In this big, ambitious, and thought-provoking book, Walter Johnson alters much of our perception of the cotton-producing South. *River of Dark Dreams* focuses on the intertwining of slavery, capitalism, and imperialism in the Lower Mississippi Valley from roughly 1800 to 1860. It demonstrates that the South was not economically stagnant but a powerful force at the cutting edge of the Atlantic world economy, tying the Cotton Kingdom to the large markets of Liverpool, with stops in New York City and other ports along the way. Many of the larger cotton producers came to support a program of commercial imperialism, hoping to spread their proslavery, white-supremacist empire into the Caribbean, especially Cuba, and other parts of Latin America. Because of later legal and economic restrictions by the federal government, this led many of the more radical cotton planters to cut their ties with the United States and create their own nation free from Washington's restraints.

According to Johnson, “the story of ‘the coming of the Civil War’ has been framed according to a set of anachronistic spatial frames and teleological narratives” (15). Historians have persistently told this story by focusing almost exclusively on the South as a region within the United States instead of seeing it as an expanding empire desiring a more prominent role in the international commercial world. They have always argued about what southerners were “seceding from” despite the fact that southerners cared little about “what was happening in Congress, from which they . . . expected very little” (16). Instead, Johnson insists, historians should be asking “where Southerners (and slaveholders in particular) thought they were going” (16).

Johnson does a fine job describing the importance of the Mississippi River to the creation of the Cotton Kingdom, covering the usual topics such as the invention of the steamboat and the massive importation of enslaved African Americans who cleared the land and then underwent a “forced neuro-muscular transformation” (162) that turned them into cotton-picking machines. However, his most innovative contribution is explaining how “the rise of the Cotton Kingdom represented a substantial ecological transformation of the Mississippi Valley” (8). Planters totally reshaped the natural environment in their attempt to organize and control it. They cut trees and dug furrows that increased flooding and washed away the topsoil. They built levees that constantly breached,
causing flooding downstream. And mono-cropping stripped the land of vegetation and leached its fertility. “From the air, the face of the landscape would have presented a visual image of the whole of nature arrayed in the service of a single plant” (156).

Also of interest is Johnson’s excellent description of how the international cotton market operated. Southern planters were tied into the greatest single sector of the global economy and, as a result, they interacted with all the personnel associated with modern capitalism: bankers, factors, shippers, insurers, large commodity brokers in New York, and the people associated with the gigantic British cotton exchange. As lowly producers, southern planters faced all the dangers associated with this process, bearing sole financial responsibility for their crop from the time they bought the seed until their bales were unloaded on the docks of the Liverpool buyer who purchased them. They had little control over their crop and bore all of the risks, especially troubling as the cotton market was characterized by extraordinary volatility. For some it brought great wealth while others faced huge setbacks and even bankruptcy. No wonder so many cotton planters identified with the professional gamblers who proliferated up and down the great river.

There is much to like about this book, and it is filled with informative and provocative insights. Nevertheless, River of Dark Dreams has more than its share of questions and problems. Most vexing is Johnson’s vague and manipulative use of some key terms. For example, at no time does he give an actual definition of what he means by the “Mississippi River Valley,” the “Cotton Kingdom,” or even the “South.” Disturbingly, he often uses these terms interchangeably to enhance many of his points.

Johnson’s book is primarily a story about Mississippi and Louisiana, from which he draws most of his materials. Both states were located at the lowermost end of the Mississippi River Valley. By 1860, they were each in the top tier of cotton-producing states, and they had roughly 50 percent of their populations enslaved. However, the other river states of Arkansas and Tennessee, which had fewer slaves and produced less cotton, never appear in the book, leaving one to wonder why they were excluded and exactly what Johnson means by the “Mississippi River Valley.”

Johnson also frequently interchanges facts about the lower portion of the Mississippi Valley with those about the wider Cotton Kingdom, conveying the impression that they were one and the same. The conflation is apparent in the book’s title, where the story of the River of Dark Dreams (the Mississippi) becomes the story of Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom. Yet the Cotton Kingdom was always a far larger entity than the Mississippi River Valley. It originated in the southeastern states and spread westward, primarily along the Gulf Coast, often benefiting from Andrew Jackson’s Indian removal policies. True, the Mississippi
was extremely important for shipping and for bringing people to the west (both free and enslaved), and New Orleans did become the major port city for the sale of both cotton and slaves. But for much of the early decades of the antebellum period, the heart of the Cotton Kingdom lay well east of the Mississippi. It was not until the 1850s that Mississippi and Louisiana became central to the Cotton Kingdom. In 1850, the two largest cotton-producing states were Alabama and Georgia, which harvested half again as much cotton as Mississippi (ranked third) and Louisiana (a distant sixth). An explosion in production by 1860 did elevate Mississippi and Louisiana into two of the top three states in cotton production, with Alabama wedged between them. Still, all of the top five cotton-producing states in 1860 were along or near the Gulf of Mexico (Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia, and Texas). Only two of those states were also along the Mississippi River. And even during this brief peak, the entire Mississippi River Valley produced just under half of the South’s cotton.1

Johnson’s tendency to equate the Mississippi Valley with the Cotton Kingdom becomes even more misleading when he describes conditions in the Cotton Kingdom and then extrapolates them to refer to the entire South. This can be seen in his overstating the percentage of individuals in the South who were enslaved. When discussing the “slave states” Johnson argues that “nearly half the people in those states were, in fact, slaves” (372). This was true for South Carolina (57 percent), Mississippi (55 percent), and Louisiana (47 percent), but there were fifteen slave-holding states, and the proportion of people enslaved in all of these states was around 33 percent: one-third rather than the one-half that Johnson claims. When Johnson writes, “The lives of enslaved people were limited, shaped, even determined by their enslavement—bales per acre per slave, pounds per day, lashes and rations” (217), he is speaking only of the 65 percent of the enslaved population who worked in the cotton fields. In 1860, 35 percent of the enslaved population, or 1.4 million people, had their lives determined by something other than bales per acre or pounds per day. Also, surprisingly absent from Johnson’s study is the significant sugar-producing region in Louisiana. By midcentury, more than 125,000 slaves worked these plantations, and part of the New Orleans slave market catered to the demands of this specialized crop.2

Even worse, at times when he is describing the South, the slaveholding states of the Upper South do not even appear. The most egregious

1 Joseph C. G. Kennedy, Agriculture of the United States in 1860; Complied from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census, under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior (Washington, D.C., 1864), xciii–xciv.
example of this is when he claims that, “By 1850, New Orleans was the third-largest city in the country (the largest in the South)” (84). This is simply not true. From 1800 until the Civil War, Baltimore was always the largest city in the slaveholding states. By 1850, the year of Johnson’s statistics, Baltimore was the second largest city in the country, while New Orleans ranked fifth. Unfortunately, but tellingly, there is no census data provided in this endnote.3

Johnson is aware of the subregions throughout the slaveholding states, and he does an excellent job explaining the adverse but mutually beneficial relationship between the slave-exporting and slave-importing states. But for most of River of Dark Dreams, these other economic interests fade and one is left with the impression that the South was being driven almost exclusively by large cotton planters from Mississippi and Louisiana. Thus, it becomes difficult for Johnson to explain the failure of their movement to create an independent, Mississippi-based empire in the Caribbean in the 1850s. The South was much more than the Mississippi River Valley, or even the Cotton Kingdom, and the majority of white southerners’ economic interests did not coincide with those of the Cotton Lords, whom many saw as extremists or a minority group whose agenda was contrary to theirs.

This one-dimensional portrayal of the South also applies to Johnson’s depiction of Mississippi River Valley cotton plantations. Through overly emotional language, we learn that owners were all vicious torturers who savagely beat and starved their human property (there were “hundreds of thousands of dead babies”) (193), while the slaves lived in romanticized communities, which “occasioned the expression and reproduction of ethics of care and practices of solidarity” (217). Individuals fitting these descriptions did exist, but the array of personality types found in any society are absent, and Johnson’s plantations are void of any of the diversity and complexities that define human behavior.

By taking a monolithic view of the South, Johnson fails to recognize that most white southerners did not want to expand southward to create a new proslavery, white-supremacist, commercial empire based on the international market in cotton: especially those in the Upper South as well as the three-quarters of all white southerners who did not own a single slave and had little reason to follow the Cotton Lords. Many white southerners found their international ambitions absurd and, before the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861, thought that creating a separate, cotton-based nation outside the United States would be disastrous. These southerners did not fear limitations on their (already very limited) international economic

connections. What they feared most was a Republican administration that would abolish slavery and in one stroke wipe out the entire economic value of their region’s largest form of capital investment, human slaves, thereby destroying the economy. What was happening in Washington and the debates over sectional policy are still important for understanding the coming of the Civil War.

Despite its problems, this is an important book. It exposes the magnitude of the South’s role in the Atlantic commercial market. Following up on other recent works, most notably Edward Bartlett Rugemer’s excellent study, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War*, Johnson also makes a strong case for more transnational studies on American slavery and the coming of the Civil War. However, the book’s contribution is marred by vague and misleading terminology, frequent hyperbole, and a selective, one-dimensional interpretation of the South designed to strengthen the author’s argument. *River of Dark Dreams* thus alters our understanding of the Mississippi Valley but not of the South or American slavery as a whole. Johnson’s book will not be the last word on the subject, in part because he effectively challenges his readers to see familiar things in new ways, clearing the ground for others to build on his provocative, if problematic, arguments.

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