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

Bryan Jack
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

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River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom, by Walter Johnson, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013.

In *River of Dark Dreams*, Walter Johnson ambitiously attempts to explore the role of slavery in the economic development of the United States, with a particular focus on the Mississippi Valley region in the antebellum area. Johnson, the Winthrop Professor of History and Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, is the author of the extraordinary *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (1999), which serves as a fitting precursor to this much more wide-ranging work. In *River of Dark Dreams*, Johnson argues for changing the paradigm of American economic history, shifting the focus from the textile mills of Massachusetts to the steamboats of the Mississippi River Valley. In Johnson's words, "there was no nineteenth century capitalism without slavery," and for far too long historians have separated the history of industrial development from slavery. He writes, "if one sets aside the threadbare story of 'industrialization' for a moment, and thinks instead in the technological terms more familiar to the time, the radical break represented by the steamboats comes into clearer focus." (254 and 4) The steamboats, with their ability to move materials upriver or down, combined with slave labor, innovations in cotton production, government policies, and capital to bring the global economy into the American heartland. This transformation of Thomas Jefferson's "empire for liberty" of yeoman farmers into the "Cotton Kingdom" ruled by the "slaveocracy," gave new life to slavery as an institution and leads to the central aim guiding Johnson's work, to embed the lived experience of slavery within the larger context of political economy and American imperialism.

It is in the personal where *River of Dark Dreams* shines, and Johnson uses myriad sources to tell the story of slavery in the Mississippi Valley. Keeping the enslaved in the center of the story, the impeccably researched book highlights well-known texts like Solomon Northrup and William Wells Brown, but digs deeply beneath the surface to use letters of steamboat patrons, court cases, plantation account books, contemporary pamphlets, and documents ranging from Liverpool to Havana to encompass multiple perspectives. As in *Soul by Soul*, Johnson uses his formidable talents to bring the reader inside the world of slavery, and uses these intimate stories to answer much larger questions. A fearless writer, Johnson's language is provocative, richly describing life on cotton plantations and Mississippi River steamboats, never letting the reader forget that people are at the center of the story. For example, he writes, "The Cotton Kingdom was built out of sun, water, and soil; animal energy, human labor, and mother wit; grain, flesh, and cotton; pain, hunger, and fatigue; blood, milk, semen, and shit." (9) In one of the strongest sections of the book, Johnson uses the separate stories of Robert and Felix, two men whose stories spoke to the geographic mobility of the river system and the fluidity of race. Their stories challenged slavery and racial categories, but to far different affects. Robert, putatively a white passenger on a northern-bound steamboat, had his race questioned by other



passengers and was eventually jailed and sent back down the river to the New Orleans slave market on the flimsiest of evidence. In contrast, Felix, the light-complexioned enslaved person once owned by the Choteaus of St. Louis, was able to pass as white and make his way north to freedom. (139-140) Johnson uses their stories to discuss not only the construction of whiteness, or the use of passing as a way of escape, but also to explore the hierarchy of management within the steamboat world, as slave owners and steamboat captains disputed responsibility for runaways' use of steamboats. Thus, Johnson uses the compelling stories of these two men as entrée into questions of labor, management, and capital.

As the title implies, the Mississippi River flows through the heart of *River of Dark Dreams*, but the book is not limited to the Valley. One of its strengths is Johnson's ability to explain the smallest, most illustrative details (for example, a Mississippi planter complaining about the bank notes paid for his cotton) and then widen his scope to address larger questions and connections. While remaining grounded in the Mississippi Valley, the last three chapters move forward temporally and geographically, discussing imperialism, filibustering, and the reopening of the slave trade as the Cotton Kingdom looked to expand. William Walker's life and filibustering efforts get a long hearing in chapter thirteen and serve as an effective lens for understanding both the ambitions and limitations of the slaveholding regime.

Johnson's daring and originality as a writer can lead to strange moments as well. The book begins rather strangely, as Johnson chooses to lead the reader into the Mississippi Valley by having them imagine what H.A. Kidd, New Orleans newspaper editor could have seen as he viewed the Valley from the peak of his flight as he the explosion of the steamboat *Anglo-Norman* throws him into the air. It is an odd passage, and a rare misstep in a book that from the start lets the reader know that this is going to be a big, ambitious work. Since the publication of *Soul by Soul*, Johnson has become an academic star, and the scope of *River of Dark Dreams* matches that of a confident, passionate historian at the top of his game. For good reason it was one of the most anticipated and discussed books of 2013, and scholars who write about slavery must address the arguments that it contains. Others who are interested in the role of slavery, capitalism, and the global economy should also give their attention to this intriguing book.

Bryan Jack
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville