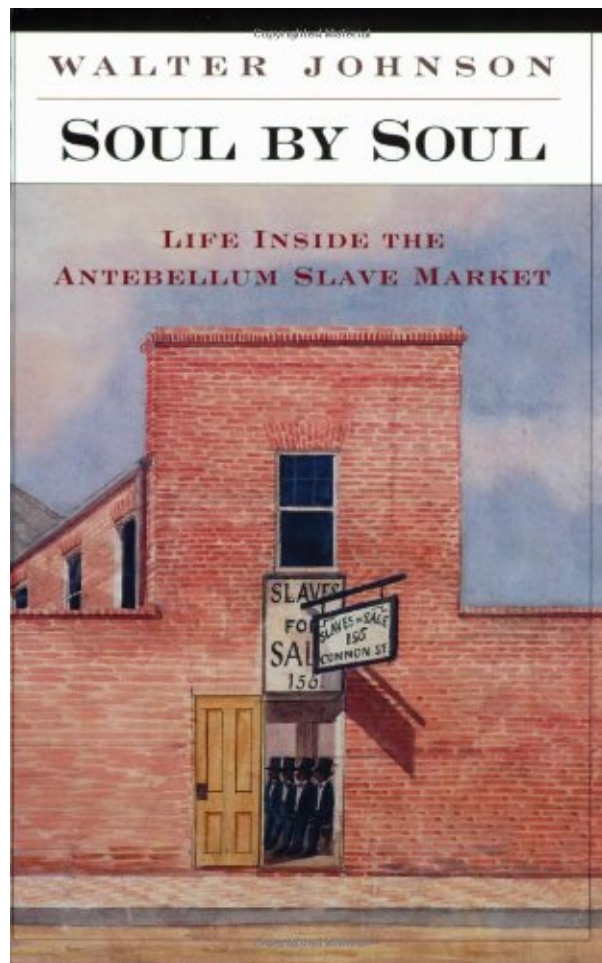


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ANTEBELLUM SLAVE MARKET BY
WALTER JOHNSON**



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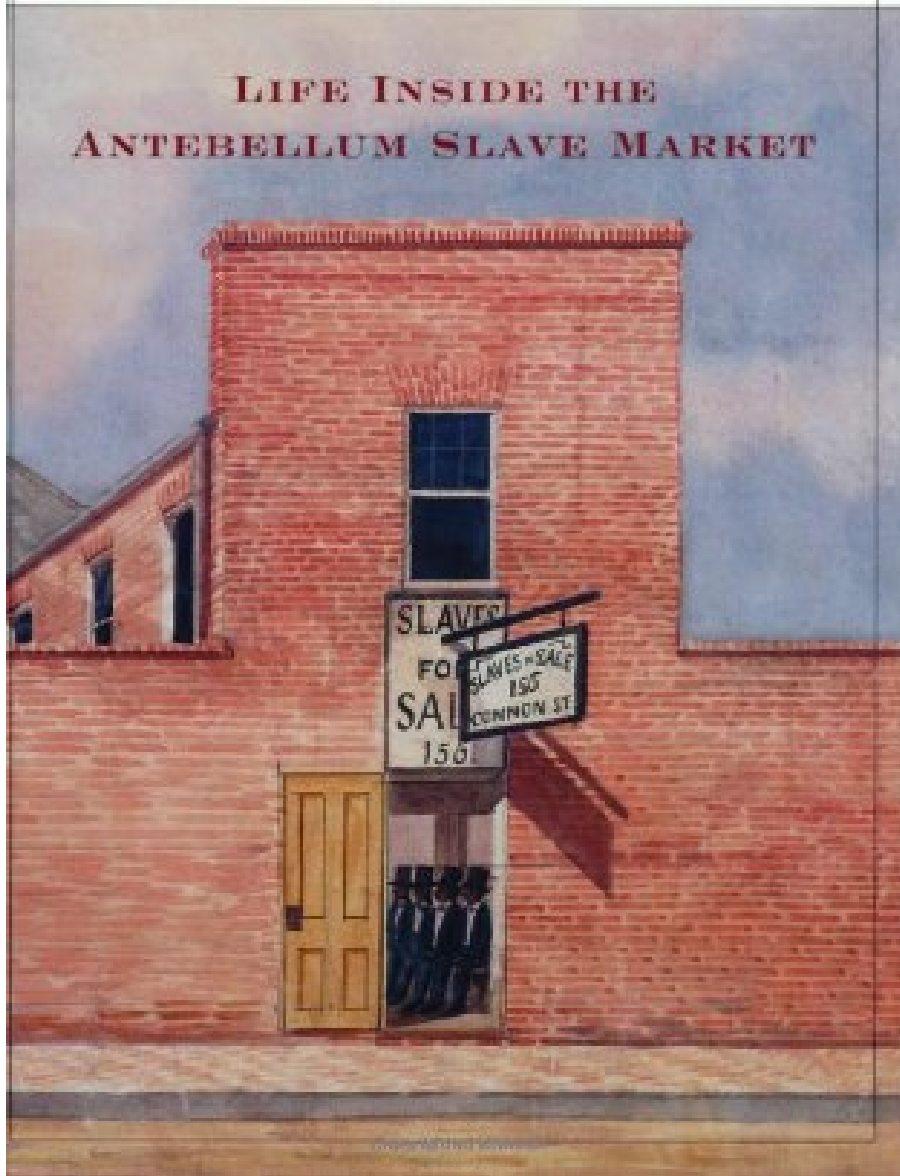


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Soul by Soul tells the story of slavery in antebellum America by moving away from the cotton plantations and into the slave market itself, the heart of the domestic slave trade. Taking us inside the New Orleans slave market, the largest in the nation, 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. Using recently discovered court records, slaveholders' letters, nineteenth-century narratives of former slaves, and the financial documentation of the trade itself, Johnson reveals the tenuous shifts of power that occurred in the market's slave coffles and showrooms. Traders packaged their slaves by "feeding them up," dressing them well, and oiling their bodies, but they ultimately relied on the slaves to play their part as valuable commodities. Slave buyers stripped the slaves and questioned their pasts, seeking more honest answers than they could get from the traders. In turn, these examinations provided information that the slaves could utilize, sometimes even shaping a sale to their own advantage. Johnson depicts the subtle interrelation of capitalism, paternalism, class consciousness, racism, and resistance in the slave market, to help us understand the centrality of the "peculiar institution" in the lives of slaves and slaveholders alike. His pioneering history is in no small measure the story of antebellum slavery.

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5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Insightful look into the antebellum slave market

By Shawn M. Warwick

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 Stampp and his highly influential *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South*. Stampp 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 Stampp; 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 book's 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."

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

The two-sided Racial Holocaust finally explained

By Herbert L Calhoun

Until this book, in all my readings, it never once occurred to me that the template for white justification for the continued unequal racist structure of contemporary American society, was already provided for by the justifications used to cover-up white complicity in the slave trade and in constructing a social structure and ideology based on that complicity.

It has always been self-evident to me that racism in America is and has always been a two-sided human tragedy: a white tragedy first and then a black one afterwards. Yet, since whites always have been able to use their power to cover up their own complicity in a greatly discredited cultural system in which only they benefit, the only narratives we are ever allowed to see are the ones with one side remaining invisible, "white-washed," or "bleached away," and the other side standing-in as the full story of racism in America.

Invariably, the side that we are allowed to see as the singular "stand-in" for the complete racist narrative is that seen only through the victim's eyes. That narrative waxes on in great detail about the color-coded water fountain signs, the seats on the back of the bus, etc., ad infinitum as if these activities occurred from out of the ether without a cause or a causal "agent?"

Telling the story from the victim's perspective is a conscious act itself that kills two birds with one stone: It garners sympathy for the black victims, at the same time that it shields the white perpetrator from complicity as the cause of the evil deeds requiring the sympathy in the first place.

If and when a scapegoat is needed, then, the general all-purpose justification: "the South did it" is often served-up as the sole responsible agent. And even today that "trope" has remained quite sufficient to explain away any and all other white complicity. After all, it is well-known that white southerners are a bunch of "low-lives" who have sex with their relatives, whose ancestors were emptied from England's jails; and oh, by the way, they did secede from the Union and did lose the Civil War didn't they?

Beyond the southern scapegoat, we are suppose to get the general idea that racism is "just the natural order of things," right?

In this book, for the first time we are able to piece together a narrative of the racial holocaust from the white side of the American cultural ledger as well as from the black, or victim's side. Through recorded testimonies, letters, court records, etc., we get to see how whites trembled with moral fear even as they calculated down to the cent the value of their moral compromises in the dollar value of their slaves; how they made the slave traders the scapegoats for the evil that was the inhuman society that they alone had created. For the first time we get a glimpse at the real "agency" and "agents" of a societal structure that remains in a steady-state even today. And while the South still gets the bulk of the blame, the ideology of justification is global and applies to all whites as well as to the racist system as a whole. All who embrace it and live under its umbrella of racist protection are culpable. There are no whites in America who are innocent of the causes of two centuries of racism, even with a mulatto in the "White" House.

Through the structure of this book, which gives the complete human story during slavery, we do indeed see that the story of America's racial tragedy is indeed a two-sided narrative: On one side of the human ledger is the "impotent but moral" black side, the intended victims of the racial holocaust, the chattel slaves, who since have been allowed to rise to second-class citizenship -- even with a "token" mulatto family in the "White" House.

On the other side of the ledger is the "powerful but always immoral" white side, the slave drivers, the buyers and sellers of human flesh, the perennial resisters of racial equality, a whole race of people identified best by the compromises they have made throughout American history with their religion, with their Constitution and Declaration of Independence, and with their feigned search for freedom: but who are known most of all for the repeated compromises they make everyday with their own consciences to keep America's racist social order in a steady-state.

The "training wheels" for the practices of evading moral responsibility for the racial holocaust, and their narratives of justification, all began with slavery. These powerful, but always invisible perpetrators, following Adolph Hitler, call themselves "superior people" and see themselves as the "Alpha males" of the known universe, and even though they have created a world that "objectifies" this lie, somehow this book makes them seem a lot smaller. A hellava read! 100 stars

61 of 67 people found the following review helpful.

New Paradigm for Slave/Owner Relations in the Old South

By Christina K. Miller

"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 antebullum 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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