

Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* (New York City: Basic Books, 2020) 528 pp. Hardback \$35.00.

In the spring of 2021, Derek Chauvin, the man accused of killing George Floyd in Minneapolis—reigniting the flames of a police brutality protest movement—stood trial. Because of this, Harvard professor Walter Johnson's book, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* (2020) could not come at a more socially pressing time. Johnson's previous work on American slavery and the resistance of enslaved men and women make him an important voice among those trying to connect present events with decisions made by those in the past. Johnson's impetus for the book is the police murder of St. Louisan Michael Brown in 2014. Johnson grew up in Missouri and wanted to put St. Louis at the historical center of state-sanctioned brutality, the over-policing of minorities, and the region's history of horrific violence.

Central to Johnson's book is the historical structure of racial capitalism, which he defines as "the intertwined history of white supremacist ideology and the practices of empire, extraction, and exploitation" (6). Johnson successfully and repeatedly demonstrates how individual, institutional, and systemic racism are woven into the city's history, from the Lewis and Clark expedition to killing of Michael Brown in 2014. Ideas of white supremacy are baked into the city's foundations as Johnson anchors St. Louis as the western outpost for expansion and Indian Removal, under the argument that moving westward was white man's destiny. After 1820, when the many compromises over slavery eventually brought Missouri into the Republic as a slave state, the merging of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers became the literal and symbolic border between slave and free states. In 1857, when the Supreme Court ruled against Dred Scott's claim for freedom, a legal conflict with origins in Missouri, the judiciary cemented the rights of slaveholders in the South as well as for those who aspired to move into the western or northern parts of the United States. After the American Civil War, Johnson explains how one sticking point against suffrage for Black men was the limitation of former Confederate suffrage. Even some Republicans argued against Black men's rights to vote so long as white former Confederates could not (151). In the twentieth century, St. Louis becomes a focal point for white men's property rights in regard to things such as integration and redlining.

Throughout all of this, Black Americans regularly asserted their independence and agency, oftentimes by working with some more radical political leaders such as Joseph Weydemeyer, a Marxist and communist revolutionary. The St. Louis General Strike of 1877 was significant for the city because of its initial commitments

to interracial unity, despite the fact that most of the craftsmen unions were segregated. African American women, though, played an especially active role in the struggle for workers' rights, like, for example, in 1932 and 1933, when Black women led strikes and protests as nut pickers. The Communist Party hoped that these victories by women in St. Louis would serve as watershed moments for Black Americans to join the party (275). Other Black Marxists, such as C.L.R. James, visited St. Louis, not to lead, but to study the successes of Black women labor organizers.

An important theme to Johnson's book is just exactly how profitable white supremacy actually is. Johnson deftly explains that Republicans argued that Indian Removal was for the sake of white men's economic freedom and made money for railroads, farmers, factory owners, and others. Historians, including Johnson, have well-documented the economic riches of American slavery. The East St. Louis race riots of 1917 start when the financial growth of World War I ends and white people see Black people as the reason for the economic suffering, killing as many as 250 Black people in the process. Redlining kept white-owned property values artificially higher than Black-owned property. There is big money in oppression, which is why city officials and others worked so hard to maintain it.

Walter Johnson's book is both timely and historiographically important. It is timely because he connects clear dots between the modern Black Lives Matter movement to events and people from the past. The reader will leave with an understanding that America's racial problems are not accidental. Things did not "just happen" the way they have for the past few centuries, but instead these were very purposeful decisions that others made with the full understanding of their actions. Different people and organizations *chose* to make St. Louis, and America by extension, a white man's land. Historiographically, the book really decentralizes other more traditional focus points of American history and places St. Louis at the center. For instance, most historians of American slavery would focus on the southern United States, especially places like Mississippi or South Carolina. Johnson places this examination of American slavery in what was then the western frontier and the current U.S. Midwest. Johnson's tactic is unexpected, but thorough and convincing. He also demonstrates very clearly exactly what historians could expect from local history. Much of local history can sometimes be rather myopic, but Johnson takes one city and follows it for 200 years, placing it in national and regional context, while still emphasizing what makes the city unique. His book is a masterclass in what local historians could expect from each other and demonstrates that the field, which some members of the academy undervalue, could be when done with the intention of placing local people and places in larger contexts.

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