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Book Review: Johnson, Walter. *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*

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Review of:

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

In *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*, Walter Johnson explores the impact of slavery, capitalism, and imperialism on the Mississippi Valley. After acquiring the Louisiana Territory, Thomas Jefferson anticipated the Mississippi Valley's "abundance of land would produce a harvest of self-sufficient, noncommercial white households headed by the yeomen patriachs whom he associated with republican virtue ... an 'empire for liberty'" (3). However, "'disloyal' whites, Native Americans, Africans, and African Americans" inhabited the region; and, to develop the empire, the United States had to "prevent alliances linking invading armies from Europe ... with the indigenous and enslaved populations of the Mississippi Valley" (25). Once the cotton boom and the extension of slavery reached the region, Jefferson's "empire for liberty" became the Cotton Kingdom. Johnson uses Madison County, Mississippi as an example to illustrate "a furious transformation from a frontier exchange economy to a boom time cotton economy" at the same time the number of slaves doubled (47).

The steamboat, which allowed shipments to go up the Mississippi River instead of having to rely on downriver flow, was an important economic aspect of the Mississippi Valley. In addition, the levee in New Orleans provided further commercial potential. Produce and products—as well as slaves—travelled the Mississippi, moved through the levee, and became destined for the metropolitan cities of the Atlantic. Because of this, Louisiana "regulated banking more strictly than almost any other state in the union," and by 1840 "was the most urbanized state in the United States" (85). According to Johnson, steamboats became the third biggest investment in the Mississippi Valley behind land and slavery. In addition, steamboats carried "the nineteenth century's emergent strategy of social management:

segregation” (129). Johnson explains that steamboats were part of a “white-supremacist ritual” that circulated “ideas about slavery and master up and down the river” (136).

Johnson explores how slaves were tortured and how they responded through the slave community. The way that planters laid out their fields—rectangular and rows—allowed the field overseer to easily witness the progress of the slaves. If they were not working fast enough, the slaveholders “produced theatricals of discipline and punishment that concretized their authority . . . in the public form of a wounded slave” (171). Further, slaveholders used various other methods to oppress their slaves. Johnson uses food as an example of how planters controlled their slaves. Also, slaveholders were involved in the reproduction of their slaves, and as Johnson argues “extended their dominion to spaces inside the bodies of the women they owned” (195). Much of the work the slaves did was cooperative—even some of the individual tasks—that historians referred to as slave community. Johnson argues that slaves acted in solidarity “because they recognized their fellow slaves not as ‘agents,’ but as family members, lovers, Christians, African, blacks, workers, fellow travelers, women, men, co-conspirators, [and] competitors” (217).

Johnson attempts to show whether planters were capitalists or not. He explains that one group of historians argues slavery was not capitalist, and another faction of historians claims slavery was capitalist. Johnson contends that a materialist and historical analysis “begins from the premise that in actual historical fact there was no nineteenth-century capitalism without slavery” (254). However, he wants to “set aside prefabricated questions and threadbare tautologies” to examine the importance of cotton on capitalism (254). Cotton had provided the Mississippi Valley with “one of the richest agricultural societies in human history” (151). The region had entered the global economy by shipping their product to locations across the Atlantic, especially in England. Soon, planters began experimenting with cotton to make it easier to pick. Slaveholders began planting cotton by how

much could be picked by hand, and started judging slaves by their hands. According to Johnson, healthy men and women were “full hand,” pregnant women were “half-hands,” first-year children were “quarter-hands,” and those who had mutilated or unsatisfactory hands were threatened and tortured (153-4).

In the latter third of the book, Johnson explores the imperialism of the Mississippi Valley by surveying how the region became interested in Cuba, Nicaragua, and the reopening of the Atlantic slave trade. According to the author, the Mississippi Valley’s interest in Cuba was “a product of a specific moment in time and a particular combination of economic, political, and technological circumstances” (307). Trade and commerce in the early 1850s was moving east to New York City because of the railroads. However, by expanding to Cuba, the South could reclaim its position to “assert dominion over the commerce of the West and revitalize the Mississippi [River] as a north-to-south axis of trade and prosperity” (320). Yet, Johnson states that the Neutrality Act of 1818 “made it illegal to raise a private army in New Orleans ... [and] asserted that diplomacy was the arena where nations, rather than ethnic groups or religions or classes confront one another” (323). After various plots to invade Cuba failed, the Mississippi Valley shifted to another nation further south.

William Walker proposed an opportunity for the Mississippi Valley to expand to Nicaragua. According to Johnson, Walker’s project worked for slaveholders because “controlling the isthmus would deliver the trade of the Pacific to the port of New Orleans; and reestablishing slavery in Central America would provide the South with a bulwark against the progress of hemispheric abolition” (371-2). Walker, who had conquered Nicaragua as a soldier of fortune and proclaimed president in 1856, returned to the nation, and greeted Louisiana Senator Pierre Soulé. Upon his arrival, Soulé delivered Walker a \$500,000 bond exactly one month before Nicaragua legalized slavery and reopened the slave trade (390). In addition, Walker appealed to the Mississippi Valley’s non-slaveholding white

men. Yet, many slaveholders soon began to question the loyalty of these men. Journalist Edward Pollard believed these whites had two ways to “forestall social disorder”: the first was to support William Walker and the second “consisted of reopening the Atlantic slave trade to the United States” (381).

According to Johnson, there were many arguments in favor of reopening the Atlantic slave trade. As he explains, if Walker represented imperialists’ quest for new territory, the slave trade intended to make sure “that territory would be transformed in the image of the plantation social order of the Deep South” (395). Also, many in the Mississippi Valley were unhappy with the Kansas-Nebraska Act, particularly with popular sovereignty. Johnson explains that by “controlling the terms of economic growth—the growth of ‘slave’ or ‘free’ states—one could control the inflow of pro- or anti-slavery whites,” and thus could control whether a political economy was free or slave (400). Further, the Deep South was in need of so many slaves that they were afraid they would deplete the slave population in the Upper South. Therefore, the Atlantic slave trade needed to reopen to avoid a slave drain. However, not all in the Mississippi Valley were supporters of reopening. Senator Albert Gallatin Brown believed reopening would “augment the power of the planter class to push poor white people off their land,” and Senator Henry Foote saw the idea of importing 200,000 slaves was “simply terrifying” (417).

Johnson concludes the work by explaining how the invasion of Nicaragua and the reopening of the slave trade failed. He explains that both “represented an imperial vision of the future of slavery, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Each in its own way proposed a reorientation of space through a global projection of ‘the South,’ and characterized its vision as one of white male regeneration” (418). In addition, Johnson argues that the supporters of the slave trade devastated the Democratic Party, and guaranteed Abraham Lincoln’s election. Overall, Johnson presents an excellent work of scholarship.

He employs a large number of primary and secondary sources. However, the work does have one minor fault. Johnson abruptly ends the work following the discussion on reopening the slave trade, and does not provide an epilogue or concluding chapter. Regardless of this, Johnson delivers an outstanding monograph on both African American and Southern history.

David Justice