Cotton from the Margins:

An Analysis of the Indian Cotton Experiment

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Introduction

In the February 26, 1840 issue of *The American Farmer, and Spirit of the Agricultural Journals of the Day* came the first mention of India Cotton. The article itself was not wholly an original article of the newspaper, but rather a copy of a British issue. The editor prefaced the article with a warning: "We commend to the attention of our Southern readers, the following article, by which they will see how strenuous are the desires and exertions in Europe to raise up a rival for their great staple."[1] "Their great staple" referred to cotton, the driving material in the British textile industry. Overall, the copy of the British article was a statement of comparison between American cotton agriculture to Indian cotton agriculture. The American south was the most profitable cotton region in the world. At the end of the article, as if it were an afterthought, the editor included another snippet from the British paper:

> "*India Cotton,*-- A Bombay paper of October 25th, says – "We understand that the Court of Directors have engaged twelve Americans to proceed to this country for the purpose of improving the cultivation and cleaning of cotton, and that they may be shortly expected to arrive in Bombay."[2]

The Bombay Paper was referring to the continuation of an experiment that began 12 years prior. On July 26, 1828, the British "Secretary of the Committee of Privy Council for Trade," named Thomas Lack, penned a letter to the Commissioners for the Affairs of India. First, Mr. Lack stated that India cotton was no match for Carolina cotton (but assured the commissioners that this was through no fault of their own) and that the British government was willing to reduce the import duty on Indian imports to Britain from six per cent to four percent.

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[1] "The Cotton Trade of India," from British papers, published in *The American Farmer, and Spirit of the Agricultural Journals of the Day,* Feb. 26, 1839, p.315.
[2] "The Cotton Trade of India," from British papers, published in *The American Farmer, and Spirit of the Agricultural Journals of the Day,* Feb. 26, 1839, p.315.

After this generous offer, Lack slyly suggested that perhaps the "peculiar system .. forbidding Europeans to settle in the country, prevents the operation of the encouragement ordinarily afforded by an extensive market and a favorable tariff."[3] Plainly, Lack proposed to the Indian Government that British subjects be allowed to own land in India for the purpose of farming cotton. On the 5th of September of the same year, the Indian Government acquiesced.[4]

In 1836, eight years after Thomas Lack penned his letter to the Commissioners of Affairs of India, the British East India Company established a project "to promote Cultivation of Cotton in *India,* with the Particulars and Result of any Experiments which have been made by the said Company, with a view to introduce the Growth of American Cotton, or to encourage the Production of Native Cotton in *India.*"[5] This approval, then, marked the beginning of the Indian cotton experiment.

It makes perfect sense that agents of the British East India Company would want to control the entire cotton production process, from planting to manufacturing. Cotton ran the world. It was and remains "the fabric of our lives," to quote one modernly famous corporation. It fueled the textile revolution in Britain, spawning the advent of steam powered mills and industrial growth. In America, cotton growth could not be removed from slave labor, nor could it be removed from the export economy of the country without serious implications. Over the 19th century, inventors would create new technology to launch cotton production ever upward. Farmers would experiment with strains of cotton, and ultimately breed new species to create the

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[3] Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons, Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company, Report from the Select committee of the House of lords appointed to enquire into the present state of the affairs of the East-India company, and into the trade between Great Britain: the East-Indies, and China, together with the minutes of evidence and an appendix (London: J.L. Cox) 1830, #5 - Report from the Select committee of the House of ... appendix. - Full View | HathiTrust Digital Library, 1135.
[4] Ibid. 1137.
[5] Parliamentary Papers, *Accounts and Papers,* vol. 9, 1847, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044106497506&view=1up&seq=11, i.

best quality for higher profit. Slavery became a pillar of contention around the world. It was locked in tension between those who decried the inhumanity of the institution, against those who recognized that forced labor could never stimulate profit the way free wage labor could.

This experiment, it turns out, would cause great turmoil in the American South and abroad in Britain. What is revealed through a close analysis of the anxieties that emerge in American and British newspapers? Who is paying attention to this experiment, and why? What were the local, regional, and global motivations for the figures in this experiment? And lastly, what does this experiment allow us to understand about small stories of global connection?

I argue that the India cotton experiment offers a moment in which we may reconfigure the antebellum cotton trade. This essay will trace this local experiment to its global roots and seek to understand the various American and British anxieties surrounding this project. Firstly, an examination of American newspapers tells us that American southerners were afraid that the "American system" could be extracted from slavery, and more importantly, that it could be reproduced with unbonded laborers. Out of this emerges a distinct self-awareness of the reality of plantation farming: that it could, at any moment, crumble. This background information helps us understand that American southerners felt threatened by Indian cotton. Notably, they were forced to turn their gazes outward, towards international threats of abolition as well as competition in cotton farming.

The idea that American cotton farming could be destabilized and replaced is affirmed by parliamentary papers, consular documents, and Bombay newspapers. It is in this section that I explore the fragile structures which supported American cotton farming. This essay highlights a moment when people around the world are starting to think comparatively. It is a moment of competition manifested, of regular people speculating about the future. The actual experiences of

the farmers in India reveal that the "American System" could not be exported, nor could its success be extracted from slavery. There were myriad factors that contributed to this precarious balance, which will be explored in this essay. These include the economic structures of plantation farming, biological factors—cotton and otherwise— and the looming specter of abolition. These aspects of the antebellum cotton trade reveal local motivations and anxieties that generated comparative discussions in newspapers and consular documents.

This work begins with a historiographic exploration of the field. The dialogue then shifts towards the history of British power in cotton farming, then to a deeper understanding of cotton botany and its prevalence in different parts of the world. This background on cotton botany is necessary because through it reveals the motivations of the British East India company in drafting the India Cotton experiment. Afterwards, the experiment itself comes to the forefront: its logistics, important figures, and one East India Company's experiences in America. This section exposes the fragile nature of the Mississippi river valley, and helps us understand the motivations of the ten American planters that packed up and moved to India.

Then, the topic shifts to a lone American Consul in Bombay, who ruminates on the future impacts of the India Cotton experiment. His pontifications bleed into a comparison between Indian and American cotton farming. From here, we launch into a closer look at the American and British newspapers as we seek to understand how the respective readers of these journals are thinking about cotton farming, trade, and their place in an increasingly globalized world.

Historiography

The India Cotton experiment initially emerged under the subset of agricultural history. Seth Leacock and D.G. Mandelbaum wrote their work "A Nineteenth Century Development

Project in India: The Cotton Improvement Program" in 1955 and offered a brief overview of the relationship between India cotton and the world market. This article was one of the first side by side comparisons between American cotton exports and Indian cotton exports. As such, it has been a common reference in the work of modern historians. Their work remains foundational in understanding the geographic, biological, and cultural differences between India and America. Their work is part of the literature that sought to explain *why* the India cotton experiment failed.[6] One economist named Alan Olmstead joined this literature. His analysis shifted the question of 'failure' away from biologic and cultural reasons to economic ones.[7]

In the last twenty years, discussion surrounding the India Cotton experiment shifted from a strictly causal analysis of the event to a focus on its larger ramifications in the global. Christopher Florio's work on the India Cotton experiment approaches the history as one of transnational relationships. In "From Poverty to Slavery: Abolitionists, Overseers, and the Global Struggle for Labor in India," Florio argues that the British India Society viewed the East India cotton projects opportunities to mitigate American slavery by introducing Indian cotton as an alternative source. In turn, the poverty in India would diminish (because they would all be working as wage-laborers) and slavery in America would no longer be necessary.

Where Florio focuses on the relationship between India, Britain, and America, Zack Sell placed the India Cotton experiment within a framework of global capitalism. His work is situated in the relationship between forced labor and the globalized economy.[8] Rounding out this group is Sven Beckert, who produced the popular work titled *Empire of Cotton: A Global History,* which

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[6] S. Leacock & D.G. Mandelbaum, "A Nineteenth Century Development Project in India: The Cotton Improvement Program," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* vol.3, no.4 (1955): 334-51, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1151961.

[7] Alan L. Olmstead, "Antebellum US Cotton Production and Slavery in the Indian Mirror," *Agricultural History* 91, no. 1 (2017): 5-38, https://doi.org/10.3098/ah.2017.091.1.5.

[8] Zack Sell, *Trouble of the World: Slavery and Empire in the Age of Capital,* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

falls firmly in the camp of the New History of Capitalism. Beckert mentions the India Cotton experiment only briefly and relegates it to the margins of history. His intervention is an analysis of how capitalism developed through a relationship of industrial production in Europe and forced labor in America.

Walter Johnson and Edward Baptist both produced works revolving around life on the cotton plantations, with an emphasis on slavery and society. *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom,* Johnson's work, makes it clear that without slavery the plantation system would have crumbled. Although he does not discuss the India Cotton experiment (neither does Baptist, as their work remains focused on the geographic south), he does outline the life of the white yeoman farmer and the anxieties of Southerners overall. Baptist's *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* produces a similar argument. American profit in the 19th century cotton trade existed *because* of enslaved labor, and the profits of enslaved labor could not be replicated using wage or unbonded labor.

I propose that the India Cotton experiment should be placed within a local and global framework. It needs to be understood on its own terms, in the context of local, regional, and global motivations. This experiment combined geographically separated characters and places to produce a project that sent ripples of anxiety through the British and the Americans. It was a moment when the boundaries of the cotton trade were challenged, and the people involved in it had to stop and reexamine their place in its web. The American and Indian newspapers that this essay draws from illustrate local anxieties about an increasingly global world. For these readers, who had likely never left their respective countries, the world was rushing at them.

As a field, global history initially arose as an alternative to national histories and area studies.[9] It focuses on interdependence, connections, and scales of analysis that switch between local, regional, and global. The India Cotton experiment serves as a moment where we may see transregional and transnational connections. In this regard, it functions as a tool of global history. To serve as a tool of global history, however, the India Cotton experiment must be contextualized within local and regional boundaries. Thus far, the India Cotton experiment has appeared in global narratives as either minute enough to be almost totally ignored, or as a point upon which the acting historian may demonstrate a global theory.[10] But thus far, it has not been analyzed on its own terms. Historians have not asked what affect, if any, the India Cotton experiment had at that specific moment in time. What does the India Cotton experiment show us about how people imagined global connections in the 1840s? The India Cotton experiment offers a reprieve from expansive, monolithic claims about global themes and narratives. Rather, it allows us to flesh out the global, regional, and local tiers of single episode. It asks another question: what does it mean to *become* global? Historians cannot ignore the local and regional motivations the ultimately generate global connections.

Richard Drayton and David Motadel present two types of global history: comparative and connective. The comparative approach seeks to understand the events in one place via the events in another, to gain insight by focusing on their continuities, similarities, or differences.[11] The India Cotton experiment is connective because it highlights how actions in India by American and British figures impacted regional and global chatter about the cotton trade.[12] It is, by nature,

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[9] Jeremy Adelman, and ed. Sam Haselby, "What is Global History Now?" *Aeon,* 2 March 2017. https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment

[10] This sentence refers to Beckert and Sell, respectively.

[11] Drayton and Motadel, "Discussion: the futures of global history."

[12] Drayton and Motadel, "Discussion: the futures of global history."

highly entangled with the local, regional, and global scales. Locally, we must understand the motivations and contexts that produced the India Cottone experiment. Without placing the local within the regional, however, those contexts make little sense. It is only after understanding the origins of the India Cotton experiment that we may grasp its global connections.

Globalizing Cotton

To recognize the motivations of the British East India Company, we must first understand the global relationship between America, Britain, and India. In the 17th and 18th centuries India was the top exporter of cotton, both raw and manufactured.[13] This was largely due to the quality and diversity of cotton-products that Indian cotton manufacturers produced, including vibrant patterns, colors, and especially the calico print. Towards the end of the 18th century, British merchants travelled to India and appropriated the techniques to achieve the desired quality of product, then returned and refined the process using American cotton.

The British East India Company stimulated much of the early cotton trade between the eastern and western hemispheres. It was the imperial arm of the British government, responsible for acquiring favorable trade between Britain and India. This moment, when Britain pulled ahead of India in the cotton trade, is widely debated in the history of capitalism. As to why India fell behind Britain in terms of cotton cloth production, there are many reasons, although much of it can be attributed to the colonial influences of the British East India Company. Because the East India company had crept into India, slowly attaining land and control over Indian laborers and merchants, the company was less inclined to protect its Indian and British merchants in the subcontinent. If the Company could foster imports from Britain to India, then profits for British

[13] Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 49.

producers would increase. Thus, the incentive to support and protect Indian artisans and manufacturers was limited.[14] Prasannan Parthasarathi explains this tension clearly: "The English East India Company ruled India on a profit-loss basis. Investment in education, agriculture, the economy – anything at all, in fact – was viewed as a deduction from its earnings."[15] As we shall see later in this essay, this topic emerged again in British newspapers. There was a sudden call for *more* infrastructure to support cotton farmers. After surmounting this obstacle, the next roadblock to British cotton control was the level of output. Thus, the 18th century heralded technology like water frames, which used water to propel the cotton loom as opposed to human labor, and the flying shuttle, which had the miraculous effect of doubling the output, came to be.[16] By the early 1800s, the cotton export had completely flipped.

It was British manufacturers, using stolen tech and imported raw cotton from America, that were exporting manufactured textiles to India. In the late 18th and early 19th century, through steady land acquisition, the East India Company crept into the production market of Indian merchants. In the case of textile manufacturers, the Company completely cut out the middle men that corresponded and negotiated on behalf of the cotton weavers. By removing the mediating party, company agents gained control over the weavers themselves. By the early 19th century, India was another colonial conquest in the British imperial collection. So began Britain's domination and suppression of the Indian cotton market, which, behind the American South, was the top exporter of cotton for the world trade. Despite the control that British merchants exerted over the Indian cotton market, the British producers still relied on America for raw cotton. This was because upland cotton, or *Gossypium hirsutum*, was the most desirable strain of cotton. It

[14] Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600-1850,* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 256.
[15] Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600-1850,* 256.
[16] Beckert, *Empire of Cotton,* 65.

was a durable strain, and the stem of *Gossypium hirsutism* was sufficiently long enough to be worked through the cotton refining machines. More importantly, however, America could produce more of it for cheaper through slave labor. The United States dominated the cotton export through slavery. Under the American plantation system, slaves farmed raw cotton for immediate export to England. Once in England, cotton was sent to Lancashire, where English laborers (with the help of water looms and cotton gins) crafted the fibrous plant into usable textiles.

Although hugely profitable for Britain, an ideal trade system would be completely in-house: Britain would no longer rely on America for raw cotton import and would instead find a way to grow cheaper cotton within the British sphere of influence. British manufacturers sought to disrupt the regional cotton relationship between Britan and America. Moreover, the threat of war between America and Britain seemed to be constantly on the horizon. If the British textile market suddenly lost its supply of cheap cotton, then the economy would crumble. There was no backup plan that could replace American cotton. Luckily for Lancashire, the British East India Company had its talons in many tropical climes, and the Indian subcontinent was a viable option for cotton experimentation. So, after 1828, the East India Company began acquiring land, cotton strains, and equipment for an extended cotton plantation experiment.

Cotton in India

It is important that we do not disregard Indian cotton exports to Britain before the India cotton experiment. Notably, there were already strains of cotton native to India, and most small time farmers already grew their own cotton. The difference, then, is that the India cotton

experiment was an attempt to grow cotton on the large scale, to convert small time farms into producers that could rival American plantations.

This section explores the local comparisons between American and India cotton. This comparison perhaps reflects how British, American, and Indian cotton farmers thought about the future of the cotton trade. In modern day, there are four dominant strains of cotton: *G. hirsutum, G. barbadense, G. herbaceum, and G. arboretum,* grown in Mesoamerica, South America, Africa, and Asia respectively.[17] In the early 1800s, *Gossypium bardanese* was the most popular cotton strain. It was a blend of strains from Mexico, Georgia, and Siam. It was used almost exclusively in Mississippi River Valley and lauded for its resiliency in various climates and soils. In India, before the intrusion of Europeans onto the cotton scene, the species primarily grown were *G. arboretum* and *G. herbaceum.*[18] Of the Indian cotton exports that made it to Lancashire, 25% of each pound was rejected because it was too unclean, commonly mixed with dirt and leaves.[19]

Additionally, the short stem length of Indian cotton proved unworkable in Lancashire spinning machines. This relates to the importance of cotton in India at the time: it was primarily used in a subsistence capacity. Only in a few places was cotton grown for profit, one example being the districts of the Bombay Presidency and Berar. Leacock and Mandelbaum point out, however, that even in the height of efficiency at these farms, the cotton was still poorly picked. They argue that this is because the cotton pickers were contracted laborers, and thus had no incentive to deliver clean cotton. Rather, they cared about picking as much cotton as possible

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[17] Beckert, *Empire of Cotton,* 6.
[18] Department of Agriculture & Cooperation, Ministry of Agriculture, Govt of India, *Revolution in Indian Cotton,* (Mumbai, India: Directorate of Cotton Development, 2009) 8.
[19] Leacock, S., &Mandelbaum, D.G, "A Nineteenth Century Development Project in India: The Cotton Improvement Program," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* vol.3, no.4 (1955): 334-51, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1151961, 336.

within a short amount of time, regardless of quality.[20] Notably, Baptist points out that enslaved laborers in America faced this same issue, and would be punished for anything less than the required amount of cotton bolls and perfect clean quality.

Leacock and Mandelbaum contribute this to the nature of the cotton industry in the early 1800s. Cotton was not grown on a large scale like it was in America for profit. Rather, the cotton industry in India was of a subsistence sort. It was a "crop of secondary importance…it received little or no care and was gathered at the cultivator's convenience…"[21] Before large scale manufacturing machines were imported, ryots used a small foot-roller to separate the cotton bolls from the seeds. Primarily, ryots farmed cotton to sustain necessities like clothing, bedding, and other soft fibrous materials.[22] Compared to American cotton plantations, Indian ryots were sorely lacking in efficiency and output.

More importantly, the strains of Indian cotton being farmed in the early 19th century had a short staple, or stem. This meant that those strains were not compatible with the spinning and manufacturing machines in Britain. If the American planters in India could transplant the longer stemmed American strains, then the textile industry in Britain could rely more on Indian imports than American ones. Thus, much of the discussion in newspapers like *The Bombay Times* centered on the agricultural success in India of the American farmers. These papers covered details about Indian soil, native farmers and their use of American plows, and the growth and progress of New Orleans cotton, Bourbon Cotton, and Upland cotton. These strains are all variations of *G. hirsutum.*

[20] Leacock and Mandelbaum, "A Nineteenth Century Development Project in India," 337.
[21] Ibid., 337.
[22] Ibid., 337.

Cotton could be fickle, and it would need years of fine tuning in the subcontinent before it could compete on the scale of production happening in the American south. The entire experiment hinged first on this primary success. Once it was ascertained that American strains could grow in India, then the farmers could focus on producing the same amount of cotton at the same rate to compete with the American south.

The American mission in India was clear: these farmers needed to grow the right cotton for the right type of machine at the cheapest price. Understanding the success and failure of different strains of cotton helps the modern historian imagine how farmers of the antebellum cotton world planned for their futures in the trade. The American farmers that moved to India for this experiment had to know that their success depended on appropriate adjustment for growing American cotton strains in a new region.

To the British, the fact that cotton farming already existed in India was a vote of confidence in the experiment. It was clear that cotton could grow in India, now the trick was to maximize growth. For Americans, on the other hand, India was a land that would only improve with the addition of American technology and methods. Cotton farmers in America had already experiment with crossbreeding cotton strains, developing resilient variations of *G. hirsutum,* the same strains grown in the Mississippi River valley. India was not a land untouched by cotton farming: that was why it was a good option for the experiment, and also why it was so threatening to American farmers.

Fragile Structures of the American South

Now that we have established an effective picture of the cotton trade and the American south, we may finally introduce the beginnings of the project itself. In 1839, three years after

Thomas Lack sought approval for this India cotton experiment, an agent of the British East India Company named Thomas Bayles landed in America after conducting a brief cotton experiment in India using Bourbon seed. He travelled to America to investigate, interview, and ultimately hire the American farmers for the Indian cotton experiment. He landed first in New York, then travelled south to Charleston, South Carolina. After that he journeyed to Augusta, Georgia, one of the cotton metropoles of the region, then to Savannah, Georgia for respite from the yellow fever epidemic. He continued to Macon and Colombia, then finally journeyed to Mississippi, where he recruited most of his overseers. His journeys took him through the verdant cotton lands of the south, where he doubtless saw the expansive rice and indigo plantations of the southeast, as well as the sprawling cotton farms of middle Georgia. When he arrived in Natchez, Mississippi, his fellow British agents warned him to keep his mission a secret, lest he inspire spite from the southerners. Over time, of course, his secret got out, and he was threatened by American southerners so often and with such vehemence that he had to travel everywhere with arms.[23] Over the course of the year, Bayles journeyed through the American South and recruited ten American planters.[24] Upon arriving in India in 1840, three planters, Hamilton McCullough, Thomas R. Woulfe, and John McCullough, were sent to Broach in the Bombay presidency. In the Madras Presidency, I.N. Hawley, Samuel Morris, and Samuel Simpson resided in the Tinnevelly district. Lastly, Thomas J. Finnie, W.R. Mercer, Thomas I. Terry, and John M. Blount settled in the Bengal Presidency, in Cawnpore.[25] Alas, none of these men would find the bounty they expected in India. The farmers in Broach resigned before 1842. Two overseers in Madras

[23] Frenise A. Logan, "A British East India Company Agent in the United States 1839-1840," *Agricultural History,* vol. 48 no. 2, (April, 1974) https://www.jstor.org/stable/3741235, 272.
[24] Newspapers of the time suggest that twelve planters were sent to India, although both Zack Sell and Christopher Florio present ten farmers in their respective works.
[25] Logan, "A British East India Company Agent in the United States 1839-1840," 274.

returned to America in 1845 at the end of their contract, having had almost no success with American strains of cotton. The third farmer died in India. Three of the four American farmers in Bengal returned in 1845, except for Finnie, who remained until 1849, then returned, unsuccessful, to America.[26]

Where did these planters come from, and why would they leave America? To answer this question requires an investigation into regional societal structures in the American south. Within the existing social and economic structure, it would be unlikely for any of the 10 planters to ascend to the level of plantation master. Their only options for social mobility lay outside America, halfway around the world. Walter Johnson's analysis on the Mississippi river valley perhaps offers some explanations. The region's history as an early addition to the United States of America was rife with violence and collusion. Initially, the government took steps to clear the land of all indigenous, so that it might become an "empire of liberty," in the dreamy words of Thomas Jefferson.[27] This "empire of liberty" referred exclusively to the opportunities of the white yeoman farmer. Jefferson dreamt that the Mississippi river valley would be a place for middle class farmers to live via sustenance farming, away from cosmopolitan dwellings, and become "masters of their own destiny."[28] Rather, what emerged in the following century was a society of plantation capitalism, violent and abusive to both black bodies and the earth.[29] At the beginning of the 1830's, the Mississippi region of arable land was launched into the center of a massive economic boom. Notably, the government surveyors could not keep up with the demand

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[26] Ibid., 275.
[27] Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Harvard, MA: The Belknap Press, 2013) 3.
[28] Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams,* 3.
[29] Not addressed in the main body of this essay is the emphasis that Johnson places on the racial conquest. His book focuses on the detailed relationships between cotton and capital, land and labor, and credit and debt. Johnson focuses on the antebellum south through the lens of cotton, and then traces its history to the forming of the confederate states. In this way, he highlights how enduring the importance of cotton capitalism was to the American south, important enough that it became the Confederate States of America.

for land, nor could they find a convenient way to account for the white squatters who already laid claim to individual plots. Once the valley had been surveyed and gridded, tediously accounted for in the maps of the American government, the territory was officially up for sale. As Johnson notes, the area was shortly flooded with capital and claims to the land.[30] The pursuit of fertile land in the region was too frenzied to properly order. As previously mentioned, white squatters claimed territory that was technically owned by others who had land grants from the British, Spanish, and the French. Plainly, the land was not managed quickly enough by government surveyors and bureaucrats to account for the region's previous history under other nations. To help remedy this situation, the bureaucrats developed preemption laws. These laws allowed for the sale of land to white squatters (before the land went on the public market) that had already been living there, with the stipulation that the land be improved upon and paid off by the end of the year.[31] Johnson points out, however, that the squatter's plots often did not geographically line up with gridded surveying that the bureaucrats carried out. The solution to this was the creation of floating land grants, which agents of the Land Office used to entice squatters to move off the land.[32] Significantly, these grants could also be sold to others. This is where the addition of capital and money comes into play. Preemption law was supposed to have a built-in ceiling because, in theory, no man could buy more land than he could labor and farm on. However, a rich white man could buy the land grants, herd white squatters off the land, then buy the labor of others (enslaved blacks) and thus meet the ceiling of the preemption law. Thus, this was the first and perhaps most important step to creating the divided caste system of the south. Land that originally belonged to indigenous communities was pushed towards the small-time white farmer,

[30] Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Harvard, MA: The Belknap Press, 2013) 36.
[31] Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams,* 38.
[32] Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams,* 28.

but ultimately succumbed to the wealthy buyers who then threw up the plantation system of the south.[33]

As we can see, the development of the Mississippi river valley was not conducive to the advancement of poor whites, nor was it the "empire of liberty" that Jefferson had imagined. Rather, the fertile grounds of the valley became plantations, which widened the gap between the rich and the poor. It is important to note that the farmers of the India cotton experiment were not plantation masters, nor were they poor whites. These farmers were part of the white middle class of the South, primarily by driving enslaved laborers. Rather, they made up the white overseer population that worked on cotton plantations. These men could not easily break into the elite Southern planter class. In many ways, the southern caste system completely stifled social mobility. Yeoman farmers knew enough about cotton agriculture to farm on their own, while simultaneously maintaining the ambition and impetus to leave the South.

Bayles' search for planters caused fiery upheaval in the American South. Planters were outraged and incensed, but most of all, they were worried for the future of American cotton.[34] If free labor succeeded in India, then what would that mean for the American cotton economy? Understandably, this experiment in India could potentially undercut American plantation cotton. The livelihood of an entire system was at risk. Of course, these planters could not know at the time that they had nothing to fear (yet). Ultimately, the India cotton experiment would fail. Much of the failure was contributed to biology, perceived racial inferiority, and cultural differences in India. The truth, however, was that American plantation capitalism could not be transplanted into India.

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[33] Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams,* 38.
[34] Ibid., 94.

Interestingly, what the articles in *The American Farmer* show, above all, is fear. These people were afraid that India cotton could dethrone American cotton. Notably, these articles show that Americans perceived slavery as something that could be separated from cotton farming. There was an idea that the same level of cotton production and profits could be reproduced *without* the exploitation of bonded labor. Americans were afraid of the East India Company and the India cotton experiment. The East India Company was not a threat that the authors took lightly. Rather, they acknowledged the following:

> "the English government having once turned their attention to this subject, and embarked in the enterprize, will not turn back until a full and thorough trial has been made of the practicability of the project—and all who are conversant with their policy must be aware that slight obstacles have never prevented her from pushing forward any plan for the extension of her trade and commerce, or for the promotion of her manufacturing interest."[35]

This quote falls short of spelling ultimate doom for American cotton, but nonetheless warns the reader to take the India experiment seriously. Britain was still a powerful empire, and the EIC was only one arm of influence. After the intimidating prose surrounding the East India Company, the author leaves the reader with one final note about the profit of free versus slave labor: "Now when all our improvements in cotton growing, our machines, our seed, and our very overseers are transferred to that vast continent, swarming with *free laborers, who will work at a price which would scarcely furnish a negroe with his salt in Mississippi, it will be all over with us in the cultivation of cotton."*[36] This warning directly addresses the issue of bonded versus unbonded labor. As we shall see later in this essay, it was the violence and terror of American

[35] "Cotton in India," *The American Farmer, and Spirit of the Agricultural Journals of the Day,* May 13, 1840, p. 401.
[36] "Cotton in India," *The American Farmer,* p. 401.

slavery that drove the extreme wealth and profit of the cotton plantation system. Moreover, when the American farmers in India tried to stand up unbonded labor, they ultimately fell back on their own knowledge of forced labor. If this experiment in India succeeded, American slavery would be rendered moot. British markets would have a new source of raw cotton, not reliant on slave labor which was increasingly contested on the global stage.

America's success in the cotton trade hinged on slave labor, in more ways than one. Without slavery, American plantation owners would not reap nearly the same profits. Although the cotton plantations of the Mississippi River Valley produced some of the wealthiest men in the world, there was a fatal flaw that hovered just outside their sphere of control. The Mississippi River Valley, where the American farmers came from, imported "most of the wheat, corn, beef, and pork its residents required to live from the Midwest and the Ohio Valley."[37] In other words, plantation owners devoted most of their capital to either buying more capital (enslaved laborers) or growing cotton. This left very little land, labor, or time for sustenance. Walter Johnson points out that there were a few planters in the antebellum period that attempted to diversify their crops using a self-sustaining system. First, they would plant corn, then feed the corn to the cattle, who would then forage in the surrounding woodlands and swamps for the rest of their necessary diet. This kept a ready supply of livestock for the plantation, but simultaneously negated arable land that could be used for cotton farming. Johnson explains this tension clearly: "Like corn, livestock drew upon the same land and labor as cotton. The energy of each sector of earth could be converted to stock or staple, but not both; the labor of each hand had to be committed to raising either fodder or fabric."

[37] Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap press of Harvard University Press, 2013) 176.

Mississippi planters were aware of this reliance on cotton profits and the personal lack of edible crops. *The American Farmer,* in light of the India cotton experiment, urged its readers to lessen their reliability on imported food: "…they [the readers] should learn to practice a system of *domestic economy,* which may render them independent of supplies from neighboring States, in regard to essentially things, for which they now look abroad, as it seems to us, without any absolute necessity, in their climate, soil or circumstances."[38] The paper goes on to explain that when profits from cotton are sufficient, then planters may continue their current reliance on its stability. It is telling that these articles emerged *after* the threat of Indian cotton entered the global economy. These newspapers were trying to prepare their readers for the worst possible situation: a destabilization of plantation capitalism. Almost flippantly, the author includes the following remark:

> "Although it may be that when the price of cotton is high, as it has been occasionally, for a year or two, it might be more profitable for the time to give all care to that; yet the question is whether, for a series of years, it would not be more expedient to combine, with attention to this main object, a *system* of domestic economy, which cannot be taken up and laid down at pleasure."[39]

The tone of this quote was suggestive, not intended to inspire fear, but rather to ponder a new future for the South, one that might hold up better when cotton profits failed to carry the weight of the regional and national economy. This article was written in October of 1841, and attached to it is an excerpt from the London Journal of Commerce, titled "The Cultivation of Cotton in India." In short, it details the hopeful outlook that the chamber had for the prospect of

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[38] "The Cotton Interest: The Cultivation of Cotton in India," *The American Farmer, and Spirit of the Agricultural Journals of the Day,* Oct. 14, 1840, p.161.
[39] "The Cotton Interest," *The American Farmer,* p.161.

agricultural development in India. It was a positive review of how the cotton experiment might progress in India, hopeful for the future of British cotton farming.

Excerpts from the *American Farmer* show that there is a certain level of self-awareness for American planters in the south. Southerners felt threatened by the India cotton experiment because they knew that cotton was more than just a way to make profit. It was their *only* way to make profit. They imported their food, they had limited arable land for subsistence farming, and their laborers were enslaved. Should the India cotton experiment succeed, there was no backup plan.

Comparisons: British and American Sources

For one member of the American government, the threat that the India cotton experiment posed was not to be taken lightly. From the American south to the Indian subcontinent, agricultural specialists had their eyes on the Indian Cotton experiment. Newspapers reported the successes and failures of the endeavor, British journalists and abolitionists the world over kept track of what this experiment might mean in the grand scheme of the textile trade. In the heart of Bombay, there was another American who had a vested interest in the Indian Cotton experiment. He was the Vice Consulate of Bombay, named E. A. Webster. He assumed primary duty of the Consulate in early 1840 when the previous Consul resigned. As the American representative in India, V.C. Webster had many responsibilities. Mostly, he kept track of American interests in the area, including trade prospects, exports and imports, and political machinations that may implicate American assets. It was his responsibility to maneuver positive economic arrangements on behalf of American merchants in India.

On October 1, 1841, Webster sent a letter to the secretary about the Indian cotton experiment. According to him, "The avowed object of this movements was such an improvement in the stock of Indian cotton as would together with its greater cheapness, enable it to command the markets, and supply the demands of English manufacturers to the exclusion of all foreign grown cotton."[40] In this case, 'foreign grown cotton' refers to American cotton. V.C. Webster made several allusions to the threat that this experiment posed to southern cotton profits. In truth, this letter, along with all the letters that V.C. Webster wrote in his short time as acting Consul, may not have even crossed the desk of the secretary. There is an index of letters sent and received by the Secretary in the National Archives, and Webster's name is noticeably missing from the "received" column.

Regardless of whether the secretary saw Webster's warning about the potential ramifications of this experiment (should it succeed), the V.C. saw fit to not only mention the experiment but also explain the goals and profit potential that the East India Company predicted. He, like the southern farmers and journalists, perceived a very real threat to the American economy. Significantly, this indicates an awareness that cotton was *vital* to the American economy.

His position as a man removed from America, yet seriously invested in America's foreign economic exploits provides us with a credible perspective on the India cotton experiment. His letter to the Secretary mirrors the southern fear that American could be unseated as the top exporter of cotton. Even far removed from the political aura of the American south, V.C. Webster exhibited the same fear and anxieties as the readers of *The American Farmer*.

[40] E. A. Webster to Daniel Webster, Secretary of State, October 1, 1841, Consulate Papers.

Through a side by side comparison of *The American Farmer* and *The Bombay Times,* this section asks the following question: what does it mean that Americans and British are talking about the same thing, i.e. the failings of the British government? Clearly, the India cotton experiment was only one subset of a much larger conversation, and points to an awareness among British readers of the competition across the Atlantic. The Parliamentary papers and Consular papers already show that the representatives of British and American governments were thinking comparatively. Now, with the introduction of these papers, we know that the readers of cotton interests were thinking comparatively, too.

The role of the government in economic structures was hotly debated in both America and Britain. It is in these newspapers that we may fully understand how both Americans and the British perceived "The American System." In America, editors and readers compared the American government and its role in the economy alongside that of the British. Could the British government build the infrastructure necessary to support a cotton economy in India? American readers were anxious about the possibility that the British government could step in and alleviate the logistical problems that plagued large scale cotton farming in India. Although cotton farming was something that Americans knew well, cotton growth outside the structures of racialized slavery and plantation profit was totally foreign. Here is where the implications of the Indian cotton experiment may be dissected once more. The threat of unbonded labor, or wage labor, emerged in newspapers both in America and Bombay, often in conversation with one another. The extent to which American authors tracked and documented the success of the India cotton experiment shows the intense anxiety of American farmers. More than that, however, it also shows an unawareness of the true nature of the "American System." In speculating on what the British government could do to better prop up the cotton farming in India, authors from *The*

Bombay Times and *The American Farmer* both obtusely ignore the element of slavery and its role in the "American System," although to different ends.

The American Farmer delivered more than just intimidating news to the planter class of America. The authors of the newspaper clearly did their own investigative research into the minutiae of implications that emerged from this experiment in India. One author posed the following question to their readers: "what obstacles have prevented the development of capabilities in India to supply the country, under whose government she groans, with an article from which, were she suddenly cut off, the very existence of that government would be endangered [?]"[41] Essentially, the author questions why India under British control has not become the primary cotton provider to the British textile market. The author argues that it is the taxes implemented by the British government officials that has held back Indian farmers from reaching the consistent supply levels that American plantations have provided. From the start, without any reference to varying prices for crops, the British government demands a fixed tax from every field and then "extracts 35 to 45 percent of the money value of that produce as its share for ever…"[42] The author goes on to explain that

> "When an individual fails in the payment of his tax, it is collected off the village. When the crop of a whole village is deficient, neighboring villages are compelled to make up the deficiency. 45 parts in a 100 of the gross produce of the soil are taken by the government. As to the cultivator, his average share of the gross produce is stated to be generally from five to six in a hundred!"[43]

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[41] "Cotton Culture in India.," *The American Farmer, and Spirit of the Agricultural Journals of the Day,* April 14, 1841, no.2, 48.
[42] "Cotton Culture in India.," *The American Farmer, and Spirit of the Agricultural Journals of the Day,* April 14, 1841, no.2, 48.
[43] "Cotton Culture in India.," *The American Farmer, and Spirit of the Agricultural Journals of the Day,* April 14, 1841, no.2, 48.

The small time cultivators and ryots of India could not begin farming without first taking out a loan from the local banker, who charged high interest rates, and then once the crop ripened, the revenue officers would not allow the cotton to be picked until "security be given for the payment of the land-tax."[44] Thus, the cotton ripened, fell from the plant, then became mixed with dirt and leaves which in turn deteriorated the quality of the crop. Later, after the cotton was brought to government yards, it would often be buried in pits until the owner could pay the taxes upon the product, further ruining the quality of the crop.[45]

All these factors contributed to the oppressive proprietary claim of the British empire. The tone of the newspaper article is clear: despite having access to the fertile agricultural lands of India, the British empire's universal lording over the Indian people was ultimately responsible for undercutting potential cotton production. The author concedes at the end of the article that all of these issues are fixable, and that "A wise government could remove them all."[46] The issues of Indian cotton did not lie in the quality of the soil, the laborers, or even the technology. Rather, the fault lived in the British government itself. Despite these ruminations, "the exportation of Indian cotton to Britain, has increased, as we have seen, during the last seven years, at the rate of 145 per cent., while that of American cotton has advances at the rate of but 70 percent.!"[47] Clearly, Indian cotton was on the rise, rapidly growing to compete with American exports.

In parsing out the facts of this story, there is tension. Was India cotton a threat, or was it nothing to be concerned about? Would British markets pull out entirely from American cotton

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[44] Ibid.
[45] For more information about the oppressive land tax that British officials placed upon Indian ryots, look to Christopher Florio's "From Poverty to Slavery: Abolitionists, Overseers, and the Global Struggle for Labor in India."
[46] "Cotton Culture in India.," *The American Farmer, and Spirit of the Agricultural Journals of the Day,* April 14, 1841, no.2, 48.
[47] "Cotton Culture in India.," *The American Farmer, and Spirit of the Agricultural Journals of the Day,* April 14, 1841, no.2, 48.

production, or would the textile system remain as it was? The many newspapers that followed this story seemed to flip flop, because the truth was that no one knew. The prevalence of these questions and speculations about the India cotton experiment shows us that Americans were deeply afraid, but also that they perceived cotton farming and profits as something that could be removed and set apart from American slavery. It is likely that American southerners recognized the unsustainability of the plantation system and the ways in which it could easily be destabilized.

Indian newspapers reflected similar sentiments about the prospects of success in India. These were discussed at great length in *The Bombay Times.* One article published in the 4 December issue of 1841 echoes that the British government *must* step in if Indian cotton is to compete with American cotton. This article includes information from a letter to the British government from the Bombay Chamber of Commerce. The merchants in the chamber call for better roads, upon which covered wagons full of cotton could properly travel to the shipping docks. Additionally, the author of the article argues that British officials in India must provide better ports, larger ones, more equipped to handle increased shipping demands. The merchants argue that storehouses for cotton loads along the larger thoroughfares would help maintain the purity of the cotton bolls.[48] The article goes on, listing all the ideas from the chamber that might increase the quality of Indian cotton, the speed with which it might arrive in Britain, and the techniques for managing large shipments while enduring limited loss on potential profit. Most of the solutions listed in the article call for increased British intervention. The merchants argue that the native laborers cannot and will not band together to pay for storehouses or sheds along the

[48] "Cotton Cultivation in India," *The Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce,* December 4, 1841, p784.

routes, but rather that it must be a part of a larger project to develop Indian infrastructure, headed and paid for by the British government.

The Bombay Times calls for a solution to this problem. The author argues that middlemen should not be receiving as much profit as they do, at the expense of the laborers themselves. Presumably, "middlemen" refers to the merchants and traders who are buying the cotton then reselling it to British markets (often referred to as intermediary purchasers in the newspapers). This solution came about in a discussion of potential incentives to grow cotton. The article from *The Bombay Times* titled "Cotton Cultivation in India" discusses the pros and cons of incentives offered by the British government in India to grow cotton. The author argues that

> "the general and permanent improvement of the Cotton can only be produced by advantages equally general and permanent ; and these will only be found when the cultivators, released from the trammels of the middlemen—who at present hold them in bondage, and consumer the profit of their exertion,-- shall begin themselves to reap the increased returns which increased carefulness and labour would then bring to them…"[49]

The author argued that initially, incentives to grow cotton might prove fruitful and bring forth a zealous group of farmers. Ultimately, however, most of those farmers would fail, and so cotton agriculture would increase only incrementally. A more permanent solution to increasing cotton growth and production in India needs a lasting presence, beyond early monetary incentives. The tone of the article circles back to an emphasis on British infrastructure and intervention.

In a way, *The Bombay Times* is speculating on how to create a type of cotton farming that could exist outside the "American System," and thus *actually* removed from slavery. It could be considered obtuse, but the issues that the paper points out certainly seem like government

[49] "Cotton Cultivation in India," *The Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce,* December 4, 1841, p784

structures that would make unbonded labor (wage labor) more profitable for all parties involved, not just the merchants. One is struck by the differences between *The Bombay Times* and *The American Farmer.* The *Times* is focused on larger governmental structures that could create long term cotton production, working with the Indian ryots as they are, without American intervention. *The American Farmer,* by contrast, produced rationale as to why their readers should or should not be concerned about the Indian cotton experiment.

The contrast in these papers illuminate two perspectives on the increasingly globalized world of the 19th century. The British seem to be one step ahead. For those readers, they already know that America is a threat, and they seem to have known for a long time. The India cotton experiment was just one project in a much broader goal to unseat American cotton. The British readers have already located their position in the global transformation of cotton.

For the readers of *The American Farmer,* they are playing a rapid game of catch up. Their perspective from the local success of the American cotton trade, for the first time, has been challenged in the form of the India cotton experiment. Suddenly, there was a powerful country that had the capital to threaten the South's position as a dominant region in the cotton trade. We return again to the questions posed at the beginning of this work: how do the respective readers of these newspapers conceptualize the growing arena of the cotton trade?

The two newspapers perceive cotton and cotton farming differently. For the British, the Indian cotton experiment was not the end all, be all solution to creating a powerful cotton market in India. In truth, there was a larger call to create structures that would better facilitate the cotton trade as it already was. For the Americans, the implications of the Indian cotton experiment reflect even further on the American government. If this experiment succeeded with unbonded laborers, then American slavery would lose the competitive edge within domestic American

policies that kept it alive in the American south: profit. If American cotton lost its place in the British textile trade, then American southern profit would tank, especially in the Mississippi river valley. If American cotton no longer propelled the economy of the country, then American abolitionists would be one step closer to removing slavery from America once and for all.

The question of abolition leads to one final component of the comparative project of the India Cotton experiment: slavery. Southern Americans were already hyper aware of their reliance on slave labor, and thus the threat that wage Indian labor may present to their way of life. But there was another group, the British abolitionists, who were advocating in support of this project.

British Abolition

Bronwen Everill argues for two types of British abolitionist movements in the late 18th and 19th centuries: legitimate commerce and free produce. Free produce was the movement to replace bonded labor with free labor.[50] Of course, "free" does not always truly mean liberty, but in this essay, it refers to a form of wage labor. It was out of this abolition movement that the British India Society (founded in 1839) developed. On July 6th, 1839, the group held their first meeting, which vied for the creation of a society that would act as a mouthpiece for the Indian laborer, who they considered oppressed and downtrodden by the British East India Company.[51] The opener and recorder of the meeting, Lord Henry Brougham, made it clear that it was not the agents of the Company that were to blame for the treatment of Indians, but the system itself. His opening speech calls for the lifting up of Indian laborers, mostly through sound governance, to

[50] Bronwen Everill, *Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020) 6.
[51] Lord Henry Brougham, "Speeches delivered at a public meeting of the formation of a British India Society, held…July 6th, 1839, the Right Hon. Lord Brougham… in the chair," London: Printed for the British India Society, 1839, 74 pages, located in the Kress Library of Business and Economics, Harvard University, Accessed through the Gale Primary Sources database, GALE|U0105703063.

provide them with wages and infrastructure so that they might stand on their own, no longer suffering the abuse of over-taxation on land. This taxation will be addressed again in Bombay newspapers later in this essay. The significance of this group cannot go unnoticed.

This group recognized the relationship between the British textile industry and the American cotton trade, which of course drew profit from slave labor. To these British abolitionists, relying on American slave labor for raw cotton was hypocritical, especially since the British government abolished slavery in 1834. This is primarily why the BIS threw its support behind the cotton endeavor lead by the British East India Company in India. Members of the BIS saw this experiment as an opportunity to rid the British merchants of their reliance on slave labor for cheap cotton. Moreover, it was an experiment that would have far reaching affects: ultimately, removing slave labor from the cotton industry would destabilize American profits and justifications for the slave trade. Overall, the India cotton experiment captured the interests of a large group of British abolitionists. Their interest in the effects of the experiment thus brought the endeavor to national and international attention.

In their ability to think progressively and into the future, this group demonstrated an awareness of increasing global connections. They, like the American and British readers of popular newspapers, looked at the India Cotton experiment and saw far reaching consequences, impacts that could shape the world's future. Although they may not have been thinking 'comparatively' in the sense that the British and American newspapers were, the abolitionists were certainly thinking globally. This group of abolitionists teases us with a loose thread, that, when pulled, may lead us to a slew of other observations about connective themes in the globalized 19th century, one of which being slavery. In addition, this group of abolitionists represent a local group that was thinking regionally and globally. These British abolitionists were

conceptualizing their country's transregional connection to America, and seeking to change it via a new global connection (the India cotton experiment).

Conclusion

The India Cotton experiment is important for global history because it is an opportunity to examine the global ramifications and connections of a local event. It is global in numerous ways: the farmers, the agents of the EIC, the members of parliament and American consuls that took interest in it, and the location upon which it was carried out. In another capacity, the India Cotton experiment was a microscopic meeting ground in history. It was a project that drew international attention, if only for a few years, and threatened the boundaries of a national establishment: the global cotton trade. The India Cotton experiment forced Americans and Britons to think comparatively. It generated questions about the future of slavery and the cotton trade.

Part of the reason that the India Cotton experiment is valuable to global history is because it was a failure, and the Americans and British who were interested in it initially had to accept that it would not have any (immediate) major impact on the global cotton trade. It still matters, though. It matters because it was an opportunity for people to think globally, to analyze comparatively. It reflected anxieties and generated discussion about future projects and government structures that might change the cotton trade. Rather than making sweeping generalizations about the increasing global connections of the 19th century, the India Cotton experiment stays grounded within specific temporal boundaries. In the field of global history, this analysis of the experiment allows us to examine the interdependence of the local, regional,

and global. This story is an integration of these scales of space. Thus, from the margins of cotton history, the India Cotton experiment offers historians a moment to analyze global connections.

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