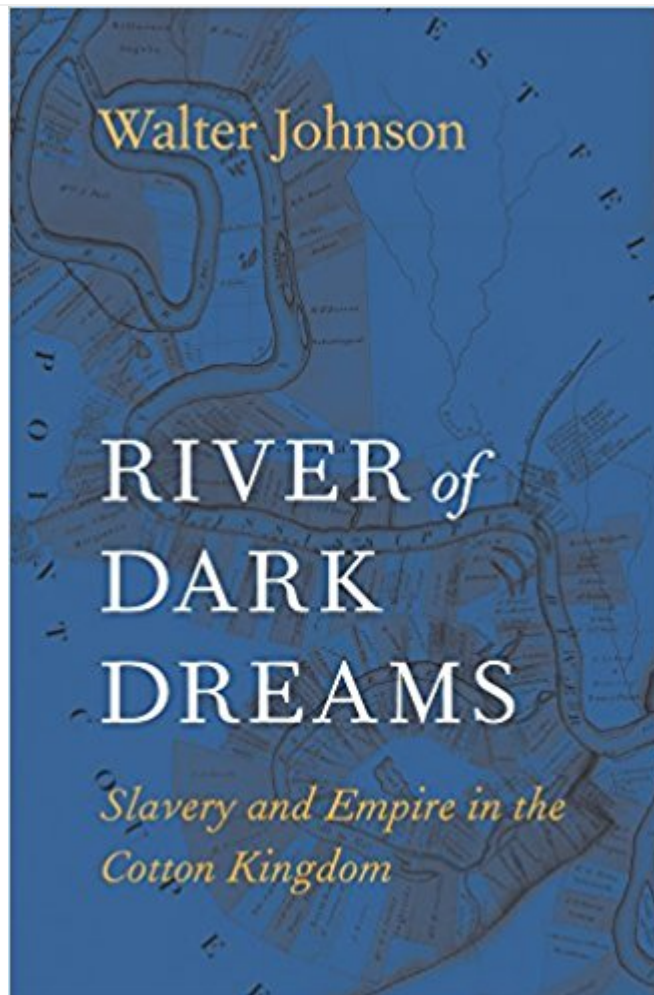


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River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom



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Reviewed Work(s)

River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom. By Walter Johnson (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013). Pp. 526. Hardcover, \$35.00.

Thomas Jefferson's dream for a nation of yeoman farmers gained momentum when he added the Louisiana Purchase territory to the burgeoning republic in 1803. However, the immense inflow of capital into the Mississippi Valley in the antebellum years distorted that dream, and the "yeoman's republic soon came under the dominion of what came to be called the 'slaveocracy,'" (5). Walter Johnson details the collapse of Jefferson's dream during the rise of the Cotton Kingdom and its attendant political economy and culture. The author presents a vast array of anecdotes, statistics, and personal records that describe the racial conquest of the antebellum Southwest by the planter class—slave-owning elites with substantial tracts of land, numerous slaves, and extensive political influence—who subjugated African slaves and Native Americans, while manipulating poor whites into propagating the existing power structure.

Key aspects of Johnson's argument include the Southern planters' various ideologies and identities. The slave system gave slave owners power that permeated Southern social and political discourse. On one hand, slavery allowed planters to amass wealth, status, and land, which they exploited to strengthen and enlarge their own positions. Planters also used the prospect of wealth to persuade poor, non-slaveholding whites that they could own slaves as well and launch themselves into the upper echelons of society, which guaranteed that the lower class would be staunch defenders of slavery, and by extension, the elites' chosen social order. On the other hand, imperialism defined the planter class. Conquering the land, the bodies of slaves, the international market, and foreign nations became an integral part of the slaveocracy because the planters' beliefs relied on expansion. Slavery was more than an economic system; it was the basis of Southern society, and thus, those invested in it sought to expand into new territory, as well as into international domains. The threat of abolitionism and slave revolts induced the

planters to rapidly expand to protect their scheme. If their slaves were emancipated or the cotton trade collapsed, the slave owners would lose their source of economic and racial power.

Another powerful argument is Johnson's analysis of the bodily processes of slavery, processes which were inherently tied into material and spatial realities. He illustrates the means by which masters exerted power over their slaves through starvation, beatings, and sexual exploitation. They created a carceral landscape, where "domination and resistance... structured each other," and where slaves' defiance took such subtle forms as eating more than their daily allotted food or taking unauthorized breaks (214). This structure reflected planters' views about property rights: because their property was ambulatory and rebellious, slavery defined "patterns of slaveholding class formation" in which masters saw their property—the bodily processes of the black slave—as embodying a common interest, thus uniting the planter class behind trapping runaways and harassing or kidnapping free blacks (226).

Perhaps Johnson's most important revision in the historiography is his contention that the perception of the South as an entity is spatially, economically, and culturally erroneous, which comes from the "conceptual anachronism" that views the South only as the states which joined the Confederacy and were defeated by the Union (16). Most historians have worked on the category of "the South," which obfuscates the slave economy's multidimensional composition. The Upper South, like Virginia and Maryland, largely became a slave *exporter* to the Lower South, where the Cotton Kingdom was blooming. Furthermore, the South's politics grew increasingly divided over questions of free labor's role in the slave economy, expansion into Nicaragua and Cuba, re-opening the international slave trade, and trade with Britain and Belgium. As Johnson convincingly argues, the spheres controlled by Richmond and New Orleans must be conceptually separated to understand the complex structures of Southern thought because the South's ideology is "not reducible to secession," (17).

Readers of the book will emerge better informed on the foundations of antebellum identity politics, capitalism, Southern ideology, and racial power. They may also enjoy Johnson's collection of stories about riverboat travel, escaped slaves, and the abortive conquest of Nicaragua. However, the book is densely packed with academic language and ideas

that may be foreign to non-historians, and should be approached as a monograph written for scholars with existing knowledge about economics, political economy, and pre-Civil War history. Moreover, readers should take note of Johnson's tendency to rely on archetypal narratives about slave masters and Southern elites as ruthless, capitalist exploiters, which are assertions he makes based on carefully selected personal correspondence. In addition, the author assumes that all planters had the same motivations and skills, acted optimally in all the instances when they exerted power, and maintained uniform practices over the thousands of plantations. But holding these limitations in mind, *River of Dark Dreams* delivers a revelatory account of slavery's economic reach and the culture it shaped. Most importantly, the book challenges the dichotomy of "North" and "South" in ways that elucidate that history of antebellum America.

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