

PRAISE FOR  
**The Broken Heart of America**

“Gateway. Ghetto. Ground Zero. Blues. This is St. Louis, unmoored from myths and exposed by one of our finest historians. Walter Johnson finds in this romanticized and reviled city the nucleus of racial capitalism and American empire and a story of dispossession, disaster, extraction, containment, and death—lots of death. A heartland broken, but not a heartless tale, for it is here we discover Black, Brown, and Native communities with heart, workers with heart, organizers fighting to bring justice to the heart of the city and the nation. After reading this book, you will never think of St. Louis or US history the same way.”

—ROBIN D. G. KELLEY, author of *Thelonious Monk:  
The Life and Times of an America Original*

“The thread that runs through this entire book is the historical relationship between US imperialism, Indian removal, and anti-Black racism. Although also a granular history of the city of St. Louis, *The Broken Heart of America* is a deep history of the United States’ continental empire with St. Louis at the center of economic and military operations. This may be the most important book on US history you will read in your lifetime.”

—ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ, author of  
*An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*

“This book is a magisterial history of the emergence and development of racial capitalism and the rise and decline of American empire examined through the lens of St. Louis. The complex dynamics of eviction, extraction, and exploitation as well as resilience and resistance are laid bare from the indigenous city of Cahokia in the eleventh century (larger than then London) to St. Louis, a frontier post and later metropolis of the US western empire. From ruling class elites Thomas Hart Benton and Harland Bartholomew and oppositional artists Kate Chopin and Tef Poe to black and socialist insurgents, *The Broken Heart of America* tells the best story of America that we have in the spirit of W.E.B. Du Bois. Walter Johnson is one of our very few great US historians!”

—CORNEL WEST

“Walter Johnson’s latest is a masterpiece that both haunts and inspires: at once a personal reckoning; a sweeping 200-year history of removal, racism, exclusion, and extraction; and a story that powerfully lifts up the human beings who, in 2014, stood together in Ferguson to demand accountability for the layered injustices that have so scarred not just one city—but America itself.”

—HEATHER ANN THOMPSON,  
Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Blood in the Water:  
The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and its Legacy*

“Walter Johnson has written a magisterial book. Using the sordid history of St. Louis, he weaves a tale of violence and betrayal—a story of the removal of peoples and the taking of land by force and by zoning—that helps the reader understand the glaring contradictions that define the United States today. Even the killing of Michael Brown in 2014 must be understood against the backdrop of the long history of greed, extraction, and racism that shaped the city of St. Louis and this country. *The Broken Heart of America* isn’t a dispassionate treatment of historical facts: Johnson has written a searing history that matters deeply to him, a native son, and it should matter to all of us.”

—EDDIE S. GLAUDE JR., author of *Begin Again:  
James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*

“When it comes to understanding the power dynamics that sparked the Ferguson Uprising in St. Louis, this is absolutely the most important book you’ll read. Walter Johnson has a Baldwin-esque ability to describe the raw emotions of Black life in the city. With stories heartbreaking yet riveting—told by someone brave enough to share them—he exposes the history of white supremacy and capitalism, class struggle and race, and Black rebellions both before and after Ferguson. In the era of fake news and mock revolutions, this book is the truth.”

—TEF POE, musician, activist, and cofounder  
of the Hands Up United movement

**THE  
BROKEN HEART  
OF AMERICA**

**ALSO BY WALTER JOHNSON**

*River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*

*Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*

# THE BROKEN HEART OF AMERICA

St. Louis and the *Violent History of the United States*

Walter Johnson

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*For my children  
And Alison—always*

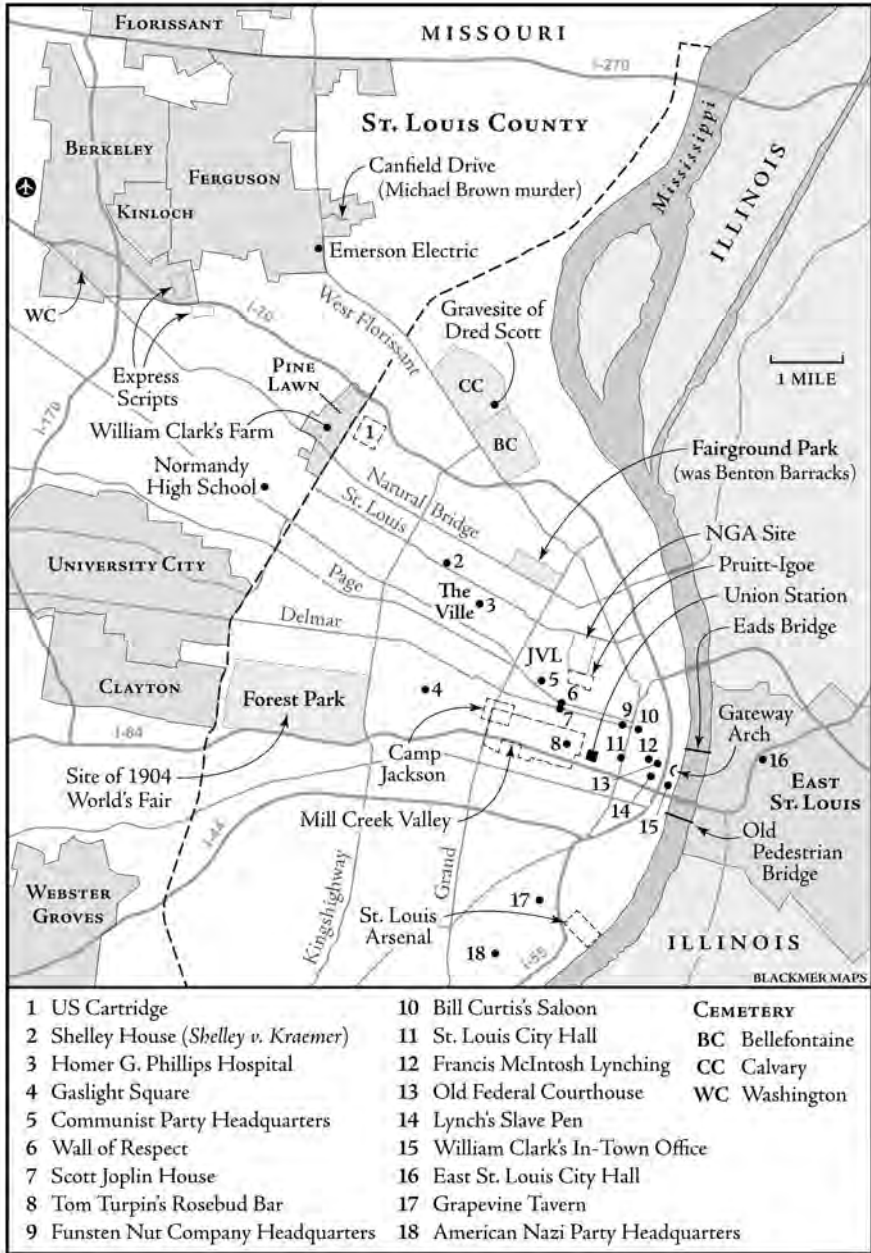
O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear!  
Even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save!

—Habakkuk 1



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City of St. Louis, showing locations mentioned in this book.

## PROLOGUE: MAPPING THE LOSS

They have torn down every house you've ever lived in. The house on Kennerly gone. Aunt Jennie's house on St. Ferdinand gone. The flat over Mrs. Scales's bar gone. The house on McMillan gone. And all the others mushed in a new riddle of one-way streets leading to vacant lots. Not one damn map familiar and comfortable.

—COLLEEN MCELROY, *A Long Way from St. Louie:  
A Travel Memoir*

THE ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF A ONCE-GREAT CITY LIES packed into crates in a warehouse near Cahokia, Illinois. Molded cement pediments, stained and structural glass, ornamental cast iron, wrought iron, and mild steel; stone columns, friezes, reliefs, and figural sculptures; doors, window frames, and full wooden staircases. Remnants of banks and breweries; churches and courthouses; dairies, department stores, and foundries; greenhouses, hotels, and hospitals; libraries, mortuaries, and museums; pavilions, post offices, and poor-houses; schools, stadiums, and steel mills; all of the row houses that lined one side of a downtown square. The red-brick Gothic classicism

of the Little Sisters of the Poor and the beaux arts Lindell Department Store; the Ralston Checkerboard Company's grain elevator and the fortresslike First District Police Station. The nineteenth-century skyscrapers that once lined Real Estate Row. The city of St. Louis torn down, pieced out into elements, cataloged, and packed into crates. The archaeological remainder of a city that once harbored the ambition of being among the world's greatest, carefully curated by a visionary demoman, perhaps awaiting the city's second coming.<sup>1</sup>

Across the Mississippi River, back in the city of St. Louis itself, the pieces of the past lie jumbled together and scattered around the foundations of the city's thirty thousand vacant houses, their windows boarded up and roofs collapsed upon themselves. Many of these houses have been repossessed by the city and delegated to the St. Louis Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority for resale; some can be bought for as little as a single dollar. Thousands of poorly maintained parcels of property on the city's Northside have been bought up by neighbors or speculators.<sup>2</sup>

The population of the city today is just over 300,000—roughly the same number as in 1870, and around one-third of the total in 1950. The city has been left behind by its population. Middle-class whites (and some Blacks) have moved to the suburbs. Meanwhile, the neighborhoods of poor Blacks (and some whites) have been torn down around them. It is a truism that the struggles of American cities in the second half of the twentieth century were due to “white flight”—and there is no doubt that St. Louis whites moved out of the city in droves in the years following the Second World War. But the story of the human geography of St. Louis is as much a story of “Black removal”—the serial destruction of Black neighborhoods and the transfer of their population according to the reigning model of profit and policing at any given moment—as of white flight.

Of the city's abandoned houses, it is perhaps fair to say that they are worth more dead than alive. The deep burgundy bricks, so smooth they seem almost glazed, molded out of the clay from pits on the city's

Southside and fired in the kilns of its famous brickworks around the turn of the century, sell for fifty cents apiece today in cities like New Orleans and Houston. For many years, there was little regulation of the demolition business, and rowhouses and brownstones containing anywhere between twenty thousand and forty thousand bricks were easy money for anyone with a pry bar and a pickup. Even today, when demolition companies must be licensed and teardowns authorized, there are rogue demo men, “brick rustlers,” who break into abandoned houses to steal the copper wiring, the iron plumbing, and the lead counterweights out of the window frames. Some will set an old house on fire, knowing that the water from the firemen’s hoses will soften the mortar, making the bricks easier to salvage and scrape clean for sale. So many of the houses in North St. Louis have been torn down that some of the neighborhoods look like rural farmsteads—clusters of houses here and there surrounded by open space.<sup>3</sup>

St. Louis today has the highest murder rate in the nation (65.8 per 100,000, around four times the rate in Chicago, and thirteenth-highest in the world) and the highest rate of police shootings in the nation (around 5 per 100,000). There is an eighteen-year difference in life expectancy between a child born to a family living in the almost completely Black Jeff-Vander-Lou neighborhood in North St. Louis and a child born to a family living in the majority-white suburb of Clayton, which sits less than ten miles to the west. Indeed, significant differences in virtually any marker of social well-being in the city of St. Louis—rates of adult diabetes or childhood asthma, levels of lead in the bloodstream, internet access—can be charted down a single line: Delmar Avenue, which bisects the city between north and south, between Black and white. Just over the city line, St. Louis County boasts three of the twenty-five wealthiest suburbs in the United States (Town and Country, Ladue, and Frontenac).<sup>4</sup>

Back in the city, standing on streets that, depending on the block, contend to lead the nation in the density of accidents involving pedestrians, gun murders, and payday loan stores, it is hard not to wonder: what happened here?

From the Lewis and Clark expedition to the police killing of Michael Brown in 2014 and the launching of Black Lives Matter, many of the events that we consider central to the history of the United States occurred in St. Louis. Much of this history is so well known that its midwestern origins have often seemed to historians to be beside the point. The Missouri Compromise, the *Dred Scott* case, and the western Indian wars; the East St. Louis Massacre in 1917, the Supreme Court decisions in the landmark civil rights cases *Shelley v. Kraemer* and *Jones v. Mayer* (housing), *Gaines v. Canada* (education), and *McDonnell-Douglas Corp. v. Green* (employment); the symbiosis of urban “redevelopment” by bulldozer, the sequestration of poor Black people in housing projects (Pruitt-Igoe was the nation’s most notorious), and white-flight suburbanization in the postwar period; the 1960s synthesis of anticommunism, COINTELPRO, and white nationalism into the Nixonian New Right and the militarization of policing: all of these events, and many others that are treated in this book, are aspects of the history of the United States that cannot be truly understood apart from their St. Louis roots.<sup>5</sup>

Looking behind the curve of the received history, one finds the often forgotten radical history of St. Louis. The history of the city turns out to be less a matter of timeless midwestern conservatism than of reaction: to the consequential efforts of conquered, stigmatized, poor, and radical people to transform their lives and their society into the image of a fuller humanity. The first general emancipation of the Civil War occurred in St. Louis, where Joseph Weydemeyer, confidant and publisher of Karl Marx, was in charge of organizing the city’s defense. The first general strike in the history of the United States, which briefly united Black and white workers in what historians have termed “the St. Louis Commune,” occurred in the city in 1877. Through the 1930s and well into the Second World War, St. Louis was one of the most radical cities in the United States, and the Communist Party in St. Louis was an important site of radical interracial organizing. Indeed, through both the period of the civil rights movement and after, the Black free-

dom struggle in St. Louis was distinguished by its focus on economic issues—jobs, housing, and a just social wage. From the successful strike at Funsten Nut and sit-ins at city hall in 1933 to one of the nation’s first rent strikes in Pruitt-Igoe in 1969, Black women from St. Louis have been at the leading edge of the radical history of the United States. Seen in the light of this history, there is nothing uncanny about the fact that the uprising that touched off the most recent wave of Black radical organizing—the Michael Brown moment in American history—happened in St. Louis.

Historians have traditionally treated St. Louis as a representative city, a city that is, at once, east and west, north and south. The place where the various regional histories of the United States come together. The “gateway” to the West, the “American confluence,” a “northern city with a southern exposure,” and so on. This book makes a more pointed claim: that St. Louis has been the crucible of American history—that much of American history has unfolded from the juncture of empire and anti-Blackness in the city of St. Louis.<sup>6</sup>

The city of St. Louis rose as the morning star of US imperialism. It was from St. Louis, itself a city built on stolen land, that Meriwether Lewis and William Clark departed on the journey to survey the commercial potential of the vast Louisiana Purchase Territory, the homeland of dozens of nations that had not been party to the bargain. It was from there that Clark later supervised the forcible relocation—the ethnic cleansing—of the tribes of the Upper Midwest. And it was from St. Louis that the genocidal Indian wars of the late nineteenth century were staged and supervised. For most of the period before the Civil War, the US Army’s Department of the West was headquartered at Jefferson Barracks; for a time after, the entire Department of War was relocated to St. Louis. By 1870, St. Louis was the fourth-largest city in the United States, and there was talk of moving the nation’s capital to the world-making confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. Although the US military footprint in St. Louis lightened over the course of the twentieth century, military contracting remained integral

to the economy of both city and country through most of that century. It is not possible to tell the story of St. Louis without including the US Cartridge Company, McDonnell-Douglas, Monsanto, and Mallinckrodt. Behind the story of the rise and demise of the city of St. Louis lies a much more complicated history of continental and even global distributions of violence.

The imperium of St. Louis (and thus of the United States) is centrally framed by the history of genocide, removal, and the expropriation and control of land—all justified in the name of white supremacy. In his 1920 essay “The Souls of White Folk,” written in the years following his visit to East St. Louis in the immediate aftermath of the 1917 massacre, W.E.B. Du Bois provided the outline that I have followed in this book. Racism, he argued, was as old as humanity: “Ever have men striven to conceive of their victims as different from the victors, endlessly different, in soul and blood, strength and cunning, race and lineage.” The exploitation of one group by another, too, was “quite as old as the world.” *But their combination in the conquest of the Americas and the slave trade was something new, something unprecedented, something world-making.* “The imperial width of the thing,—the heaven-defying audacity—makes its modern newness.” Using a term I draw from the work of the political philosopher and social theorist Cedric Robinson, I present the history that follows—all the way from the slave trade and the Indian wars down to the murder of Michael Brown and the uprising in Ferguson—as part of the history of “racial capitalism”: the intertwined history of white supremacist ideology and the practices of empire, extraction, and exploitation. Dynamic, unstable, ever-changing, and world-making.<sup>7</sup>

At bottom, the history of racial capitalism has been one in which white supremacy justified the terms of imperial dispossession and capitalist exploitation. Thus has it been possible to expropriate Native American lands on the grounds that they were empty—*terra nullius*. Thus has it been possible to justify slavery in a republic founded under the rubric of equality. Thus has it been possible to maintain a distinction



between the deserving and the undeserving poor; between the victims of economic downturns and those who lack the personal responsibility to keep up; and between the “real Americans” and “our traditions” and the people who don’t respect the country, its past, and the flag. And importantly, thus has it been possible to make poor and working-class white people believe that their interests lie in making common cause with their political leaders and economic betters. Common cause in whiteness: the idea that they might eventually share in the spoils, and the understanding that the discomforts and anxieties of their own precarious lives were due to—are due to—those below them rather than those above them. As the historian Robin D. G. Kelley suggests, guns and tanks and tear gas are sufficient to control the Black people (or, for that matter, the Indians and immigrants); white supremacy is necessary to control the white people.<sup>8</sup>

Critical analysis of capitalism often centers on the ways in which profits are generated, distributed, and concentrated in the form of intergenerational wealth. But can the same be said for this analysis’s understanding of “spoils,” which must also be generated, but far more widely distributed in order to socially and politically maintain the system? An important strand of the argument in this book traces the promises made to poor and working-class white people—some kept, some broken—in order to keep them committed to social order, that is, to history in the service of empire and capital: to war in the name of white homesteads; to low wages subsidized by segregation; and to social isolation and cultural monotony understood as suburban exclusivity.

Beyond even the function of white supremacy in underwriting expropriation and exploitation, however, the notion of racism and capitalism as organically related *but not identical* helps us understand the excessive pleasures of white supremacy: the joyful mob in East St. Louis in 1917 (it was “like Mardi Gras,” one observer remembered); the dumb grins on the faces of the lynch mobs, mugging for the camera in front of the body of the lynched man; the rage of the five thousand St. Louis

whites who rioted after some Black kids jumped into the pool on the first day of the summer season in Fairgrounds Park in 1949; the masculine fellowship of the St. Louis police in the 1960s as they traded stories about beating up Sonny Liston, the onetime heavyweight champion of the world; and all the torture and violation by which white people have historically drawn pleasure from the suffering of Blacks.

On the other hand, analysis through the lens of racial capitalism helps us understand that the disciplinary tools and predatory takings originally justified by imperial and racial entitlement come eventually to be deployed against the working class as a whole; the insistent generalization of the tools of empire and anti-Blackness, what Achille Mbembe calls the paradoxical “Negrofication” of the white world. Tracing the United States’ centuries-long history of imperial dispossession and relating it to the foreclosure crisis of our own times, the legal historian and theorist K-Sue Park suggests that the forms of military, social, and financial control pioneered in empire and slavery (and justified by racialization) were eventually adapted and absorbed, in race-neutral form, into general practice.<sup>9</sup>

“Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the Black it is branded,” Karl Marx wrote in *Capital*. Beneath their skin privilege, poor and working-class whites have often found (although not always recognized) that the very tools the wealthy rely upon to ensure class rule—the police, the prison, the reduction of the social wage, and the derogation of public education—come eventually to foreshorten dreams of everyone, not just the radicalized, the marginalized, and the imperialized. In the fall of 1966, following the previous year’s fury in the Black neighborhoods in St. Louis over the police murder of Melvin Cravens, a seventeen-year-old boy shot to death while handcuffed in a police station, the Black activists Macler Shepard and Ivory Perry organized a march in solidarity with Southside whites mourning the death of Timothy Walsh, a young white shot in the back while in police custody. The license to kill, they were saying, has been issued in our neighborhood,

but it can be carried into yours. The cover of whiteness, it turns out, offers incomplete protection from the violence unleashed in its own name.<sup>10</sup>

This book traces the history of empire and racial capitalism through a series of stages, beginning with the fur trade in the early nineteenth century and following all the way down to payday lending, tax abatement, for-profit policing, and mass incarceration in our own times. These stages should not be understood as pure forms, nor as having unfolded according to a strict sequential historical logic. These improvised solutions to imperial problems and commercial imperatives have been mixed up with one another and with other ideas about identity and economy. They each have characteristic spatial and environmental aspects. And the stages of empire and racial capitalism were repeatedly interrupted and confronted, and occasionally even overthrown, by the people whom they so insistently dispossessed, ravaged, and repurposed in the service of empire, whiteness, and wealth.

And yet, beneath all the change, an insistent racial capitalist cleansing—forced migrations and racial removal, reservations and segregated neighborhoods, genocidal wars, police violence, and mass incarceration—is evident in the history of the city at the heart of American history. Viewed from St. Louis, the history of capitalism in the United States seems to have as much to do with eviction and extraction as with exploitation and production. History in St. Louis unfolded at the juncture of racism and real estate, of the violent management of population and the speculative valuation of property. The first to be forced out were Native Americans, who were pushed west and killed off by settlers and the US military. But in St. Louis the practices of removal and containment that developed out of the history of empire in the West were generalized into mechanisms for the dispossession and management of Black people within the city limits. And because removal is fundamentally about controlling the future, about determining what sorts of people will be allowed to live in what sorts of places, it is always concerned with the control of gender, sexuality, and

reproduction; often women and children are singled out for particular sanction and targeted violence.<sup>11</sup>

From the time of the Missouri Compromise through the decision in the *Dred Scott* case, whites in St. Louis used Indian removal as much as slavery as the model for dealing with their Black neighbors. And from that time on, Black St. Louisans have been repeatedly driven out: from East St. Louis in 1917; from the riverfront, Deep Morgan, Chestnut Valley, and Mill Creek Valley in the middle years of the century; from Pruitt-Igoe in 1972; and from whatever neighborhoods were wanted for “economic development” down to the present day. To be sure, eviction (like extraction and even exploitation) has meant different things at various historical moments. And yet the continuity between St. Louis’s role as the gateway to empire and the twenty-first-century project of enclosing Black communities in the hope of a final round of extraction only underscores the point that in St. Louis empire, slavery, and segregation have been distinct aspects of a single common history. The red thread that runs through this entire book is the historical relationship between imperialism and anti-Blackness.<sup>12</sup>

In the aftermath of the murder of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014, and the uprising that followed, the term “structural racism” gained renewed currency as a way to understand the depth of the history that was exploding into plain view across the nation. Part of the work of this book is to try to lend meaning to that phrase—to take us beyond using it to mean simply really bad or really persistent racism and begin to understand the ways in which racism has been built into the material fabric of daily life in the United States—into our roads and neighborhoods and schools and universities. The point of identifying racism as structural is not to just say it is really bad (or still less to say that it is so bad that we can’t really do anything about it anyway and so should just go on doing whatever we’re doing). The point is to search out the material history of white supremacy and the alibis in which it has been cloaked in order to understand something about structural racism that isn’t otherwise visible: the way the racial character of our

everyday lives has become inexorable, even as its origins have been insistently obscured. Any program intending to address economic inequality in our society—whether revolutionary or reformist—that fails to grapple with the racialized character of our material lives will likely intensify rather than ameliorating it.<sup>13</sup>

For the sake of example, one might point to various sorts of racism evident in the social postmortem that followed the uprising in Ferguson in the fall of 2014. Most telling for many was the discovery of the persistent *attitudinal* racism of the white police and court clerks in Ferguson, who were shown to have had a particular fondness for hackneyed racial humor. That attitudinal racism shaded imperceptibly into the *institutional* racism of the police department as a whole, manifested in the disproportionate targeting of Black motorists and street-level harassment of Black pedestrians; shoddy record-keeping and routinely ignored training protocols; and the systematic levy, through excessive tickets and exorbitant fines, whereby the subsistence of the government of Ferguson was extracted from its mostly Black population by its almost entirely white police force. All of this was amply documented in the US Department of Justice's report on the Ferguson Police Department.<sup>14</sup>

What the report passed over, however, was the *structural* aspect of the racism: Why was the police department revenue-farming poor Black motorists when there was a Fortune 500 company, doing \$25 billion of business a year, headquartered just a quarter-mile to the south of the spot where Officer Darren Wilson shot Michael Brown? And how could that seem so natural that the corporate headquarters of Emerson Electric on West Florissant Avenue, right there where the demonstrators first sat down in the street and the militarized police rioted through the month of August, would go almost unremarked upon in the thousands of pages and millions of words written in the aftermath?

The twelve shots fired by Officer Wilson on Canfield Drive ended the life of an eighteen-year-old child and touched off a new period in the history of the United States—the era of Black Lives Matter. This

book explores the two-hundred-year history of removal, racism, and resistance that flowed through the two minutes of confrontation on August 9, 2014.<sup>15</sup>

I began writing this book in the months after that event. In the days after the shooting, activists in St. Louis took to the streets of Ferguson demanding that Officer Wilson (whose name was initially withheld) be held accountable. Police in St. Louis County and then the Missouri Highway Patrol and eventually the Missouri National Guard responded on a scale and with a ferocity that many observers found wildly disproportionate. Armored personnel carriers patrolled the streets of Ferguson. Police armed with automatic weapons occupied the city. Peaceful protesters were repeatedly dispersed with tear gas—a chemical weapon banned under the Geneva Convention. By the end of November, when the now-notorious prosecutor Robert McCulloch announced his decision not to bring charges against Officer Wilson, the protests exploded into violence and “Ferguson” had become a by-word for both police violence and the origins of what would come to be called the Black Lives Matter movement.

Having grown up just two hours to the west, I had been to St. Louis countless times to visit family, to go to the universities or the museums, even to do historical research for other books I have written. I came to this book less as a professional historian than as a citizen taking the measure of a history that I had lived through but not yet fully understood. This is a history that I have resisted, but also a history from which I have benefited, as a white man and a Missourian. I offer the result, not in the spirit of academics’ too-common conceit that injustice is everywhere but in their own biographical backyards, but rather in the hope that we may all seek to do better—to walk humbly, to act justly, to love mercy.

## 1 | WILLIAM CLARK'S MAP

However our present interests may restrain us within our own limits, it is impossible not to look forward to distant times, when our rapid multiplication will expand itself beyond those limits, & cover the whole northern, if not the southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, & by similar laws; nor can we contemplate with satisfaction either blot or mixture on that surface.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON to James Monroe, November 24, 1801

IT IS A COMMONPLACE TODAY TO REFER TO ST. LOUIS AS THE “Gateway to the West.” But there was a time when the land that sits today in the shadow of the Gateway Arch was neither part of the West nor just east of the West, nor the gateway to anything. It was just the world—indeed, the center of the world. Of course, it was not St. Louis then either, but the ancient city of Cahokia, the metropolis of the Mississippian Mound Builders and the largest city in North America during the eleventh century. Cahokia was in what is known today as the American Bottom, on the east side of the river with satellites near

what is today East St. Louis and across the river, on the west side, in St. Louis, known in the nineteenth century as the “Mound City.”<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of the nineteenth century, many of the mounds for which the city was known were deliberately leveled, so that streets could pass through, or bucketed out and used as backfill to support the rising foundation of the growing city. As many as forty-five mounds were dismantled in East St. Louis and another twenty-five or so in St. Louis in the years before the Civil War. Today only one mound remains in the city of St. Louis. Across the river, around the center of the once-great city of Cahokia, about fifty of the original approximately one hundred twenty mounds, some of them once forty or fifty feet high and hundreds of feet across, remain. Some of them rise out of the floodplain of the Mississippi River in uncanny echo of their ancient grandeur, and some are so worn away by erosion and foot traffic as to seem only small bumps in the otherwise level bottomland. They stand today as a weary reminder of the history before the empire that unfolded from St. Louis over the course of the nineteenth century, beginning in the century’s first decade with the upriver journey of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, an initial reconnaissance mission for a set of increasingly greedy and increasingly deadly military and economic forays launched from St. Louis.<sup>2</sup>

At its peak, Cahokia had a population of around ten thousand (larger than London at the same time) and a hinterland almost fifty miles in radius populated with another twenty thousand or thirty thousand people. It was connected by networks of travel and trade northward to present-day Minnesota and Wisconsin and southward to Louisiana, and possibly beyond to Mexico and Central America. The city consisted of as many as fifteen hundred structures, including one hundred earthen monuments, spread over thirty-two hundred acres. Some speculate that it grew suddenly, over the course of several years, as a sacred site spurred by the deep-space detonation of a supernova that brightened the skies around the globe in 1054. Cahokia was ap-



parently laid out in advance of being inhabited. At its center was a massive plaza (sixteen hundred by nine hundred feet, about six times the size of Red Square in Moscow) headed by the largest of the mounds, the so-called Monks Mound—about one hundred feet high and almost nine hundred feet at the base, as broad as the pyramid at Giza and wider than the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacán in Mexico. Recent archaeological work suggests that the mounds were built out of blocks of cut sod, laid in alternating bands of light and dark, and pounded firm underneath the feet of the builders.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the mounds were leveled at the summit. Topped with buildings, they provided a platform for celestial observations—the entire city was laid out in observation of the movement of the sun, the moon, and the stars—and for sacred rituals. Cahokia seems to have been the site of tremendous festivals; one, archaeologists estimate, involved the simultaneous butchering and preparation of almost four thousand deer. The residents of the city lived in thousands of densely clustered thatched-roof houses, their floors dug down into the earth to keep them cooler in the summer. They made small clay sculptures and copper jewelry and chiseled arrowheads and knives out of river rocks.<sup>4</sup>

And then, for reasons that are lost to history, the Mound Builders seem to have walked away. Perhaps they had overhunted or overplanted their hinterland, maybe the city was riven by political conflict or social unrest, maybe they received the same type of celestial message that had caused them to move to Cahokia in the first place. Archaeologists speculate that, as the rulers of Cahokia gradually lost authority over their hinterland, their civilization dissolved into a welter of smaller polities and internecine wars. By around 1350, Cahokia was abandoned, the houses gone, and the mounds covered with grass, some of the largest falling in on themselves. The descendants of Cahokia spread across the plains and along the rivers, where they became the Arikara, the Hidatsa, and the Mandan, whom Lewis and Clark encountered on their way up the Missouri. For hundreds of years, the remains of what