

River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom

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Review

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

A New Map of the Past

“At first glance,” admits Walter Johnson, “the experience of slaves the Mississippi Valley seems far removed- indeed, conceptually antithetical- to the world of ‘capitalism’” (244). Johnson devotes his sprawling, ambitious, and much-awaited new study, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*, to deconstructing the narrative that situates the flowering of America’s market economy in the antebellum North. Johnson places “capitalism” in quotation marks, not to argue that capitalism is a fiction, but rather to remap, and perhaps redefine, the origin story of U.S. capitalism itself.

As his landmark 1999 study, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, made clear, Johnson is one of our most creative historians, and his mastery of metaphor and analogy is put to good use here turning the capitalist map on its head. In the place of the Panic of 1837, Johnson highlights the “Panic of 1835,” where fears of a potential slave insurrection led to a “pogrom” (47) that left at least sixteen slaves and seven white men dead. While scholars of the “market revolution” have pointed to factories, made possible by the innovation of the joint stock company, as the synecdoche of capitalist development, Johnson instead crowns the steamboat the ultimate break between past and present. The mills of Lowell “used energy according to a formula that was thousands of years old,” while steamboats, the third leading investment sector in the Mississippi Valley after 1830, harnessed enough power to reverse gravity, or to “run the entire factory complex at Lowell” (6), and, far too often, to explode in spectacular displays of carnage. These explosions should not be understood as “accidents,” Johnson explains, but rather as “portents” or “symptoms” of the violence of capitalism. The steamboat becomes the reigning trope of his volume.

And so he takes readers on a steamboat tour, of sorts, of a capitalist Cotton Kingdom where violence is on ample display. Fanning out from his old stomping grounds, New Orleans, the book explores the Mississippi Delta, and from there moves into the Caribbean, where slave owners sought an imperial solution to the pressures of markets, landless (and slave-less) whites, environmental degradation, and Northern "aggression", that were rendering their way of life increasingly imperiled in the 1850s. The carnage is impossible to avoid. The Mississippi Valley was nothing less than a "wild zone" (196) of unchecked power, where the capitalist imperative turned human beings into a cash crop. As in *Soul by Soul*, Johnson unflinchingly renders both the sufferings of slavery, and the "slaveholder pantomimes of civilization" (155) in a manner both stomach-turning and particularly illuminating. Torture, starvation, rape, and murder emerge as natural results of an economy where the "hand" is the measure of the rate of exchange between labor and land, distance is measured in suffering, and slaveholders "processed starvation into racism" (191).

While onboard the steamship, be sure to note the race of the other passengers. Johnson has, and his analysis of the instability of identity on these conduits of people and products is one of the many pleasures, if one can put it that way, of this volume. But above all else, look at the land, and the people occupying it. For unlike *Soul by Soul*, *River of Dark Dreams* is intensely engaged with questions of environment and space, and Johnson's insights into the relationship between land, people, and capital are reminiscent of William Cronon at his best. The emergence of the Cotton Kingdom "shifted the axis of nature from vertical to horizontal" as biomass was removed for planting (156), while cotton planters "regulated the metabolism of nature into energy in weekly rations" (178). Like Cronon, Johnson links the fate of people with animals, highlights the refuse of production, (in this case shit, both human and animal), and memorably reveals how a landscape shapes its occupants. The Cotton Kingdom emerges from this multifaceted analysis as a dangerous, unstable, and violent realm that Johnson convincingly renders as the natural result of unchecked capitalism.

While a few of his assertions smack of hyperbole, (were steamboat explosions truly "the landmark events in the history of the era"? [103]) Johnson's prose is engaging enough that the reader is more than willing to let them slide. His caustic wit and genuine outrage at the horrors of slavery turn passages like the following, delivered after a lengthy quotation from a slaveholder about the work of cotton production, into art: Passing over, for the moment, the

appropriative I-language, the labor-eliding passive voice, and the slippery subject-verb relationships that deform the grammar and define the meaning of virtually every recorded statement made by cotton planters about their agricultural practice, we can follow the progress of the season in the ways that planters talked to one another about what needed “to be done” (157). One could argue that this volume is worth reading from a stylistic perspective, alone. Note, for example, the introductory sentences of each chapter. My favorite, from Chapter 5, “The Runway’s River”: “In 1857, Herman Melville published a novel entitled *The Confidence Man*, which, even by the standard measures of misunderstood literary genius, was a stupendous failure” (126).

Johnson is hardly the first to recognize that capitalism drove the settlement of the Cotton Kingdom, or that the region was an integral part of an international market with wide ranging effects at home. Indeed, this work is as much a first-rate synthesis of the best work of a generation of scholars focused on slavery, capitalism, and expansionism, as it is the result of individual research and analysis. Readers will recognize the influence of Adam Rothman, Robert E. May, Deborah Gray White, Steven Stoll, and Mark Smith, among others. Some of his most important primary sources are surprisingly well-trod, with narratives of Solomon Northrup, Charles Ball, William Wells Brown, and Harriett Jacobs playing key roles. Nor has Johnson’s close reading been limited to history, and the breadth of vision is in part the result of encounters with theorists, from Karl Marx to Elaine Scarry, and Walter Benjamin to Wai Chee Dimock.

But *River of Dark Dreams* is much more than a particularly dexterous work of synthesis. Johnson’s imagination and remarkable skills as an interpreter of history are such that previously familiar events, from the Louisiana Purchase to William Walker’s conquest of Nicaragua, appear in a strange and compelling new light, linked together within a coherent, original, and convincing narrative about the practices and far reaching effects of political economy in the antebellum South. Johnson has provided a new map of the past, one that scholars will find difficult to avoid following.

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