

Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1999; 283 pages; ISBN: 0674005392 paperback; \$12.00.

Walter Johnson's cultural history, *Soul by Soul*, tells the story of American slavery by focusing on the internal or domestic, as opposed to the transatlantic, slave trade. The decades between the U.S. Constitution and the Civil War saw the relocation of approximately one million black slaves from the upper to the lower South, and two thirds of them were sold "through a pattern of commerce that soon became institutionalized as the domestic slave trade" (5). Johnson makes the showrooms of the New Orleans slave market into his key trope, thus illustrating his focus on the moment of sale and on the long and complex process which preceded that moment. He draws attention to the oft-forgotten fact that in the U.S. domestic slave trade slaves were frequently sold in extended private bargains, rather than at large public auctions. He argues that during these lingering processes, which could last for months, enslaved African Americans demonstrated their agency in ways largely overlooked by previous scholarship. While studies that focus on the auction block must, inevitably, stress first-generation slaves' immediate post-Middle Passage exhaustion and confusion, the showroom opens up a different space for discussion, enabling the scholar to examine and highlight black agency, which even slavery could not extinguish. Obviously, the two foci are not contradictory, but complement one another.

While all the time acknowledging the deeply inhumane and dehumanizing nature of the slave trade, Johnson looks at the act of sale as the climax of a multidimensional human drama, whose respective actors – slaves, buyers, and traders or sellers – had their own conceptions of, and vantage points on, the nature of the process. Seeking to reconstruct these three vastly different viewpoints, Johnson argues that such work opens up a perspective into the Peculiar Institution that is so representative as to constitute "the story of the making of the antebellum South" (18). Most importantly, Johnson highlights black agency, as suggested above, from angles that are far from commonplace. He suggests, for example, that at least some slaves attempted to exert control over their futures by trying to manipulate the process in the showroom: they encouraged buyers who seemed, relatively speaking, humane, and – subtly or, at great risk, explicitly – discouraged others. Another frequently ignored aspect that Johnson brings to the fore is the trade's significance for the identity formation of the buyers, who re-invented their own identity by fantasizing about the elevation of social status and the improved standard of life that the ownership of human commodities would bring with it. These fantasies, observes Johnson, often failed to consider the actual realities of life on the farm or plantation after the transaction. Johnson also looks at dealers, brokers, and traders, addressing both the financial profits they could expect and the more dreary aspects of their profession. The traders knew, for instance, that they might have to "protect themselves from their property" during the long walk from home to the market (61). Johnson, in other words, reveals the various dehumanizing and pernicious effects of slavery not only on the slaveholder and the slave but

also on the various go-betweens who actively contributed to – and, paradoxically, both benefited and suffered from – the peculiar ideology according to which the commodification of black humanity was justified and acceptable.

Johnson uses hardly any graphs or charts, but rather seeks to reconstruct, in a highly evocative style, the human experiences and realities behind the figures. He uses three kinds of sources: antebellum slave narratives, the docket records of about two hundred cases of disputed slave sales that appeared before the Louisiana Supreme Court in the nineteenth century, and letters written by slave owners. Johnson addresses his use of sources in the Introduction, mainly reflecting on his deployment of slave narratives. Aware of the methodological challenges faced by historians working with these early African-American autobiographies, he agrees that slave narratives are the stories of survivors, who tended to be exceptionally strong and determined individuals. Despite this potential problem of representativeness, however, antebellum slave narratives are, as Johnson maintains, crucially important documents for any scholarly reconstruction of the antebellum South, because they render the slaves' own voices audible much more powerfully than any other available primary sources do.

Chapter 1, "The Chattel Principle," lays out the elementary principles of chattel slavery – in particular, the premise that slaves were commodities with a monetary value. While emphasizing the centrality of this principle for the entire economy of the antebellum South and reaffirming that a slave could be sold at any time at the owner's convenience, Johnson highlights slave resistance even when discussing the initial stages of the sale process. In his ironic words, "many slave sales had to be negotiated twice through – once with the buyer and once with the merchandise" (30). Refusing to act as if they were mindless objects, the human "commodities" sometimes found effective ways of reacting to the news of the planned transactions. Johnson, for example, tells the story of an Edward Hicks, who "used flight to renegotiate the terms of his own sale" (32).

Chapter 2, "Between the Prices," examines the identity positions of traders and brokers, but it also calls attention to black agency by examining the connections that slaves made with another while journeying towards the slave market. Sometimes such bonding during the trip ended in a joint escape; at other times, it served as mutual psychological support. Chapter 3, "Making a World Out of Slaves," investigates the "transformative possibilities" (78) that the slave market held for the slaveholder in his social imagination. Chapter 4, "Turning People into Products," deals with the preparation of slaves for the showroom. Chapter 5, "Reading Bodies and Marking Race," looks at the potential buyer examining slaves in the showroom, particularly focusing on the buyer's interest in the slaves' generative capacities and on his interpretation of the marks of physical punishment inscribed on their bodies. Chapter 6, "Acts of Sale," continues to study the buyers' and the slaves' interactions in the market, claiming that the latter sometimes "shaped a sale to suit themselves" (177). Johnson quotes, for example, the case of the ex-slave narrator Henry Bibb, who at first spent months in a New Orleans slave pen and was eventually "sent out to

find himself a master" (177). Chapter 7, "Life in the Shadow of the Slave Market," takes a glimpse into the lives of slaves and slaveholders after the completion of the transaction.

Soul by Soul persuasively argues that the slave market was "everywhere in the antebellum South" (115), a constant presence in the slaveholders' minds. Slaves were used as living collateral for various financial transactions, and the fact that their bodies could be transformed into currency in the economic system powerfully affected not only the financial but also the social imagination of the slaveholding class, influencing the way in which the slaveholders viewed themselves, their peers, and, of course, their slaves. Johnson's argumentation concerning the constant psychological presence of the slave market in the minds of both black and white Southerners, supported by individual stories drawn from various documentary sources, is convincing. The verbal portraits that he ably paints are thought-provoking and, in the case of the slaves, moving. A carefully researched and compellingly written study, Johnson's book is an important addition to the existing work on the history of slavery in the antebellum South.

Tuire Valkeakari

Yale University

Melissa Nobles, *Shades of Citizenship: Race and the Census in Modern Politics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000; 256 pages; ISBN: 0804740593 paperback; \$19.95.

A comparative study, Melissa Nobles's *Shades of Citizenship* explores the intricate interplay of censuses, racial politics, and citizenship in the United States and Brazil. Wryly pointing out that in the United States the allegedly inherent and immutable racial categories have "changed from nearly one census to the next" (x), Nobles sets out to explore how census bureau officials in the two countries have thought about race – that is, what is actually being classified and counted in censuses, and why. In addition, she investigates the ways in which racial categorizations, as expressed in census forms, have affected political, intellectual, and social life in the two national settings. Nobles's method is that of systematic doubt: in her words, she "first examined the assumptions that characterize most scholarly and popular treatments of censuses and census bureaus, and then assumed the opposite" (x). Questioning what tends to be taken for granted, Nobles asks the critical – and crucial – question of why race is a category in census forms at all. Ultimately, she wishes to "advance theorizing about race and its political significance" (xi).

Nobles argues that censuses significantly contribute to and sustain racial discourse, which in turn "affects the public policies that either vitiate or protect the rights, privileges, and experiences commonly associated with citizenship" (1). In other words, Nobles affirms, first, that race should not be viewed as an objective category that censuses study and impartially tabulate, but as "a fluid and internally contradicting dis-