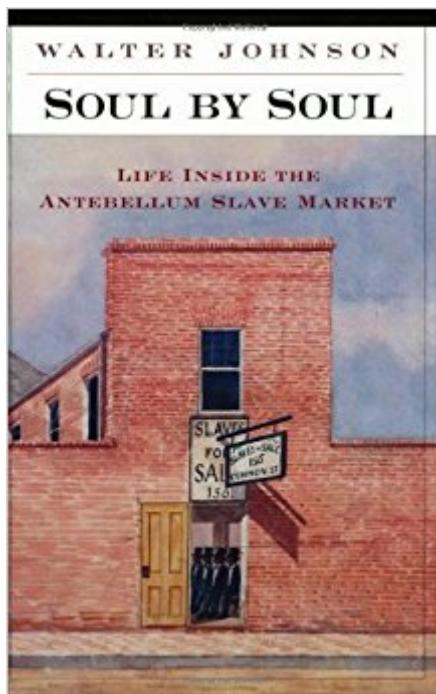


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Soul By Soul



Synopsis

Soul by Soul tells the story of slavery in antebellum America by moving away from the cotton plantations and into the slave market itself, the heart of the domestic slave trade. Taking us inside the New Orleans slave market, the largest in the nation, where 100,000 men, women, and children were packaged, priced, and sold, Walter Johnson transforms the statistics of this chilling trade into the human drama of traders, buyers, and slaves, negotiating sales that would alter the life of each. What emerges is not only the brutal economics of trading but the vast and surprising interdependencies among the actors involved.

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Customer Reviews

Walter Johnson's *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* broadly focuses on the history of slavery, but Johnson uses that to explore how the geographic and cultural space of the slave market, specifically those in New Orleans, shaped ideas of wealth, race, gender, and social status for all members of Southern society regardless of gender, race, or condition of bondage. Johnson seeks to answer how the transformative process of slavery, in which people became objects, affects all members of Southern society and transformed that society

itself. Johnson argues that the slave pens in New Orleans offer insight into all aspects of Southern slavery. Johnson writes, “In the slave pens, the yet-unmade history of antebellum slavery could be daily viewed in the freeze framed detail of a single transaction on its leading edge” (11). Johnson explores these transactions from the point of view of each.

According to Johnson, “The abstract value that underwrote the southern economy could only be made material in human shape” (11). The slave was frail, sentient, and resistant. Fully aware of these contradictions, slaveholders based their social relationships on slavery and tied their honor to the choices made in the marketplace. Johnson writes, “By buying a slave, [J.B.] Alexander had bought himself a public stake in the world of white men: he was a man who was worthy of notice” (11). Even the measurement of time was tied to the slave market, with sales and purchases depending on the agricultural needs of plantation owners. A man could assert his patriarchal benevolence toward his family by purchasing a slave to aid their family. Writes Johnson, “By publicly framing their purchases in terms of the needs of their white dependents, these men reframed the leisure of their wives as evidence of their own virtue” (11). “Their wives would not have to wash or wait or nurse, they would see to that” (11). In this way, Southern honor was tied to a man’s fortunes and skill as a slaveholder. Johnson writes, “Affairs of honor were more likely to be played out in the slave market than on the dueling ground” (11). Finally, Johnson demonstrates that slaves could take advantage of the buyers’ and traders’ expectations to maintain families, exercise a modicum of choice in their owners, and even escape. The system of buying on trial “gave slaves an opportunity to examine their buyers and choose whether to match or subvert their evident expectations” (11). The slave market represented the nexus of all these interchanges. Johnson primarily builds upon the work of Frederic Bancroft and Michael Tadman. He also draws upon Eugene Genovese and James McPherson. Johnson uses four types of sources. He relies on the narratives of escaped slaves first and foremost. Additionally, Johnson uses the docket records of disputed slave sales, slaveholders’ own letters, and various records of sales from notarized acts to record books and advertisements. Johnson contextualizes slave narratives with “sources produced by slaveholders and visitors to the South” (11). Further, Johnson assumes the docket records “contain only lies,” though he suggests these lies must have fit an understood pattern for them to seem plausible in

court.

Walter Johnson's award winning book, published in 1999, takes a cultural history approach to his study, arguing that the slave market, not the plantation, is the defining feature of slavery in the south. Johnson notes the contradictory nature of the system: the bodies of slaves are assigned a value, but those same bodies are people, not things. Furthermore, in order to do this, slave-sellers use a system of categorization based on physical attributes (skin color, gender, stature). This paradoxical process necessitates the acknowledgement of their individuality as human beings, while, at the same time, it turns them into commodities and property. (Johnson, 5-8)

The author also noted that a central piece of his complex argument is slaveholders

often represented themselves to one another by reference to their slaves. (13) Lastly, Johnson argues that the slaves had some agency in the process by attempting to glean information about their potential owner and in the way they present themselves and answer questions during the sales process. While the historiography on slavery is often written from the vantage point of the plantation or the slave community, Johnson is the first to insist that the purchasing of slaves was fundamental to what slavery was. In this, he differs from historians such as Eugene D. Genovese whose focus is on the community the slaves create.

Having said that, Johnson covers some of the same ground as Genovese (paternalism) and influences other historians such as Stephanie Smallwood whose more recent work also talks about the violence of slavery in Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora, 2009. Moreover, when it comes to evidence, Johnson primarily relies upon slave narratives. The author does acknowledge that while there are problems with these (amongst which are their obvious use by abolitionists of the day as political propaganda against the system), by using sources produced by slaveholders and visitors to the south along with the narratives, it is possible to interrogate and authenticate the latter. (Johnson, 11) Johnson also relies upon two hundred court cases of disputed slave sales that went before the Supreme Court of Louisiana, letters by slaveholders, and the sales records generated by the slave trade itself. (Johnson, 12-14) In other words, he has a plethora of primary sources, some of which historians in the past had been wary of using. Historiographically speaking, Johnson is following in the footsteps of historian Kenneth Stamp and his highly influential The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South. Stamp argues that slavery was an institution based on profit, not on paternalism (an argument put forward by U.B. Phillips in 1908). However, Johnson was not simply indebted to Stamp; he builds on that argument by showing the importance of the domestic slave trade and arguing (as noted above) that it was the

heart of slavery in America by the nineteenth century. Finally, the book has a number of strengths and very few weaknesses. One of the strengths was the books dialectical approach in which the author moves back and forth between the viewpoint of the slave buyer and seller. As Johnson himself notes, he was attempting "to understand a slave sale from the contingent perspective of each of its participants." (9) As the narrative advances, it spirals around evidence and analysis used earlier, reinforcing the argument. Another area of strength was the fact that Johnson looks at a subject, which has certainly not suffered from a lack of study, but he does so from a radically different vantage point. It is this uniqueness which makes the book compelling and enjoyable. Historian Bertram Wyatt Brown, of the University of Florida, criticizes the author of not supporting his conclusions with his evidence. The reviewer then goes on to say the weaknesses do not outweigh the strengths, thereby undercutting his own criticism. In fact, the evidence Johnson brings to his argument is formidable and does support his conclusions. I find it hard to criticize anything in Johnson's work. In my opinion, it was a masterpiece that stands the test of time and, fifteen years later, continues to influence how historians view the antebellum south and the "peculiar institution."

"Soul by Soul" is required reading for anyone interested in the history of the American South. Anyone familiar with the historiography of the antebellum South is familiar with discussions of slaves and owners and "the worlds they made." Genovese, Fox-Genovese, and Sobel, among others, make various arguments about how slaves and owners worked together or in opposition to create the world of the Antebellum South. Johnson convincingly molds this trope into a new paradigm for discussing the relationships of slaves and owners. He argues that the buying and selling of slaves was central to antebellum white culture -- it was through the buying and selling of slaves that white people sought upward mobility and gentility and it was in discussions of these sales (successful and unsuccessful) that whites judged one another. In the end, Johnson reformulates the long-standing trope of "worlds made," arguing that slave owners were "made of slaves": their self-image (and, as important in a pre-modern society, their public image) was made of their ability to make shrewd decisions both about the purchase and management of slaves. He also presents convincing evidence that far from being passive victims in the domestic slave trade, African-Americans did, sometimes at great personal risk, influence the terms of their own sale. Johnson's arguments will shape discussions of slaves and slave owners for many years to come. "Soul by Soul" is required reading for anyone who studies the American South.

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