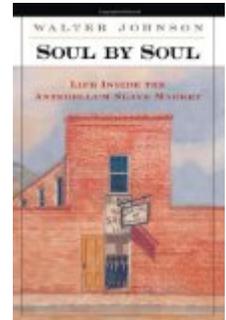


Walter Johnson. *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999. 283 pp. \$26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-82148-4.



Reviewed by Robert S. Wolff

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Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* traces the human history of the slave trade in the United States. Designed as both complement to, and measured criticism of, economic and demographic approaches to the slave trade, *Soul by Soul* begins with the claim that, "we must now consider the roads, rivers, and showrooms where broad trends and abstract totalities thickened into human shape. To the epochal history of the slave market must be added the daily stories of the slave pens, the history of sales made and unmade in the contingent bargaining of trader, buyer, and slave" (p. 8). By placing enslaved African Americans at the center of analysis, Johnson shifts the scholarly focus on the slave market from aggregate numerical measures to the chilling day-to-day commerce in human beings. *Soul by Soul* indicts the antebellum South on its own terms, meticulously dismantling the slaveholders' world. According to Johnson, the market served as the foundation of the planters' fantastic and frightening worldview in which they "imagined who they could be by thinking about whom they could buy" (p. 79).

What distinguishes *Soul by Soul* from other recent works on the experience of slavery, and, indeed, the history of the antebellum South, is the innovative use of court records. Johnson, an assistant professor of history at New York University, begins by asserting the importance of seeing the moment of sale through the eyes of the people who were sold and not just through the eyes of slaveowners and traders. A careful reading of the voluminous quantity of published slave narratives forms the foundation of the volume but much of the insight comes from an exploration of roughly two hundred disputed slave transactions that were brought before the Louisiana Supreme Court. Under so-called "redhibition" laws, slave buyers dissatisfied with the people they had bought could sue the seller. Louisiana law forced slave traders to warranty these sales in cases where the buyer was deceived or misled regarding a slave's physical health or "character." [See Judith K. Schafer, *Slavery, the Civil Law, and the Supreme Court of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997) for more information on the legal history of slavery.] Johnson makes excellent use of these documents, and oth-

ers, to describe the physical spaces and transactions of the slave trade. Far from the image of the "slave auctions" that figured so prominently in abolitionist accounts, the slave markets cloaked their transactions in civility as they clothed slaves to reflect buyers' desire. Traders displayed enslaved African Americans for inspection in genteel showrooms, set apart from the slave pens in which they were imprisoned. And it was in these showrooms that sellers and buyers displayed their "knowledge" of slave bodies, reading them for signs of punishment and disease, extrapolating character traits and physical abilities from their faces, hands, limbs, and breasts, and all the while defining through these acts their own honor, manhood and mastery.

The public transcript of disputed slaves sales allows Johnson to create what might be termed, following James Scott, the "hidden transcript" of the market transactions in human bodies. [James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).] Johnson examines all of his documents -- including slaveholders' writings -- to describe what the sales meant to the parties concerned, whether it was the traders' ambitions, the slaveholders' desires, or the slaves' fears. Through his careful reading of the evidence emerge the slaves' own narratives of sale. Johnson's evocative language describes the bitter ironies of a market in which African Americans were "alienated . . . from their own bodies" and forced "to perform their own commodification" (pp. 163-164). Here they were often faced with impossible choices, for example whether to confirm a dealer's embellished account of their own abilities or not, when either course of action could lead to a beating. Nevertheless, *Soul by Soul* argues that precisely because slave deals invariably relied upon the slaves' own presentation of their bodies and minds, slaves had the ability to shape the moment of sale. At great risk to themselves, they could selectively confirm or deny sellers' claims based on their own reading of the potential buyer. They

could declare their intentions to run away or harm themselves if certain conditions were not met, such as being sold with family members. On the margin slaves could hope for a beneficent master living within the city and struggle to avoid a cruel master who owned a sugar plantation. Again, at peril of their own lives, slaves could continue this struggle past the point of sale in an effort --through faking illness or developing "bad" traits -- to induce their masters to use the redhibition laws to return them to the markets. There are times in the narrative where this seems to be at best a pyrrhic victory. Yet in one of the most significant passages Johnson concludes: "Placed on a scale between slavery and freedom or judged according to a theory that accepts revolution as the only meaningful goal of resistance, these slave-shaped sales do not look like much: as many skeptics have put it, 'after all, they were still enslaved.' But placed between subordination and resistance on the scale of daily life, these differences between possible sales had the salience of survival itself" (p. 187).

The possibility of being sold is what set chattel slavery apart from other forms of coerced labor. *Soul by Soul* demonstrates that slaveholders had a far greater affinity for cash than for any individual slave. In so doing it demolishes the lingering romanticism that still pervades much of the literature on the Old South. In particular, *Soul by Soul* questions whether there ever was a Southern paternalism that, in Eugene Genovese's words, "implicitly recognized the slaves' humanity" or established a truly "mutual" set of obligations between master and slave. [Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (reprint ed., New York: Vintage Books, 1976), p. 5.] According to Johnson, violence against slaves, often irrational and unpredictable, was the "essence of that grim mutuality," not a "violation" of it (p. 206). When slaves were beaten, it was for violating the master's vision of his or her own world which was constructed, both literally and figuratively, by the slaves themselves. Slave-

holders, as Michael Tadman has also demonstrated, crafted elaborate myths that have obscured the cold calculations of the market. [Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).] *Soul by Soul* demonstrates that far too much of the historical literature has obscured those cold calculations as well.

No research is without flaws, and no scholar impervious to the claim that something should have been done differently. Johnson carefully crafts his narrative to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of his evidence. For example, Johnson wisely reads the court records as contingent evidence, which is to say, he does not take the accounts contained therein as literal truth. Court depositions and testimony do reflect the realm of the possible. People presented arguments that were plausible; if they were not true in the specifics, they were always framed in a way that made them possibly so. Similarly, he acknowledges that the slave narratives were always survivors' stories. Most slaves died in bondage. Is *Soul by Soul* really, as Johnson claims, "the story of the making of the antebellum South" (p. 18)? Yes, in large measure it is. Johnson's narrative does possess a self-admitted timelessness which makes it difficult to see whether time and place matter. It may be that this story is unique to Louisiana in the late antebellum period, but this would hardly lessen the volume's significance. New Orleans was a critical site in the slave trade, and Louisiana slaveholders epitomized much of the southern gentry. By focusing on the moment of sale, and analyzing what it meant to both slave-owner and slave, *Soul by Soul* establishes itself as perhaps the most innovative work on slavery published in the last twenty-five years.

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