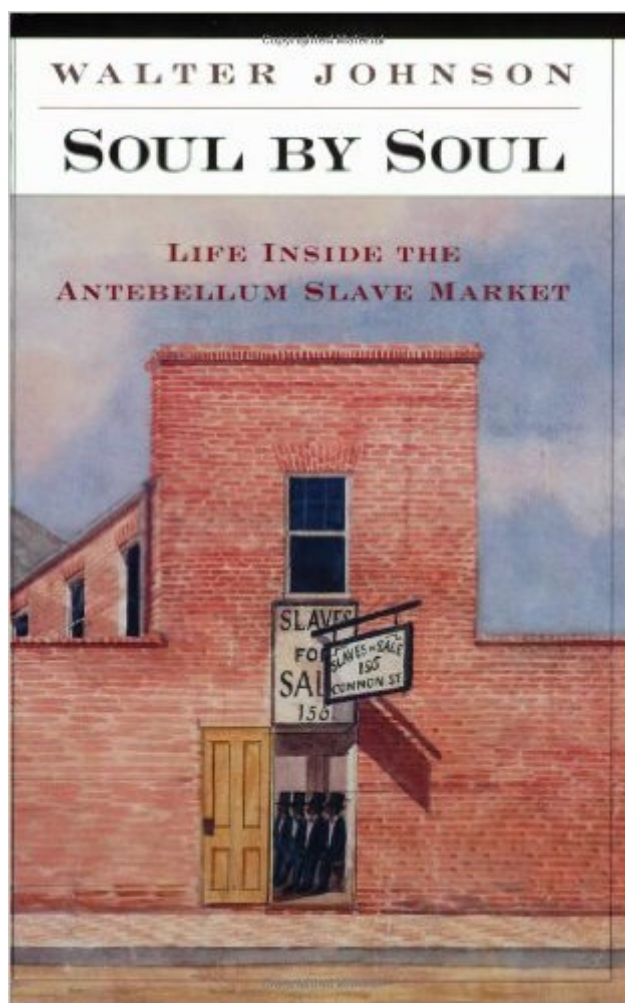


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Soul By Soul: Life Inside The Antebellum Slave Market



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. 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.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press; 58328th edition (1999)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674005392

ISBN-13: 978-0674005396

Product Dimensions: 0.8 x 6.2 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (42 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #68,625 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #37 in [Books > Science & Math > Earth Sciences > Geography > Regional](#) #42 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > Civil War > Abolition](#) #179 in [Books > History > Africa](#)

Customer Reviews

In a book that argues that the slave trade itself fundamentally defines American slavery as a whole, a focus on the brutality and inhumanity of slavery would be expected. The tragedy of individuals torn from their families, kept in inhumane conditions in the slave markets, and sold to strangers who likely would physically abuse them is certainly one focus of *Soul By Soul*. However, Walter Johnson has gone much further than that in defining the slave markets as central to our understanding of slavery. Through creative interpretation of numerous personal and business documents drawn from slave dealers and owners, the court transcripts produced when their bargains went awry, and the haunting memoirs of slaves who either came through the markets themselves or had relatives who did, Johnson shows that the act of buying a human being was profoundly important to the Southern mind in ways that transcend economics or dynamics of power. It is thus not possible to dismiss Johnson's interpretation with the argument that the majority of slaves never passed through the traders' hands, so their experience with the market was negligible and therefore of less importance than Johnson would suggest. This is a book less about the experience of black slaves in the market than about the effect those markets had on the white psyche. Johnson sees southern whites as consumers, ready to be marketed to in the modern sense. Traders knew this and were prepared to advertise their wares in ways that would allow those consumerist impulses to be satisfied. The purchase of a first slave for a man just starting to build his fortune was an act of hope; the buyer's dreams of prosperity rested upon the slave whom he had chosen, in a sense transferring dependence from the slave to the paternalist himself.

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