Playing Dress Up

This summer, public television stations across the U.S. aired *The 1900 House*, a four-part series billed on PBS's website as "sci-fi drama of time travel meets true-life drama" but perhaps better explained as *This Old House*meets *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Originally broadcast in the U.K. in September of 1999, *The 1900 House* transported an ordinary middle-class English family, the Bowlers, back in time "to live in a house restored to the exact specifications of the late Victorian era." For three months, the Bowlers not only lived without central heating or electricity, but also adhered (more or less) to a strict set of House Guidelines, the most burdensome of which turned out to be the rule requiring wearing period clothes—"including the relevant layers of undergarments"—at all times. Buttoning up said undergarments for the first

time, the mother of the family, Joyce Bowler asked, with charming candor, “So, um, how do I go to the loo?” (The answer: unbutton, and aim.)

> “Aging hats and casting brass button moulds is all well and good, and probably Oscar worthy, but what’s the point if no one bothers to research speechways or family life or race relations or colonial politics?”

Most of the four hundred English families who applied to live in *The 1900 House* expected the experience to be both thrilling and enlightening. Even the otherwise levelheaded Joyce enthused, “We might find we don’t need some of the things that we’ve come to depend on so much.” But actually living in *The 1900 House* turned out to be pretty miserable. By the third day, Joyce was reduced to tears when her nine-year-old son, Joe, refused to eat yet another (admittedly dubious) meal cooked with nineteenth-century ingredients using nineteenth-century appliances. And watching her husband, Eric, a Royal Marine, leave the house for work every day (in period uniform) while she was stuck at home cleaning the three-story house from top to bottom using only rags, soda crystals, and an utterly useless hand-pumped vacuum, left Joyce enraged. “I’m jealous,” she admitted to a camera concealed in her closet, “because he’s a man and whether it’s 1900 or 1999, he gets the better deal.” Beat. Smile. “But I get the frillier drawers.” By the fifth week even the frilly drawers had lost their appeal: the family was forced to call in a doctor after the corsets Joyce and her eldest daughter wore left them chronically short of breath. (“I hate it,” Joyce screamed at her whalebone-and-lace. “I hate the bloody thing. I absolutely hate it.”)

Just as *The 1900 House* ended, at the beginning of July, and the Bowlers gleefully chucked their petticoats and pinafores for Levi’s and Polarfleece, Columbia Pictures released *The Patriot*, a two-hour-and-forty-minute epic about the American Revolution starring Mel Gibson as Benjamin Martin, a South Carolina planter who, according to David Denby in the *New Yorker*, “is the kind of guy who would never wear a powdered wig.” But Gibson does manage to don a nicely tailored linen shirt and wool knee breeches. Indeed, the costumes for *The Patriot*, designed by Academy Award winner Deborah Scott with assistance from costume specialists at the Smithsonian, were painstakingly researched and produced. *The Patriot*‘s website boasts that “83,900 military buttons were made with historic details in three different sizes” for the military uniforms worn by the thousands of redcoats and Continentals marching across the screen, while “[o]ver 1500 hats were created and aged to appear as though they had been worn for several months.”

Aging hats and casting brass button moulds is all well and good, and probably Oscar worthy, but what’s the point if no one bothers to research speechways or family life or race relations or colonial politics? Why bother getting the costumes right if the rest of the film suffers from scenes like the one in

which Martin's love interest replies to his question, "Can I sit here?" with a petulant, "It's a free country—or at least it will be," while the African Americans who labor on Martin's plantation are *free* men and women devoted to serving their beloved master, to whom they later offer protection at an otherwise all-black seaside encampment where the Martin family happily dances to the music of African drums in a kind of multicultural Beach Blanket Bingo. Not for nothing did historian David Hackett Fischer conclude in the *New York Times* (July 1, 2000) that "'The Patriot' is to history as Godzilla was to biology." The film may get its costumes right, but it gets just about everything else wrong. In a climactic speech before the South Carolina legislature, Martin explains his unwillingness to fight against the British by declaring, "I'm a parent. I can't afford principles." What could be more modern? Benjamin Martin is the Wayne Gretzky of the Revolution, the Joe Kennedy Jr. of the eighteenth century, a man who holds a press conference to announce his retirement from public life and declares, with tear-filled eyes, that he is tired of working hard and traveling too much, and eager to spend more time with his family.

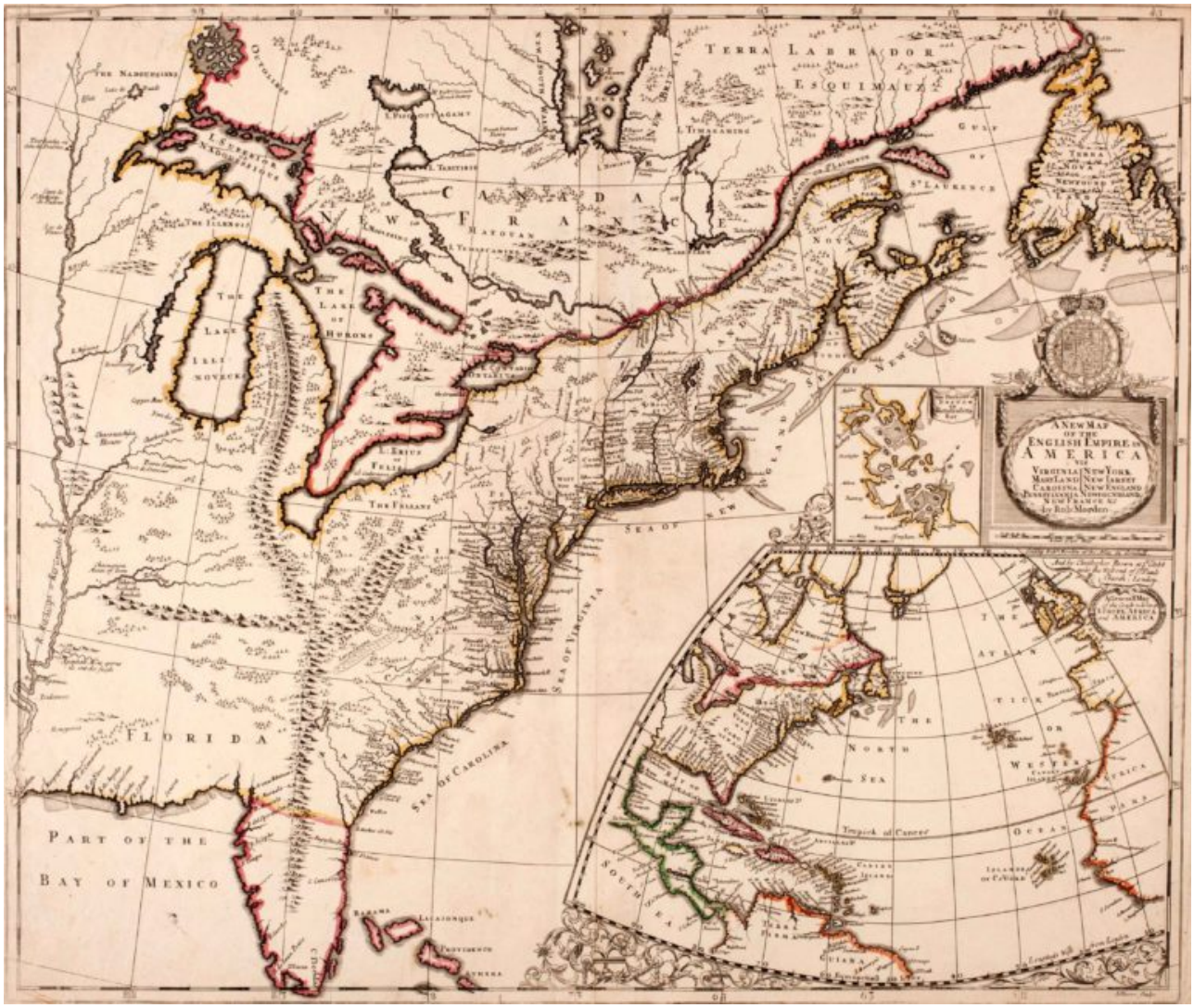
If the past is a foreign country, traveling to Benjamin Martin's world doesn't even require crossing state lines. It only requires dressing up. And therein lies the brilliance of *The 1900 House*, which understands that dressing people up, and putting them in a house filled with props, doesn't actually transport them to another era. "Remember me?" Joyce Bowler asks her children in the series' final episode, after she's changed back into her modern clothes for the first time in three months. "I was still here all along."

And so, of course, was Mel Gibson, though no one seems to have minded (with the notable exception of historians, whose professional list-serves have seethed with such abundant derision for the film that one posting finally urged, "Get over it!"). *The Patriot* has received generally favorable critical reviews, even if it's lost out to *The Perfect Storm* at the box office. Meanwhile, *The 1900 House* has nearly drowned in a flood of crocodile tears offered up by media critics who have persistently compared it to this past summer's other "voyeur TV" shows—*Survivor* and *Big Brother*—a new television genre that is always taken as evidence, in one form or another, of the decline of Western civilization. In truth,*The 1900 House* is better understood as a historical film stripped of pretense, or, perhaps, as a "costume documentary" that unveils the artifice of "costume dramas." The Bowlers know, far better than *The Patriot's* writers do, that the past—especially the remote past—is difficult to visit, even when you dress for the occasion. "It's an original," Joyce Bowler says of the antique range on which she cooks the family's meals, "I'm the fake."

Living in *The 1900 House* left Joyce Bowler keen to learn more about the past: "It's made me want to dig deeper, to know what it was *really* like then, and not just to accept what's between the pages of a history book." Maybe what Joyce Bowler needs is *Common-place*, which seems, after all, quite a reasonable compromise between reading a history book and wearing a corset for three months. We hope it will take your breath away.

This article originally appeared in issue 1.1 (September, 2000).

The Global History of the Seven Years' War



Crucible of War begins with hints toward the possibility of a universal history with a cosmopolitan intent (to steal a phrase from Kant), but ends firmly within the paradigm of American history.

Sans Souci

A generation away from the Sans Souci, we try to talk about what we see at museums, historic sites, and monuments.

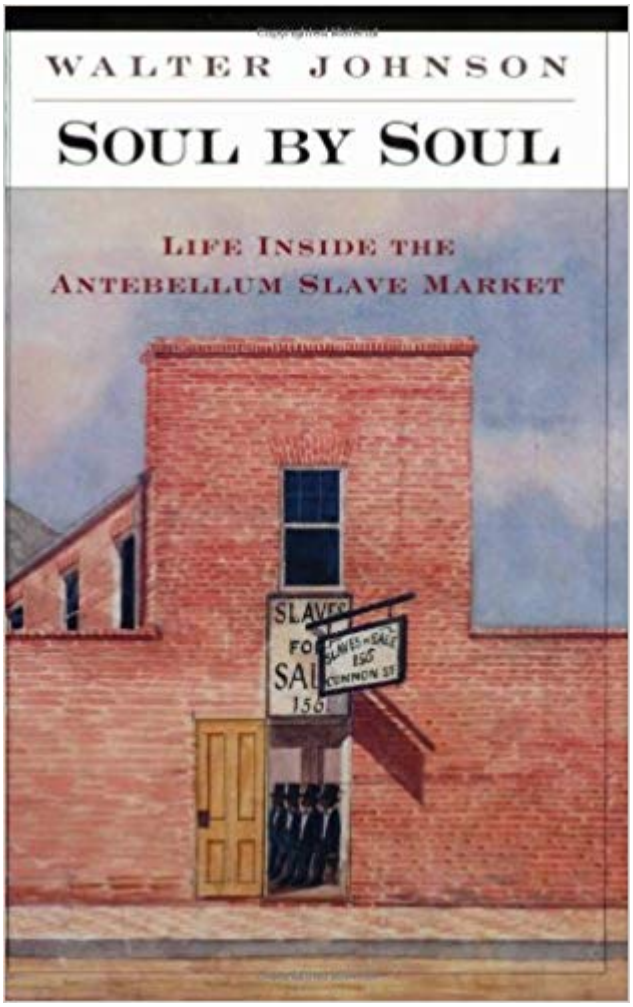
From Minnesota to Barbados, Jamaica, Virginia, and Alabama

In the 1970s a number of excellent books, using the same kinds of sources and responding to the same social movements in contemporary American society, began to open up the study of slave life in the British West Indies. The new literature on slave life in the thirteen mainland British colonies and in the antebellum South was even larger and livelier. Did I really have anything fresh to contribute?

The Journey of Miles Brewton's Bottle

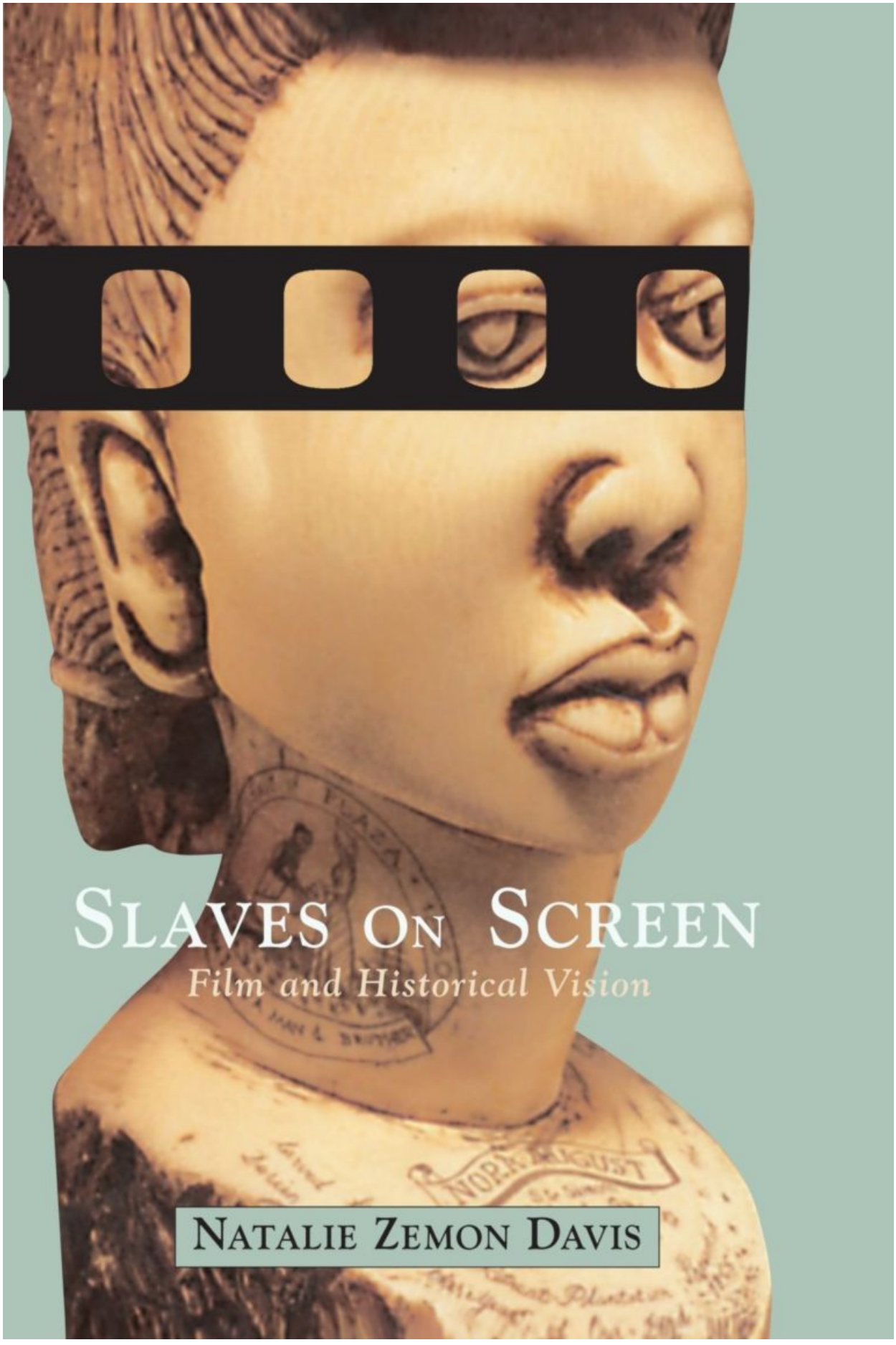
Perhaps the bottle traveled to the swamp full, part of a social gathering of African people, rather than empty, as part of a haul of refuse. The bottle could have been a pilfered item, or one reused after Brewton discarded it.

Searching for Identities in the New Orleans Slave Market



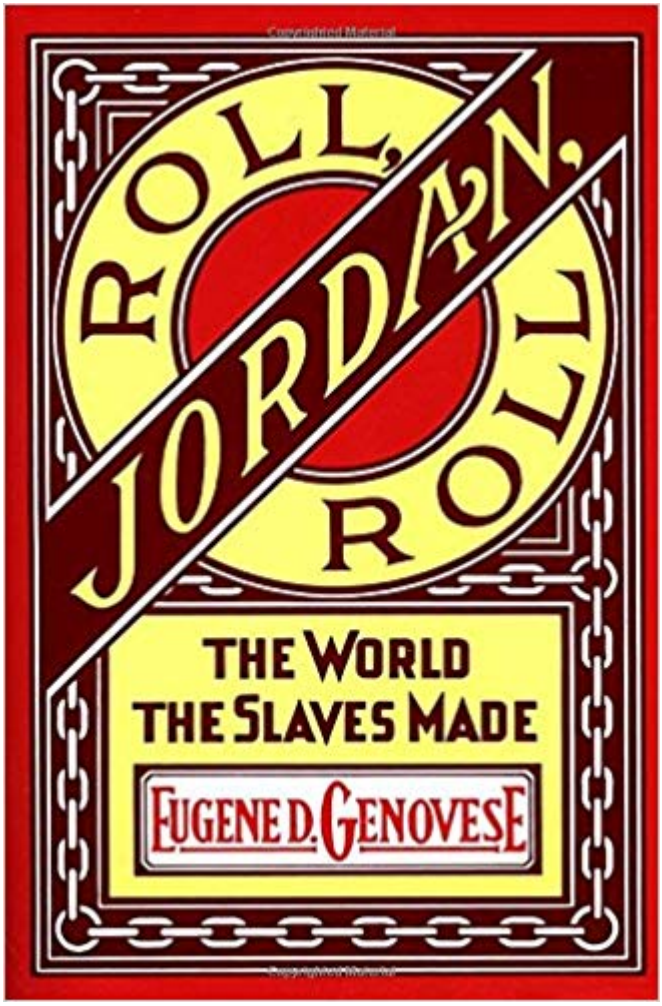
The evocative writing style pulls the reader into the book, creating word-pictures about the wharves of New Orleans, the slave pens where deals were struck, or the desperation of slave families confronted with the loss of loved ones, often forever.

Slaves You Have Never Seen


SLAVES ON SCREEN
Film and Historical Vision
NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS

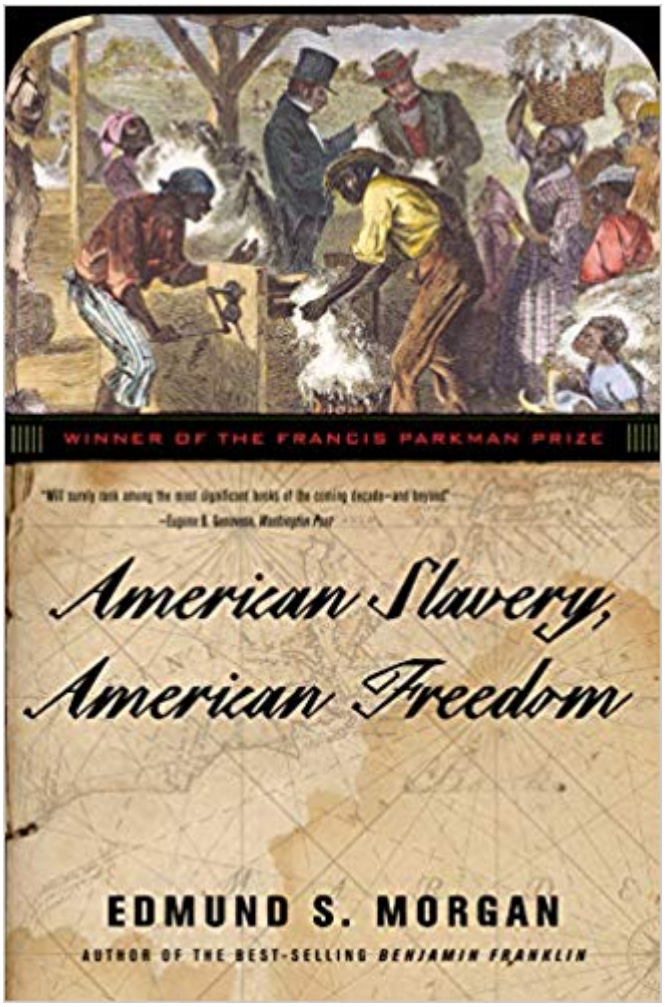
While Davis’s erstwhile contention about the potential symbiosis between history and film is one that most of us can share conceptually, the history of the documentation of slavery as a subject for film is a sad and sorry one . . .

A Nettlesome Classic Turns Twenty-Five



Roll, Jordan, Roll is the locus classicus for some of the most powerful and important ideas that have shaped the discussion of slavery for the last quarter century.

Americans on the James



As rendered by Morgan, English-style freedom was naive, arrogant, and ethnocentric, qualities that readers in the post-Vietnam United States might have recognized with shame.

Confronting Slavery Face-to-face: A twenty-first century interpreter's perspective on eighteenth-century slavery

And yet, for all that, I am still troubled by the issue: why was a white person teaching about black history?