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Soul by Soul

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Soul by Soul

Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market

Walter Johnson

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"The being of slavery, its soul and its body, lives and moves in the chattel principle, the property principle, the bill of sale principle: the cart-whip, starvation, and nakedness are its inevitable consequences."

JAMES W. C. PENNINGTON,
The Fugitive Blacksmith

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INTRODUCTION

A Person with a Price

Nineteenth-century New Orleans was, by the breathless account of its boosters, on the verge of becoming one of antebellum America's leading cities, a city to be compared to New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston. What had once been an imperial outpost, passed back and forth between European powers in faraway trades was, by the early nineteenth century, a city poised on the brink of commercial greatness. Along the city's waterfront, ships from Europe and around the coast, steamers from the Mississippi River valley, and thousands of flatboats were packed so tightly that one could walk deck to deck from one end of the city to the other. Stevedores and draymen, white and black, traced out tiny connections in the world economy, unloading and loading, moving goods that had been paper-traded miles away and weeks before: crates of clothes, shoes, and buttons; guns, tobacco, and textiles; china, books, and French wine; cattle, hogs, corn, and whiskey. Salesmen and sailors shouted warnings and instructions in a half dozen languages. Overhung by the odor of batter-fried fish and pipe smoke, the hopes of the lower South's leading city were reefed across the broad frontage where the Mississippi met the Atlantic: thousands of bales of cotton and barrels of sugar, stacked and flagged with the colors of the commission merchants responsible for their sale.[1] And though the city never managed to outrun the underachievement that accounted for the shrill edge of the boosters' accounts, New Orleans

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was throughout the antebellum period unsurpassed in one respect. Not far from the levee was North America's largest slave market.

In the same way that contemporary tourists concentrate on a few sights in their visits to "see" a given city, antebellum travelers and curiosity-seekers converged on the slave market when they went south to Louisiana in search of slavery. Rather than making their way out of the city to the sugar plantations that covered the broad alluvial plain at the outlet of the Mississippi, or traveling upriver to the cotton plantations strung along the banks from Baton Rouge to Memphis, they began in the neighborhood where today Chartres Street meets broad, boulevarded Esplanade—a few short blocks from the levee, past the cathedral and the gin houses and sailor's tenements that served the nearby docks. After the 1840s there was also a slave market further uptown, amidst the shooting galleries, cock pits, barbershops, and bootsellers of the city's central business district. Both of these markets were really clusters of competing firms, each of which, in turn, maintained its own yard for keeping slaves—"slave pens" in the parlance of the trade—and frontage for displaying them.[2] Between September and May—the months that bounded the trading season—the streets in front of the pens were lined with slaves dressed in blue suits and calico dresses. Sometimes the slaves paced back and forth, sometimes they stood atop a small footstand, visible over a crush of fascinated onlookers. As many as a hundred slaves might occupy a single block, overseen by a few slave traders whose business was advertised by the painted signs hanging overhead: "T. Hart, Slaves," "Charles Lamarque and Co., Negroes." Here the traveling observers and writers found what they were looking for: a part of slavery that could be used to understand the whole of the institution. Slavery reduced to the simplicity of a pure form: a person with a price.[3]

The walls surrounding the pens were so high—fifteen or twenty feet—that one New Orleans slave dealer thought they could keep out the wind.[4] Inside those walls the air must have been thick with overcrowding, smoke and shit and lye, the smells of fifty or a hundred people forced to live in a space the size of a home lot. And the sounds that came over the walls from the street outside must have been muted and mixed—horses' hooves striking the stone-paved street, cart wheels and streetcars, fragments of conversation, laughter, shouting. Along the inside walls were privies, kitchens, dressing rooms, and jails. The jails were

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sometimes as many as three stories high and built of brick.[5] They looked like the slave quarters that can be seen today in the yards of many New Orleans houses: steep-backed, one room deep, and fronted with railed galleries. In the nineteenth-century slave pens, however, those galleries were lined with barred windows and doors that locked from the outside. Behind the doors were simple rooms with bare pine floors and plain plastered walls; measuring ten or twelve feet across, they were intended for multiple occupancy. On the ground floor of one of the jails or across the yard were offices and a showroom. The traders' offices were probably the type of spaces where nobody sat down—places for drinking, pacing, signing, and counting. The real business took place in the showrooms, which were large enough for a hundred slaves to be arrayed around their walls, questioned, and examined. These rooms had finished floors and painted walls, a fireplace, a few chairs, and doors all around—a door from the offices where the traders did their counting and signing, a door from the street where the buyers gathered before the pens opened, and a door from the yard where the slaves waited to be sold.[6]

What follows is the story of these showrooms. It is a story of back and forth glances and estimations, of hushed conspiracies and loud boasts, of power, fear, and desire, of mistrust and dissimulation, of human beings broken down into parts and recomposed as commodities, of futures promised, purchased, and resisted. It is, in no small measure, the story of antebellum slavery.

The bargains sealed in the New Orleans slave pens were centuries in the making, late additions to a four-hundred-year history by which the trade in African and African-descended people transformed the New World. By the end of the fifteenth century, Portuguese merchants and soldiers had dotted four thousand miles of the west coast of Africa with outposts, where they traded for slaves to export to sugar- and wine-producing islands off the coast. The Portuguese were shortly followed to Africa by the other imperial powers of Europe: the Spanish in the sixteenth century, the Dutch, Danes, French, and English in the seventeenth. Beginning in the 1650s, when sugar planted on Barbados and in Brazil began to grow into huge profits for colonial planters and metropolitan shippers, the African trade was a central concern of Europe's colonial powers, each of which attempted to control it through exclusive licensing and colonial customs.

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The word for the economic theory behind the trade has come down to us scrubbed clean by usage: mercantilism. Colonial staples, shipped from abroad and finished at home, would yield metropolitan profits, which would be shared with the monopoly-granting state. And colonial markets would consume domestic manufactures, profits again dutied and taxed into state revenue. In practice this meant that well-connected investors could form themselves into syndicates like the Royal African Company and the Dutch West India Company and receive monopoly license from their governments to pursue trade in other parts of the world—license to make war on non-Christian kings and to snatch or purchase their subjects along the shores of a distant continent, license to have their slave-trade monopolies protected by governmental decree and their African-coast slave factories defended in European wars. Though punctuated by imperial conflict and political regulation, the trade's four centuries were, by and large, charted along the demand curves for colonial staples: tobacco, indigo, rice, cotton, coffee, and especially sugar. There was direct trade among the colonies and between the colonies and Europe, but much of the Atlantic trade was triangular: slaves from Africa; sugar from the West Indies and Brazil; money and manufactures from Europe. People were traded along the bottom of the triangle; profits would stick at the top.[7]

In the four centuries of that triangular trade, ten to eleven million people—fifty or sixty thousand a year in the peak decades between 1700 and 1850—were packed beneath slave ship decks and sent to the New World. Indeed, up to the year 1820, five times as many Africans traveled across the Atlantic as did Europeans.[8] And those numbers do not include the dead—the five percent of the human cargo who died in crossings that took three weeks, the quarter who died in crossings that took three months.[9] Behind the numbers lie the horrors of the Middle Passage: chained slaves forced to dance themselves into shape on the decks; the closed holds, where men and women were separated from one another and chained into the space of a coffin; the stifling heat and untreated illness, the suicides and slave revolts, the dead thrown overboard as the ships passed on.[10]

The United States Constitution, ratified in 1789, contained a provision that led to a ban on the importation of African slaves after 1808. Closing the trade was favorable to both opponents of slavery and a portion of slaveholders, mostly Virginians, who feared that the contin-

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ued importation of slaves would dilute the social power that their own slaves supported. Because the enslaved population of North America had been self-reproducing for at least fifty years by the time the Constitution was ratified, the closing of the Atlantic slave trade did not mean that North American slavery would wither away through the high mortality and low birth rates that characterized slavery elsewhere in the New World. It meant, instead, that any expansion of slavery into the western states would take the shape of a forcible relocation of American-born slaves. In the seven decades between the Constitution and the Civil War, approximately one million enslaved people were relocated from the upper South to the lower South according to the dictates of the slaveholders' economy, two thirds of these through a pattern of commerce that soon became institutionalized as the domestic slave trade.[11]

In its earliest years the domestic slave trade was probably not recognizable as such. By the end of the eighteenth century slave coffles were a common enough sight on the roads connecting the declining Chesapeake—its soil exhausted by a century of tobacco planting—to the expanding regions of post-Revolutionary slavery, the Carolinas to the south and Kentucky and Tennessee to the west. But in these years the trade was a practice without a name or a center, a series of speculations made along the roads linking the small towns of the rural South into an attenuated political economy of slavery. As the coffles traveled south, slaves were sold at dusty crossings and roadhouses through an informal rural network of traders and chance encounters that continued to characterize much of the trade throughout its massive nineteenth-century expansion.[12]

At the end of the eighteenth century, the slave trade began to follow the international demand curve for cotton. Although slaves continued to cultivate the tobacco, rice, and indigo that funded the first expansion of American slavery, the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, the purchase of Louisiana in 1803, and the subjugation of southern Indians, finalized along the Trail of Tears in 1838, opened new regions of the South to cultivation and slavery. Slaveholders called it a "kingdom" for cotton, and they populated the new states of the emerging Southwest—Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana—with slaves brought from the East: 155,000 in the 1820s; 288,000 in the 1830s; 189,000 in the 1840s; 250,000 in the 1850s. As many as two thirds of these one million

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or so people were carried south by slave traders, whose daily business resolved the diverging fortunes of the declining upper South and the expanding lower South into mutual benefit.[13]

Throughout the antebellum period the slave trade continued to follow the course of the world cotton economy. The boom years of the 1830s were followed by depression in the 1840s and then another decade of massive volume in the 1850s. Indeed, the price of slaves tracked the price of cotton to such a degree that it was a commonplace in the years after 1840 that the price of slaves could be determined by multiplying the price of cotton by ten thousand (seven cents per pound for cotton yielding seven hundred dollars per slave). Only in the 1850s did slave prices seem to cut loose from cotton prices in a cycle of speculation that made entry into the slaveholding class prohibitively expensive. Tensions increased in an already class-divided society, and a premonitory wave of anxiety swept across the slaveholding South.[14]

Between 1820 and 1860 the slave trade—urban and rural—accounted for a significant portion of the South's economy. It has been estimated that in slave-exporting regions of the antebellum South the proceeds from the sale of slaves was equivalent in value to fifteen percent of the region's staple crop economy. As those people passed through the trade, representing something close to half a billion dollars in property, they spread wealth wherever they went. Much of the capital that funded the traders' speculations had been borrowed from banks and had to be repaid with interest, and all of it had to be moved through commission-taking factorage houses and bills of exchange back and forth between the eastern seaboard and the emerging Southwest. And the slaves in whose bodies that money congealed as it moved south had to be transported, housed, clothed, fed, and cared for during the one to three months it took to sell them. Some of them were insured in transit, some few others covered by life insurance. Their sales had to be notarized and their sellers taxed. Those hundreds of thousands of people were revenue to the cities and states where they were sold, and profits in the pockets of landlords, provisioners, physicians, and insurance agents long before they were sold. The most recent estimate of the size of this ancillary economy is 13.5 percent of the price per person—tens of millions of dollars over the course of the antebellum period.[15]

Along with the two thirds of a million people moved through the interstate trade, there were twice as many who were sold locally. Sales

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from neighbor to neighbor, state-supervised probate and debt sales, or brokered sales within a single state do not show up in the statistics that have been used to measure the extent and magnitude of the slave trade. And yet state-supervised and local sales were as much a feature of the antebellum economy as interstate slave trading. Noting the frequency with which the civil courts sought solutions to slaveholders' legal problems in the valuation and liquidation of enslaved people, one historian has referred to the state as South Carolina's "largest slave auctioneering firm." Taken together, there were over two million slaves sold in interstate, local, and state-ordered sales during the antebellum period.[16]

In the four decades before the Civil War, the tiny capillaries of trade that distinguished the early years gave way to a new pattern of trade. Although much of the trade remained rural and the majority of the traders itinerant, the tributaries of trade were increasingly gathered into a pattern of trade between large urban centers. This new intercity commerce was dominated by well-organized permanent firms, as opposed to the one-time speculations and itinerant trade that constituted the continuing rural trade. Slaves were gathered in Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, Norfolk, Nashville, and St. Louis and sent south, either overland in chains, by sailing ships around the coast, or by steamboats down the Mississippi. These slaves were sold in the urban markets of Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, Natchez, and especially New Orleans. Contrary to the popular image, most of these slaves were not sold quickly at large public auctions but in extended private bargains made in the slave pens maintained by slave dealers.[17]

Thousands of slaves from all over the South passed through the New Orleans slave pens every year in the antebellum period, their purchase and sale linking the city to both the larger southern economy and the regional economy of the lower South. Slave buyers from Texas, Arkansas, and Mississippi, as well as Louisiana, looked to the city for people to tend their fields and harvest their crops. Those whose slave-based agricultural ventures proved successful made their way back to the pens, this time looking for skilled artisans and domestic slaves who represented the high end of the slave market and could be found only in large urban centers like New Orleans. What the New Orleans slave pens sold to these slaveholders was not just field hands and household help but their own stake in the commercial and social aspirations of the expanding Southwest, aspirations that were embodied in thousands of black

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men, women, and children every season: the slaves out of whom the antebellum South was built.

As slaveholders bound the South together with a criss-crossed pattern of trade and regional interdependence, as they made their way through market cycles and depressions and expanded the boundaries of the slaveholding South to the point of Civil War, they charted their progress by buying and selling slaves. Thus the history of the slave trade has often been represented graphically as an outline of prices and the volume of trade—rising into spiky peaks through the 1830s and then plunging into sharp decline, only to rise again in the 1850s. Or it has been represented cartographically as a series of migrating dots on a map—a black bulge being gradually forced southwestward. The shapes on the graphs and the maps are chastening: they trace the time-and-space history of one of the largest forced migrations in world history.

And yet the time-and-space outline of that trade does not fully describe it. Indeed, it could be said that the daily process by which two million people were bought and sold over the course of the antebellum period has been hidden from historical view by the very aggregations that have been used to represent it. Building upon what we have learned about the extent and importance of the slave trade in the political economy of slavery, we must now consider the roads, rivers, and showrooms where broad trends and abstract totalities thickened into human shape. To the epochal history of the slave market must be added the daily stories of the slave pens, the history of sales made and unmade in the contingent bargaining of trader, buyer, and slave.

This project takes the form of a thrice-told tale: the story of a single moment—a slave sale—told from three different perspectives. Following from a tradition of work in African American history stretching back at least to W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, this book began with the idea that the history of any struggle, no matter how one-sided its initial appearance, is incomplete until told from the perspectives of all of those whose agency shaped the outcome.[18] The systemic brutality apparent from the perspective of the demographic map needs to be punctuated by the episodes of resistance that occurred on dusty roads; the counting up and parsing out of sales must be complicated with an account of the intricate bargaining that preceded the final deal; the central symbol of a property regime that treated people as possessions

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must be fleshed out with the power, desire, and dissimulation that gave it daily shape. Rather than charting a map of foreordained conclusions, I have tried to understand a slave sale from the contingent perspective of each of its participants—to assess their asymmetric information, expectations, and power, to search out their mutual misunderstandings and calculated misrepresentations, to investigate what each had at stake and how each tried to shape the outcome.

Much of this account relies on the nineteenth-century narratives of former slaves, the best-known of the six thousand published slave narratives that document every era of American slavery.[19] These are the survivors' stories, written and published in the North by those who had escaped or been freed from slavery. Printed in runs numbering in the thousands, advertised in the pages of antislavery newspapers, and sold at antislavery meetings, the nineteenth-century narratives were the stock-in-trade of abolitionism. Most of them probably ended up on the drawing room shelves of northern opponents of slavery, where they served as reminders of their owners' political commitments, or at least of their shared appreciation of the best intentions of the emerging northern middle class.[20]

The antislavery history of these narratives has made some historians wary of using them as sources for writing the history of slavery. In proslavery responses to the narratives, which were taken up by early historians of slavery like Ulrich B. Phillips, the narratives were treated as politically interested fabrications and were dismissed according to one of the most durable paradoxes of white supremacy—the idea that those who are closest to an experience of oppression (in this case, former slaves) are its least credible witnesses.[21] Recently, however, historians have followed the path of scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois, Herbert Aptheker, and John Hope Franklin, away from the "master narrative of American History" and into the slave narratives. These pioneering efforts have been bolstered by the careful scholarship of John Blassingame, Joseph Logsdon, Sue Eakin, and others, who have authenticated some of the more controversial narratives piece by piece. Locating telling details and matching them to other sources, they have retrieved the narratives from the race-tinged skepticism that dismissed them as fabrication.

But taking slave narratives for transparent accounts of reality can be as misleading as dismissing them entirely. The narratives, like all histo-

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ries, were shaped by the conditions of their own production—the conditions of both southern slavery and organized antislavery. The narratives are by definition incomplete accounts. They are the stories of the escapees and survivors of an institution that gave up very few of either. The vast majority of the millions of people enslaved over the course of the history of New World slavery died as they had lived—in bondage. As the former slave William Wells Brown saw it, those who could tell the true story of slavery would never have the chance to do so: "slavery has never been represented, slavery never can be represented," he wrote.[22] Moreover, as a genre the narratives are dominated by the skilled and sometimes literate men who were disproportionately represented among the escapees, and this demographic fact skews their representation of slavery; the nineteenth-century narratives often elide or ignore the experiences of unskilled men and of women.

The narratives' account of slavery was equally shaped by the historical conditions of antislavery. Unconnected and sometimes unlettered, ex-slave narrators depended upon white northern abolitionists for their access to editors and publishers, their daily livings as orators, and whatever hope they had of freeing family members who remained in the South. White abolitionists, in turn, forced their own version of antislavery upon those who tried to tell their stories of slavery. "Give us the facts," Frederick Douglass was told, "we will take care of the philosophy." The impact of organized antislavery on the narratives must be considered in any effort to use them to write the history of slavery. As accounts which led up to a known ending—the escape of an individual slave—the narratives rarely enlarge upon the daily life, joys, and travails of enslaved communities. As stories of saved souls, they sometimes ignore the sufferings of enslaved bodies. As vehicles for supplying a moralistic bourgeois audience with the ideal slaves they demanded, the narratives often gloss over the anger, dissimulation, sexuality, and occasional brutality of real slaves' daily lives. As entrants into a rhetorical field dominated by white supremacy, they sometimes reproduce the prejudices of their readers.[23]

Though they require careful reading, the nineteenth-century narratives remain our best source for the history of enslaved people in the slave trade.[24] In what follows I have used three strategies to accomplish the dual task of reading the history of the many in the stories of the few and separating the experience of slavery from the ideology of antislav-

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ery.[25] First, I have read the narratives in tandem with sources produced by slaveholders and visitors to the South. Many of the most mundane as well as some of the more incredible aspects of the narrators' accounts—from descriptions of where slaves slept along the road and what they ate in the pens, to the revelations that some buyers bought slaves as subjects for medical experiments and some slaves shaped their own sales—are supported by other sources. By reading these sources in juxtaposition, I have been able to use them to authenticate as well as interrogate one another.

Second, I have read the narratives for traces of the experience of slavery antecedent to the ideology of antislavery, for the "facts" provided by Frederick Douglass without which William Lloyd Garrison could not have fashioned his "philosophy."[26] The descriptions of events in the narratives often include telling details which could not be fully contained by the purposes of antislavery editors and amanuenses. Visual descriptions of other slaves, for example, can be read as evidence of the way strangers evaluated one another in the coffles and slave pens. Likewise, the biographies of other slaves, often presented as a scene-setting aside to the narrator's central struggle, can be read as evidence of a history of communal life and collective resistance among slaves in the trade which was largely excised from the narrators' printed accounts.

Third, I have read the narratives for symbolic truths that stretch beyond the facticity of specific events. Some incidents appear so often that it seems certain they are stock figures drawn from the reading of other narratives rather than from experience. These include the idea that illiterate slaves holding books for the first time would put them next to their ears to hear them talk, or that an escapee seeing a steamboat or train for the first time would run away, thinking it was the devil. But these stock figures have a truth of their own to tell: they gesture at the way the world looked to people whose access to information and technology was limited by their owners and the threat of violence. I have taken the same approach to the disquieting stories of slaves who mutilated themselves to avoid the trade or women who killed their children to spare them from slavery. Whether or not every one of these stories was true (and we know some were), collectively they tell a truth about people forced by their slavery into a doubled relation with their bodies and their children.[27]

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In addition to the slave narratives, I have relied heavily on the docket records of approximately two hundred cases of disputed slave sales that came before the Louisiana Supreme Court in the nineteenth century. Louisiana, like other southern states, had detailed commercial laws regulating the sale of slaves.[28] In Louisiana, these laws were called redhibition laws, and they regulated the terms of warranty—what a buyer was explicitly or implicitly guaranteed by a seller—and the terms under which a sale of animals or slaves might be rescinded. Under these laws, slave buyers who felt that the people they purchased had "vices" of body or character could sue the seller for the return of the price they had paid. To sustain their cause, they had to prove both that the slave had been affected at the time of sale and that they had themselves behaved in the market as a "prudent" buyer would have, though they nevertheless might have missed the "defect" at the time of sale. These records, mixed in with the records of thousands of cases dealing with every aspect of slavery and law in antebellum Louisiana, were discovered in a courthouse basement in the 1980s and have only recently become available to readers at the University of New Orleans.[29] Ranging in length from a few tattered lines to hundreds of pages with attached exhibits, the docket records include the verbatim transcriptions of cases later decided by the Louisiana Supreme Court. Captured in the neat script of a law clerk are conversations a century and a half old: visitors describing the physical space of the pens and the bargains they saw made there; slave traders discussing their finances and explaining the daily practice of their business; slave buyers talking about their aspirations, anxieties, and the strategies they used to select their slaves.

Highly formalized and recorded amidst heated debate at a distance of time and space from the events they describe, the court records are no easier to read than the slave narratives. The testimony given by witnesses in these cases, though sworn, cannot be taken as a truthful account of what "really" happened in the pens. Indeed, I have generally read the docket records as if they contain only lies. And yet lies, especially sworn lies given in support of high-stakes legal action, must be believable in order to be worth telling: these lies describe the circumstances of a specific sale in the terms of a shared account of what was *likely* to happen in the slave market. A few stock stories supported much of the testimony: the story of dishonest trader and the duped buyer; or the story of the canny buyer who used the favorable terms of

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buyer-protecting laws to take advantage of an unwitting seller; or the simple story of the inscrutable slave and the honest mistake. These stories about slaveholders were underwritten and intertwined with stories about slaves: the buyer's story of the incorrigibly malign character who seemed sound in the market; the trader's story of a good slave driven to transgression or infirmity by a bad buyer; or the stories told by buyers and sellers alike of invisible ailments or slaves shamming an infirmity to undermine their own sale.[30] In these strategic appropriations of stock characters and in the conflicting and overlapping formulas with which lawyers and litigants framed their cases, I have sought slaveholders' commonsense opinion of the limits of what was possible in the slave pens.[31]

Letters written by slaveholders make up the third major body of sources for this project. In the overwhelmingly rural and increasingly mobile antebellum South, the substance of social relations was often epistolary. Many communities, families, and friendships had their primary existence in the form of letters mailed back and forth by their constitutive members—people who were rarely in the same place and who knew one another mostly through their letters. These letters, then, can be read as remote performances of the self, self-consciously produced representations that antebellum slaveholders offered to one another as versions of themselves.[32] Such letters are doubly revealing, for not only do they memorialize a single performance of the self but they reveal the terms which made that performance intelligible, the cultural register of the roles upon which their authors drew as they sat down to write. The letters thus recapitulate accounts of slaveholding selves that were likely to surface in other circumstances—conversation, gossip, fantasy, folklore, and so on. The letters are full of striving sons, masterful patriarchs, anxious brides, and dutiful wives, all of the recognizable social identities available to antebellum whites as they tried to make themselves make sense to someone else. And they are full of talk about slaves—slaves described, desired, bought, and brought home. The fact that slaveholders included so much about the slave market in their letters (much more, for instance, than they did about the duels that have figured so prominently in historians' accounts) is absolutely central to one of the arguments of this book: that slaveholders often represented themselves to one another by reference to their slaves.

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Finally, I have relied on the chillingly economical descriptions of slave sales generated by the trade itself: the notarized Acts of Sale by which a sale was given legal standing, and the traders' slave record books, price lists, and advertisements.[33] These lists of names, ages, prices, and body parts have been used by many historians to chart the price history and demography of the slave trade. The sources produced by the traders have often been taken to be the most reliable accounts of the slave trade—free of the confused purposes and strategic (mis)representations of the narratives, court cases, and correspondence; but to me they seem less useful in constructing a historian's overview than in reconstructing a historical point of view. Indeed, they are the most apparitional of the sources I have used. They represent the world as a slave trader's dream: slaves without frail or resistant bodies; sales sealed without manipulation, coercion, or opposition; history without contingency. Like the maps and graphs they have been used to create, the traders' records treat a contested process as if it were a foreordained conclusion.

Historians have generally followed the traders in defining the boundaries of the slave trade around the commercial record it produced—a sale in the upper South to a slave trader as a beginning and a sale to a slaveholder in the lower South as an end. This definition of the slave trade, however, cannot withstand the centrifugal pressure of the competing perspectives presented by the narratives, the court records, and the letters. The slave trade did not begin or end in the same place for traders, buyers, and slaves. For slaves, the slave trade was often much more than a financial exchange bounded in space and time. A slave traders' short-term speculation might have been a slave's lifelong fear; a one-time economic miscalculation or a fit of pique on the part of an owner might lead to a life-changing sale for a slave. For buyers, too, the slave market was a place they thought about and talked about long before they entered the confines of the pens and long after they left with a slave. Comparing the sources produced by those on different sides of the bargain makes it clear that "a slave sale" was not a single thing which one could view from three different sides and sum into a whole—the way one might walk all the way around a physical object, measure every face, and then create a three-dimensional diagram. Rather, like a web of unforeseen connections, the morphology of a sale depended upon the point of departure. Time ran differently depending upon where you started the clock.

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This history, then, is not organized around "change over time" in the traditional sense. It does not begin at one time (say 1820) and progress toward another (say 1860), providing an overview of the history of the slave trade in between. Still less does it offer a theory or a formal definition of the institution of slavery. Instead, it begins with the efforts of various historical actors—traders, buyers, or slaves—to imagine, assimilate, respond to, or resist the slave trade, with the desires and fears that gave the trade its daily shape. The scope and scale of the chapters shifts according to the efforts of the participants to understand and control the history in which they were joined. In some of the chapters the slaves have names and stories, in some they are slaveholders' fantasies, stripped bodies, or recorded prices. In some the traders have motives and strategies, in some they are ghosts stalking the daily life of the slave community or scapegoats for proslavery southerners' anxieties about the human selling and family separating that pervaded their "domestic" institution. In some the buyers imagine the slave market as a vehicle of self-amplification, a place where they could remake themselves in the image of the slaves they bought; in others they strip, question, and discipline the enslaved people through whom their imagined identities became material.

Maintaining these separate perspectives on the trade throughout the book, especially in accounts of the relentless objectification to which slaves in the market were subjected, can make tough reading. But it was out of the clash of conflicting perspectives that the history of the slave trade was daily made. As they went to the slave market, for example, potential buyers might have been self-consciously playing a part in the historical project of making manifest the expansionary destiny of the antebellum regime, or they might have made their slave-market choices with an eye toward crop calendars and cycles of commercial speculation, or they might have simply imagined their presence in the market as part of their own biography—the stages of a slaveholding life cycle marked out in purchased slaves. Slaves, on the other hand, might have framed the trade in terms of the sinfulness of slaveholders and their own providential hopes for salvation through suffering, or they might have seen their own sale as part of the larger demographic transformation of the slave communities of both the upper and lower South, or they might have imagined the trade in personal terms—the waiting to be sold which suffused every moment of the present with the fear of an

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unknown future, the heart-rending pain of losing loved ones to the traders, loss and survival in the shadow of the slave market. These various ways of imagining history—providential, political, economic, communal, biographical, and so on—were layered and intertwined through the daily process of the slave trade.[34] Many slaves trades, many versions of what was happening, met and were contested in every slave sale.

This book begins along the separate paths taken by slaveholders and slaves to the showrooms and leads up to the moment of sale in the market. The early chapters explore the radically incommensurable views taken by slaves and slaveholders of the relation of the slave trade to the broader system of slavery and follow this philosophical difference through the practical contests that defined the history of the slave trade: the efforts of slaveholders to coax or coerce their resistant slaves into the trade, the strategies the traders used to get their slaves to market, the slaves' efforts to make common cause with their fellow slaves and to resist the traders. The subsequent chapters of the book treat the contested bargains made by traders, buyers, and slaves in the showrooms and auction houses. In the slave market, the central tension of antebellum slavery was daily played out as slaveholders invested their money and their hopes in people whom they could never fully commodify. Even as the traders packaged their slaves by "feeding them up," oiling their bodies, and dressing them in new clothes, they were forced to rely on the slaves to sell themselves, to act as they had been advertised to be. Likewise, even as slave buyers stripped the slaves naked, probed their bodies, and asked them questions, they depended on the slaves to give them answers that would help them look beyond the traders' arts. The stakes were high, for their identities as masters and mistresses, planters and paternalists, hosts and hostesses, slave breakers and sexual predators were all lived through the bodies of people who could be bought and sold in the market. And so the questions the buyers asked and the examinations they made were also answers, accounts of their own origins and intentions.

During their time in the trade, the slaves had come to know and trust one another, and in the market they could share their observations of the slaveholders and collectively (and sometimes violently) resist them. Even those who did not revolt found ways to resist the trade. In the way they answered questions, characterized their skills, and carried their

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bodies—in the way they performed their commodification—slaves could use the information unwittingly provided them by the traders' preparations and the buyers' examinations to select the best among the poisoned outcomes promised them by the trade. Sometimes, at very great risk, they shaped their own sales.

Every one of the two million human-selling transactions which outlined the history of the antebellum South provided a way into its deepest secrets: into the aspirations of southern slaveholders and the fears of southern slaves; into the depth of the slaveholders' daily dependence on their slaves, despite claims of lofty independence; into the dreams of resistance that often lurked within the hearts of slaves; into the terrible density of the interchange between masters and slaves, whose bodies and souls were daily fused into common futures in the slave market. Running through each sale as well was the seeming paradox of a "paternalist" society which registered its historical progress through the number of people who were bought and sold in the market; the interplay of racism, patriarchy, and commodification in the system of slavery and the slave market; the attenuated hopes and survival strategies of slave communities living under the constant threat of dissolution; the repeated cycle of social death and rebirth which snatched people from their own lives only to transport and eject them into a marketplace where they were reanimated as pieces of living property; the strategies of individual and collective resistance used by slaves to shape and escape the fate plotted for them by the political economy of slavery; and the emotional volatility and frustrated brutality of slaveholders, whose fantasies could be made material only in the frail and resistant bodies of their slaves.

The history of the antebellum South is the history of two million slave sales. But to that history, to the history of the outcomes, must be added the daily history of the slave pens. The point in emphasizing the everyday life of the trade is not to diminish the chilling effect of that broad arrow on the map. It is rather to search out the shape of historical change in its moment of immediate expression and to explore the contingency of a history that was being pulled apart at the seams even as it unfolded over time and space. The quantitative dimensions of this history—the number of slaves traded over the course of the antebellum period, the amount of time they spent in the trade relative to time spent in the fields, their dollar value in comparison to the rest of the southern

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economy—are less important to my argument than the window into slavery provided by the moment of sale. 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—a trader, a buyer, and a slave making a bargain that would change the life of each. This, then, is a book not only about Louisiana, or the slave market in New Orleans, or the domestic slave trade as a whole, although it is all those things. This is the story of the making of the antebellum South.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Chattel Principle

Long after he had escaped from slavery and settled in Canada, William Johnson's memory stuck on one thing his owner used to say: "Master," he recalled, "used to say that if we didn't suit him he would put us in his pocket quick—meaning that he would sell us."[1] That threat, with its imagery of outsized power and bodily dematerialization, suffused the daily life of the enslaved. Like other pieces of property, slaves spent most of their time outside the market, held to a standard of value but rarely priced. They lived as parents and children, as cotton pickers, card players, and preachers, as adversaries, friends, and lovers. But though they were seldom priced, slaves' values always hung over their heads. J. W. C. Pennington, another fugitive, called this the "chattel principle": any slave's identity might be disrupted as easily as a price could be set and a piece of paper passed from one hand to another.[2] Of the two thirds of a million interstate sales made by the traders in the decades before the Civil War, twenty-five percent involved the destruction of a first marriage and fifty percent destroyed a nuclear family —many of these separating children under the age of thirteen from their parents. Nearly all of them involved the dissolution of a previously existing community.[3] And those are only the interstate sales.

As revealing as they are, these statistics mask complicated stories. Signing a bill of sale was easy enough; selling a slave was often more difficult. Many slaves used every resource they had to avoid being sold

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into the slave trade. Families and friends helped some slaves escape the slave trade entirely and gave others a chance to negotiate the terms of their sale into the trade. Whether they were sold for speculation, debt, or punishment, many slaves refused to go quietly. They disrupted their sales in both philosophy and practice. In philosophy by refusing to accept their owners' account of what was happening, by treating events that slaveholders described in the language of economic necessity or disciplinary exigency as human tragedy or personal betrayal. In practice by running away or otherwise resisting their sale, forcing their owners to create public knowledge of the violent underpinnings of their power. However they resisted, hundreds of thousands ended up in the slave trade. These were the "many thousands gone" memorialized in the stories and songs out of which antebellum slaves built a systemic critique of the institution under which they lived. In these rituals of remembrance, the disparate experiences of two million human tragedies were built into the ideology of the "chattel principle."

LIVING PROPERTY

From an early age slaves' bodies were shaped to their slavery. Their growth was tracked against their value; outside the market as well as inside it, they were taught to see themselves as commodities. When he was ten, Peter Bruner heard his master refuse an offer of eight hundred dollars (he remembered the amount years later), saying "that I was just growing into money, that I would soon be worth a thousand dollars." Before he reached adulthood John Brown had learned that the size of his feet indicated to a slaveholder that he "would be strong and stout some day," but that his worn-down appearance—bones sticking "up almost through my skin" and hair "burnt to a brown red from exposure to the sun"—nevertheless made it unlikely that he would "fetch a price." Likewise, by the time she was fourteen, Elizabeth Keckley had repeatedly been told that even though she had grown "strong and healthy," and "notwithstanding that I knit socks and attended to various kinds of work . . . that I would never be worth my salt." Years later the pungency of the memory of those words seemed to surprise Keckley herself. "It may seem strange that I should place such emphasis upon words thoughtlessly, idly spoken," she wrote in her autobiography.[4] Condensed in the memory of a phrase turned about her adolescent

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body, Elizabeth Keckley re-encountered the commodification of her childhood.

Through care and discipline, slaves' bodies were physically incorporated with their owners' standards of measure. Henry Clay Bruce nostalgically remembered his youth as an easy time when "slave children had nothing to do but eat, play, and grow, and physically speaking attain a good size and height." But, Bruce also remembered, the daily routine he enjoyed was charted along a different axis by an owner interested in his growth: "a tall, well-proportioned slave man or woman, in case of a sale, would always command the highest price paid." As John Brown remembered it, the daily incorporation of his youthful body with his enslavement was a matter of coercion as much as care. Brown's mistress "used to call us children up to the big house every morning and give us a dose of garlic and rue to keep us 'wholesome,' as she said and make us 'grow likely for the market.'" Having staked a right to her slaves that stretched into the fibers of their form, she would turn them out to run laps around a tree in the yard, lashing them to make them "nimbler," forcibly animating their bodies with the spirit she imagined buyers would desire.[5]

Brown's memory makes another thing clear: the process by which a child was made into a slave was often quite brutal. As an adolescent, Henry was adjudged "right awkward" and beaten by his mistress, who thought his arms too long and hands too aimless for work in her dining room. Ten-year-old Moses Grandy was flogged "naked with a severe whip" because he "could not learn his [master's] way of hilling corn." Thirteen-year-old Celestine was beaten until her back was marked and her clothes stained with blood because she could not find her way around the kitchen. Twelve-year-old Monday was whipped by his mistress because his lupus made his nose run on the dinner napkins.[6] Just as the bodies of slaveholding children were bent to the carefully choreographed performances of the master class—in their table manners, posture and carriage, gender-appropriate deportment, and so on—motion by disciplined motion, the bodies of slave children were forcibly shaped to their slavery.[7]

From an early age, enslaved children learned to view their own bodies through two different lenses, one belonging to their masters, the other belonging to themselves. As Henry Clay Bruce put it about a youthful trip to the woods that ended in a narrow escape from a

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