

WALTER JOHNSON, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2013), 526 pp.

In *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*, Walter Johnson, Winthrop Professor of History and Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, tries to correct, if not completely turn on its head, the dominating perspective on antebellum America. According to the most widely shared interpretation of the period, the North rapidly developed into a modern, capitalist, industrial, and aggressively expansionist society over the course of the nineteenth century, whereas the South—remaining premodern, quasifeudal, and agricultural—fought a rearguard action to defend the status quo and eventually broke away from the union once Southerners realized that time was not on their side in the sectional power struggle over the nature of westward expansionism. Johnson challenges this narrative in two ways. First, he depicts the Mississippi Valley (incorporating parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri) as a vibrant and dynamic region whose slave-holding inhabitants were at the forefront of the nineteenth-century capitalist revolution rather than backward-looking traditionalists, took full advantage of new technologies such as the steam boat, operated their plantations in highly sophisticated and systematic ways, and employed modern management techniques. According to Johnson, it was no coincidence that “by 1860, there were more millionaires per capita in the Mississippi Valley than anywhere else in the United States” (5). Second, Johnson leaves the national framework of the well-known story about how the North and South became increasingly alienated from each other behind by putting the Mississippi Valley slave-holders in a global context: he shows them to be key players in the emerging global capitalist system who had utopian dreams of building a worldwide slave empire, reopening the transatlantic slave trade, and turning the South into an international trading hub. He thus traces “the history of alternative visions of what ‘the South’ might look like” by asking “where Southerners (and slave-holders in particular) thought they were going and how they thought they could pull it off in the first place” rather than defining the South in hindsight simply as the states that seceded from the union in 1860/61 and consequently merely inquiring “what ‘the South’ was leaving” (16).

It is hardly possible to concisely summarize the multitude of Johnson’s arguments and to critically assess all the claims he makes in his book of fourteen chapters and more than 500 pages, which combines ecological, economic, and cultural history and makes use of a wide range of primary sources such as newspapers, slave narratives, legal documents, personal

correspondence, pamphlets, and popular literature. The larger contours of the work, however, can be sketched briefly: When the federal government acquired the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, President Thomas Jefferson hoped that the land would be settled by independent, self-sufficient, and noncommercial white yeomen farmers who he believed were the ideal bearers of republican virtues and would sustain a largely agricultural American ‘empire of liberty,’ as Johnson begins his account. By thus expanding across space rather than developing through time, the United States would be able to avoid the fate of Europe, which Jefferson perceived to be characterized by hordes of dependent wage laborers in ever growing industrial urban centers and consequently by strict class hierarchies.

Jefferson’s dream, however, was frustrated, as the land—once it had been opened up for settlements through the violent displacement or extermination of Native American tribes—was mostly bought up by speculators and wealthy plantation owners who brought their slaves to strip the forests, build levees, burn the bushes (thus turning the wilderness into harvestable land), and eventually work the cotton fields. Johnson argues that in the process slaves were turned into a commodity, as they were moved from one place to another and treated as just another material factor in the production line. A ‘Cotton Kingdom,’ Johnson concludes, rather than an ‘empire of liberty’ emerged in the Mississippi Valley, which became fully integrated into the Atlantic economy and, in consequence, also fully subject to cycles of bust and boom. Slave-holders would hence experience profound economic uncertainty, as crises resulting from overproduction would break out regularly and as their capital-intensive ‘industry’ made them highly dependent on foreign credit. Moreover, the material limitations of this process of commercial expansion would eventually be reached. “Cotton monocropping stripped the land of vegetation, leached out its fertility, and rendered one of the richest agricultural regions of the earth dependent on upriver trade for food” (8). The steamboat mania likewise reached its peak in the 1840s: by that time, “every inland backwater that had just enough water in the spring to carry a steamboat was being serviced” (7). Furthermore, slave-holders feared the effects of national tariffs that the North wished the federal government to impose to protect its emerging manufacturing industries. Despite these mounting obstacles, southern slave-owners, unlike other capitalist entrepreneurs, could not simply abandon their trade and invest their capital into new ventures, as Johnson reminds us, since their capital was—except for the land—human. He makes clear that “slaveholders as a class could not simply transfer their investment from one form of capital to another, cutting their losses and channeling their money into the Next Big Thing. Their capital would not

simply rust or lie fallow. It would starve. It would steal. It would revolt.” (13) At this point, slave-holders from the Mississippi Valley turned into ardent imperialists who saw the solution to their economic problems in the creation of an international slave empire. First, they sought to acquire Cuba or at least to topple the Spanish colonial government and instead install a proslavery and profree trade regime. Second, they financially and militarily supported filibustering expeditions aimed at taking possession of Nicaragua hoping that they could thus establish trading links to the Pacific economies. They also envisioned sending poorer whites from the Mississippi Valley who could no longer afford to own slaves themselves and whose support for the institution to slavery and the slave-holders’ political dominance therefore could not be taken for granted anymore to Nicaragua. Finally, Mississippi Valley slave-holders worked to effect a reopening of the transatlantic slave trade, expecting that it would not only allow poorer whites to again purchase slaves, thus reconciling potentially explosive class distinctions among whites, but also that it would stop the ‘slave drain’ from the states of the Upper South, which had sold many of its slaves to the dynamic Mississippi Valley region and which, if this development continued, would turn eventually into ‘free-labor’ states. Only when these efforts to create an international slave empire were thwarted did Mississippi Valley slave-holders turn inward, focus on the sectional controversy, and decide to leave the union and build a new nation with fellow slave-holders from the Upper South.

As the Mississippi Valley slave-holders’ dreams did not come true, one might, after reading Johnson’s learned book, ask: so what? The relevance of depicting their ‘lost cause’ could have been made clearer by analyzing what actually did happen and thus providing an explanation of why their plans failed and why their global slave empire never materialized. Moreover, it remains an open question as to how representative the sources used by Johnson actually are. That the majority of Mississippi Valley slave-holders was really more interested in Cuba, Nicaragua, and a resumption of the transatlantic slave trade than an acquisition of western lands and the spread of slavery to western territories is certainly a far-reaching claim—one that Johnson does not satisfactorily prove. He also does not explore how the slave-holding elite managed to maintain the support of the poorer slaveless whites who, after all, constituted roughly forty percent of the region’s total population. After all, the implementation of their plans to resettle some of them to Nicaragua or to provide them with affordable slaves through a reopening of the international slave trade was not successful.

The most significant message of *River of Dark Dreams*, however, is based on solid research, rests on a powerful and timely argument, and is convincingly and eloquently presented: that southern slavery stood not in opposition to the capitalist driving forces of American history but that, to the contrary, the spread and rising importance of slavery in the four decades before the Civil War was the result of the rigorous application of the capitalistic logic to the plantation economy. Taking up Edmund Morgan's conclusion—famously put forward in *American Slavery, American Freedom*—that white Americans' democracy in the South was not so much contradicted by but rather predicated on black servitude, one might say, after reading Johnson's book, that slavery in the antebellum Mississippi Valley was not incompatible with but rather based on American capitalism.

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