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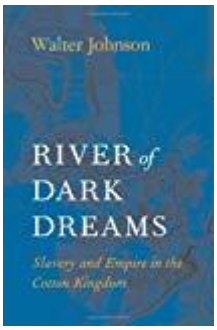

Walter Johnson. *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 560 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-04555-2.

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Walter Johnson's most recent work, ***River of Dark Dreams***, builds on Adam Rothman's groundbreaking study, ***Slave Country*** (2007), and others by reframing Southern antebellum history in a global context. While Rothman masterfully shows slavery's successful expansion westward, even implicating the federal government in that spread, Johnson points to slaveholders' unsuccessful attempts to spread the institution further south as evidence of their attempts to build a proslavery empire. Using a wide range of sources, including newspapers, court cases, slave narratives, correspondence, and literature, he makes two major arguments in the book--that the cotton economy's international position led to powerful sectionalism in the South, and that these ideas fostered a solution focused on globalism. Divisiveness and contradiction characterized the South, according to Johnson: Upper South versus Deep South, nonslaveholders versus slaveholders, planters versus merchants, and slaves versus masters. To survive, slavery had to expand not just to the west, but south. For Southerners hoping to preserve the Union, direct trade to the Atlantic markets was vital. As Johnson persuasively argues, "planters and merchants set about trying, first, to reform themselves and, failing that, to remap the course of world history" (p. 14). Efforts to acquire Cuba and Nicaragua and to reopen the Atlantic slave trade were part of this attempt, and they link Southern political goals in this period to global capitalism--rather than to the burgeoning North-South divide. In this way, Johnson's analysis focuses on "where Southerners (and slaveholders in particular) thought they were going and how they thought they could pull it off in the first place" (p. 16).

Johnson begins by explaining Thomas Jefferson's dream for an "empire for liberty" by chronicling its transformation, through slavery, into the Cotton Kingdom. This process allowed the Mississippi Valley to become one of the largest exporters of cotton in the world. However, Johnson contends, "the process by which the presumptions of social order upon which the Cotton Kingdom was founded were undermined by the fear of racial insurrection that shadowed its development at

every step" (p. 50). The Haitian Revolution served as a constant reminder of this possibility, and local slave revolt scares, like one in Madison County, Mississippi, in 1835, only brought those fears to the forefront. To make matters worse, slaves' humanity, the very quality that made them desirable, allowed them to resist their oppression in less overt ways, again heightening white anxiety. Slaves were able to use the "off-the-grid landscape," which included the woods and swamps they knew better than their masters, as a locus for foraging and resistance (p. 229).

Johnson is not the first scholar to point to this underlying fear. Kathleen Brown in ***Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*** (1996), Sylvia Frey in ***Water from the Rock*** (1992), Richard Follett in ***The Sugar Masters*** (2007), and others have also discussed this anxiety and the violence it engendered. Like them, Johnson describes this violence, but he also links it to the uncertainties surrounding cotton and profit. In this line of thought, planters' violence was directly linked to their measurement of slave production through the daily weighing of cotton.

The author contends that the Madison County revolt of 1835 embodied these fears, and that one man's involvement, John Murrell, a slaveless white man accused of inciting slave revolts in the region, linked it to another tension in the South. In reality, Murrell was stealing slaves from more affluent white men, showing that unscrupulous poor whites had interests that differed from those of white slaveholders, creating a "fault line in the structure of Southern rule: the discrepant interests [of nonslaveholding whites] ... who could attain some of the privileges promised them by virtue of their race by betraying the loyalty to the slaveholding social order that their whiteness supposedly demanded of them" (p. 64). Like their wealthier counterparts, these men saw advantages in slaveholding, making them loyal to the institution. However, Murrell's supposed role in planning a large-scale slave uprising in 1835 pointed to underlying anxieties in the slaveholding elite--their awareness of the status granted to them and denied to other whites through slaveholding. Elites came to truly understand that nonslaveholding whites could be dangerous.

Johnson also reveals how planters' dependency on cotton mono-cropping and food importation made them vulnerable to changes in the economy. Planters relied on "fictitious capital"--the price pledged in advance of a sale or planting--to do business each year, indebting them to factors and merchants. Most risks in this system were the planters', and planters' debts were due regardless of any complications. As Johnson explains, the new hybrid strain of cotton, Petit Gulf, boosted planters' profits. But its weaknesses included a vulnerability to insects. Cotton was also susceptible to shipment problems, including rain and fire, and fluctuating market prices. Planters were able to insulate themselves to some degree by insuring cotton before its shipment and by controlling when it shipped, but their "overinvestment in slaves, overproduction of cotton, and overreliance on credit" left them particularly vulnerable to any economic crisis--a feeling that manifested itself in violence against slaves (p. 12). One of the strengths of this part of Johnson's argument about the cotton economy is his ability to demonstrate the inherent disconnect between merchant and planter, as well as between North and South--as most debtors could trace their debt from New Orleans to New York or even Liverpool.

As Johnson demonstrates, the Panic of 1837 brought this divide to the forefront, entangling the political economy, the cotton market, and racial domination as "planters and merchants set about trying to reform first themselves and, failing that, the rest of the world" (p. 282). The problem, as planters came to see it, was that most global trade flowed through New York, forcing the South to pay a bounty for Northern development, while only one-tenth of global imports went to the South. This "sectionalist reading of the economic crisis"

prompted Mississippi Valley slaveholders to promote regional autonomy through direct global trade (p. 285). For these men, two versions of "the South" existed, one limited by U.S. sovereignty and one governed by the laws of supply and demand in the Atlantic world. Only the latter of the two would bring equality to the two sections, saving the Union. By the 1850s, however, men were even prepared to die for it "on the battlefields of the Civil War" (p. 302).

Johnson uses the steamboat, the third largest sector of investment in the South following slaves and land, as a lens for illustrating this friction in the South and the ways white men attempted to shape its progress along the Mississippi River. He discusses the inter-workings of steamboats as well as the ways Southerners tried and failed to control the river. When steamboat profitability reached its limit and boats began filling every navigable route, competition rapidly increased. Owners began pushing boats to their limits, and as Johnson points out, "competition in the steamboat business spurred technological degradation rather than technological innovation" (p. 122). Most owners, for example, shifted to high-pressure engines, which were more prone to explode than their low-pressure counterparts, but these new engines made steamboats faster. Owners, however, had failed to address the real issues of this economy, that the river was too crowded. Johnson is able to connect this weakness to underlying issues in the steamboat era, where the explosions symbolized the "risks known, but ignored; fears at the margin of hope" (p. 124).

Johnson further argues that the promoters of global-commercial proslavery believed it would resolve most tensions in the South. These movements were an effort to assert white male authority and offered an opportunity to reconcile class distinctions. These Southerners believed that Cuban annexation would open the South to direct trade in the Atlantic, promote slavery in the Americas, and prevent an abolitionist encirclement propagated by the Haitian Revolution and the British Empire. Occupying Nicaragua would have provided poor whites with viable land, while the reopening of the Atlantic slave trade would have granted them affordable slaves.

For many, a renewed Atlantic slave trade would have also resolved concerns surrounding the exportation of slaves from the Upper South to the Deep South. Many Mississippi Valley planters feared that the rate of exportation in the domestic slave market would drastically drain the Upper South of slaves, leaving it to join the North in its promotion of free labor. Not surprisingly, the Upper South tended to oppose the Atlantic trades' reopening, as it would devalue their slaves. For the promoters, however, reopening the external slave trade would consolidate the South's control of the cotton economy and solidify the future of the institution of slavery by transforming new territory into "the image of the plantation social order of the Deep South: staple-crop agriculture for the global market; the equivalence of white manhood and mastery; and household patriarchy" (p. 395).

River of Dark Dreams is a powerful book, addressing such broad-ranging topics as steamboat technology, the inter-workings of cotton plantations, race, capitalism, and filibustering. Johnson is also able to address various historiographical debates of the antebellum era in these discussions. He argues against the idea that slaveholders tried to dehumanize their slaves. Rather, they "were fully able to do what they did and say what they said, even as they argued that their victims were humans ... [in an effort to] dis-humanize enslaved people" (p. 207). He further contends that debates over the extent of capitalism in the South ultimately miss the workings of the market within its historical context. Capitalism and slavery were linked during the nineteenth century. Echoing his earlier work, ***Soul by Soul*** (2001), Johnson also tells a compelling story, drawing the reader into the lived experiences of both the masters and the slaves with imagery and sounds. He writes, "the

geography of slaveholding power was characterized by its visuality, that of resistance and escape was characterized by aurality--the precedence of the ear over the eye" (p. 232).

Although the book is well researched and argued, one point is worth mentioning. Although Johnson's goal is certainly not to write a book on the coming of the American Civil War, discussing the honor and ambition characteristic of Southern white males, which Stephen Berry discusses in ***All that Makes a Man*** (2002), would have connected this book to that historiography, especially since these qualities likely played a role in promoting global-commercial proslavery. However, this is a minor issue.

Ultimately, Walter Johnson effectively describes both ***what*** slaveholders wanted to spread and ***why.*** Theirs' was a "vision of race, sex, slavery, space, and time" projecting the political economy of slavery and white male supremacy throughout the world, what Johnson calls "global whitemanism" (p. 418). Tensions within that economy--the growing divide between slaveholders and nonslaveholders, the slave-draining of the Upper South, devotion to cotton mono-cropping, and widespread dependency on both credit and slaves--compelled many planters to promote this global vision in their dreams of taking Cuba and Nicaragua and reopening the Atlantic slave trade. On all three counts, they failed, with secession and the coming of the Civil War definitively destroying their dreams. However, Johnson masterfully points out that these issues have not been highlighted by historians, and they never unified the entire South. He explains, "but for a time in the late 1850s, in the Mississippi Valley, these were seen as the two most important issues in proslavery politics" (p. 381). Johnson rightly reminds historians not to assume that slaveowners saw secession and war as inevitable outcomes or even that they were entirely focused on the growing divide between the North and the South. ***River of Dark Dreams*** is an important book for any scholar interested in antebellum slavery, technology, capitalism, or the Atlantic world.

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