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### Ginning Cotton and Slavery Veils

Ask almost any primary schoolchild who invented the Cotton Gin and they will tell you matter-of-factly it was Eli Whitney. They might also add that it was in 1794. Ask Angela Lakwete and you would get a very different answer. In her book *Inventing the Cotton Gin: Machine and Myth in Antebellum America* she deconstructs this simplistic version of ginning history. She reminds readers that the cotton gin is almost as ancient as the very act of cultivating cotton.

Lakwete begins her book with descriptions of the origin of cotton gins in Asia. She then follows ginning technology west where it became critical to the rapid industrialization of Britain. Joseph Eve a Philadelphia born businessman working in the Bahamas invented a self-feeding gin several years before Whitney's 1794 "breakthrough." Whitney's gin separated much more cotton fibers than Eve's but the fibers were mangled. This willing sacrifice of quality over quantity prompted Whitney's business partner Phineas Miller to patent, license, and legally fight anyone who attempted to copy Whitney's design. These legal proceedings are of no little consequence in shaping of Whitney's and the gin's mythos. They are partly the reason that it appears that Whitney's invention was only preceded by slaves that separated the cotton fibers from the bolls by hand.

The 'deliberate inventor' pedestal is not the only one that Lakwete pushed out from under Eli Whitney. His celebrated Yankee ingenuity is called into question when she reveals evidence of southern mechanics improving Whitney's rough design into the saw gins whose technology is still in use today. What can be made of these claims and this evidence? With Whitney's cotton gin placed within a longer narrative context and southern mechanics improving

on the model later, does this explain the success of the cotton industry and the increase of slaves held in the Antebellum South of America to work this king crop?

Lakwete stops short of any major assertions that are not directly stated with her sources. As a result her work does little to offer another argument within the slavery narrative at the slave level. What her book does it remove the specialness of Eli Whitney's contribution to the American way of life as well as reveal more about industrialization of the American south in the years preceding the American Civil War.

In contrast with Lakwete's lack of slave as harbinger of knowledge, Royline Fontenelle-Williams Thesis *Beneath the Veil of Slavery: Black Ingenuity, Technological Space and the Antiguan Slave* examines the knowledge base and technological innovations within the culture of the slave as a major factor in the success of sugar plantations in the West Indies. The investigation of the knowledge base held within the syrup boiling houses on the plantation is a fine example of innovation and specialization of a skillset. This knowledge was shared by all the slaves who worked within the building and constantly improved or monitored in order to produce as much profit for the plantation owner's as possible.

Her research on these slaves and their knowledge spaces reveal that indigenous knowledge can be readily adapted to fit certain situations. Much of this knowledge allowed plantation owners to survive severe droughts early in the endeavor to exploit the islands of the West Indies. It also works to reveal how innovations and improvements within the work expected of slaves can, and should, be considered to be a type of science. This work should serve as a model for attempts to explain any knowledge base in other slave cultures.

When read together Lakwete reveals that no single event or individual has created a better world for slaves or an increase in cotton production, while Fontenelle-Williams proves that

there was knowledge created and improved on within the slave labor force themselves. In both cases, the cotton gin and the boiling houses both created a special group of individuals with special skillsets that were important to the men running the plantations. Whether or not these skillsets helped or hindered individuals after the Emancipation in America is hard to discern, but there can be no doubt that what was created as a result of a new or improved technology was a precise knowledge base within a group of individuals who were supposed to have none.