
Walter Johnson begins *River of Dark Dreams* with Thomas Jefferson’s vision of a western American frontier populated by an independent landholding yeomanry. Johnson sets out to narrate the demise of Jefferson’s vision by force of another vision, which Johnson names “slave racial capitalism.”¹ According to Johnson, historians’ understanding of the intensifying conflict over slavery in the 1840s and 50s is limited by conceptual anachronisms. “The South,” most often defined by the states which became part of the Confederacy, is a “spatial euphemism,” he explained, that has been imbued with historical meaning and significance.² Johnson repudiates such a characterization and recovers alternative southern visions at play before the Civil War. Instead of defining the South in reference to the politics of secession, Johnson asks “where Southerners (and slaveholders in particular) thought they were going and how they thought they could pull it off in the first place.”³

Such an expansive question gives Johnson the opportunity to re-narrate almost any and everything about slavery, which he nearly does. In more than four hundred pages and over fourteen chapters, Johnson integrates into a single narrative what historians have learned from decades of scholarship on slave labor and resistance, staple crop production, the domestic slave trade, as well as southern plantation economies and the global cotton market. As a result, he sidesteps many historiographical debates that have defined slavery studies. For example, the chapters “Dominion,” “The Empire of White Man’s Will,” and “The Carceral Landscape” detail the horrors of slavery including various forms of torture, starvation, and sexual violence against

¹ Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom,* 2013, 14.
² Ibid., 15.
³ Ibid., 16.
slaves, yet, at times, highlight the cooperative nature of slave labor and solidarity within slave communities. But slavery was detrimental to both slaveholders and slaves. Slaveholders, in addition to being vile, inhumane, merciless villains, were further denigrated by their commercialism—plagued by debt and increasingly anxious about their economic stability. Perhaps Johnson’s mission was to offer an account of slavery with more “both/ands” than “either/or.”

One debate in which Johnson weighs forcefully is that concerning slaveholders’ ideas about their economic pursuits. Pursuing “prefabricated questions and threadbare tautologies” like whether slaveholders were capitalists or not (they were, but that is the wrong question), he explains, obscures our view of a distinct “culture of cotton” of the antebellum lower Mississippi Valley. Also, Johnson demonstrates that slavery as an economic system was profitable and productive. He echoes Fogel and Engerman in arguing that this should be attributed not to slaveholders, but to the slaves themselves. For example, Johnson juxtaposes the knowledge slaves held about cotton cultivation—which they embodied both mentally and physically—with the ignorance of planters in relation to the crop. However, Johnson’s larger repudiation of the notion that Mississippi Valley planters were backward or pre-modern includes descriptions of their interest in agricultural reform and inclination to increase productivity. Notwithstanding slaveholders’ demands for quicker output and attendant threats of violence, Johnson gives the sense that slaves retained the most intimate knowledge cotton production were primarily responsible for increasing their productivity, on average, sixfold between 1820 and 1860.7

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4 Ibid., 254.
7 Ibid., 244.
Johnson’s ability to create vivid imagery through his language makes for an enjoyable read. Steamboat travel on the Mississippi River is one setting of the book that becomes colorfully animated in the reader’s imagination. Through that particular imagery, though, which appears in “The Steamboat Sublime” and “Limits to Capital,” one gets a sense of Jefferson’s dream quickly dissolving into a nightmare. Steamboat explosions, the destruction of levees and plantations by floods, and extensive deforestation were physical manifestations of its disintegration. But, as Jefferson’s dream died hard, the Cotton Kingdom that emerged in its wake, Johnson argues, was also an “excruciating becoming.”

Planters struggled to quell slave resistance, increase productivity, and bounce back from economic downturns. The volatility of southern plantation economies and the subordination of Southern capital accumulation to Northern industry fueled expansionist visions in the region.

“Pro-slavery imperialists” looked to expand slavery’s empire to places like Cuba and Nicaragua, and revitalize the regional economy through “global economic integration.” Those movements grew directly out of what Johnson called the “political economy of slavery,” defined by “increasing class stratification among whites, its slave-draining internal trade, its self-consuming devotion to cotton mono-cropping, its dependence on unwilling slaves.” Failed efforts on the part of confidence men like Narcisco López and William Walker to enact their expansionist visions through territorial invasions and political coups, in addition to those leading the charge to reopen the slave trade populate the final chapters of the book. In the book’s concluding paragraph, Johnson emphasizes the importance of recovering the era’s forgotten alternatives. He explains,

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8 Ibid., 243.  
9 Ibid., 291.  
10 Ibid., 418.
“It should perhaps give us a moment of pause that the vision of political economy espoused by the filibusters and the reopeners—with its foursquare acceptance of the notion that ‘freedom’ was a quantity to be forcibly extracted from the suffering bodies of those who entered its economy from the positions of greatest vulnerability, that ‘freedom’ was a social relation bearing the vicious stamp of slavery on its underbelly—seems to describe our own world better than the notion to which it was opposed: the idea that ‘freedom’ is the natural and inevitable condition of mankind.”

Although much of Johnson’s analysis is not altogether new, *River of Dark Dreams* is extremely accessible and covers much ground within the field of slavery studies. I am certain that, as I have, students will enjoy wading through this opus to find subtler arguments to engage in their own work.

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11 Ibid., 420.