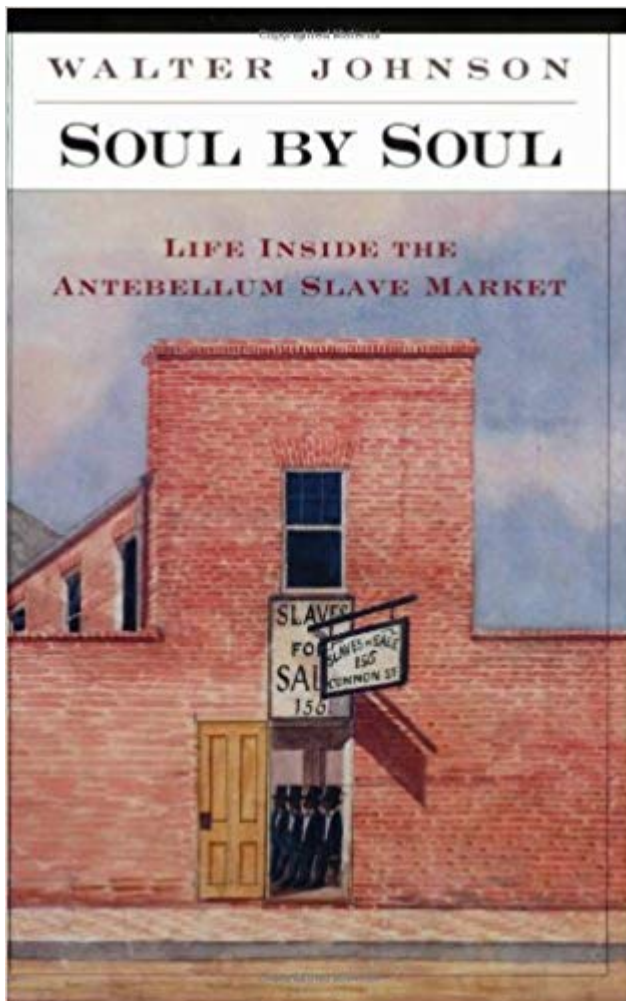


# Searching for Identities in the New Orleans Slave Market



Walter Johnson's cultural history, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, paints perspective-shifting portraits of the buyers and sellers active in the trading of humans, without neglecting the persons sold as its central commodity. Throughout his text, Johnson emphasizes the remoteness of paternalism from this aspect of slavery, which turned on the central proposition that a person could always be bought or sold if the price was right. The evocative writing style pulls the reader into the book, creating word-pictures about the wharves of New Orleans, the slave pens where deals were struck, or the desperation of slave families confronted with the loss of loved ones, often forever. This forms a notable contrast to the work of Michael Tadman, whose *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison, Wisc., 1989) is filled with graphs and charts to provide full statistics on the chattel trade of the Old South, but which ultimately does not read in as compelling fashion as Johnson's work does. That is not to say that Johnson has given us the last word on the subject of the slave trade, however; while his book breaks new ground by examining closely the New Orleans slave

market and considering the cultural ramifications of the purchase and sale of persons within the institution of slavery, *Soul by Soul* may leave some readers with more questions than answers when they reach its conclusion.

### *Time*

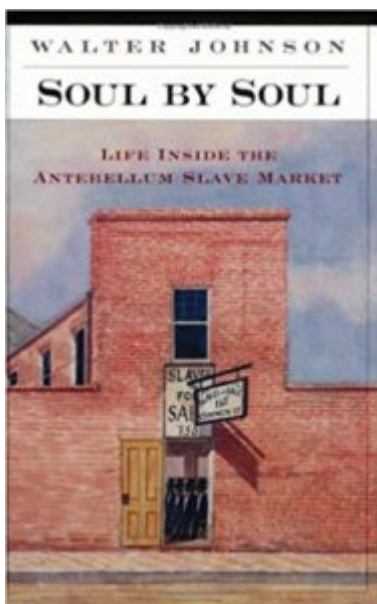
Johnson's period of emphasis is from 1820 to 1860, although he avoids a chronological arrangement of his chapters. Rather, Johnson organizes his material according to how the actors involved in purchase and sale first encountered one another: the acquisition of slaves by traders for resale (chap. 1), the business side of slave trading (chap. 2), the prospective purchaser's dreams and desires to be met through the purchase of slaves (chap. 3), the preparation of slaves for the market (chap. 4), how purchasers inspected slaves at the market (chap. 5), how slaves and buyers interacted in the act of sale (chap. 6), the transition of both owner and owned from the market to new surroundings (chap. 7), and finally, the cultural meaning of the slave pens for abolitionists and as an exemplar of the institution of slavery (epilogue). Throughout the work, Johnson emphasizes that time ran differently for all participants (14). This is a sentiment the reader can easily understand when considering the slave's perspective, since time doubtless seemed much longer for bondsmen newly separated from loved ones than it would have for traders, who thought in terms of seasons for purchase (summer and fall) and sale, or prospective buyers in the New Orleans market, who would have bought slaves primarily from November to April (49).

The reader might wonder whether the tone of New Orleans slave markets altered with the fluctuations of cotton prices or with the looming prospect of civil war, but these are contingencies Johnson mentions at the outset (5-7) and then does not return to. Apparently, a slave bought and sold in 1859 experienced much the same treatment and buyers approached the market with the same expectations as they would have in 1829. Rather than focus on separate periods or specific events, Johnson uses chapter 1 to remind the reader how quickly a slave could be converted from person to property—in the time it took to make a deal or exchange a piece of paper. At all times, slaves were used as living collateral for financial transactions, and owners calculated and recalculated their own wealth by mentally transforming bodies into dollars whenever they wished. As such, the divide between slavery and the market, Johnson argues, was artificial at best and a rationalization at worst (25). How long traders worked in the market for human flesh also passes with little explanation. Although some men worked as dabblers while others' firms were well-established and traded in slaves for years, the longevity and methods of small-timers versus the Donald Trumps of that world appear to have varied only as a function of capital and manpower (46-48). Did these small-time traders wish to become stationary auctioneers or factors, or did they dream of an agrarian retreat from the world of flesh dealing? The reader must presume that the records do not answer this question.

### *Manner*

Much of the action in *Soul by Soul* turns upon the aspirations of would-be

owners and attempts by slaves to control their own futures. Johnson describes in convincing fashion how the possibility of purchase allowed slave buyers to invent themselves by imagining the slaves they would purchase (78-87). While acknowledging that all owners thought about slaves and the market differently (79), Johnson focuses on a few of the more prevalent dreams that could be realized through slave buying: total control over another, or sexual escape and fantasy (81, 113). The process of building internal identities through slave purchase meant that slaveowners always dreamed of more from slave purchase than could be provided in reality. This dichotomy threatened the slave's well-being, for once purchased and unable to meet the expectations of a new owner, the threat of punishment was all but assured. While internal identity creation might swing from fancy to fact, external identities also hinged on slave buying—the trader or buyer who purchased a slave only to discover that she was ill or dying might find himself labelled (for almost all purchasers were men) as having poor judgment in slave acquisitions (103-05). Those who sought to create external identities as slave breakers or tender-hearted paternalists (for “rescuing” a slave from the clutches of the trader) could also gain that neighborhood reputation by taking action in the slave market. Traders also sought to provide slaves with external reputations, by changing the physical appearance of the bondsmen through altered diets and better clothing. This created the illusion of slaves without pasts, whose prior identities had been obliterated and thus were free to be inscribed with new fantasies by the would-be purchaser. Slaves, however, were not pieces of furniture, but attempted to influence their sales to men who appeared more humane or who might provide better opportunities for escape (165, 171). In describing how identities (of buyers and those bought) were self-fashioned or manipulated, chapters 3, 4, and 6 of Johnson's book are the most persuasive.



Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999. 283 pp., \$15.95

Where the notion that identities could be shaped through slave purchase weakens, however, is when corporate entities and managers enter the picture. While the individual white male who bought female slaves might fantasize that he was Don Juan, what image, if any, did the church, the town, or the company seek to create when buying slaves? All of these groups owned slaves in the antebellum South, but we are left to wonder what perception they might have wanted to create in the minds of other Southerners when slaves were purchased. To suggest that these groups, disembodied as they were, uniformly sought to manufacture a particular opinion among others seems bizarre, for at best, it might be the perception that selected leaders (like modern-day corporate trustees) wanted to project about the company image. And what of absentee owners, whose holdings in land and slaves were vast? Did they approach the market with the same expectations as other slaveowners, or did they expect a factor or overseer to purchase and sell on their behalf? If so, did managers or overseers have the same ability to or desire to craft their identities through the purchase of slaves? Not all buyers acted alike. As for the slaves being sold, while traders might clothe their wares in uniform outfits to project erasable pasts, this ruse would fall apart when the slaves were purchased in lots from state penitentiaries (another corporation) for well-documented and very public crimes. Phil Schwarz described these individuals in *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705-1865* (Baton Rouge, 1988): slaves convicted of murder and other felonies by law were exported for sale beyond the boundaries of Virginia. While Johnson might argue that such slaves could still escape their past lives and fashion new identities (with the witting help of traders who might then gain a higher market price), the repeated practice of selling upper-South slaves with criminal backgrounds to the lower South was well known among white antebellum Southerners, and certainly would have affected the fantasies and choices of possible purchasers in New Orleans—an element not discussed in *Soul by Soul*.

### *Place*

Johnson utilizes extensive records preserved by the Supreme Court of Louisiana to explore in detail the slave sales made at the New Orleans market. One look at the footnotes convinces the reader he has plumbed them to considerable depth. Although he touches upon aspects of the slave trade outside of Louisiana—when he talks about traders acquiring slaves for resale in chapter 1, for example—this book is not about all antebellum slave markets (as the subtitle hints it may be), but almost entirely about New Orleans. Readers who want to know about slave trading in city versus country, or upper South versus lower South will not find their answers here. However, the data available from New Orleans, and its centrality as the destination for many upper South slaves sold to the deep South make it of great interest, and Johnson's book examines it closely. Problems about New Orleans's centrality persist, though. While the record base for New Orleans is very large, and nearly one hundred thousand slaves passed through the slave pens there, the peculiarities of slavery in that city need be not only acknowledged, but emphasized. New Orleans's "fancy

trade" in female slaves for concubinage and houses of prostitution was much greater than elsewhere in the South, and must therefore have had some effect upon the workings of the slave market there. Slave women considered a threat because of their ability to "pass" and thus possibly escape from slavery elsewhere were deliberately sent to New Orleans for sale. Similarly, extensive water traffic upon the Mississippi also affected the possibilities for escape that slaves could capitalize upon, providing options unavailable to them in other Gulf port cities where slave markets worked.

Having noted these limitations, *Soul by Soul* remains a well-crafted story, compelling the reader to keep turning the pages. A winner of two prizes from the OAH, Johnson's book tells a good story that will give interested persons an introduction to the workings of New Orleans's slave market. It remains for other scholars to flesh out Johnson's lively cultural history with a fuller description of the workings of the slave trade throughout the antebellum South.

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