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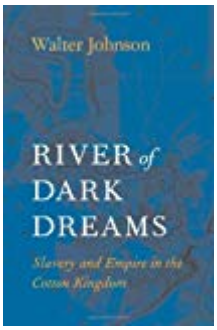

Walter Johnson. *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 560 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-04555-2.

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Published on H-Empire (November, 2015)

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Using the 1850 destruction of the *Anglo-Norman* as his opening, Walter Johnson explores the rise and ultimate fall of slavery, capitalism, and imperialism in the Mississippi River Valley. The destroyed steamship, in Johnson's estimation, came to symbolize the region and the demise of the imagined world built around slavery and imperialism with the American Civil War, Confederate defeat, and destruction of slavery. Rather than focus on the "agency" of enslaved people or present a national view, Johnson expands the lens to include the global and imperial influences on the region's development in order to recast the pivotal decade of the 1850s beyond traditional sectionalism that cumulated in secession. Johnson demonstrates that as a result of regional participation in the global economy, proslavery defenders sought solutions to the region's ills beyond the United States as a natural extension instead of a forced engagement. Johnson argues: "Thus were the science of political economy, the practicalities of the cotton market, and the exigencies of racial domination entangled with one another--aspects of a single problem, call it 'slave racial capitalism'--as planters and merchants set about trying, first, to reform themselves, and, failing that, to remap the course of world history. In order to survive, slaveholders had to expand … on a global scale" (p. 14).

In the first eight chapters, Johnson deftly weaves the history of the region as the realization of various stakeholders' imaginings and anxieties. These men, from President Thomas Jefferson to the agro-capitalists who settled the region, staked their dreams to the Mississippi River. He eloquently shows how the Haitian Revolution disrupted Thomas Jefferson's initial vision of an empire of liberty and transformed it into one of slavery and brutality involving the pacification of Native Americans, transformation of landscape with cotton production, and reworking the Mississippi River itself with the "steamship sublime." This initial overland imperialistic effort quickly became dependent upon white dominance, slavery, and

racial privilege in what would become the Cotton Kingdom.

Moving away from the "agency" promoted in his 1999 ***Soul by Soul***, Johnson offers a new interpretation of the experiences of enslaved people, slave resistance, and master-slave relationships. To be sure, white supremacy, surveillance, and owners exerting control over the lives of enslaved people still matters. Johnson maintains that by taking away enslaved people's humanity, slaveowners perpetuated and extended their regional, national, and even global dominion. Instead of the ambiguous and amorphous term, Johnson shifts the conversation by more precisely defining the ethical code and practices of solidarity created and recognized by enslaved people, which "was neither separable from their enslavement nor reducible" and "did not exhaust or liquidate the force of those actions" (p. 217). Moreover, Johnson shows that the "occasioned expression and reproduction of ethics of care and practices of solidarity … transcended and actively reshaped their enslavement" (p. 217). This precision permits Johnson to view the slave community and resistance as enslaved people's knowledge of the known and off-the-grid landscape acquired through communal ethics and practices informing their actions. Thus, slaveowners' power rested on the landscape, counterinsurgency of enslaved people, and the state, in cases of capital punishment proceedings.

Johnson convincingly demonstrates the importance of landscape, technology, and the Mississippi River itself in the lives of plantation elites but most significantly for the enslaved men and women whose extracted labor, resistance, and lived experience made and remade the region. Indeed, the Mississippi River Valley was an overland cotton empire in which those who had staked their futures in it also found themselves entrapped by its limits. Overcommericalization, industrial accidents, federal regulation, falling cotton prices, and low returns on slave labor not only revealed the outer limits of the overland imperialistic project but caused regional elites to seek imaginative solutions while continuing to take risks on the "river of dreams."

Writers from the Mississippi Valley, as Johnson shows in chapter 10, articulated the need for reorienting the economy around regional autonomy. Rather than emphasizing the difference between slave and wage labor, they viewed regional difference based on federal regulation of economic spaces. Thus, they sought new relationships with the federal government and Northern states as well as embarked on imperial projects beneficial to their regional autonomy. From these imaginings, as discussed in chapter 11, Cuba became instrumental to the elite residents of the Mississippi Valley. They imagined that by staving off possible British control over Cuba and preventing another Haiti, Cuban freedom would preserve slavery, decrease taxes on slaveowners and capitalists, and promote free trade. Cuba offered a solution to the region's problems of overinvestment in land, slaves, and steamships by allowing them to reassert power over trade along a North-South axis. Their vision never came to fruition, as Johnson explains in chapter 12 with the failed filibustering campaigns of Gen. Narciso Lopez and Col. William Crittenden. Failure and the subsequent leaders' execution illuminate the limits of the envisioned Mississippi Valley's empire.

After analyzing the failure in Cuba, Johnson demonstrates how regional elites and industrialists were firmly committed to the region's imperialism as a means to secure the desired regional autonomy and future through the writings of Hinton Rowan Helper and Edward Pollard. Both intellectuals wearily viewed nonslaveholding whites as threats to the region and its future. In turn, they looked toward the intertwined fates of three continents around "white imperialism and black slavery with a set of not-so-subtle warnings of rise of white degeneracy without slavery" (p. 393). Whereas Helper proposed the abolition of slavery

and colonization, Pollard provided a more prescriptive two-step solution that included a filibustering expedition to Nicaragua and the reopening of the Atlantic slave trade as a means of ameliorating regionalists' anxieties within the 1850s United States. The former again resulted in failure. Gaining momentum after 1855, the latter became a real possibility in 1858 but ultimately failed due to a lack of a common language promoting the idea as either secession or unionism. Despite the differences, Johnson shows that the varied reopeners' arguments embodied a reworking of "privileges of white patriarchy" on a global scale and not just a regional one (p. 415). As essential to the Mississippi Valley and South's global domination, reopeners viewed the trade and slavery as the means to ensure social order and historical progress. As Johnson succinctly concludes, all came to naught withthe 1860 election of Lincoln, the Confederate States of America outlawing of the Atlantic slave trade in its constitution, and ultimately, the demise of slavery and the Confederate defeat. In the end, the Mississippi Valley's definition of freedom as the forced extraction of suffering could not overcome the "idea that freedom is the nature and inevitable condition of mankind" (p. 420).

Again, Johnson has provided a provocative argument but he overstates the region's imperial interests at times. He convincingly demonstrates that a small cadre of men saw imperialism as a solution to the region's problems after the Panic of 1837. However, was this interest as widespread among nonelites or the even among the enslaved men and women whose labor and forced migration would be required? Was there even national support? While they promoted regional autonomy, these capitalists were very much embedded within the national and international markets. Could they have really embarked on any truly successful imperialist projects beyond the intercontinental United States without national or international support? Moreover, would these men have been able to convince the federal government and military to promote such endeavors, if they could not even convince other residents in the Mississippi Valley? Notwithstanding, ***River of Dreams*** will have a lasting legacy on the scholarship and will definitely become a definitive text for graduate students and scholars in the field of slavery in the antebellum global South.

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Citation: Hilary N. Green. Review of Johnson, Walter. *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom.* H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. November, 2015.

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