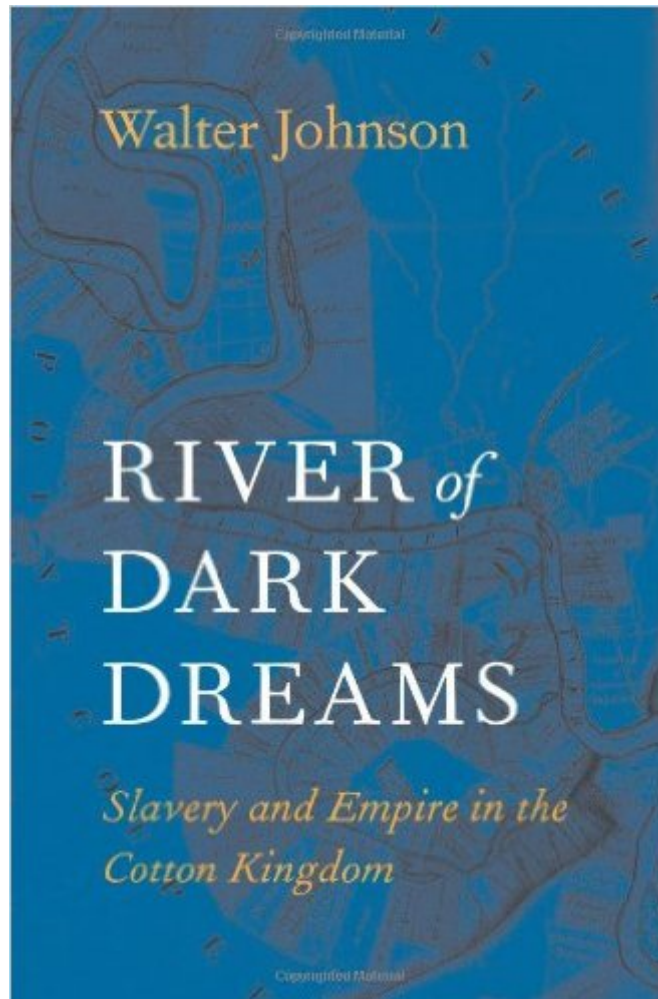


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# River Of Dark Dreams: Slavery And Empire In The Cotton Kingdom



## Synopsis

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 ascendancy. 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As Walter Johnson'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, Johnson'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.

The nay-sayers are already out in force on : Too much moralizing. Too many big words and long sentences. No evidence, just opinion. Repetitious use of evidence. (These last two are contradictory.) Too biased. Good only on steamboats. And so forth. Nevertheless, this impressive work promptly earns classic status in the historiography of slavery.\*\* It synthesizes an enormous secondary literature, but is also strongly based on a close reading of voluminous primary sources. While scholars will have to chew over "RODD" for a while to grasp the full implications, the second full paragraph on p.9 lays out a research agenda for a generation. Johnson makes very good use of recent developments in integrating sensory, bodily and spatial aspects of the past. He is very harsh on slaveowners and traders, but this is still fair criticism given the horrors of slavery. One great strength is the sharp focus on the Lower Mississippi combined with appreciation of the region's essential contacts with the global economy. Critics flinch at the author's unflinching look at the economics of slavery, along with his grasp of the threat to America posed by the Slave Power. But we must not turn away, because like it or not, these matters fundamentally shaped US history.\*\* Its scholarly peers include K. Stampp, "The Peculiar Institution;" J. Blassingame, "The Slave

Community;" E. Genovese, "Roll Jordan Roll;" P. Wood, "Black Majority;" G.M. Hall, "Africans in Colonial Louisiana," & very few others.

I read this book straight through in about a week, ignoring everything else I had planned to read in that time. I found it really interesting. Some key images I had not known about really stuck in my head: for example, the poor diet of the slaves, consisting mainly of pork and corn (maize). I had thought, naively, that most plantations grew most of their own food, in addition to whatever cotton they grew -- no, they were devoted to cash crops (and heavily in debt for them) to the point that they bought food principally from Northern farmers. What they bought was not very nutritious and many masters starved their slaves in order to control them better. I know a lot about this subject already (I was born in New Orleans, my father's family comes from Mississippi, and I had read a great deal before), but still, the odd detail can shock me. For example, before Emancipation, if the state put a slave to death for some crime, it had to reimburse the slave's owner for his loss. (Why? Surely they would have regarded the owner as an accessory, or would have said the owner did not control the slave.... How naive I am: the slave owners controlled the state governments.) I plan to continue now with Johnson's book *Soul by Soul*...

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