Winter 1995

[Review of the Book *William Johnson's Natchez: The Ante-Bellum Diary of a Free Negro*]

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Abstract
[Excerpt] To raise this issue of Johnson's silences and social isolation is not to engage in historical pity. He made choices from the options available to him and suffered the consequences as they developed. But his history underscores the fact that slavery generated a corresponding social system that was unforgiving to the individual caught in its contradictory currents. As Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark suggest in Black Masters, their sensitive study of another slave owner and ex-slave, William Ellison of South Carolina, a purely personal solution to such volatile social relations proved impossible. What bound William Johnson to Mississippi, what inner torment in search of resolution drove him to a relentless acquisitiveness, how he understood his identification with the dominant racial group that kept him at a far distance and would have kept him enslaved but for chance—the diary provides us only with silence on these and similar tensions. What we do know, especially from the survivors of more modern collective acts of evil, is that no one individual can predict precisely how he or she might react to so unforgiving a system. William Johnson's diary, with its paradoxes, hidden conflicts, and unresolved contradictions, allows the reader a glimpse of the social context the author lived in but could take little comfort from.

Keywords
slavery, freedmen, William Johnson, social history

Disciplines
African American Studies | Labor Relations | Social History | United States History

Comments
Suggested Citation
Salvatore, N. (1995). [Review of the book *William Johnson's Natchez: The ante-bellum diary of a free Negro*] [Electronic version]. *African American Review 29*(4), 676-678.

William Ranson Hogan and Edwin Adams Davis, eds. *William Johnson's Natchez: The Ante-Bellum Diary of a Free Negro*. 1951. New intro. by William L. Andrews. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1993. 837 pp. $18.95.

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African American Review, Volume 29, Number 4

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in 1831, his travels brought him through the populous cities of the Northeast, into the recently settled states of the old Northwest Territory, and then down the Mississippi Valley, where he saw at first hand the central paradox of the American experience—slavery and freedom existing side-by-side. Tocqueville's overall analysis of American life and culture in the Jacksonian era is well-known, as is his famous understanding of American democracy as fueled by broad-based acquisitive individualism. In Tocqueville's reading, "self-interest, properly understood" in the context of familial, religious, and civic voluntary associations, checked this individualism and created a democratic culture he considered a major contribution to Western political life.

Tocqueville also recognized that American society contained the seeds of its own potential destruction. He worried that a "manufacturing aristocracy" would undermine the "free mores" of the citizenry, and he feared the possible tyranny of the majority in democratic life. Each of these tensions, Tocqueville thought, found its resolution in the voluntary associations of the citizenry. But the third threat to American democracy lacked an obvious antidote. Even were slavery abolished, Tocqueville perceived a danger to democratic culture because "the prejudice which repels the Negro" increased "in proportion as they are emancipated, and inequality is sanctioned by the manners while it is effaced from the laws of the country."

But this keen observer possessed blind spots himself, and none was more pronounced than his misunderstanding of African Americans. Neither African nor American—in his view, without family, religion, or language—blacks, Tocqueville believed, lacked the foundations of civilization. Even if emancipated, he wrote, the freedman or woman would sink "to such a depth of wretchedness that while servitude brutalizes, liberty destroys him." Although Tocqueville passed by Natchez, Mississippi, when traveling between Memphis and New Orleans, he clearly did not meet that town's most prominent barber, William Johnson.

Born on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, in 1809 to a mulatto slave mother and a white father (presumably his owner, after whom the son was named), the slave William Johnson won emancipation eleven years later on the strength of his master's petition to the Mississippi legislature. Apprenticed as a barber to his brother-in-law (both his sister, Adelia Johnson, and his mother, Amy Johnson, had been emancipated by the white William Johnson), the young freedman learned his trade and established a shop in Port Gibson, Mississippi, in the late 1820s. Back in the Natchez area by 1830, Johnson opened a barber shop and bath house, began to accumulate land, and took a three-month trip to Philadelphia and New York. In April 1835 Johnson married a free mulatto woman, Ann Battles, of Natchez. Six months

later he began a diary that ultimately grew to fourteen volumes and ended only with his murder in a land dispute in 1851.

In an odd way, had the Frenchman been able to shed his own racial blinders, Tocqueville would have recognized Johnson as an example of his quintessential American. The scope of Johnson's activities and the commercial interests that lay closest to his heart echoed qualities Tocqueville discerned throughout his travels. Johnson was a barber with two shops; the owner of a bathing establishment; a landowner, a farmer, and a hunter; a broker and money lender to Natchez's business and agricultural community; a gambler, a marksman, and a horseman; and a logger who sought to turn every iota of his holdings to profit. His diary is weighted with the sheer volume of his thumbnail commercial observations: "Buisness has been Tolerable Good To Day" (28 Nov. 1840); "Buisness very dull, Nothing new that I know of" (7 Aug. 1844). The diary groans under the repetitive entries enumerating the loans made, the interest charged, and the terms of repayment. Johnson took distinct pleasure in recording his profits, especially when he sold land in quick turnarounds. What Tocqueville would have recognized, of course, was Johnson's acquisitiveness. Johnson penned the most telling sentence in the entire diary in October 1841: "This has been a Dull week with me for I Could not Collect any money from Any One."

But William Johnson was not simply a Tocquevillian everyman. An emancipated slave, a free person of color living in a slave state even then drawing tighter its regulations of non-whites, free or slave, Johnson was also himself a slave holder. In his first account of taxes paid, in 1836, Johnson acknowledged owning four slaves assessed at $1,655; at his death in 1851 he owned fifteen slaves worth more than $6,000. Like any slave holder, white or black, Johnson kept a keen eye on the local slave market. He frequently attended auctions, and he exhibited the focused, narrowed vision of a businessman bent on profit: "I Bot Moses from a man by the name of William Good," he wrote in June 1836; "at Least I Bot him at auction under the Hammer for four Hundred Dollars cash—I Bot also 2 Boxes of wine at 2.87½ per Box and 5 small Boxes of shaving soap, 43 cents per Box . . . ."

As with all slave owners, the purchase of slaves was but a prelude to disciplining them, and William Johnson hesitated not at all in that regard. Male and female slaves who ran off, drank, flirted, or failed to perform their duties all received his lash. One slave, Steven, ran off for the evening in 1836, was caught and whipped by the white patrol established to curtail slave mobility, and then was whipped again "in the morning afterward" by Johnson himself. Over the next eight years Johnson repeatedly whipped and flogged Steven for a series of infractions, put him in chains, and otherwise disciplined him. Such continuous violence seemed not to bother Johnson, since he saw in it the potential for moral improvement. Following "a pretty severe thrashing" administered to Steven in 1838, Johnson confided in his diary: "Tis singular how much good it does to some people to get whiped." Ever the businessman, Johnson determined to get a minimum of $600 for Steven when, in 1844, he ceased his attempt to break him. The night before the sale Johnson "rested bad," but that morning he brought Steven to the dock, gave him some small gifts, and shook his hand. "I felt hurt but Liquor is the Cause of his troubles" was the not uncommon explanation of this unusual slave owner suspended between moral principle and maintaining a way of life.

But if William Johnson was not a bit player in a Tocqueville staging, neither was he simply a reflection of slave-holding white Mississippians. True, he shared with most of them a disdain for slave culture—he considered his own slaves "Low minded Creatures. I Look on them as Soft"—and, like white owners, he used his own presumed moral superiority to justify his property holding. But Johnson's world was far more complex and dangerous. He attended political barbeques, the race track, and even the theater, but he was never a part of that dominant white sporting culture. He

understood at least part of his paradox when he arranged for friendly whites to bid for him at an 1844 slave auction, so that other whites "would not run [the price] up on me two high." When he witnessed the legal kidnaping of a free person of color back into slavery that same year, Johnson could only cry in exasperation: "Greate God, what a Country." Unlike most white owners, moreover, Johnson recognized his slaves' spouses and, within the strict rules he established, treated them evenly.

Beneath the frenzy of commercial activity, William Johnson led something of a lonely life. He had one friend, Robert McCary, a free black who, interestingly, owned no slaves. He and Mc, as Johnson referred to him, hunted, gambled, and attended minstrel shows together. They also discussed politics, and Johnson recalled how he and Mc reacted to an anti-abolitionist tract from the Southern press: "We both got tired of it before I had finished [reading] it."

But what is most striking about this long and detailed diary is its silences. Johnson did not analyze politics in any serious fashion, did not discuss his religious beliefs, and only infrequently noted the activities of his family. Aside from Mc, he had no one he recognized as a friend, and his own death at the hands of another acquisitive free black underscores the broader social isolation that surrounded Johnson. Nor did he explore in the diary the central contradiction in his life as an antebellum, slave-holding Mississippian who was himself a manumitted slave.

To raise this issue of Johnson's silences and social isolation is not to engage in historical pity. He made choices from the options available to him and suffered the consequences as they developed. But his history underscores the fact that slavery generated a corresponding social system that was unforgiving to the individual caught in its contradictory currents. As Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark suggest in *Black Masters*, their sensitive study of another slave owner and ex-slave, William Ellison of South Carolina, a purely personal solution to such volatile social relations proved impossible. What bound William Johnson to Mississippi, what inner torment in search of resolution drove him to a relentless acquisitiveness, how he understood his identification with the dominant racial group that kept him at a far distance and would have kept him enslaved but for chance—the diary provides us only with silence on these and similar tensions. What we do know, especially from the survivors of more modern collective acts of evil, is that no one individual can predict precisely how he or she might react to so unforgiving a system. William Johnson's diary, with its paradoxes, hidden conflicts, and unresolved contradictions, allows the reader a glimpse of the social context the author lived in but could take little comfort from.