

Perimeters of pain

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Walter Johnson *RIVER OF DARK DREAMS* Slavery and empire in the Cotton Kingdom 526pp. Harvard University Press. £25.95 (US \$35) 978 0 674 04555 2 In April 1802, Thomas Jefferson wrote to Robert Livingston, his minister in Paris, that there was "on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy". That spot was the city of New

Orleans. Jefferson urged Livingston to secure for the United States access to the banks of the Mississippi River near its outlet at the Gulf of Mexico. For years, settlers in what was then called the West had threatened to secede if the federal government did not guarantee them an "American deposit" in New Orleans, a market for commodities drawn from throughout the continent's midsection.

The next spring, Livingston, reinforced by James Monroe, went one better for Jefferson: the diplomats purchased all of Louisiana for \$15 million from Napoleon. Napoleon had just spent mountains of gold and spilled rivers of blood trying to crush the Haitian Revolution.

Wary of expensive colonial endeavours in the Americas, he washed his hands of Louisiana. Jefferson, for his part, celebrated. The newly acquired territory contained nearly a million square miles of land; it stretched from the alluvial bottoms of the Mississippi River country to the dizzying heights of the Rocky Mountains, from north of the Canadian border in today's Montana to as far south as the Gulf of Mexico. Louisiana almost doubled the size of the United States.

Jefferson believed in 1803 that his vision for national development would root itself in Louisiana's rich soil. He imagined tens of thousands of white settlers sweeping inland from the Atlantic Coast, like seeds upon the wind. These freeholders would bring civilization to a wild land. They would germinate a society of small farms. And in time, republican virtue would blossom among them as surely as dirt would collect beneath their fingernails. But by 1860, wealthy proprietors had converted much of that land into plantations worked by slaves sold down the river as part of a massive trade in human beings. How Jefferson's "empire for liberty" withered, across a bit more than half a century, into "the dominion of ... the 'slaveocracy'", a society built on the backs of unfree labourers, is the subject of Walter Johnson's *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and empire in the Cotton Kingdom*.

River of Dark Dreams is best read as two books conjoined under one cover: a material history of slavery in the lower Mississippi Valley, the "Cotton Kingdom", and an exploration of the role that imperialism played on the road to the American Civil War. Framing the first of those discussions, Johnson provides what serves as a lyrical outline for his project (and perhaps a homage to Pare Lorentz's Depression-era propaganda film *The Plow that Broke the Plains*): "The Cotton Kingdom was built out of sun, water, and soil; animal energy, human labor, and mother wit; grain, flesh, and cotton; pain, hunger, and fatigue; blood, milk, semen, and shit". Johnson moves through these categories and others, covering topics as varied as hybridizing, harvesting and marketing cotton; the workings of the General Land Office, a federal agency that rendered the Western landscape "legible" by surveying and imposing a rectilinear grid on

the region; and the terrifying power of steamboats, technology that enabled Mississippi Valley traders to speed commerce, the Cotton Kingdom's lifeblood, up and down the capillaries, veins and arteries of the Mississippi system.

Steamboats allowed settlers to realize the potential they believed that God had inscribed in the valley's geography. Observers, before and after Jefferson, read the valley's landscape like a map, discerning in the region's layout the work of a benevolent Creator. In an era of limited transportation technologies, more than 15,000 miles of navigable waterways comprised the Mississippi River system - made up of the trunk stream and its tributaries - a riparian funnel shunting commerce inevitably towards New Orleans. A Jesuit priest visiting the fledgling commercial entrepôt early in the eighteenth century remarked, "Rome and Paris had not such considerable beginnings ... and their founders met not with those advantages on the Seine and Tiber, which we have found on the Mississippi, in comparison of which those two rivers are no more than brooks". The downstream current, though, could also be an obstacle; it could transform the return journey from market into an ordeal of many months. Edward Livingston, Robert's brother, harnessed the power of steam to surmount that hurdle in 1811. Fifteen years later, more than a hundred steamboats plied the river system.

An emerging commercial class used steamboats to remake the Valley economically and environmentally: imposing the logic of capital on the Mississippi system and clear-cutting millions of acres of fertile land and planting those tracts over with a mono-crop. Steam, Johnson notes, "emancipated the Mississippi Valley from its reliance on animal energy". By the 1830s, the waterfront at New Orleans served as a showplace for a region transformed. Today, we are accustomed to shopping in emporia where goods from around the globe are displayed. We often consume without considering the nature of the labour that produced a product, that product's place of origin, or the long supply chains that brought it within our grasp. Antebellum observers in New Orleans, by contrast, were awed by the sight of wharves groaning beneath the weight of corn from Illinois, whiskey from Kentucky, cheese from Wisconsin, furs from the Canadian backcountry, and, of course, towering piles of the Valley's monarch: King Cotton arrayed in bales that reached for the heavens. As one breathless traveller remarked in 1832, "distance is no longer thought of in this region - it is almost annihilated by steam".

New Orleans's waterfront overwhelmed visitors with the majesty of human ingenuity, "the steamboat sublime" in Johnson's words. The power of artifice to "annihilate space and time" sometimes obscured the reality that the reworking of the valley depended on coerced effort, the labour of slaves, as much as on technological innovations. Johnson, though, never lets his readers forget this fact, avoiding abstractions as he describes the dirt and grime, the explosions and exploitation, underlying the Cotton Kingdom's rise.

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. A representative section on how the stooped labour of picking cotton functioned as a kind of torture relies on the memories of a man named John Brown (no relation to the famed abolitionist). Brown recalled slaves being "compelled to go across a thirty, forty, or fifty acre field without straightening themselves one minute, and with the burning sun striking their head and back, and the heat reflected upwards from the soil onto their faces". Some slaves bore permanent reminders of their experience working in this manner; they "could not stand straight to save their lives". Or, in Johnson's subtly brutal phrasing, "their bodies [had] bent in forced tribute to the cotton plant".

Discipline, a well-worn topic in the literature on slavery, has fresh power in Johnson's hands. He explores the boundaries of human endurance, suggesting that pain thresholds "served slaveholders as a sort of physiological perimeter - a line of control". Slaves could only run so far before confronting their own limits. "Distance in slavery", Johnson explains, "was measured not simply in miles, but also in suffering: in wounding and exposure, in the fearful nausea of a human being hunted like an animal, the mind-shattering loneliness of a person starving to death somewhere on an unknown map." Finding significance in the minutia of resistance, he suggests, "Runaway slaves often referred to the condition of their feet as an index of their vulnerability".

Aside from a few under-edited or over-written passages ("The point at which the techno-enhanced visuality of slaveholding power materialized as a boundary to enslaved mobility was the point at which someone asked the unanswerable question: 'Whom do you belong to?')", few books have captured the lived experience of slavery as powerfully as *River of Dark Dreams*, at least not since the narratives on which Johnson draws so frequently for source material were published.

Unfortunately, Johnson's sections on empire are not nearly as compelling as his material on slavery. The book opens with a chapter that recounts the dispossession, in the 1830s, of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes from the eastern reaches of the Mississippi Valley. In Johnson's cramped telling, one moment indigenous people were there, the next they were entirely gone. With little exposition or background, he notes: "By 1840, the homelands of the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, the Creek, the Seminole, and the Cherokee had, through the military power and legal authority of the United States of America, been converted into a vast reserve for the cultivation of whiteness". For much of the remainder of *River of Dark Dreams*, cotton, the slaves who picked that cotton, and the white elites who owned those slaves fill the horticultural and demographic gap once occupied by forests and indigenous people. Rarely have the sharp contours of Indian removal been recounted so flatly. The contrast with Johnson's fleshed-out history of slavery is striking. Rather than visceral, this section is bloodless and cold. Unless I missed something, Johnson does not even mention a single Native person by name.

Johnson argues that a focus on imperialism can serve as a counterweight to studies of the coming of the Civil War that overwhelmingly tilt towards investigations of sectionalism. Such works, he points out, are "resolutely nationalist", focusing on the "conflict over slavery within boundaries of today's United States to the exclusion of almost every other definition of the conflict over slavery". His point is well taken but oddly made, as imperialism mostly disappears from *River of Dark Dreams* for hundreds of pages, until, finally, excursions overseas signal that the book's last chapters will again take up the issue. Johnson brings readers first to Cuba, where Narciso Lopez tried to liberate the island from the yoke of Spanish rule early in the 1850s. Lopez's American backers hoped Cuba could become a satellite of the Cotton Kingdom, part of an empire of slavery expanding into the Caribbean and beyond. Readers next journey to Nicaragua, where William Walker, another filibusterer, had similar plans for that nation. Johnson intimates that Lopez and Walker should be understood as representative figures, as avatars of American imperialism. But in the event, rather than treating their lives and deaths as subjects worthy of serious inquiry, Johnson depicts them as oddballs, characters whom readers will be tempted to dismiss as cartoons. The effect, coupled with a significant tone shift in Johnson's writing - the book's last chapters unfold as a straight narrative, with few analytical interventions - undermines the importance of empire.

By 1860, conquering Latin America no longer captivated most Southerners. The slaveocracy had turned its attention to more realistic imperial dreams. In that year, the United States held what amounted to a referendum on competing visions of empire. In the 1860 election the Republican Abraham Lincoln proposed a plan for national expansion that, from certain angles, appeared downright Jeffersonian: the nation would move west, but slavery would not move with it. Settlers, free labourers, would homestead land given to them by their government. The West would become an empire of liberty. The Democratic Party, meanwhile, split. Stephen Douglas ran a national campaign and refused to prostrate himself before slaveholders. John C. Breckenridge, on the other hand, ran as the South's man, promising that if elected he would pass a federal slave code to protect the peculiar institution. On election day, voters chose Lincoln as their president. The West remained free soil. And early the next year, the possessors of Louisiana would once again become the enemy of the United States.