

River Of Dark Dreams: Slavery And Empire In The Cotton Kingdom

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At the centre of this rich, provocative book is a body of water and a steampunk contraption. In the 19th century, the Mississippi River loomed large in the American imagination; a waterway of immense power and possibility which sliced through the North American continent. The river was also a natural wonder which cried out to be tamed, and over the early decades of the 19th century, Americans threw everything they had at it. They surmounted the distance between the river's banks and forded it to settle western territories. They built port cities on the river which acted as magnets for settlers, speculators, foreign investors, farmers and slaves. The current of the river, which flowed relentlessly from north to south, made travel upriver difficult, but by the early 19th century, Americans had answered the challenge with a boat which defied nature. In 1811, according to legend, the first steamboat was launched on the Mississippi: a technological marvel which prompted amazement, and more than a little awe. Steamboats changed everything. They revolutionised the ways that Americans ferried themselves, their harvests and their human property. Steamboats also turned the Mississippi River Valley into one of the most important emerging markets of the age. By the middle decades of the century, the banks of the river were home to some of the wealthiest citizens in the United States; several important entrepôts like New Orleans and Memphis; hundreds of thousands of slaves, and hundreds of steamboats which made its way up and down the river with alarming speed.

The steamboats and the river they travelled on became more than the mechanisms and magnets of settlement and trade. The Mississippi River Valley also became the spiritual home of expansionist slaveholders and imperialist dreamers, who looked upon their lands heaving with cotton, not to mention the slaves who made it all possible, and imagined a future of limitless possibility. Anything but backwards or reactionary, the architects of the Mississippi River Valley saw themselves at the leading edge of a political and economic revolution that was sweeping the Atlantic World. It was a revolution borne not only of bold ideas, but of account books and plantation ledgers: the cold cost-accounting of a cotton monoculture, made more brutal by the blood, sweat and semen of African Americans, whose labour made the fantasies of river planters possible, and whose offspring bolstered the slaveholders' return on investment. With everything to gain, these men, according to Walter Johnson, staked their future on an ambitious plan of expansion: a plan which took root in the dramatic expansion of the republic across the continent, but which had extended by the

1840s and 1850s to include Cuba, Nicaragua and, if fortune willed it, much of the Caribbean Sea. When that empire came crashing down around them, slaveholder dreams found succour and meaning in the sectional conflict which was tearing the American republic in two. So often, as Johnson argues, the literature on the coming of the American Civil War pits an expansive, forward-thinking North against a retreating South, with slaveholders breaking from the Union and into their own Confederacy, all to stop the tide of history which was contracting the plantation complex all over the Atlantic World. This narrative – so central to the history of the United States – remains a relentlessly inward-looking story, though Johnson’s aim is to inject the story of the American slaveholding masterclass with cosmopolitan bravura and world beating ambition. As Johnson puts it, if ‘instead of looking at what “the South” was leaving ... one asked where Southerners (and slaveholders in particular) thought they were going and how they thought they could pull it off’, historians might better understand one of the turning points in American history in an entirely new way (p. 16).

To say that this book is ambitious does not do justice to the full scope of what Johnson attempts. Insights, creative interpretations and clever turns of phrase leap from almost every page. The author – whose first book, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (1), repositioned the historiography of American slavery by showing just how much the market-driven commodification of African Americans turned would-be planters into paternalist masters – has cemented his reputation as an academic star. Despite this initial success, there is a restless tone to the book: an undercurrent of frustration with older ways of thinking and older interpretations, which reads, at times, like the work of an overlooked historian, rather than a doyen of his field. It is this restlessness, however, which gives Johnson’s argument its punch. What the author wants is nothing less than to change the way that we think about the history of the United States in the 19th century and at points throughout, he achieves just that.

Though divided into 14 overlapping chapters, the book contains three braided themes. Each theme connects to a historiographical debate and in every case, the author looks to deal reigning interpretations with a body blow. The first five chapters of the book detail the settlement and the American mastery of the Mississippi River Valley: a region which lay on the littoral of the imperial Atlantic. The author takes aim in this section at the ways in which historians have written about the development of American capitalism. Whereas the literature so often points to the northeastern United States as the engine of the American market revolution, Johnson looks to the periphery and finds the real beating heart of transformation on the Mississippi River. Moreover, by connecting this place to an energetic plan of territorial expansion, Johnson argues that understanding American manifest destiny is impossible without making sense of the relationship between capitalism and the imperial dreams of planters.

According to Johnson, however, the Mississippi River Valley represented something more than an imperial will to power. It became, rather, the great laboratory of American capitalism, and the site where an emergent international capitalist system mingled effortlessly with the imperial dreams of its first planters. There, international capital flooded the region, creating a cosmopolitan master class who imagined the Mississippi River as an economic umbilical cord which would connect the region to the markets of the world. To make the dream real, Americans perfected innovations in cotton planting and harvesting and built steamboats which defied gravity: all to collapse time and space, to bring goods closer to markets and to maximise profits. The combination of imperial ambition, capitalist drive and technological innovation represents one of the great strengths of this book. Seen through the prism Johnson constructs, it would be hard to imagine America’s early national history in quite the same way.

To be sure, the violence necessary to make the whole system operate required that both planters and slaves live in an environment where ordered society teetered on the edge of chaos. The book’s first chapter begins with a slave rebellion in 1811 which threatened to upend all the promise of a cotton empire, and in successive chapters, Johnson is clear that life at the centre of capitalist transformation was as likely to kill as it was to make someone rich. As he illuminates in a particularly revealing third chapter on steamboats, the lure of a quick buck pushed steamboat owners and engineers to push their contraptions to the outer limits, resulting in explosions on the river which killed by the score. Just like Herman Melville and Mark Twain

before him, Johnson also detects an instability to life on the Mississippi River; an instability which was tolerated, but required constant vigilance. Though Johnson does not break new ground when he focuses on the confidence games which lay at the heart of American capitalism – the trickster cons which propped up so much of a system where so many economic transactions could not be trusted – he does show how slaves played confidence games of their own: passing as respectable, all in a bid for freedom.

If the first five chapters of the book detail the creation of one of the 19th century's most important emerging markets – with all the technological innovation and social instability that emerging markets always seem to possess – the middle chapters of the book take up the camera lens, both to understand what made the cotton empire work, and what connected it to a broader world. These chapters make up the core of the book, and they show Johnson's real talent for interpretive insight and the telling anecdote. Throughout, the author focuses attention not only on the ruthless system planters built for themselves, but on what slaveholders dreamed; what they imagined when they looked out on their lands and looked to their river. It is this focus on the speculative – on the fantasies and anxieties of a master class – which gives Johnson's work much of its interpretive power. Added to this, however, *River of Dark Dreams* shoves the gritty, lived reality of slavery to the foreground. While the prevailing turn of the literature on slavery has, of late, concerned itself with the relative agency of the slaves themselves, Johnson is keen to set aside dry, intellectual concerns and focus on the real power at the heart of the plantation complex. There is talk of dirt, shit, sweat and blood; the breaking down of simple human processes into brutal units of market measurement. In Johnson's first book, *Soul by Soul*, a focus on the base, carnal gaze of slaveholders was evident. In *River of Dark Dreams*, however, the focus becomes a key part of his argument, which collapses the distinctions between capitalism and slavery. In Johnson's hands, slaveholders were masters of Fordism, decades before Model Ts rolled off the assembly lines. Planters quantified every scarred black hand and every boll of cotton picked, all to turn the American Cotton South into one of the richest monocultures in world history. The middle chapters of the book, which deals with the labour of slaves, is shorn of the romanticism which has, of late, crept into the study of slaves. Rather than interpreting them as a proto-peasantry, using their culture and their wits to subvert a master's control, Johnson places slaves at the centre of a system of total, coercive domination. It was this control which sustained the South, the American republic and an emergent international process of industrialisation, stretching from New Orleans to Liverpool and beyond.

It is when Johnson begins to zoom out from the cotton row to the larger system to which the Mississippi Valley was tethered, that readers begin to understand both the indomitable optimism and the nagging doubts of slaveholders. By following a bale of cotton from the field to the marketplace, Johnson shows in a ninth chapter how despite their mastery of the world around them, cotton planters actually sat on the lower rungs of the economic ladder. Absorbing much of the risk in bringing a valuable crop to market, which could be easily spoiled, the nature of the financing system that grew up around cotton was such that planters were locked in an economic cycle they could never dominate in the same way that they controlled their plantations. 'Because their cotton was generally sold on consignment', writes Johnson, 'planters retained legal ownership all the way up to the time it was finally sold, often thousands of miles from their plantations, and months after it had left their care. And because they had received advances against that sale, they could find themselves dunned for money they had already spent, in the event that their cotton eventually brought less than had been advanced for it' (p. 264). Just as the confidence games so central to capitalism made the system lurch from boom to bust, so too did the confidence in cotton result in an empire being built on shifting sands. The international marketplace proved the circle planters could never square.

The final chapters of Johnson's book carries the designs on mastery and the worries about their position in the world into the 1840s and 1850s, as imperialist planters looked beyond the Mississippi Valley to territories further afield. Tying Narciso López's raids on Cuba between 1849 and 1851 and William Walker's conquest of Nicaragua in 1857, Johnson argues that the American 'filibuster' movement was intimately connected to both the ambition and the worries of planters in the Mississippi Valley, who wondered (with some justification) about whether their empire was on the downward slide. In making this connection, *River of Dark Dreams* delves into a history which has been told before (most especially by Robert May), and for this reason, specialists in the field will find little that is especially new. Though the later chapters of the

book do make obvious connections which fits well with the picture Johnson paints in the earlier chapters, there is not the same interpretive payoff.

One point which is new is that in the pamphlets and published journals of the most ardent of southern imperialists, Johnson finds a view of history which helps to explain why those same southerners, in 1860, believed they could go it alone in a breathtaking bid for nationhood. Drawing selectively from the recent past, Mississippi planters could not help but see the emancipations of Haiti and the British and French Caribbean colonies as a quixotic errand, rendered useless in the face of progress. With hindsight, historians too often paint American slaveholders as reactionaries, who sought retrenchment in the face of the dramatic contraction of the Atlantic slave system by the middle decades of the 19th century. Johnson's argument, however, is that when we see the 1850s through the eyes of slaveholders, the world looks far different. For them, 'the irresistible force of the Mississippi [River] symbolized the gathered power of the emergent tendencies of historical development – white man's republicanism, free trade, and institutionalized slavery – which made it both crucial and inevitable that Americans, and particularly Southerners, would turn their attention' to Cuba and the Caribbean Sea as the key to their collective futures (p. 318). When these forays into empire building abroad amounted to little, it made sense to pour their ambition and their belief that the tide of history was on their side, to a nation-building project of their own.

Occasionally, a book emerges which shakes a broader literature to its foundations, and this was surely the ambition of *River of Dark Dreams*. For this reason alone, Walter Johnson is to be commended for writing something with such a grand sweep and penetrating vision. Like all great books, *River of Dark Dreams* poses as many questions as it answers. While Johnson deals somewhat roughly with the work of Eugene Genovese, there is little in the book about how slaveholders secured the support of the majority of those white, non-slaveholding southerners, for whom cotton dreams so often rang hollow. The outward, international gaze of the book also seeks to overturn an old literature on the coming of the Civil War, without showing how, or even whether, slaveholders in the Mississippi Valley attempted to control national policy with the same bravado as they did their own empire on the river. Though *River of Dark Dreams* shines a bright light on the assumptions which have undergirded the study of the sectional conflict, it does so not by engaging with these old debates about national politics, so much as it talks over them. Taken together, however, it is a measure of what the book sets out to do that by the time readers finish reading it, so much of 19th century American history looks different. By inverting accepted wisdom and charting a new path through the history of the South, *River of Dark Dreams* will be the measure against which future studies of American slavery, cotton, capitalism and manifest destiny will be judged.

Notes

1. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA, 1999). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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