over four million black people. It allowed the rhetoric of black savagery to dominate the discourse concerning black freedom. Republicans attempted to steer the discourse in another direction by pointing to the lack of a reconstruction period in the island country. More pointedly, they argued that black Jamaicans lacked full citizenship, which made situations like the one that took place in Morant Bay inevitable. They hoped to avoid any uprising by freed people by "recognizing black manhood and giving freedmen the right to vote, hold property, and pursue their own livelihood" (Emberton, 33). Although they suggested that pursuing such a course would quell any potential uprising among poor and degraded freed people, they also gave legitimacy to the idea that freed people were capable of such violence.

Eventually, white northerners and southerners would unite as they created a sense of shared suffering. This would allow the muting of sectional differences. African Americans did not share in the promise of a united north and south. Actually, they suffered as a result of it. While Radical Republicans sometimes intervened and addressed black people's suffering through policy, some saw suffering as a necessary ingredient in the making of freedom. Black people were supposed to experience such physical torment in order to become good citizens. Hence, the Republicans struggled with the idea of protecting freed people versus allowing for the disciplining of them.

While freed people sought the protection of the federal government, they also organized in order to protect themselves and their families. Black veterans raised militias throughout the south for that expressed purpose. White politicians responded by crafting legislation that sought to disarm freed people, making them vulnerable to the white population bent on using violence as a way to force them into submission. However, black people continued to demand full citizenship and agitate for the recognition of their constitutional right to bear arms.

The end of the Civil War and Emancipation created more questions than they answered. Questions surrounded what sort of power should be invested in the federal government; would freed people rebel if they were denied the basic rights embodied in citizenship? In the end, freed peoples' expectation that the federal government would wield its power to protect black bodies in the south was quickly stifled. Republicans turned their attention to rebuilding the nation, and that left little room to attend to the needs of these newly minted citizens.

These studies are important additions to the historiographies on slavery and emancipation. Johnson’s seminal work forces us to internationalize our understanding of the Cotton Kingdom, moves us beyond sectionalism as the singular cause of the Civil War, and encourages us to examine the role of imperialism in the conflict. Indeed, the book is dense. But, it will draw historians into a nuanced debate about slavery and capitalism in the American South. Cottrol masterfully uses laws to explain the development of racial hierarchies in the United States and Latin America. One of the most compelling aspects of the book is its treatment of contemporary movements to end racial inequality in Latin America. In many of these struggles, women take center stage. Cottrol’s work is a welcomed inclusion into a scant historiography that considers law and race in Latin America. Willis and Krauthamer show how photographs offer a window into understanding what freedom looked like. This book provides its readers with a wonderful array of photographs that indeed capture the essence of the transition from slavery to freedom. The treatment of photographs as a tool to support scientific racism is most engaging. However, missing was a deeper analysis (in the latter part of the book) to accompany the copious number of photographs. Finally, Emberton illustrates how the idea of redemption was complex and appropriated more widely than we initially thought. Emberton effectively complicates our understanding of redemption as she uses it not merely as an end point for the Reconstruction period, but as an idea present and acted upon throughout the entire era and beyond.

### Notes

1. This is a theory that Ira Berlin articulated in “Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America,” *The American Historical Review*, 85:1 (Feb. 1980), 44–78. Berlin suggests that studies often fail to ground slavery in time and space because they become preoccupied with defining the nature of American slavery, especially as compared with racial bondage elsewhere in the Americas.

