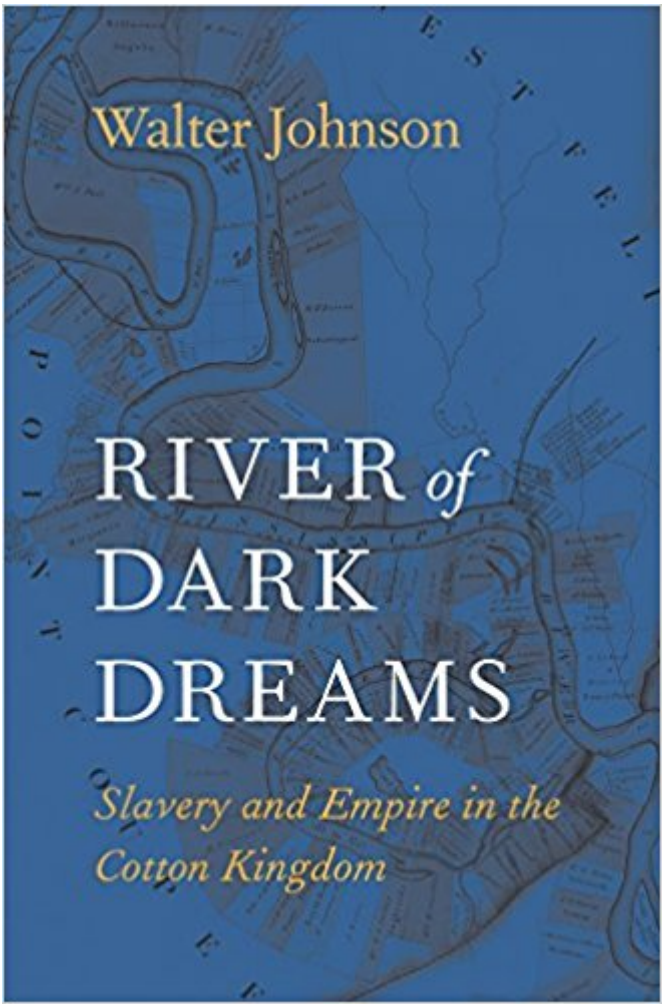
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River Of Dark Dreams: Slavery And Empire In The Cotton Kingdom



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Synopsis

Winner of the SHEAR Book Prize, Society for Historians of the Early American RepublicHonorable Mention, Avery O. Craven Award, Organization of American Historians A Choice Outstanding Academic Title of the YearÃ¢â ¬Å“[One] of the most impressive works of American history in many years.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â ¢Timothy Shenk, The NationÃ¢â ¬Å“River of Dark Dreams is an important, arguably seminal, bookÃ¢â ¬Â¦ It is always trenchant and learned. And in highly compelling fashion, it helps us more fully appreciate how thoroughly the slaveholding South was part of the capitalist transatlantic world of the first half of the 19th century.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â ¢Mark M. Smith, Wall Street JournalÃ¢â ¬Å“Walter JohnsonÃ¢â ¬â„¢s River of Dark Dreams shows how the Cotton Kingdom of the 19th-century Deep South, far from being a backward outpost of feudalism, was a dynamic engine of capitalist expansion built on enslaved labor.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â ¢A. O. Scott, New York TimesÃ¢â ¬Å“River of Dark Dreams delivers spectacularly on the long-standing mission to write Ã¢â ¬Ëœhistory from the bottom up.Ã¢â ¬â„¢Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â ¢Maya Jasanoff, New York Review of BooksÃ¢â ¬Å“Few books have captured the lived experience of slavery as powerfully as River of Dark Dreams.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â ¢Ari Kelman, Times Literary Supplement

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

With deep insights, original readings, expansive vision, and dramatic narratives, Walter Johnson reconfigures both the political economy of American slavery and the landscape of struggle in the slave South. (Steven Hahn, author of A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural

South from Slavery to the Great Migration)Walter Johnson's River of Dark Dreams is a unique, brilliant, and relentless critique of the sordid logic of American slavery as it unfolded on cotton plantations, aboard steamboats plying the Mississippi, and in toxic proslavery adventures that spilled across the country's borders. The next generation of debates over slavery in the United States must wrestle with Johnson's startling and profound insights. (Adam Rothman, author of Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South)River of Dark Dreams solidifies Walter Johnson's standing as a brilliantly gifted interpreter of the past, whose work sets the benchmark for a powerfully lucid--sometimes heart-wrenching--vision of what enslavement meant for slaveowners, for the women and men they enslaved, and for the nations that participated in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. (Jennifer L. Morgan, author of Laboring Women: Gender and Reproduction in New World Slavery)Mining journals, correspondence, public records and popular literature, Johnson reminds us that New Orleans, not Richmond, was the engine of Southern prosperity: its largest city, largest slave market and the center of a booming international trading system...Mixed with fascinating anecdotes, grim accounts of slave life and a convincing argument for plantation slavery's essential role in the 19th century's burgeoning industrial capitalism. (Kirkus Reviews 2012-12-15)River of Dark Dreams is an important, arguably seminal, book...It is always trenchant and learned. And in highly compelling fashion, it helps us more fully appreciate how thoroughly the slaveholding South was part of the capitalist transatlantic world of the first half of the 19th century. (Mark M. Smith Wall Street Journal 2013-02-22)Johnson has written a book as big and bold as the Mississippi River valley region it surveys. In it, he maps the various interlocking connections among slavery, land surveys and speculation, steamboats, capital and credit, cotton planting, and more to show how President Jefferson's promise of an 'empire for liberty' to come from the Louisiana Purchase became instead a place of people grasping for advantage, gouging for wealth, and gaining through will and brutality. Readers will find Johnson's discussions of steamboat technology, adaptations of new strains of cotton, and credit and market arrangements especially compelling as he makes the case for a modernizing, slave-based cotton empire that sought to extend its reach across the continent and, through violence, to claim Central America and Cuba as well...An essential book for understanding the dynamism and direction of American economic ambitions and the human and environmental costs of the physical, political, and social energy that drove such ambitions and ended in civil war. (Randall M. Miller Library Journal (starred review) 2013-03-15)[Johnson] firmly believes that the booms of the early 1830s, followed by the devastating collapse of cotton prices and fortunes in 1837 and then the same cycle again in the 1850s, culminated in the Civil War. For those who have the penetration to see it, the cycles were written on

the land, the technology, the crafty new financial instruments, and the bodies of the enslaved. Johnson never misses a chance to remind us of the relevance of all this today: the deregulation, speculation, profit, bubble, bust, misery, and war...Johnson's book attempts something daring and bold. Instead of perpetuating the regularly compartmentalized treatment of American slavery and the global antebellum political economy, he follows the example of Eric Williams's Capitalism and Slavery (1944) by bringing both together. He does this with an eye toward the enslaved on the ground, observing what they ate and produced, how they lived, how they were brutalized and died. Johnson is brilliantly attuned to the stories of the enslaved whose lives were coexistent with the cycle of production, who planted and harvested cotton but were at the same time commodities themselves, whose every biological function (reproduction, waste elimination) was an economic calculation. (Lawrence P. Jackson Los Angeles Review of Books 2013-05-30)Johnson paints a picture of slavery in the Mississippi Valley as rich in twists and surprises as the Mississippi itself...A seminal study. (D. Butts Choice 2013-07-01)"River of Dark Dreams is at its best when it focuses on the day-to-day lives of slaves in the valley. Johnson empathizes with his subjects, allows them to speak for themselves through written records they left behind, and is a gifted enough writer to make the past come alive in his prose...Few books have captured the lived experience of slavery as powerfully as River of Dark Dreams." (Ari Kelman Times Literary Supplement 2013-07-26)This most impressive piece of history writing will be a source of inspiration and debate for many years to come. It demonstrates the national significance of regional history and the transnational scope of 'slave holding agro-capitalism.' It has an overarching story to tell and argument to make, but many of its meaty chapters take a vital area of research and decisively reorder it. (Robin Blackburn Dissent 2013-07-01)Johnson shows in horrific detail how the culture of slave society--intellectual, social, sexual--arose out of the imperative of more and more cotton cultivation. In a brilliant chapter titled 'The Carceral Landscape,' Johnson's book reads as a kind of scholarly companion to Quentin Tarantino's studiously gothic film Django Unchained...What makes Johnson's book more than a catalogue of horrors is its account of how slave-owners, too, were caught in the cycle of fear...As new technologies (not only the cotton gin) and new markets (Europe as well as the industrializing North) drove the expansion of cotton production against any and all compunction, talk of ending slavery, which had once been central to debate about the future of the republic, became a deadly threat to the economy of the South and, to a significant degree, of the whole nation...Johnson's point is not to equate the suffering of slaves with the anxiety of slaveholders; but his book has the effect of showing their interdependence in a way that makes the abstractions of political history--'property,' 'expansion,' even 'slavery' itself--feel vivid and immediate. (Andrew Delbanco

New Republic 2013-08-19)Walter Johnson’s River of Dark Dreams shows how the Cotton Kingdom of the 19th-century Deep South, far from being a backward outpost of feudalism, was a dynamic engine of capitalist expansion built on enslaved labor. (A. O. Scott New York Times 2013-09-27)The artistry of River of Dark Dreams lies in the close-up--in Johnson’s mesmerizing attention to the ’material’ in historical-geographical materialism. In the pointillist style so dexterously displayed in his reconstruction of the New Orleans slave market, Soul by Soul, Johnson zooms in on the ’nested set of abstractions’ that made the Cotton Kingdom run: money, markets, maps, labor...River of Dark Dreams delivers spectacularly on the long-standing mission to write ’history from the bottom up’: from the soil tangy and pungent with manure, and the Petit Gulf cotton plants rooted into it, and the calloused fingers plucking its blooming, sharp-edged bolls. This is a history of how wilderness became plantations that became states, nations, and empires--of how an overseer’s lashes sliced into a slave’s back turned ’into labor into bales into dollars’ into visions of America’s future in the world... Johnson recreates the grinding, sometimes deadly work of moving in the Mississippi Valley with such originality that it doesn’t much matter that the analytical payoff rests largely in metaphor...Whereas Johnson’s analysis of steamboat imperialism turns on metaphor, his detailed description of slavery acts as a rebuke to the oversimple metaphors that are used to describe slaves’ lives and labor: money and markets. (Maya Jasanoff New York Review of Books 2013-10-10)The American Civil War is still being fought. The racist inheritance of the South now permeates the collective unconscious of many who are taking their stand against African Americans and other people of color through this country’s racist legal and prison system and also through cutbacks in government that fall most heavily on those whom this society dragged across oceans to enslave and exploit. To understand the dynamics of the present, we must perceive the peculiar way in which racism is intertwined with a global system of economic exploitation that continues to flourish, rewarding some while disinheriting many others. Walter Johnson’s magnum opus puts the economy of slavery at the center of American history. His account succeeds in avoiding the sort of vulgar Marxist reductionism that misses the depth of human suffering that reached an apex in the first sixty-five years of the nineteenth century--suffering which in its modern twenty-first century manifestations continues to exact a heavy price from the bodies of African Americans and from the emotional well-being of everyone else. Johnson’s detailed account of the Cotton Kingdom prepares us to understand the later manifestations of oppression and imperialism that have shaped much of the world ever since slavery was officially abolished (but more plausibly taken into new forms and globalized). (Tikkun 2013-09-01)As the Harvard historian Walter Johnson explains in his bracing new history of slavery and capitalism in the Deep South, River of Dark Dreams, the slaveholders

were the quintessential American capitalistsÃ¢â ¬Â¦River of Dark DreamsÃ¢â ¬Â¦casts his insight about slavery-as-capitalism onto a broader canvas: the history of the Mississippi Valley and its political economy in the first half of the nineteenth century. Johnson, of course, is hardly the first historian to think about slavery in the context of capitalismÃ¢â ¬Â¦But Johnson moves in another direction. The relationship between slavery and capitalism, he insists, does not depend on any connection between American slavery and European (or American) industry. On the contrary, plantation slavery was capitalism. (Robin Einhorn The Nation 2014-02-11)[One] of the most impressive works of American history in many years. (Timothy Shenk The Nation 2014-11-05)An important bookÃ¢â ¬Â¦Johnson sees slavery not just as an integral part of American capitalism, but as its very essence. (Sven Beckert Chronicle of Higher Education 2014-12-12) --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Walter Johnson is Winthrop Professor of History and Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University.

As Walter JohnsonÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s River of Dark Dreams weaves its way through the history of slavery and economics in the Mississippi River Valley, he does everything in his power to dispel all romanticized notions of the antebellum South. Johnson crafts a unique narrative that reinvigorates the scholarship on this time period with an impressive grasp of the impact of human nature on historical events, as well as an innate ability to expand and connect broader regions and themes. While the book revolves around, and always returns to, the history of the rise of the Cotton Kingdom, Johnson integrates this development seamlessly with the rise of northern banking capitalism and industrialization as well as the broader Atlantic world through fears of slave revolts inspired by the Haitian example, and ambitious imperialist designs of expansion into Cuba and Nicaragua. Despite this broad range, Johnson maintains a close connection with the people and land of the river valley. His insistence on delving into the evils of slavery, rather than taking it as a given, provides a sharp bite to the work. Opinionated, occasionally superfluous, and stocked with an ostentatious lexicon, JohnsonÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s style of writing may not appeal to every casual reader. Yet for those willing to overlook those blemishes, this book provides a perception-altering account. Potentially groundbreaking within the context of its historiography, this work is a must read for any scholar, armchair or academic, within the field and should be strongly encouraged inclusion in the material for relevant upper level college courses.

Walter JohnsonÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom was a very interesting read. It seeks to give its reader a full understanding of life in the Mississippi River Valley during the 19th century. The book concentrates on men of the white planter elite and their slaves. There are the expected chapters that examine life on the cotton plantations. Johnson borrows from historian Mart Stewart in his understanding of planter imposition of strict order on land and labor in the interest of profit. But Johnson takes it a step further by emphasizing the human element of the plantations, using information from multiple slave narratives to piece together their lives. Unexpected chapters that examine the development of the steamboat economy and slaveholder attempts to bring slaveholding Cuba to the Union. Although these chapters add to the understanding of the Mississippi as a whole, they stand out from the rest, and are awkward. I was also displeased by the lack of information on women and Native Americans in the narrative. Even though Johnson declares in his title that he will focus on those people who fit under ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“EmpireÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (the white planter elite) or ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Slavery,ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• the book would have been more complex with the incorporation of these groups. Nonetheless, River of Dark Dreams was a fascinating book. I gained a greater understanding of the Mississippi Valley and of the violence, oppression and greed that characterized antebellum life there.

Walter Johnson’s River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom offers, is the critical scholarship that our assessment of the slavery institution has needed as it that has everything to do with what we are were as a nation and perhaps even why, in large part, we remain there; chained but unlinked, as it were, to our national past. Bookended with Edward Baptist’s The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and he Making of American Capitalism we are far better able to reckon with past tense as present tense toward a future tense. As ably said by William Faulkner: "the past is not dead, it’s not even past." Like Edward Baptist’s, this work warrants, on a scale of one to five stars, nothing less than six stars -- both important reads for us all.

This is a riveting account of slavery in the Mississippi Valley during the antebellum. With great prose, Walter Johnson dissects the cruelty and brutality meted out to African slaves by slave masters and their overseers, It is an account of how capital was accumulated through the cultivation of cotton with use of free labor. Walter Johnson’s writing is lucid, very well researched and easy to read. His prose keeps you on edge and fills you with a roller-coaster ride of emotions, now angry at the inhumanity of the slave holders and pity for their insecurity. Totally enjoyable tome.

A great new work of scholarship. If you care about American history, how it is written, what impact Southern history has had on the bigger picture, you must read this book. I have read a lot about American slavery, over many years. But this is quite original.

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