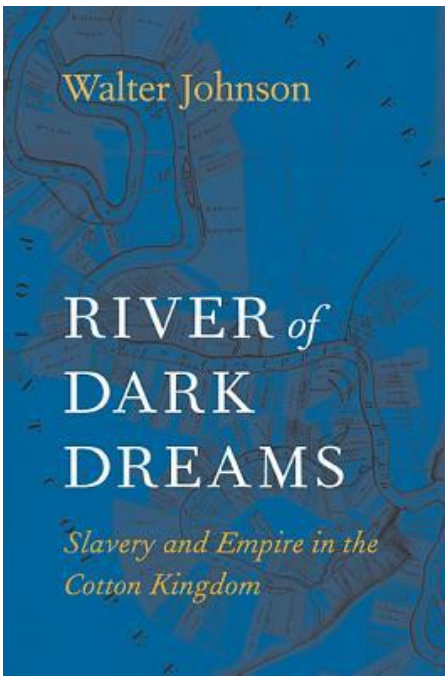

River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom

Walter Johnson

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River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom Walter Johnson
When Jefferson acquired the Louisiana Territory, he envisioned an empire for liberty populated by self-sufficient white farmers. Cleared of Native Americans and the remnants of European empires by Andrew Jackson, the Mississippi Valley was transformed instead into a booming capitalist economy commanded by wealthy planters, powered by steam engines, and dependent on the coerced labor of slaves. "River of Dark Dreams" places the Cotton Kingdom at the center of worldwide webs of exchange and exploitation that extended across oceans and drove an insatiable hunger for new lands. This bold reaccounting dramatically alters our understanding of American slavery and its role in U.S. expansionism, global capitalism, and the upcoming Civil War.

Walter Johnson deftly traces the connections between the planters pro-slavery ideology, Atlantic commodity markets, and Southern schemes for global ascendency. Using slave narratives, popular literature, legal records, and personal correspondence, he recreates the harrowing details of daily life under cotton s dark dominion. We meet the confidence men and gamblers who made the Valley shimmer with promise, the slave dealers, steamboat captains, and merchants who supplied the markets, the planters who wrung their civilization out of the minds and bodies of their human property, and the true believers who threatened the Union by trying to expand the Cotton Kingdom on a global scale.

But at the center of the story Johnson tells are the enslaved people who pulled down the forests, planted the fields, picked the cotton who labored, suffered, and resisted on the dark underside of the American dream."

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

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From Reader Review River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom for online ebook

Scriptor Ignotus says

This is an extraordinary book; a compelling history of the carceral empire of the Mississippi River valley and its inhabitants, written with a theoretician's eye for the social, political, and economic currents of imperial history, and a novelist's ear for the emotional and psychological subjectivities of those who built the Cotton Kingdom, justified it, and were enslaved by it. Walter Johnson maintains a brilliant sense of relationality; between the personal and the impersonal, ideology and lived experience, inevitability and contingency; and in so doing is able to weave the seemingly-disparate people, places, and events he describes into a single historical and cultural continuum.

The Mississippi River was the jugular vein of the American slaveocracy. We often think of American slavery as the residual taint of the social regimentation of old Europe; a type of neo-feudalism which coiled its way into the American Constitution like the serpent, where it enjoyed an artificially-prolonged life under the auspices of the United States before being at last defeated by the *true* American ideals nested in the Declaration of Independence. Johnson tells a very different story, one in which the slave society of the Mississippi was a radical social *innovation*, created, strengthened, and legitimized by the modernizing forces emerging in the nineteenth century: global mercantile capitalism, industrialization, biological or pseudo-Darwinian racism, and "progressive" colonialism among them.

Slavery in the antebellum United States was not an antiquated social system on its last legs, struggling vainly against the forces of progress and humanity. The Mississippi valley, with its hub at New Orleans, was the center of a dynamic and expansionary mercantile empire with global aspirations and enormous civilizational pretensions. The stewards of the Cotton Kingdom believed (or at least told themselves) that they *were* the agents of progress, leading the world toward a necessary and inevitable future in which the dark-skinned and heathenish peoples of the world would be united and improved under white tutelage.

Our contemporary ideals being what they are, we think of racism as a symptom of social primitivity; a sort of inwardness and provincialism that prevents us from seeing ourselves in others. But if we use the Mississippi valley as a case study, we find that racism—or, more exactly, the racialization which provides cogency for racist ideology—was an ideological mechanism by which the Euro-American project of economic expansion and accumulation perpetuated itself. Racism was a conceit of Western cosmopolitanism. While modernity was commodifying the world, racialization provided for the commodification of certain groups of people.

When the United States acquired the Mississippi as part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Jefferson dreamed that it would become part of a vast, decentralized web of (white) independent yeoman farmers stretching across the American continent; a continental republic of cincinnati. But when the public land went on sale, the financial power of the land barons showed its hand. Land speculators and venture capitalists bought up every parcel of land along the Mississippi (the parcels were rectangular in shape, with the short sides of the rectangle adjacent to the river so that more parcels could be sold), not to become self-sufficient subsistence farmers, but to devote every inch of arable land to the cultivation of cotton for sale on the global market.

Slaves cleared the forests, planted and picked the cotton, and packed it into bales that were shipped down the river to New Orleans; and from there to cities like Liverpool and Manchester, where they fed the European textile industry.

To some extent, the Cotton Kingdom may be thought of as an economic and political sphere quite distinct from that of the United States. Its world was the world of the Black Atlantic, encompassing the Mississippi, the Gulf of Mexico, Cuba, the West Indies, and Central America. It was only incidental that the valley was located within that amorphous, uncongealed cartographic mass known as the United States of America. There was a real fear in the early decades of the nineteenth century that the Mississippi would become a breakaway republic in order to have fuller control over its economic and diplomatic affairs.

Reading this book will take you beyond the well-intentioned but intellectually-inept moralizing about American slavery. You'll learn about the mechanics of how the system actually functioned. You'll learn about the tension between the human agency of the slaves and their status as material objects in an economic order. You'll learn about the dangerous but incredibly lucrative steamboat industry, which fed the American interior with capital before being threatened by the transcontinental rail system. You'll learn about the alienation of poor whites in this racialized society, and how this influenced their interactions with runaway slaves.

You'll meet people like John Murrell, a highwayman and slave-stealer who would lure slaves away from their masters, obscure the paper trail linking them to those masters, and then sell them to other slavers before repeating the process; Solomon Northrup, who, of course, wrote one of the most important primary source documents on the life of a slave and a runaway; and William Walker, a filibuster who led a private army of Kentuckians to Nicaragua and seized power there for the purpose of establishing white supremacy and expanding the Cotton Kingdom.

Most importantly, this book will help us look beyond superficialities in our present discussions about the nature and legacy of American racism and racial oppression.

Eric says

As a reviewer, I couldn't possibly do better than this:

"The enlightening, progressive force of liberalism has carried us far from slavery, we like to think. We are not those people and never could have been. In River of Dark Dreams, we are reminded that between the slave empire and our own age lies only a handful of generations. Johnson shows the historical meaning of this proximity. We are connected not just through the shortness of time but through the persistence of the liberal capitalist tradition itself. The form of freedom fantasized by the slaveholding South, in turn, is the freedom of our own society: ensuring a standard of living sufficient to confirm our self-image and limit domestic conflict; built upon ecological degradation, the conquest of darker nations by international bureaucracies, their enslavement by debt, their forcible integration into a global commercial network; enforced by our own armies of the night, surveilling, killing, torturing without oversight. The myth of our great distance from slavery—of the old South's fundamental illiberalism—exists precisely to give us a way of managing our experience of this continuity, and to let us continue to enact it."

https://nplusonemag.com/issue-17/revi...

Wendy G says

Having read Walter Johnson's "Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market," I was very eager to read his next work of historical genius. Johnson is a pretty extraordinary writer, especially considering historians aren't trained to be writers and so many of them write dull stuff. Johnson's prose is lovely, if 'lovely can be used to describe a book about slave-holding imperialism in the Cotton Kingdom. Johnson asks us to reconsider the Southern slaveholder; he wasn't only concerned with his slaves and his land. His wealth, his well being (such as it was), his future was intimately tied to the Mississippi River, the steamboat, slave men and women, and the very real possibility of expanding slavery not west, but south. Even small slaveholders, according to the author, were capitalist imperialists to the core. ...Thank you, Walter Johnson, for another beautifully written history with theory that is accessible to all of us.

Tim Brown says

The second book I read this month about slavery in the antebellum era. This book differs from *The Half Hasn't Been Told*, which focuses more on the slave-slaveholder experience. The author focuses on the extension of slave territory, arguing that a white supremacist idealogy drove the expansion of slavery. Accounts of "filibusters" who invaded Texas, Cuba, and Nicaragua with the intention of adding territory to the U.S., specifically slave territory, illustrate this process. Simultaneously, slave holders settled the southwest frontier, tying up virtually all available land for growing cotton. The reader gets the impression that cotton "plantations" were not like the genteel Tara in *Gone With the Wind*, but more like labor or concentration camps in Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union in the mid-20th century. Ironically, the spread of whiteness resulted in some very dark dreams indeed.

Marcus says

An extraordinary compendium on Mississippi River Valley's history of slavery and the cotton economy. Mr. Johnson provides the reader more than a 100 pages of references in support of his narrative on cotton's capitalistic use of slavery. When insurance was procured for bales of cotton and slaves, but was not for paying ridership aboard steamboats traversing the Mississippi River; little doubt is left to the darkness of slavery's economics.

Ian Divertie says

If you wonder why things like Ferguson, Trayvon Martin and the out and out hatred of the current president are with us this book should help you understand that dynamic. Also alludes to the fact that many contemplated a much larger and wider US empire even as far back as the 1840's and 1850's, which dovetails with our current situation separate from our race relations and yet how driven by a racist context that desire for empire seems to be.

Ai Miller says

Wow what a book. I actually skimmed this once for a class and then went back to try to read it more carefully--and while it took me a really long time, it was so worth it. Johnson (as I'm sure many other people will tell you) is an amazing writer, while also being so intellectually rigorous in his work and with his argument. And that argument is so important--drawing together imperialism and its connections in the US to slaveholding culture, to the absolute necessity of expansion that I think really still is glossed over in teaching US history. I will say, if read in as many disjointed ways as I did, it can feel a little disconnected (especially the last three chapters from the initial readings) but each piece is so beautiful and really does connect. It's long but boy is it really, deeply worth it if you're at all interested in slavery studies and connection to empire.

Josh says

Walter Johnson's River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom traces the development of an imperial ethos among southern planters and firebrands in the Mississippi River Valley between roughly 1820 and 1861. Throughout the volume, Johnson tries to detail a specific vision of empire held by southern planters that encompassed a common appraisal of "race, sex, slavery, space, and time—a vision that outlines what the world and the future looked like to slaveholders and other white men in the Mississippi Valley on the eve of the Civil War" (418). Johnson steps back from the common narrative of causes for the Civil War, asserting that secession after the Election of 1860 was the "lowest common denominator" for most southerners. Instead he presents a compelling, if sometimes overstated, argument that before secession southerners in the Mississippi Valley tried to remedy their growing dependence on the North by extending the Cotton Kingdom first into the Caribbean by trying to provoke a revolution on Cuba and later by filibustering the Nicaraguan government and pressing for a re-inauguration of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Johnson advances his argument through a narrative that combines histories of slavery, capitalism, and imperialism during the nineteenth-century with a sprinkling of environmental/ecological history to freshen our understanding of the cotton plantation.

Steamboats, surveying crews, and land organization came to the Lower Mississippi before cotton plantations dominated the landscape. The early chapters of the book detail the process of creating the region. Steamboats allowed for faster commercial exchange up and down the river and surveyors, speculators, and the Land Office created private property allotments and provided the means for future planters to settle the region. Johnson's chapters on the Steamboat are brilliant both in the level of technical detail and his attention to the diverse peoples that traveled by steamboat during the period. For slaves, the steamboat might represent their road toward bondage if they traveled down-river, but it might represent freedom if it traveled up-stream. Gamblers and confidence men used the steamboats as opportune times to scam unsuspecting planters out of their money, smuggle runaways, or rig card games. And free peoples of color (usually of a mixed-race descent) often passed for white aboard the steamboats—and the fact that many could not distinguish a free person of color from a respectable white gentleman or lady only undermined social hierarchies based on racial difference.

The main thrust of Johnson's argument starts from chapter ten onward. The Panic of 1837 (and subsequent depression) led southern planters, championed by Matthew Maury, to play with ideas of a direct trade with the global economy. Rather than relying on New York City to trans-ship cotton to Liverpool, England, southern planters began eying Cuba, Latin America, and the Atlantic to increase profits and expand their growing race-based empire. Maury's early machinations translated into New Orleans lauding and supporting

Narsico Lopez's (failed) invasion of Cuba in 1851. By the late-1850s, southern yeoman desperate to make inroads in the slave economy followed William Walker into Nicaragua, where they temporarily overthrew the government. Finally on the eve of Civil War, many in the South promoted re-opening the trans-Atlantic slave trade to serve two purposes. First, it would alleviate the "slave drain" from the Upper South and unmoor perpetuation of the slave economy from the reproductive capacities of slave women. Second, an infusion of slaves would depress slave prices and allow yeoman and middling whites to acquire slaves, have a stake in the cotton trade, and diminish class conflict. Cuba, Nicaragua, and the slave trade represented alternatives from secession—all of them rooted in ideas of white supremacy and pro-slavery progressivism. Before 1861, a distinct group of southerners mostly from the Lower Mississippi advocated a regional or sectional foreign policy distinct from the homogenous national foreign policy. It was not yet a fully developed secessionist movement wherein extremists advocated total political separation from the Union.

Perhaps the biggest problem among academics today is the recourse to gibberish and obfuscating language, and historians are not exempt from this trend in their own writing. For the most part Walter Johnson is an exception to this rule because he writes a lucid account of the nineteenth-century Lower Mississippi that includes fine-grained, stunning and horrifying accounts of slave punishment, cotton harvest, runaway slaves, and the novel steamboat. In fact, his chapters on steamboat technology and transportation should be the example that all historians of technology and the market revolution should emulate. His tactical narrative of Lopez's failed Cuba expedition rivals that of the best military historians. Unfortunately, the middle chapters rest on an assortment of jargon—Chapter 6, "Dominion"; Chapter 7, "The Empire of the White Man's Will" ; Chapter 8, "The Carceral Landscape." Here you will find unexplained and often unnecessary buzzwords and phrases such as: choreography (of space, place); theatrics and theatrical performances of domestic slavery; space-determining technology; agents of their own actions; subjectivity; horses as a "tool that converted grain into policing"; and "techno-enhanced visuality" [a phrase that sounds more appropriate for a dystopia sci-fi flick than a historical account of nineteenth-century slave societies]. Other words are considerably overused in the volume: "human condition"; space; place; twinned; agency that usually short-cut full explanation of subordinate claims in certain chapters. On the whole, these jargon phrases obscure more than they reveal in certain sections of the work and often make over-complex very qoutidian interactions that happened daily on plantations. At one point Johnson describes a slave who "had been harvesting not cotton but fish, which he had transformed into bacon by means of barter" rather than stating more directly that the slave secretly caught fish that he bartered for bacon.

My quibble with jargon in these middle chapters is probably symptomatic of my broader critique of Johnson's employment of environmental history to add nuance to our understanding of plantation life. Labor historians have wrestled with the usefulness of environmental history for understanding working-class history for quite some time and the debate primarily centers on whether coupling an analysis of the natural environment with working-class mobilization, activism, or oppression can actually tell us anything new about human experience.

In River of Dark Dreams, Johnson draws on environmental history to distinguish between "work" as human energy expended upon the natural world and "labor" as slaves' relationship to their master, or a workingman's relationship to his employer. Johnson thus describes the plantation as a "landscape of labor" where slaves dialectically engaged with an environment that they modified and that in turn changed their bodies. Johnson does suggest a use for environmental history through work, because it provided indispensable skills for cotton picking and memorizing local waterways, woods, and "off-grid" locations that allowed slaves to have pride and satisfaction with their own capabilities independent from the grueling labor performed for the master. When Johnson describes the mundane and brutal aspects of plantation life—toiling in the fields, hewing wood, constructing quarters, using whitewash, washing, sleeping, hunting—he describes the power relations between slave and master and how the landscape and topography could tilt the balance of power

one way or another. Masters wielded more power on the plantation because they constructed the house, fields, and sight lines so they could easily monitor slaves and spot/punish potential runaways. When slaves did escape into the woods, bayous, and swamps of the Mississippi they gained the upper-hand because masters relied on dogs and sound to track men. Despite Johnson's description of the plantation as a "landscape of labor" and trying to interpret the differences between the visual orientated cotton field and aural-centered woodlands, his overall narrative of brutality on the plantation largely coheres with previous assessments of plantation life provided by Eugene Genovese, Herbert Gutman, Ira Berlin, and countless other historians of slavery, even if Johnson does reject the idea of paternalism as the essence of southern plantation culture. The environmental methodology, despite the specialized vocabulary and jargon, doesn't provide anything profoundly different for understanding that narrative.

Despite these criticisms, Johnson has written a solid narrative of nineteenth-century slavery in the Lower Mississippi that will surely become the basis for future historians' engagement with the subject. His middle chapters excepted, the chapters on steamboat technology, the failed Cuban invasion, the botched Nicaragua coup, and vociferous debates to reopen the Atlantic slave trade are compelling additions to our understanding of "southern identity" before the Civil War and some potential causes of that conflict. He leaves us with a thought-provoking catalogue of antebellum racial-imperial thought—the chanting of "freedom" that concealed enslavement, pseudoscientific racism, and white supremacy—that he suggests have some analogue in contemporary discussions of promoting "freedom" and "democracy" abroad (p. 420).

3.5 stars.

Margaret Sankey says

Maybe the best way to describe this is as a brilliant and visceral illustration of the political and social economy of slavery, especially as it hit a point at which it had to expand (Cuba? Nicaragua? Re-opening the Atlantic slave trade?) or implode, and the warpings this wrought on the people who perpetuated it. Johnson uses as an effective metaphor the Mississippi steamboats, which hit a saturation market about the same time slavery did, and adapted by pushing for speed and recklessness with equipment that often ended in catastrophe. It is really at its best when Johnson uses overlooked sensory materials from existing primary sources (smells, sounds, tastes of slavery) to explicate the horrifying means by which white people convinced themselves that the human beings they starved, exploited and raped were lazy, stupid and sexually deviant.

Richard Pierce says

This book was a waste of money to buy, a waste of time to read and a waste of space to put on my bookshelf. If you have read nothing about the history of the Mississippi valley then you may find something of interest in this book. For being 420 pages long, this book was a huge disappointment.

Amber says

Fantastic book. It views the slave economy of the American South as part of a global economic system, and does not shy away from the inherent contradictions in the political philosophy involved or the horrifying

conditions under which enslaved people lived their lives. It offers a panoramic view and still manages to paint a portrait.

Bfisher says

I enjoyed reading this book, in spite of several issues with it. The book was generally very readable, but the author sometimes resorted to an academic style; highfalutin language when simpler words would probably have done as well. The larger structural issue was that the book read more like a collection of essays, so I came away without a sense of an overall theme. I felt that with a really good editor to impose some order, this could have been a great book.

In spite of the above reservations, it is a very worthwhile book for anyone interested in the slave-based economy and society of the antebellum lower Mississippi Valley. The chapters are almost standalone, in the discussion of such issues as the tug-of-war between open and closed markets, fears of servile insurrection, financial risk-taking like the steamboat bubble, the social issues of racial mixing, the commoditization of humans as well as the view of humans as farm livestock, accounting methods for slave-raised cotton, annexationists and filibusterers like William Walker, and the pressure for a resumption of the Atlantic slave trade.

Samuel says

While the research and organization of this work are laudatory, the new content introduced and the overall "slavery is bad" tone of Walter Johnson's RIVER OF DARK DREAMS has little to offer in the realm of innovative scholastic methods or findings. However, there are some attempts to incorporate an environmental history approach to the Cotton Kingdom as well as a transnational thrust that is explored rather well and interestingly (Cuba and Nicaragua were both prized by and settled by Southerners hoping to extend their slavery empire into new markets and thus preserve their way of life during the mid-nineteenth century). Again, these are things that have been identified by many other historians, but they are explored and applied in a new packaging that is quite handsome and convincing. Overall, beginning with Jefferson's agrarian ideal concept of populating the Mississippi River Valley (the Louisiana Purchase) with white yeoman farming families, Johnson shows how this dream was shaped into a nightmare by the slave-owning reality of the Southern population that settled along the banks of the Mississippi in the early nineteenth century. Using legal, personal, and environmental documents, Johnson shows the exploitive conditions that made Cotton King in the global economy of the nineteenth century.

It is easy to be too critical of this work after coming out of a seminar where the Professor was less than enthusiastic about the book, but beyond the fact that it might be a historiographical repeat in many ways, it is very well researched and constructed to give the reader a sense of general environmental conditions for black slaves and white masters as well as certain political events during the antebellum years. The tone can be a bit too presentist at times, but if you can get past that, there is a solid image of how the system of slavery operated in the nineteenth century Cotton Kingdom.

(* pgs. 1-17, 176-422).

Matt says

I hesitate to use the word “entertaining” when describing a book about slavery, but that’s what comes to mind. Walter Johnson’s *River of Dark Dreams* is entertaining. It is compelling. It is a book that is brilliant, weird, passionate, ambitious, filled with unnecessarily big words (“concupiscence” is used not once, but twice), and razor-edged in its condemnations of the antebellum slave society in the American South. (You would think that being against slavery is an obvious position; I challenge you to read the one-star reviews of this book. You will find there are still people waiting to be convinced). This is not a perfect book. I thought it too scattered at times, too digressionary. Rather than honing in on his point, Johnson tends to rattle around like a pinball. And his word choice – well, his word choice sometimes seems designed to woo freshmen at a Harvard mixer. But all in all, this is an original take on an uncomfortable subject.

River of Dark Dreams centers on slavery in the Mississippi Valley, and places it firmly within the context of worldwide 19th century capitalism. I knew I was going to dig this book, when Johnson opens up with the explosion of the steamboat *Anglo-Norman*, which blew up on her maiden voyage. The explosion sent correspondent H.A. Kidd high into the air and deposited him – alive – in the river. Kidd later wrote about the incident in an essay entitled *The Experience of a Blown-Up Man*. Johnson quirkily uses the anecdote to give us a view of the main setting for his narrative:

> If he had dared open his eyes at the top of his arc, Kidd would have seen the Mississippi Valley laid out before him. Downriver was the great city of New Orleans: the commercial emporium of the Midwest, the principal channel through which Southern cotton flowed to the global economy and foreign capital came into the United States, the largest slave market in North America, and the central artery of the continent’s white overseers’ flirtation with the perverse attractions of global racial domination. Upriver lay hundreds of millions of acres of land. Land that had been forcibly incorporated into the United States through diplomacy…and violence…; land that had been promised to white yeoman farmers but was being worked by black slaves; land that had been stripped bare and turned to the cultivation of cotton; land that had been stripped bare and turned into the cultivation of cotton; land in the United States of America that was materially subservient to the caprice of speculators in distant markets; land…for which, in a few short years, young men would fight and die.

Johnson’s overarching goal is to trace the many strands of the capitalist web connecting Mississippi Valley cotton to New Orleans’ ports, New York commodities markets, and foreign purchasers. He begins with the land itself. It was good land. However, driven by speculators, fueled by slavery, the Mississippi Valley became a monoculture. Despite having some of the most fertile land in the world, the area had to import foodstuffs.

In the Valley, Jefferson's yeoman farmer gave way to large plantations. These plantations relied on slaves. Cotton is labor intensive; slavery made it profitable. Johnson takes us into the fields to show us what this life was like.

> Slaves often remembered the work they did as a form of extended, repetitive torture. John Brown recalled that when the slaves “scraped” the cotton, they were “compelled to go across a thirty, forty, or fifty acre field without straightening themselves for one minute, and with the

> burning sun striking their head and back, and the heat reflected upwards from the soil onto their faces." Making it to the end of the row, where one might briefly stand straight up and perhaps drink some water, took between an hour and an hour and a half… In picking season, Brown continued, "the boll of the plant when split by ripeness, pricks the fingers, even when you are careful and lacerates the flesh round the nails to cause great soreness…till the blood runs from the tips of their fingers, where they have been pricked by the hard pod…The perspiration, meanwhile, streams from every pore of the body till the whole of it, head, hair, and all, are covered with a crust of mud…" In Brown's account, we see the outlines of the gradual process by which human life was turned into cotton: the tortuous conversion of labor to capital, and of living people to corpses.

Picking cotton was one thing; getting it to market something else entirely. Accordingly, Johnson devotes a fascinating chapter to steamboats, which allowed for travel both upriver and down, and helped to "annihilate" space and time. This chapter emblemizes what I liked so much about *River of Dark Dreams*. It is freewheeling and beautifully detailed. It covers the mechanics of steamboats, the difficulties of navigation, the dangers of steam propulsion, the segregation of the boats, and even the tactics of card sharps.

Johnson also devotes considerable space to the global finances of the cotton trade. He describes the multitudinous instruments by which cotton was insured and sold on consignment. The complexity of the commercial paper developed for this process is very modern, and gave me jarring flashbacks to various finance and law classes I've taken (and repressed in memory). Johnson does a decent job explaining these transactions, though sometimes the lucidity of his descriptions gives way to buzzwords like "commodity fetishism" and "commercial fungibility."

River of Dark Dreams concludes by exploring Southern expansionist policy before the Civil War. Not westward expansion – Johnson does not cover the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Compromise of 1850, etc. – but rather down into Central and South America. The hope of expansionist proponents was to enlarge the empire of slavery into more favorable climes. Some even pushed for a resumption of the international slave trade. Johnson follows various filibuster schemes, which are both insane and strangely admirable in their breathtaking ambitions. Chief among these filibusters was William Walker, the "grey-eyed man of destiny" who was stood up against the wall by un-amused Hondurans in 1860. Once again, in these chapters, Johnson has an eye for excruciating detail. Take, for instance, his description of the end of filibuster Narisco Lopez. Lopez was executed by the Cubans in Havana's town square, with an adjustable metal collar around his neck.

> As it closed, the collar would occlude and perhaps crush [Lopez's] windpipe, and drive the base of his tongue upward into his throat. The closing off of his air supply and the rising level of carbon monoxide in his blood would cause him to experience a sensation of intense anxiety before he lost consciousness, his heart racing in a desperate effort to reoxygenate his blood. The blockage of his jugular vein would close off the drainage of blood from his head, causing his face to turn blue and swell and his eyes to swim forward out of their sockets. It would take the general several agonizing minutes to die.

I chose this book, and read it, as part of my History of Slavery in America reading project. The last book I read for this project was David Potter's *The Impending Crisis*. Potter's work presented a political history of

the slavery issue from the Mexican War to the Civil War. It's an excellent volume. However, in focusing on the halls of Congress, slavery became oddly abstracted, an ideological issue rather than a matter with stakes as high as life. *River of Dark Dreams* is the flipside to that approach. It has a global scope, but it is intently focused on the human experience, of the slaveowners, the steamboat captains, the filibusters, and most importantly, the slaves themselves.

Once again, here is the list of books for my History of Slavery in America reading project. The books that have been struck-through are those books that I have already read and reviewed.

1. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in America*, by Ira Berlin
2. ~~*Dark Bargain: Slavery, Profits, and the Struggle for a Constitution*, by Lawrence Goldstone~~
3. ~~*The Missouri Compromise and its Aftermath*, by Robert Pierce Forbes~~
4. ~~*Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836*, by William Freehling~~
5. ~~*The Impending Crisis: 1848-1861*, by David M. Potter~~
6. *The Road to Disunion Volume 1: Secessionists at Bay*, by William Freehling
7. *The Road to Disunion Volume 2: Secessionists Triumphant*, by William Freehling
8. *America's Great Debate: Henry Clay, Stephen Douglas, and the Compromise that Preserved the Union*, by Fergus M. Bordewich
9. ~~*River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*, by Walter Johnson~~
10. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, by Edward Baptist
11. *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865*, by James Oakes
12. *The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution that Transformed the South*, by Bruce Levine
13. *Reconstruction*, by Eric Foner

Jacob Vigil says

This book ranks as one of the most entertaining and beautifully written scholarly works I have ever read. Johnson's turns of phrase and coinages are sharp, accurate, contextual, and packed with so much insight.

Each chapter covers a different aspect of the slave-based economy/social structure in the antebellum Mississippi Valley. These topics include: The technology and economics of steamboats, the attempts by pro-slavery filibusters to invade and take over Cuba and Nicaragua for the United States, an examination of how credit and debt worked in the cotton economy, the importance of food as a tool of control on plantations, and many others.

The narrative and analysis alone are excellent, but added to that Johnson's incredible use of language and wit, this was a thoroughly fascinating and engaging read from beginning to end.

Several chapters were devoted to painting a picture of the lived experiences of slaves in the Mississippi Valley cotton empire, and Johnson's use of former slaves' memoirs in these chapters is stunning and powerful. The connections between intimate bodily violence, capitalism, imperialism (and Manifest Destiny), white supremacy, technology, and ecology are illustrated in this book like no where else I have ever seen, and done so with remarkable clarity and insight.

One chapter for example, entitled "The Carceral Landscape," was haunting and disturbing in hwo it exposed

the ways in which the reorganization of the land itself in service of one single export crop became a physical medium through which master oversaw, controlled, and inflicted violence on enslaved bodies. Throughout the book, Johnson holds no punches when it comes to breaking slavery down into its most fundamental elements. Black labor and Black flesh (and Indian land)were "converted into" bales of cotton and thus, white wealth. The mechanism for this conversion was not complicated: it was the torture of Black bodies, the destruction of Black families, the commodification of Black labor (and the conversion of Indian land into white property).

Johnson ends his study with an implication that reappears throughout the book: That in American history, the very idea and reality of "freedom" may not be an inevitable outcome of human progress, but rather the consequence of intentional and systematic violence and extraction directed at others. In other words, Black slavery (and Indigenous removal) were not incidental to White freedom, empire, and democracy-- they were its very foundation.
