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LIFE INSIDE THE ANTEBELLUM SLAVE MARKET

WALTER JOHNSON

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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

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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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

charging boar: "It was a close call. But we kept that little fun mum, for if Jack Perkinson had learned of his narrow escape from the loss of two or three Negro boys worth five or six hundred dollars each, he would have given us a severe whipping."[8] Whether by care or coercion (or by their peculiar combination in the nuzzling violence that characterized slaveholding "paternalism"), enslaved children were taught to experience their bodies twice at once, to move through the world as both child and slave, person and property.

Just as the chattel principle was worked into the bodies of enslaved people, it was also present in their families and communities. As Thomas Johnson remembered it, one after another his childhood friends were "missed from the company." Hearing that the man who took them away was a "Georgia trader," Johnson and his friends would run and hide whenever they saw "a white man looking over the fence as we were playing." The threat of sale, Johnson later remembered, infused his friendships with fear.[9] Thomas Jones remembered that the trade was present in his most intimate relations from the time he was very young: "my dear parents . . . talked about our coming misery, and they lifted up their voices and wept aloud as they spoke of us being torn from them and sold off to the dreaded slave trader." The account Jones made of his later attachments was similarly interpolated with the dread of sale: "I had a constant dread that Mrs. Moore would be in want of money and sell my dear wife. We constantly dreaded a final separation. Our affection for each other was very strong and this made us always apprehensive of a cruel parting." Likewise Lewis Hayden: "Intelligent colored people of my circle of acquaintance as a general thing *felt no security whatever for their family ties.* Some, it is true, who belonged to rich families felt some security; but those of us who looked deeper and knew how many were not rich that seemed so, and saw how fast the money slipped away, were always miserable. The trader was all around, the slave pens at hand, and we did not know what time any of us might be in it."[10] Under the chattel principle, every advance into enslaved society—every reliance on another, every child, friend, or lover, every social relation—held within it the threat of its own dissolution.

Slaveholders used that threat to govern their slaves. As slaveholder Thomas Maskell proudly put it to a man who had sold him some family slaves: "I govern them the same way your late brother did, without the

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whip by stating to them that I should sell them if they do not conduct themselves as I wish."[11] No matter how benign Maskell thought his own rule, it is hard to imagine that his slaves were not living in terror of making a mistake. Henry Clay Bruce remembered the nominally nonviolent power of men like Maskell from the other side: "Slaves usually got scared when it became clear that Negro-Trader [John] White was in the community. The owners used White's name as a threat to scare the slaves when they had violated some rule." "If a man did anything out of the way he was in more danger of being sold than being whipped," George Johnson likewise remembered.[12] Like a disease that attacks the body through its own immune system, slaveholders used the enslaved families and communities that usually insulated slaves from racism and brutality as an instrument of coercion, to discipline their slaves.[13] Among slaveholders, this peculiar mixture of ostensible moderation and outright threat was called paternalism.

As well as threatening social death—the permanent disappearance of a person as a playmate, parent, child, friend, or lover—the slave trade was understood by slaves as threatening literal death. After years of answering questions at antislavery meetings, Lewis Clarke explained slaves' fear of the slave trade to an imagined interlocutor: "Why do slaves dread so bad to go to the South—to Mississippi or Louisiana? Because they know slaves are driven very hard there, and worked to death in a few years." Or as Jacob Stroyer put it, "Louisiana was considered by the slaves a place of slaughter, so those who were going there did not expect to see their friends again." The fear of being sold south, wrote the Reverend Josiah Henson, the man whose life was thought to be the basis for Harriet Beecher Stowe's fictional Uncle Tom, filled the slaves of the upper South with "perpetual dread."[14]

"Perpetual dread," "always apprehensive," "the trader was all around," "the pens at hand"—the terms in which ex-slaves remembered the trade collapse the distinction between the immediate and the distant. Fear of Louisiana was a constant in Virginia, future sale was always a present threat. For slaves, especially those in the exporting states of the upper South, time and space were bent around the ever-present threat of sale to a slave trader.[15] Hundreds of thousands of times in the history of the antebellum South was this sinuous description of the relation of time, space, and slavery ratified in experience. It is, however, only in contrast to the carefully delimited accounts of the trade offered

by their owners that the ideological importance of the slaves' version of the chattel principle can be fully understood.

SLAVEHOLDERS' STORIES

Among slaveholders, the slave market existed in a different place and time. Far from being ever-present in cities like New Orleans, the slave market was a quarantined space, legally bounded by high walls to "prevent them from being seen from the street" and banned from many neighborhoods throughout the antebellum period. The state of Louisiana outlawed the trade entirely during the period of panic that followed Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion, and the city of New Orleans (like cities across the South) taxed it at the same high rate as pawn shops, cock pits, and race tracks.[16] Like the business they conducted, slave traders were marginalized, through rhetoric more than regulation: "Southern Shylock," "Southern Yankee," and "Negro Jockey" they were called, the sorts of insults that marked them as figurative outcasts from slaveholding society. When Daniel Hundley sat down to write the description of slave traders that would be included in his proslavery account, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (1860), he described the slave traders as a caste apart and assumed that they would be readily identifiable to even the most casual observer. In his description, slave traders looked almost as different from other southern whites as slaves did. "The miserly Negro Trader," Hundley assured his readers, "is outwardly a coarse, ill-bred person, provincial in speech and manners, with a cross-looking phiz, a whiskey tinctured nose, cold hard-looking eyes, a dirty tobacco-stained mouth, and shabby dress." You knew them when you saw them.[17]

Hundley's description of the traders' business represents a summary statement of a half century of white southern efforts to riddle out the implications that this thriving trade in people had for their "domestic" institution. He began by noting that the slave trader "is not troubled evidently with conscience, for although he habitually separates parent from child, brother from sister, and husband from wife, he is yet one of the jolliest dogs alive." But, Hundley continued, the trader's "greatest wickedness" was not his "cruelty to the African." It was the dishonesty and the avarice with which he threatened to poison social relations among white people: "nearly nine tenths of the slaves he buys and sells

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are vicious ones sold for crimes or misdemeanors, or otherwise diseased ones sold because of their worthlessness as property. These he purchases for about one half what healthy and honest slaves would cost him; but he sells them as both honest and healthy." Slave traders, according to slaveholders like Hundley, were family separators in a land of organic social relations, sharp dealers in a society of "honorable men," merchants of disease and disorder in an otherwise healthy social body. In the figure of the slave trader were condensed the anxieties of slaveholding society in the age of capitalist transformation: paternalism overthrown by commodification, honor corrupted by interest, and dominance infected with disorder.[18]

By embodying the economy in people in the stigmatized figure of the trader, Hundley was doing what countless southern laws and slaveholding commonplaces attempted to do: maintain an artificial and ideological separation of "slavery" from "the market." Never mind that it was "ordinary" slaveholders who decided to sell all of those diseased and disorderly slaves to the traders in the first place, never mind that the majority of family-separating sales occurred at the behest of upper-South slaveholders rather than lower-South slave traders, never mind that antebellum slaveholders went to the pens to buy and sell these uprooted people by the thousands: for Hundley, the traders' contaminating presence served as a measure of general cleanliness, an easily isolated element of an otherwise sound system, acknowledged only to be explained away.[19] Isolating the slave market as a place and limiting their definition of slave trading to a full-time profession allowed "ordinary" slaveholders like Daniel Hundley to insulate themselves from responsibility for the family separations, sharp dealing, and uncertainty that characterized their "domestic" institution. Scapegoating the traders was a good way to defend the rest of slavery.

But just as their money seeped through the southern economy and their prepackaged fantasies suffused the dreams of slave buyers, the traders' practice could not be contained by the bricks and mortar that bounded the pens. The entire economy of the antebellum South was constructed upon the idea that the bodies of enslaved people had a measurable monetary value, whether they were ever actually sold or not. Slaves were regularly used as collateral in credit transactions; indeed, rather than giving an IOU when they borrowed money, many slaveholders simply wrote out a bill of sale for a slave who would

actually be transferred only if they failed to pay their debt. The value attached to unsold slaves was much more useful to antebellum businessmen than that attached to land, for slaves were portable and the slave traders promised ready cash. In antebellum East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, slaves accounted for eighty percent of the security offered in recorded mortgages. Similarly, slaves were used as collateral by purchasers of shares in Louisiana's investment banks. And slaves, even when they were not sold, were valued when estates were divided; coheirs could not be sure of their shares until the people owned by the deceased were translated into prices. Everyday all over the antebellum South, slaveholders' relations to one another—their promises, obligations, and settlements—were backed by the idea of a market in slaves, the idea that people had a value that could be abstracted from their bodies and cashed in when the occasion arose.[20]

More than that, the daily business of slaveholding was measured in the terms of a slave market that existed only in slaveholders' heads—a market that made the value of their slaves seem to dance before their eyes, jumping and shifting, even as, day after day, the slaves did the same work they always had, tilling fields, nursing children, waiting tables. Slave buyers tracked rhythms, cycles, and tendencies in "the market" as they tried to decide when and where to buy slaves. Likewise, they consulted agricultural manuals that included rising slave values among the attributes of a good crop. Louisiana planter William Welhan dutifully made a list of his slaves by age and value in 1856 and kept a running subtotal of their worth; in a document dated 1858 he broke that list down by age and sex and counted out the cash value he had in each of the market categories—$850 for males from 15 to 45 years, of whom he had twenty-nine, for example, totaled out to $24,650 in prime-age male property. Slaveholders like Welhan could track their fortunes in *Affleck's Planter's Annual Record*, which provided a convenient table by which slaves' annual increase in value could be tracked in the same set of tables as their daily cotton production, and a page at the back where the "planter" could fill in the value of his slave force, and calculate the "interest on the same at ten percent." Indeed, slaves' market value—"advantage, worth, quality"—was often cited as the best guarantee that their owners would treat them well; paternalism itself, it turns out, was sometimes best measured in cash.[21]

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dense as to make the boundary between them indistinguishable; though bounded in place, in practice the slave market suffused the antebellum South. Slave traders held collateral on much of the economy and ideology of the slaveholding South: commercial instruments, daily business practice, common figures of speech, all of these depended on the slave market to make them make sense. References to the cash value of slaves signaled more than a simple awareness that any slave could be sold in the market: they were a central way of underwriting, understanding, and justifying antebellum social relations. In the slave pens the traders bought and sold the people whose notional value underwrote much of the business done in the slaveholding economy.

What "ordinary" slaveholders like Hundley believed distinguished them from slave traders, however, was that they could usually come up with a noncommercial reason for selling a slave. That is not to say that they were not capricious or greedy, for they often were. It is rather to say that "ordinary" slaveholders generally supplied public reckonings of what they did, reasoned explanations—accidents, opportunities, practicalities, necessities—that made clear why at one moment they decided to sell a slave whom they would otherwise have wanted to keep. The accounts slaveholders gave of their actions emphasized the specific events that led to an individual sale over the everpresence of the market in slaves and the inexorability of the chattel principle—they were circumstantial rather than structural. And they traced an imaginary line of self-justification between "slavery," where slaves were sold only by happenstance, and the "market," where every slave was always for sale.

There were probably almost as many reasons given to justify the selling of slaves in the slaveholding South as there were slaves sold. Josiah Henson, like many others, was sold because his master died and the estate needed to be divided equally among the heirs. Two men known by Isaac Williams were sold because they had run away after receiving a brutal beating; likewise, one of the men with whom Christopher Nichols had run away was sold out of the jail where he was taken upon his capture. Hunter was sold because he did not work hard enough for his owner, and John Brown was sold because his master was building a new house and found himself in need of some ready cash to pay for the work. William was sold to pay for the support of his owner's three illegitimate children. Moses Grandy was sold because his master defaulted upon a mortgage that Grandy had not even known existed.

Lucy Delany was sold because her mistress thought she was getting too proud and putting on "white airs"; Celestine was sold by her elderly mistress because the woman's son liked "to play and fool about her." J. W. C. Pennington's mother was sold because she had been raped by her master's son and her mistress found out about it. Henry Crawthorn was sold because his master was a "sporting character" and could not pay his bills. Mrs. Harry Brant was gambled away to a slave trader aboard a steamboat. A man known by Frederick Douglass was sold because he was tricked by his owner into saying that he was not happy with his treatment.[22] The list could go on and on: slaveholders always had some reason for selling a slave—an estate to divide, a debt to pay, a transgression to punish, a threat to abate. What they rarely had when they sold a slave, it seems from the accounts they gave of themselves, was any direct responsibility for their own actions.

Take Maryland slaveholder T. D. Jones's effort to explain why he had sold Eliza, for example. The occasion for his explanation was a letter from Eliza in which she asked that the slaveholder sell her daughter Janine to Louisiana so that mother and daughter could be closer to one another. While Eliza's daughter was not allowed to respond to her mother's letter, Jones reported that he had told her of it and "she seemed glad to hear from you & her countenance lighted up with smile at the names of Aunt Liza and Tillie Ann (as she calls you and her sister.) But she says she does not want to go away from her master." Jones justified his refusal to reunite Eliza's family with a paternalist homily: the bond between master and slave was so strong that not even the love of a (slave) mother for her child could justify its dissolution. And Jones went on to explain his attachment to Eliza's daughter by comparing the little girl to her mother: "I would be reluctant to part with her. She is petted as you used to be. She is a watchful little spy as you used to be; she has a good disposition, is neither cross, nor mischievous: she is useful for her services in the house, for going on errands, and for nursing & I should miss her very much." Still, Jones's description of the little girl to whom he was so attached sounds a lot like an advertisement directed at a potential buyer in the lower South—perhaps to the flagrantly wealthy Butler family of Louisiana who now owned Eliza and through whom she corresponded with Jones—and he promised to consider Eliza's request.

Jones's comparison of mother and daughter quickly led him into an exculpating account of why he had sold Eliza in the first place. He must

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