The Valuation and Commodification
of Slave Women in the New Orleans Market

Elizabeth Ann Brown

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Finding the Women in Slavery

This project aims to consider the modes by which the Atlantic slave trade necessarily and intentionally reduced enslaved women “to the simplicity of a pure form: a person with a price.”¹ Using the moment of slave sale as an insight into the experience of the oppressor and the oppressed alike, I reconstruct the oft-neglected and painfully unique experience of enslaved women in the market and on the auction block in the years surrounding the abolition of the Atlantic trade. In peeling away the layers of this economic transaction, I unravel the ways in which perceptions of women—as well as the prices they garnered in the market—changed in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Through each transaction, key actors—trader, planter and financier—inscribed enslaved women with their own conceptions of race, gender, morality, and self by placing a price on a woman’s humanity. Through this analysis of women specifically, I aim to understand the lives of African and African American women during the last decade of the legalized trade and the early decades of the western expansion of plantation agriculture. In doing so, this project also remarries the study of slavery with its economic and political centrality. By linking the economic and social realities of the trade, I highlight the ways in which the financial system further inscribed the subjection of enslaved women, and (somewhat ironically) the ways in which enslaved women affected and supported this system. In other words, women were critical determinants of the shape, scope and experience of the slave trade due to their rising prominence as commodities. Within this model, women experienced the slave trade differently than men and held different ties to its economic underpinnings as a result of the rising commodification of femininity, domesticity, and motherhood.

This study places women at the forefront and focuses upon the ways in which women

experienced slavery in a unique and particularly atrocious fashion. Women were relegated to the lowest social position as their subordination occurred not only along racial lines, but also along gendered lines. This study aims to consider the ways in which this double subjection was manifested within the slave market. As one historian argued, enslaved women were “subordinate to men, both slave and free, and thus dominated by them.”

Within this sphere, these women were further reduced by the sexualization and objectification inherent to the male “gaze—that is, the power exercised in looking that opens the captive body to the lewd desires and pecuniary interests of would-be owners.” In short, “slave women in the South’s entrepôts, like those on the plantations, were exploited not only by race but also by gender.”

As the end of the legal Atlantic trade neared, planters grew anxious about the perpetuation of their labor force, shifting the perception of female capacity and directly increasing the perceived value of enslaved women. Throughout the eighteenth century, women were viewed as less valuable commodities due to their perceived physical inferiority and the threat of the time consuming (and thus inherently economically detrimental) process of child rearing. This sexual division of labor resulted in a lesser demand for women within the marketplace and led to a stark sex ratio within the slave population, with men outnumbering women roughly 2:1. On the plantation, women were often relegated to the traditionally more feminine labors of housework, childcare and cooking as they were considered less productive

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4 Morton, Discovering the women in slavery, 179-180.
5 Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, “Calculations.” Databases for the Study of Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1719 – 1820 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000) <http://www.ibiblio.org/laslave/calculations.php>. In slave societies that did not abolish the trans-Atlantic trade in 1808 (like Brazil), the ratio discrepancy between men and women was greater and did not shift in this era. For more information, please see Herbert S. Klein and Ben Vinson, African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
field hands than their male counterparts. As planters anticipated and prepared for the end of slave importation, they came to value not just productive but reproductive capacity, transforming women’s subjection, commodification and valuation; women were seen now as potential mothers whose offspring, like themselves, would add to the riches of their masters. The economic valuation of femininity and reproduction meant that women were also physically subjected to the inspection and violation of traders and prospective owners within the market.

The price and demand for slaves within the New Orleans markets increased as slaveholders strived to perpetuate chattel slavery itself within the South, but the value of a slave was not defined by demand and abstract market forces alone. Rather, it was the result of a complex multi-directional and nuanced process carried out by the varied actors who participated in the market—trader, planter and especially slave. On the surface, the slave trade operated much like the trade in commodities or livestock, as enslaved bodies were assigned values predicated upon their physical attributes and capacity. However, unlike the commodities or livestock market, the slave trade dealt in human bodies and must therefore be considered in socio-historical terms, not simply economic. The persistent economic valuation of the enslaved body purposefully commodified the slave, in a sense abstracting her humanity. But this process was always incomplete, precisely because value was placed increasingly on reproductive capacity and on the value of human characteristics. In addition, each woman—examined, valued, and sold—sought to counter the process, shaping her sense of self, exercising personal agency within the market and engaging both sellers and buyers at the point of sale and after. My analysis of this process will consider these competing understandings of value in New Orleans (the largest trading site in North America) by using the moment of sale as the temporal and spatial

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framework to consider the interplay between race, gender, and identity.\(^7\)

This project explores the economic motivations of the slave trade with the notion that slavery—and in particular the slave trade—intentionally and necessarily abstracted the humanity of slaves and put humanity up for sale as fungible, easily traded commodities. Because of its violent and inhumane nature, we now look back on slavery and the slave trade and recognize that it is “‘shocking to humanity, cruel, wicked, and diabolical.’”\(^8\) Such characteristics are easily deciphered from our modern-day vantage point, but early nineteenth-century perspectives on slavery were more convoluted and complex; slavery was bound together with the moral and political economy of the early modern world, and could not be brushed past with a casual wringing of hands. Without a doubt, the enslavement of African bodies reflected an underlying racialism that permeated Euro-American society: a racialism that was increasingly problematic, as the spread of the institution during the early national era was not met without protest. Many Americans knew that the institution betrayed the primary principles enshrined within the Declaration of Independence—principles that they had only recently fought for during the Revolution. But the trade flourished, even as delegates to the Constitutional Convention debated its demise, because slavery was lucrative and bound to the rise of American enterprise.\(^9\) The trade also continued because Americans continued to view slaves as inferior and distinct from the white, masculine image of the nation. In this sense, “[t]he otherness of the slaves made it easier to employ the violence and cruelty necessary for total control.”\(^10\) This totalitarian control of the human body and its intimate relation to the economic prosperity of the early nation sat uneasily with the increasing sentiment of abolitionistism. The latter would be at the heart of the

\(^7\) Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 2.


\(^10\) Ibid.
trans-Atlantic slave trade’s eventual demise, but the pressure to end the trade could not abate the power of racial supremacist thinking and economic exigencies. As I’ll argue below, somewhat ironically, the end of the trade would transform the trade itself, but not in the way early abolitionists imagined; instead, their efforts increased and transformed, rather than diminished, the desire for enslaved female bodies amongst southern planters. As such, this project focuses on the decades surrounding the end of the international trade because women came to the forefront of slaver and trader interests in part due to a rising pressure to create a self-perpetuating slave population throughout slave country.

Following 1808, the domestic trade fueled the demand for new labor and largely transported coffles of slaves from more northern slave states to the western-most slave states. The slave market, of course, provided aspiring planters with a source of new labor and represented a stable guarantee of future profits for planters throughout Louisiana and the Lower Mississippi Valley. Slaves supplied planters with productive and, as I’ll demonstrate, reproductive labor, but they also were the most stable investment aspiring planters could make in this era. Slave prices rarely diminished, and in an era when liquid capital was scarce, slaves were the ideal guarantee for much needed loans. All aspects of the institution were wildly profitable and consequently the persistent, ever-increasing demand for imported bodies at the turn of the century made slave trading exceptionally lucrative to trading firms and individuals, as well as the financial institutions that backed them. The moment of sale, however, constituted more than simply an exchange of funds between buyer and seller. When a buyer gave money to a seller, the transaction became part of social, cultural, and moral landscape of the American South: all of which became imprinted on the bodies of the enslaved. The slave body was a commodity, but it was also a vessel within which understandings of race, gender, family and

society were poured. In this sense, the slave market and the physical exchange of bodies (through negotiation and auction) stand as the ultimate reflection of the subjection, objectification and brutality of slavery (and the society and nation built around the institution) as it reduced a human body to a monetary valuation of his or her physical attributes and future outputs. The process of auction—in which prices were hotly contested publicly—reflected the ways in which a human life could be simplified to a dollar amount and thus “exposed the very essence of human bondage.”

These recorded prices represent “the building blocks used to evaluate the economics of slavery,” but they also reveal much more than this, for as value increased and altered, it bore more than simply economic aspirations. The purchase of a slave (as social and cultural capital) affirmed the white masculinity of the buyer as he asserted his own superiority and ownership over human bodies. This ownership was intended to last for life and guaranteed a man’s place in society through the subjection of others. Thus, the promise of economic returns was coupled with the social and cultural implications of buying and selling slaves.

This rings particularly true in the study of New Orleans: a city defined by competing international powers and a complex national heritage. Prior to 1803, Louisiana was under imperial control (by the Spanish and French consecutively) and became an enormously lucrative trading site of agriculture, industry, foreign trade, and the slave trade upon entrance into the United States. As 1808 neared, New Orleans was a city on the rise, reaching for financial and commercial prominence within an increasingly transnational economy. Following the acquisition of the Louisiana territory under the Louisiana Purchase, a massive influx of sugar and cotton

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growers, as well as other settlers rapidly increased the city’s economic viability and guaranteed the slave trade’s centrality to the city’s future. New Orleans would subsequently become the largest site of the slave trade throughout the nineteenth century: a rise that was in part the consequence of the federal government’s successful efforts to end the Atlantic slave trade. Rather than curtailing New Orleans’ traffic in bound humanity, the city’s slave market would continue to rise as the cotton empire and the domestic slave trade flourished.

This narrow study of the slave trade draws upon centuries of evidence, both primary and secondary. From slave manifests and narratives to contemporary scholarly literature, this project engages a rich base of historical information. Many records of the slave trade, in addition to the statistical information, stem from the Gwendolyn Midlo Hall’s Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1719-1820 database and the extensive data collection of Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman. The New Orleans Slave Sample, created under Fogel and Engerman, draws upon the New Orleans Notarial Archives and is considered to be reliable and accurate because, as noted by the investigators, “these records [did not] arise under circumstances or for purposes that were likely to make respondents give false information regarding age, sex, or place of origin of slaves. The records were created by a law requiring the registration of all slave sales in order to give legal force to an owner’s claim to title.

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16 Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, Time on the Cross vol. 1, 52; Many historians (most notably Herbert Gutman) have critiqued and rejected several of the conclusions put forth in Fogel and Engerman’s Time on the Cross by arguing that the historians depended upon an unrepresentative plantation and that the authors were careless in the calculations published. Due to the contested nature of their findings, I depend solely on their findings for primary source material, information on the history of slavery, and analytical responses to slavery as a whole. For more information on the historiographical rejection of the work, please see Herbert Gutman,
In bridging the gap between social and economic histories, this project draws upon the works of scholars like Edward Baptist, Adam Rothman, Joshua Rothman, Seth Rockman and Sven Beckert. This project also deviates from many economic historians and aligns itself with the work of Baptist and Rockman in that it not only remarries the discourse of economic and social history, but also fundamentally argues that the development of American capitalism depended on its use of unfree labor. Slavery—as a source of labor, credit, and social stability—fueled the rise of cotton, westward expansion, and the United States’ rise to global commercial prominence in the early 19th century. Echoing the framework of Jeffrey Young Robert’s Domesticating Slavery: The Master Class in Georgia, this project operates on the basis that the capitalistic market rested on the backs of unfree laborers and served as a venue in which ideas of mastery, ownership and capitalism were illustrated and inscribed.

For broad historical information and the history of the New Orleans trade, this work draws heavily upon the work of Walter Johnson, Ned Sublette, Ira Berlin and Eugene Genovese. In recent years, the broad study of slavery and the slave trade has come to recognize


the importance of women within this narrative. As noted by John Thornton, “the slave trade had a significant impact on the role and life of women, and researchers are increasingly pointing out that the study of women, both as slaves and as free people in areas where slaving occurred, is a necessary corollary to the study of the slave trade as a whole.”

The validity and importance of the female experience represents the central drive of this project, in addition to the process by which the American economic system (and its key players) necessarily and intentionally reduced the human condition of slaves to a fungible commodity and price. In terms of socio-political analysis, the brutal implications of the trade have been studied and documented extensively by Jacqueline Jones, Amy Dru Stanley, Saidiya Hartman and Elaine Scarry. While recent historiography and specifically the work of Stephanie Smallwood, Sharon Harley, Jennifer Morgan and Stephanie Camp also address the immense importance of the female narrative within the greater scope of the slave trade, this project largely differs from many major contemporary analyses in its discussion of slave agency.

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While Stephanie Camp and many other feminist scholars focus upon the ways in which resistance, independence and rebellion define the experience of slavery, this project aims to address the ways in which slave women navigated self-making and the construction of identity within the physical and psychological confines of slavery. I analyze the participation of women within the slave market through a more dynamic lens by considering the slave trade as a process predicated on its dehumanizing qualities and “crushing objecthood:” not necessarily upon narratives of resistance, but upon the construction of self within the constraints of slavery.\textsuperscript{23} In this sense, the work echoes the work of Walter Johnson’s recent article “On Agency,” in which he reconsiders the focus on slave agency and contends that the focus on agency “overcodes the […] complex discussions of human subjectivity and political organization and presses them into the background of a persistently mis-posed question: African-American slaves: agents of their own destiny or not?\textsuperscript{24} This project undoubtedly agrees that enslaved women exercised agency, but does so by considering the ways in which women constructed their own political and social allegiances within (and not in spite of) the parameters of chattel slavery. Throughout the project, women occupy the second portion of each chapter because it is the subjection and brutality of traders and planters that defined the experience of slave women. By synthesizing an account of the female experience through firsthand records and modern theory, I aim to complicate the dialogue of the commodification of women.

The project is divided into three sections. First, I consider the history of the slave trade in New Orleans, specifically before and after the 1807 Slave Trade Act and its implementation in


\textsuperscript{23} Frantz Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks} (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 189.

1808. From the analysis of the slave trade as a whole to the specifics of the transactional nature of the New Orleans slave market in the years surrounding to the abolition of trans-Atlantic slave trade, the slave trade was fundamentally linked to the economic development of the United States and depended upon the commodification and dehumanization of slaves. The following chapters analyze the prominent actors within this market and their interactions with slave bodies. By considering market dynamics, the ever-changing rubric of slave pricing and interactions in the marketplace, these chapters address the way in which sellers and buyers inscribed their own social, political and cultural concepts onto the bodies of slaves. While the transactional nature of the New Orleans slave market can be viewed as solely an economically motivated interaction, the underlying humanity of the commodity at hand alters the study from a purely economic consideration to a deeply telling and intimate perspective on Southern culture, the relationship between slave and oppressor, and the ties between economy and society. The second chapter addresses the driving economic incentive for traders within the slave market, the financial backing for these traders and the transitory involvement of traders in the transfer of slaves from merchant to planter. The third and final chapter of this project focuses upon the other half of the market transaction: the planter. In considering the inspection, negotiation and purchase of slaves, it becomes evident that the narrative of slave subjection by planters began in the market. The market served as not only the beginning of the brutality and objectification of female slaves, but also stands as a microcosm for slavery in its entirety. Within these latter chapters, the importance of the female narrative becomes evident as the aforementioned double subjection manifested itself in physical violation, violence and psychological domination. By specifically analyzing women as actors within these economic transactions, I wish to question ideologies of value and the interplay between race, gender, and identity within the antebellum New Orleans slave market.
Chapter One:  
An Introduction to the Study of the New Orleans Slave Market

The history of the Atlantic—fraught with tensions of race, class, and exploitation—culminated in a multinational, multidirectional trade in human bodies. The Atlantic slave trade served Western Europe’s dreams of colonizing the Americas as a generator of labor that took advantage of a pre-existing African slave trade and, in turn, facilitated colonial conquest. Within a world divvied up by Western imperial powers, the slave trade connected nations and kingdoms to each other, to their territories, and to every person who fell prey to the trade. Within the complex narrative of this wretched commerce, local slave markets represented the loci through which enslaved bodies passed during their brutal passage from capture in Africa to plantation life in the Americas and throughout the expanding colonial dominion.

In its confinement, objectification and violence, the marketplace stood as an emblem of the greater narrative of slavery. The market also served as the sole venue in which oppressive actors (merchants, traders, planters and financiers) coalesced under the veil of commerce; within the structure of a brokered sale of human bodies, buyers and sellers inscribed their own ideas of family, race and gender upon the bodies of the enslaved. From our modern perspective, the moral qualms against slavery cast the trade (rightfully) in a shadow of inhumanity and unspeakable brutality while brushing aside, if not outright denying, the centrality of the trade to our contemporary social, political and economic world. The very foundations of American capitalism are inextricably tied to the early iterations of the Atlantic trade and, as noted by historian Edward Baptist, the slaveowner’s “whip was also driving the creation of a new, more complex, more dynamic world economy.”

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1 Edward Baptist, “Toxic Debt, Liar Loans, Collateralized and Securitized Human Beings and the Panic of 1837,” in Capitalism Takes Command: the Social Transformation of Nineteenth-
and nineteenth centuries rested upon the backs of unfree laborers. Undoubtedly, the slave trade represents one of the most appalling examples of human brutality, of distorted morality and of outright racism in modern history. These aspects, however, mask the fundamentally economic purpose that the slave trade and slavery itself served within colonial expansion and imperial dominion. Furthermore, slavery was intimately bound up with other lucrative industries and served a pivotal role the construction of the modern American capitalist system as “[s]lavery, staple agriculture and consumer credit were tightly bound together.”\(^2\) Slavery’s economic relevance connected Northern financial institutions to Southern agriculture and, in turn, represented a practice “[m]uch closer to the core of the global financial system… than we might initially suspect.”\(^3\) From the broadest analysis of the Atlantic slave trade to narrowest example of a single transaction, the trade was inextricably linked to the economic motivations of nations, merchants, planters and financiers.

I. The Atlantic Trade:

In recent years, historians have aimed to unpack the catalyst of what Kenneth Pomeranz refers to as the “Great Divergence:” the early nineteenth-century period in which Western Europe and the United States experienced rapid economic development and, consequently, the rise of a capitalist economic model.\(^4\) While some consider the slave trade “an unfortunate detour on the nation's march to modernity,” it was actually a key economic driver in this rapid

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development of the nineteenth century. For Europe, the slave trade and slavery’s role in agriculture throughout their imperial holdings in the Caribbean and North America spurred massive economic growth while the United States depended on the trade as a labor source—as well as a valuable source of credit and capital—within the rapidly expanding territory.

However, this nineteenth-century dependence on the lucrative institution of slavery as an economic driver was by no means novel as the mercantilist model of the eighteenth century equally relied upon slavery and the slave trade. As noted by James Rawley, Europe’s entrance and subsequent dependence upon the trade “enjoyed an ideological underpinning in the theory of mercantilism” and as such, aimed to “exploit colonial markets and strengthen royal dominance.”

Mercantilism directly enhanced the power of the crown—be it Spanish, British, Dutch, Portuguese or French—and played a pivotal role in opening much of the globe to commerce. Under the mercantilist model, imperial power came from the accumulation of land, raw materials, and wealth; as per Thomas Hobbes, “[w]ealth is power and power is wealth,” while another mercantilist stated that “[f]oreign trade produces riches, riches power, power preserves our trade and religion.” Slavery played into a strict, highly protectionist economic system of trade that defined early imperial territories and demanded a balance of payments within a zero-sum philosophy. Importantly, slavery enhanced the political and economic power of the growing empires through the eighteenth century. Under this doctrine, governments protected their own

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7 Ibid.
8 As quoted within Freiden, *Global Capitalism*, 2; as quoted within Jacob Viner, “Power Versus Plenty as Objectives of Foreign Policy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *World Politics* 1 (1948), 15.
interests by establishing onerous trade barriers and utilized their colonies not only as a method of political competition, but also as a wealth of resources. Within these territories, slaves provided a vital source of labor and the outright trade in enslaved bodies became a lucrative one. As the practice of indentured servitude fell by the wayside, colonists and empires came to rely more heavily on slaves, increasing their dependence on a reliable and protected Atlantic slave trade. In the context of mercantile trade and plantation agriculture, imperial leadership, colonial merchants and the growing planter class treated black men and women as commodities: transferable, transportable and ultimately replaceable objects that they could define through monetary abstractions. Reliant upon the capacity to abstract humanity into a price tag, the trade in human bodies (between European imperial powers, African traders, and colonists in the New World) became a rapidly growing, profitable task from the sixteenth century onward.

European traders—generally from the Netherlands, Spain, France, Portugal and Great Britain—exploited coastal Africa as a source of enslaved bodies. These bodies were then transported to Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the New World and other colonial dominions like the British West Indies and colonial North America. This transport of bodies on massive slave ships treated slaves as commodities whose value depended only upon their survival. Torn from their homes, forced into bondage, and treated as sub-human beings, African slaves were brought to the Americas by merchants; funded by trading companies, a merchant’s profits depended only upon the survivorship of their cargo. Thus, the conditions aboard slave ships were truly the bare minimum. Enslaved bodies “were shackled together in coffles, packed into dank ‘factory’ dungeons, squeezed together between the decks of stinking ships, separated often from their kinsmen, tribesmen, or even speakers of the same language, left bewildered about their present and their future, stripped of all prerogatives of status or rank… and homogenized by a
dehumanizing system that viewed them as faceless and largely interchangeable.”⁹ As noted by Adam Rothman, national and regional differentiations were lost as traders “lumped all slaves together under the racist category ‘Negro.’”¹⁰ The perceived homogeneity added to the ways in which slaves were stripped of their identities by the slave trade by extricating the body from senses of personal belonging and physical security. As the Atlantic slave trade violently removed bodies from their homes and nations, the trade forced men, women and children into a rapid succession of social and economic gateways from capture through the Middle Passage to the market and finally to plantation life, revealing the trade as “a process of social transformation that involves a succession of phases and changes in status” that fundamentally stripped bodies of kin, social belonging and individualized, recognizable identities.¹¹ These bodies were equated to livestock and were treated as such by the merchants and crew.¹²

Through ledgers, crew narratives and commercial documents, a troubling and telling practice becomes evident. By emphasizing economic and commercial accounting terms (‘volumes,’ ‘distributions,’ ‘rates,’ and so on), simple transactional documents reflect the ways in which traders and merchants reduced humans to a simple price, quota or statistic. These actors deliberately aimed to “obscure the humanity of the people they describe.”¹³ In doing so, the oppressive actors stressed the fundamentally economic motivations underlying the slave trade. However, as we will come to see, the trade in human bodies cannot simply be viewed through

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¹³ Brown, Reaper’s Garden, 28.
lines on ledgers; the economic reality forged out of black bodies was vastly overshadowed by the humanity of the people it sought to reduce. Though the economic incentive behind slavery perpetuated the trade into the nineteenth century, the Atlantic slave trade held specific implications for traders, planters, financial institutions, and, most importantly, for slaves within the American South.

II. American Slavery:

Despite the prevalence of the slave trade within the European colonies, the Atlantic slave trade was two centuries old before it found a lucrative market within North America. Slaves were brought to early American colonies throughout the seventeenth century, but the trade did not boom until the 1730s, specifically in the tobacco producing regions of the South. Due to this delayed entry into these colonies, American international traffic in slaves was “telescoped in a short span of time, well under a century” from roughly the 1730s to the conclusion of the Atlantic trade in 1808.\(^{14}\) Though the trade became truly financially relevant in the 1730s, its impact on the American economy peaked at the turn of the nineteenth century. At this juncture, the American market represented roughly one sixth of the global trade in enslaved bodies.\(^{15}\) The so-called revolutionary generation protected slavery as an institution. Despite the rhetoric of Thomas Jefferson (a well known and well-established slaveholder)—who called the slave trade a form of “piratical warfare”—this generation not only maintained the import of slaves, but also increased the scale of the trade.\(^{16}\) The revolutionary generation had little trouble reconciling the notion that all men are created equal with the fact that America’s economic prosperity rested heavily on the backs of unfree laborers. The doctrinaire terminology of the Declaration of

\(^{14}\) Rawley and Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 359.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.

\(^{16}\) Rawley and Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 274.
Independence willingly excluded men without land, all black individuals, and all women. However, slavery remained a deeply controversial issue within the United States and abroad throughout the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Slavery represented a moral and profoundly political issue as it threatened the North-South balance of power within the rapidly expanding nation. Though American colonies and states took an early lead in legislating against the importation of slaves, many leaders and industries remained staunchly pro-slavery. In order to compromise, the American Constitution (1788) granted two prominent compromises to assuage the American populace.

Under the United States Constitution, two prominent compromises were enacted. First, the 3/5 Compromise reaffirmed the inferior status of blacks. Second, the Constitution put forth the new government’s ability to determine the future of the international slave trade, but guaranteed exactly twenty years of continuation. Despite the importance of the trade for both southern planters and northern merchants and financiers, it was assumed that the trade would not last beyond January 1, 1808. Coupled with a rising international trend toward abolitionism led by British pressures to end the trade, this looming cessation of the trade witnessed a massive increase in the importation of slaves. During this twenty-year period, slavery increased tenfold. The threat of abolition pressured slaveowners and planters—whose insatiable appetite for profit was an equal match to the moral fervor of the abolitionists—to create a larger and eventually self-perpetuating slave population.

Additionally, the shifting agricultural landscape of the expanding nation demanded a greater need for slave labor. Though tobacco facilitated economic and agricultural development throughout much of the American South, other crops like indigo and rice, as well as pitch, lumber, tar and livestock, defined American agriculture until the late eighteenth century. At this

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juncture, distinct agricultural transitions occurred that had particularly strong consequences for
the Deep South and specifically Louisiana: a Spanish colony. Under Spanish governance, Lower
Louisiana served as a hub of Spanish colonial power within the Americas and served as Spain’s
chief entrepôt for trade with North America. Under Spanish dominion, the population of Lower
Louisiana tripled from 1765 to 1785.18 During this era, indigo, fur, tobacco and lumber
represented the principle exports of Louisiana. Still, Louisiana was marginal to much of the
Spanish economy as the Spanish government focused on their lucrative, resource-rich territorial
holdings in South America. By the late 1780s, this pattern shifted as Louisiana’s exports reached
roughly $1.5 million annually—a massive increase from 20 years prior as a result of new trade
policies.19 Spain began importing large sums of tobacco from Louisiana to Mexico, creating a
massive boom in production and consumption. Though this subsidized growth was short-lived
and its demise halted Louisiana’s tobacco production in the 1800s, this boom had a secondary
consequence for Louisiana: Spain liberalized trade between Louisiana and the French West
Indies just as the French colonies were near collapse. These new policies—in addition to
increased trade liberalization and subsidized tobacco growth—hastened the expansion of the
slave trade.

Slave labor fueled the export of vital crops from Louisiana and these crops facilitated
economic prosperity for the imperial powers of Europe. Throughout the seventeenth and
eighteenth centuries, tobacco represented the most valuable export from Spanish and British
holdings in North America. This export facilitated a balance of payments between the colonies
and their protective and protectionist governing nations as much of the crop was exported to
continental Europe. Due to the rampant consumption of tobacco within Europe and the valuable
trade that American agriculture provided, French interest in the British share of the trade served

18 Rothman, Slave Country, 74.
19 Rawley and Behrendt, The Transatlantic Slave Trade, 359.
as a vital incentive for the French support of the American Revolution, resulting in concepts of “King Tobacco Diplomacy.”

Though tobacco reigned supreme until the late eighteenth century, a gradual shift occurred, specifically in the more Southern states, toward a rise and subsequent expansion of the cotton agriculture, resulting in a commodity-driven focus on the crop and a shift toward the supremacy of cotton. Throughout the 1790s and well into the next century, cotton edged westward, replacing tobacco as America’s greatest cash crop. This vast expansion of cotton agriculture occurred for three distinct reasons. First, the invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney in 1791 exponentially increased the speed and scale of cotton production. Second, the acquisition of Louisiana (1803), westward expansion and Indian removal throughout the early nineteenth century opened new territories to the crop. Finally, the rapid growth of the textile industry (first in Great Britain and then the American northeast) cultivated an insatiable demand for the fiber. The expansion of cotton, its rising commodity power, and, in turn, the expansion of slavery rested upon Jeffersonian ideals of creating a transcontinental American empire defined by “yeoman’s republicanism” and removal from the “depravity of moral dependence and corruption” tied to European industry.

As a result, the ideologies that fueled westward expansion very much linked ideals of agrarian freedom, slavery and an imperial drive westward. This linkage was echoed by W.E.B. DuBois’s *John Brown* as “[t]he slavery of the new Cotton Kingdom in the nineteenth century must either die or conquer a nation—it could not hesitate or pause.” The efficacy and power of his words cannot be overstated as cotton came to define not only the Southern agricultural

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20 Rawley and Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 359.
landscape, but also the imminent push of the nation’s boundaries and the rise of the United States in the increasingly transnational global economy. Of course, the popular romanticism of the West rested on the backs of unfree laborers. Slave labor came to represent the keystone of American commercial successes in the expanding South, the redefined West, and the modernizing North. As noted by Edward Baptist, “[e]nslaved people and the land where they were forced to sow, weed, and pick cotton augmented the capacity of the western world’s new industrial sector, with very little direct cost in terms of wages, foregone agricultural production, or environmental pressure in the commercial core.” Distant industry and the global demand for inexpensive textiles directly led to the increased importation of slaves, which, in turn, spurred the massive economic development that heralded modern capitalism. This shift toward cotton was coupled with the introduction of another lucrative crop: sugar.

The Haitian Revolution ended the French colonial control of not only St. Domingue, but also the French monopoly on sugar production. The events of St. Domingue—the single largest slave revolt in history—represented not only a growing call for freedom for enslaved masses, but also embodied of the greatest fears of planters and traders. The social and political ramifications for France and her colonies were tremendous. St. Domingue represents the single most successful slave rebellion in the history of the Atlantic world, culminating in the end of slavery in the colony and the birth of the Haitian republic. The pervasive nature and outright success of the revolution stood as a threat to slave populations across the globe while planters throughout the Americas witnessed their greatest fears actualized. Regardless of this nascent fear of revolt, the rebellion also benefited the Southern agricultural economy.

St. Domingue’s grasp on sugar production collapsed following 1791, opening the lucrative commodity to planters throughout the American South. In regions that already grew sugar, production increased and, for Louisiana, this void created an agricultural alternative to the struggling tobacco and indigo industries. As noted by a Louisiana planter in 1795, planters “found[ed] all their hopes on sugar cane.” The mass exodus of experienced planters—like New Orleans’ first mayor, Etienne de Boré—from St. Domingue also facilitated the rise of sugar production within the United States. As a result of de Boré’s successful experiments with sugar cultivation, the crop flourished and attracted new settlers to Lower Louisiana. Thus, in the 1790s, a new era of agriculture power arose as Spanish Louisiana “inherit[ed] the capital-intensive, slave-hungry ways of its French Creole sibling.”

Sugar cultivation brought forth a new approach to agriculture and therefore a new approach to slavery. Louisiana inherited a lucrative agricultural heritage associated with St. Domingue that was defined by its high fixed capital processes and its rapid consumption of slaves. In general, bodies—both male and female—were valued for their strength and capacity to work within such grueling conditions where disease and exhaustion quickly consumed laborers. Death was presumed and the survival expectancy of a slave on a sugar plantation rarely surpassed ten years of labor. Sugar never represented the majority crop within Louisiana, but its rapid rise during the 1790s, as well as its excessively high demand for expendable labor, led to a massive increase in the demand for slaves.

25 Rothman, Slave Country, 75.
27 Rothman, Slave Country, 75.
Lower Louisiana emerged as a distinct agricultural landscape as the rise of sugar was coupled with the quickly expanding dominion of cotton. Within Louisiana, slaves were the commercial commodity upon which the local economy’s success depended. And because of the centrality of the slave trade, the subordination of African bodies became a defining characteristic of New Orleans economically and culturally. When Spain ceded the territory to Napoleon, who subsequently sold it to the United States under the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, “the slave trade to Louisiana was thriving.”\(^{30}\) Despite, or perhaps because of the imminent abolition of the slave trade, the port city came to represent the single largest locus of the slave trade within the United States, surpassing the former leaders of the Old South within the first decade of the nineteenth century. However, the United States abolished the Atlantic slave trade on the first constitutionally acceptable date, January 1, 1808. This, by no means, ended the institution of slavery in the United States or the domestic slave trade in New Orleans.\(^{31}\)

Through this broad study of the history of the slave trade in the American South, it becomes evident that a transition occurred in the era between American Independence and the conclusion of the Atlantic slave trade. The massive increase in the number of slaves imported from Africa, in addition to shifting agricultural endeavors throughout the American South, brought the newly acquired territory to prominence as the single largest port of trade in slaves within the United States. Within the years prior to the conclusion of the trade, the sheer scale and demand for international commerce reflected the nation’s (and specifically Louisiana’s) commitment to the continuation of slavery in the South. By the time Louisiana became the eighteenth state in 1812, the port of New Orleans represented a flourishing city that, similar to much of Deep South, was fundamentally defined by slavery.

\(^{30}\) Rothman, *Slave Country*, 84.

III. The Market:

The slave market, as a nexus of human interaction between the oppressive and the oppressed, stood as a solitary point through which all bodies passed. Within the confines of the market, planters, traders and slaves were forcibly brought together under the purpose of commerce and, in turn, revealed the isolation, confinement and brutality that defined the world of slavery. Each market tells a story: a chronology of human suffering that fundamentally shaped a nation and its economy. New Orleans represents a single example of the sphere of the marketplace: a locale in which traders, planters, and enslaved coalesced and cultivated distinct experiences along socio-economic, racial and gendered lines.

Before one can understand the deeper nuances of the interactions that took place within this location, one must first understand the physical embodiment of the slave trade in New Orleans. New Orleans held a seasonal trade that coincided with agricultural cycles. Well into the nineteenth century, the trade took place in one market in the area where Chartres Street intersects Esplanade. The market housed competing trading firms that advertised widely and served local and distant buyers. The traders served as middlemen between merchants and potential buyers and, in many ways, their position as facilitators—though reviled—granted traders the power to determine market conditions and protocol.

Slaves were housed within decrepit slave pens (often referred to as jails), enclosing humans like livestock. Memories of the trade describe the New Orleans markets as a horrific site of confinement and restraint. High-walled and windowless, pens resembled a prison and housed their inhabitants as such.
Not far from Canal Street, in the city of New Orleans, stands a large two-story, flat building, surrounded by a stone wall some twelve feet high, the top of which is covered with bits of glass, and so constructed as to prevent even the possibility of any one's passing over it without sustaining great injury. Many of the rooms in this building resemble the cells of a prison, and in a small apartment near the “office” are to be seen any number of iron collars, hobbles, handcuffs, thumbscrews, cowhides, chains, gags, and yokes.

Death and disease permeate each account of the slave quarters in the marketplace, as do the shackles, the confined spaces, and the general filth of the scene. The quarters were large rooms with high walls, no windows and barred doors. Not surprising, these spaces were off limits to speculative customers. Instead, bodies were judged and examined in showrooms, designed to display the stock of each trading house. These rooms were decorated and comfortable, standing in stark contrast to the confines of the slave quarters. It was within these rooms that sales were often made or customers decided their bids for auction.

In the corners of these rooms and behind curtains that attempted to make private the most gruesome modes of assessment, value was addressed. Men and women were assigned prices based on physical appearance alone. Prior to auction, bodies were stripped, examined in excruciating detail, and inspected for physical flaws. This process preceded auction and allowed potential buyers to investigate and speculate slave bodies:

For nearly a week this gang had been subject to inspection at the mart, but that did not preclude more of it at the sale. To facilitate this, the slaves were arranged as much as possible in a row around the yard of the jail with their backs to the wall. Each slave or other and infant wore a number that corresponded with the one in a printed description ‘list’ or ‘catalogue.’ Giving the age, habitual occupation and any other important fact… Some were stripping and others were dressing, and still other were all but naked, while prospective buyers satisfied themselves that there were no serious whip-scars, no signs of rheumatism, or of more serious diseases.

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33 Ibid.
In examples of this nature, the analogy to livestock becomes apparent; human bodies were reduced to a commodity to be judged and exchanged. This price, though crafted in the market, was never extricated from the life of a slave and the price only further alienated the slave from ownership over his or her own body.

While this process would remain almost unchanged throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the years directly before and after the abolition of the trade in 1808 witnessed a critical shift in the nature of the slave trade. First, matching the boom in agriculture and the looming end to the international trade, the price for slaves increased. In the 1770s, the mean price for a slave was $358.56 while the mean cost for a slave in the 1800s was $651.17. While there was at times a premium for men, the margin of difference was never more than 20% and remained roughly the same throughout the expansion of the trade. In addition to this price explosion, the sheer scale of the slave trade also increased. From 1770 to 1810, the number of African bodies imported directly to New Orleans grew from 595 to 10,743 individuals per year. New Orleans in this brief span of time, then, became the single largest slave market in the nation. This rise to prominence brought the city of New Orleans and the newly acquired Louisiana territory national attention as a burgeoning slave market, a center of finance and an emblem of the nation’s westward expansion. The marketplace played host daily to the buying and selling of human beings and while the ebbs and flows of the trade mirrored the natural fluctuations of a

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35 Robert William Fogel, and Stanley L. Engerman, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery (Technical Papers)* (New York: Norton, 1992), 42; To adjust these figures for inflation over time, please look to [http://www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com). Slavery represented a billion dollar industry and each purchase represented an enormously expensive undertaking. For example, the average cost of a fieldhand in 1800 was roughly $650. Adjusted for inflation, that is roughly $12,000 by 2011 standards. Considering many women fetched upwards of $1000 around 1800 (roughly $17,600 in contemporary USD), the slave trade was responsible for immense global exchange.

36 Fogel and Engerman, *Without Consent or Contract (Technical Papers)*, 42.

37 Ibid.
commodity trade, it also served as a venue in which white masculine ideals were bound up in each transaction.

IV. The Transaction And The Commodity:

At the core of the slave market stood a single transaction through which slave ownership was transferred. In order to fully understand the market as a whole, we must consider the transactional nature of the market, the factors that contributed to the price of a slave within the marketplace and the actors that set these prices. The transaction consisted of the actual process by which individuals viewed bodies, haggled over prices, and then transferred wealth. The value of a slave was not defined by abstract market forces, but rather was the complex result of multi-directional and nuanced processes carried out by the varied actors who participated in the market—slave, merchant, planter, and, less directly, financier. Enslaved bodies were assigned values predicated upon their physical attributes, their perceived capacity, and their future values. For men and women, these values were inscribed with different markers of value.

Men and women navigated and experienced this process in different ways despite the fact that the transformation of people into commodities sought to compress and erase gendered difference. Historically speaking, women were considered a less viable form of labor on the plantation, but were utilized extensively within the domestic sphere. Thus, women and men received similar prices, but in disparate quantities. Despite the marginal separations of prices between women and men, some women garnered different prices. For example, light-skinned, biracial women were sold at a premium, as reflected by slave records. Contemporary literature and the later abolitionist works highlighted Louisiana planters’ inclination toward and fetishized approach to light-skinned slaves, who were judged incrementally upon their racial

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38 Fogel, Without Consent or Contract (Technical Papers), 32.
heritage. New Orleans, as described by William Wells Brown retrospectively, had long since “been noted for its beautiful Quadroon women” and as such, slave advertisement played into the sexualization of light-skinned women within the market.39

Bottles of ink, and reams of paper, have been used to portray the “finely-cut and well-moulded features,” the “silken curls,” the “dark and brilliant eyes,” the “splendid forms,” the “fascinating smiles,” and “accomplished manners” of these impassioned and voluptuous daughters of the two races,—the unlawful product of the crime of human bondage.40

During the early years of the New Orleans slave markets, exceptionally strong, large women who could work on the plantation itself also consistently sold at elevated rates.41 This was largely reflected within documentation of planters who consistently called for “‘good field wenches’” capable of withstanding conditions of manual labor.42 Occasionally, prior maternity was also held at a premium as a woman with children was capable of serving as a domestic worker and a wet nurse, an unlikely need in a frontier economy.43 For the most part, however, fertility was seen as a threat to productive labor. Nursing mothers, referred to as “‘sucklers,’” were designated not as full laborers, but as “‘half-hands.’”44 Prior to the 1780s, it was not deemed economically beneficial to bring women from Africa or to keep women physically capable of labor out of the workforce long enough to have a child or to raise future laborers. In other words, “it was more profitable to bring male laborers from Africa, work them to death, and replace them with newcomers.”45

As a result, prior to 1808, there was little demand for the importation of female slaves. As a result of planters’ demand for hard labor, “[t]he desires of planters in the Americas and those of

39 Brown, Clotelle, 1.
40 Ibid.
41 Fogel, Without Consent or Contract (Technical Papers), 32.
42 Rothman, Slave Country, 88.
43 Fogel, Without Consent or Contract (Technical Papers), 32.
44 Johnson, River of Dark Dreams, 197.
the power elites in Africa therefore dovetailed in a preference for male slaves.”

However, as the nation neared the abolition of the trade, the margin between the numbers of men and women decreased greatly reflecting an “increased planter interest in acquiring females.” As noted by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, the number of men imported in the 1760s stood at over double that of women. Comparatively, the 1800s reflected a different narrative: women constituted roughly half of all imported slaves in New Orleans. As the demand for slaves increased during this era, the demand for female bodies increased disproportionately and echoed a shifting idea of value embodied by a slave woman. The most prominent shift was that of valuable labor and specifically a rising interest in reproductive (and not just productive) labors.

Fertility or future maternity was not valued in the marketplace until the abolition of the trade approached. Though the prices of the female body did not increase in a disproportionate relation to that of men, the methodology of valuation did shift in a distinct way. The sustainability of slavery became increasingly relevant and women were valued for their productive and reproductive capacities. As one young Mississippian noted in a letter to his uncle in Louisiana: “[f]or a young man just commencing in life the best stock in which he can invest capital is, I think, Negro stock…. Negroes will yield a much larger income than any Bank dividends.” The economic incentive to create a self-perpetuating population and the practice of breeding slaves permeated American culture commencing in the early 19th century, but remained central to the slave markets and the nation’s political economy for decades. As noted by the prominent abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass in 1846, states like Louisiana strived

48 Hall, “Calculations.”
49 Ibid.
50 Sam Steer to William Minor, February 23, 1818, William Minor Papers, LSU.
to cultivate a “slave-breeding state… where men, women, and children are reared for the market, just as horses, sheep, and swine are raised for the market. Slave-rearing is there looked upon as a legitimate trade; the law sanctions it, public opinion upholds it, the church does not condemn it. It goes on in all its bloody horrors, sustained by the auctioneer’s block.”

In addition to the “backbreaking, soul-savaging labor that all enslaved people performed,” slavery within the United States also demanded an additional form of labor “that remains almost inarticulable in its horror: reproducing the slave workforce through giving birth and serving as forced sexual labor to countless men of all races.”

Much like the slave trade itself, a self-perpetuating slave society was economically motivated, as more slaves meant more property and more wealth. As the abolition of the Atlantic trade came and went, reproduction came to the forefront of economic and political interests, “encourag[ing] planters to breed rather than buy their workforce.” This emphasis on expected reproductive capacity was speculative and bound intimately to shifting agricultural and political realities. As noted by Amy Dru Stanley, “the stakes of slave reproduction rose over time” due to imminent abolition, the rise of cotton and sugar, and the expansion of slavery westward.

Each slave sale occurred around three basic steps. First, traders purchased or imported and subsequently housed slaves within the marketplace. Second, planters and other buyers entered the market to examine and then bid on enslaved bodies. Finally, buyers exchanged money for the enslaved, and the transfer of ownership—and the brutal commodification of individual persons—was complete. This persistent economic valuation of the enslaved body

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purposefully commodified and attempted to dehumanize the slave, while slave women
simultaneously countered that process, shaping their sense of self and exercising personal agency
within the market, engaging both sellers and buyers at the point of sell and after. This conflict
was unknowingly perpetuated in the transactions described. As noted by Amy Dru Stanley, by
putting such personal processes as reproduction at the center of their economic transactions,
buyers and sellers emphasized, even as they sought to ignore, the humanity of each person they
bought and sold. Slave breeding placed love and human relations at the center of the institution.
As Stanley argues, “love” became centered “in the conflict between slavery and freedom.” As
such, the domestic trade “was as much about eros and civilization as about profit, power, and
personhood.” Furthermore, the marketplace also was a site of the struggle over the body. As
noted by Dorinda Outram, a body placed on the auction block—and especially that of a
woman—simultaneously represented the most intimate and most public entity that one can
possess. “The body, then, provides a ‘basic political resource’ in struggles between dominant and
subordinate classes… the personal is political.” In the marketplace and on plantations, every
phase of a woman’s life became commodified labor, her “daily existence ultimately produced
marketable goods for the slaveholder with little control over the amount and type of work
performed.” Women became objects of production and reproduction, beginning precisely in the
moment of sale.

Through the interactions intrinsic to the slave market, three primary actors—the trader,
the planter and the slave—marked their own identities upon the body of the enslaved;
simultaneously, financial institutions addressed the worth of a human body through objective

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56 Ibid.
57 As quoted within Stephanie Camp, “Pleasures of Resistance Enslaved Women and Body
58 Harley et al., Sister Circle, 1.
terms of collateral, property and futures. Commencing in the transaction of the market, women represented an economic entity into which ideas and values could be poured. As noted by Saidiya Hartman, “the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of the others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved in the surrogate for the master’s body since it guarantees his embodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion.” Within the process of the transaction, the female body absolutely represented a site of oppression, subjection and violation. Traders confined the body to the despicable conditions of a slave pen, consistently withheld food to the point of malnutrition, subjected the body to brutal physical punishments and permitted outright sexual violation by other actors. Speculators reduced the body to a price tag, poked, prodded, and stripped the form, and began a trajectory of subordination within the same space.

Nevertheless, confined, constrained, humiliated and stripped of humanity, enslaved women still constructed their senses of self, femininity and family within the marketplace. As noted by Stephanie Camp, “[f]or people, like bondpeople and women as a group, who have experienced oppression through the body, the body becomes an important site not only of suffering but also (and therefore) of resistance, enjoyment, and potentially, transcendence.” Slaves, then, defined their own identity through interpersonal relations, resistance and the transmission of African culture into the American South even as buyers, sellers and financiers sought to transform them into exchangeable commodities with simple prices.

Within the physical slave market of New Orleans, individuals crafted identities and assessments of self-worth in relation to each other. Slave bodies became the location upon which

60 Camp, “Pleasures of Resistance,” 540.
traders and planters constructed ideologies of supremacy, masculinity and property through the assignment of value on the female body. A socio-economic relationship was established between these oppressive powers, as well as with their financial backers, but it was one fraught with notions of superiority, paternalism, morality and fundamentally profit. Through the persistent commodification of the bodies of enslaved women, supply side actors and prospective buyers simultaneously abstracted the humanity of slaves and put their humanity on the auction block. This dueling, paradoxical process, in addition to the economics of sale, defined the framework in which enslaved bodies resisted oppression to craft their own identities, concepts of family and valuations of self-worth.
Chapter Two:  
Women at Auction: Supply Side Actors and Human Commodities

In 1857, Martha Griffith Browne wrote a composite slave narrative (though fictional) based on the lives of her own slaves and specifically the narrative of a master falling on hard times. Despite its questionable veracity, Browne’s narrative accurately portrays the abstraction of enslaved humanity and the daily experience of slaves whose masters used the marketplace to settle all their transactions. “[B]ecoming embarrassed in his business,” the slave owner quickly sold his property; “[o]f course the slaves went.”¹ Among the numbered lots stood the protagonist’s mother and though the young girl “longed and begged to be sold with her,” her mother was sold and the two never saw each other again.² Sold to the highest bidder, the mother was torn from her child and departed with her new master. With a single fall of the auctioneer’s hammer, this successful economic transaction destroyed a family unit, willingly separating mother from child in the pursuit of profit. In doing so, the slave trader and auctioneer ignored, obscured and destroyed their bond of blood. The trader willingly reduced the humanity of each enslaved person they sold, but, in turn, revealed the deeply human characteristics of such separation.

None can ever know my wretchedness, unless they have suffered a similar grief, when I saw her borne weeping and screaming away from me. I have never heard from her since. Where she went or into whose hands she fell, I never knew.³

Through the transaction of the auction, the trader and auctioneer obscured the humanity of slaves by reducing their existence to the prices they fetched and thus turned women into trade-able, profitable commodities by simultaneously disregarding and marketing the humanity of female

¹ Martha Griffith Browne, Autobiography of a Female Slave (New York: Redfield, 1857), 310.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
bodies. As a result, the financial transaction of sale reveals supply-side actors’ nuanced understanding of themselves, their business and their product: enslaved humans.

Contrary to this process, however, the auction could not help but also assign value to human characteristics like femininity and motherhood: the very things being sold and rendered asunder by the market. Slave traders were intensely invested in revealing the humanity of women, whose reproductive capacity added immense value to their pre-existing appraisal as field-hands and domestic laborers. And throughout it all, women consistently refused the dehumanizing aspects of the marketplace, constructing and fighting ceaselessly to maintain and protect their bodies and families. The auction represented the ultimate moment of abstraction, simultaneously denying enslaved women’s humanity and placing a mark-up on their price because of it, a herculean task to be sure; at once, slave women were simple price tags and complex valuations of future labors, femininity and reproduction. By obscuring, commodifying and denying a woman’s humanity, supply side actors worked toward key economically motivated goals. As abolition approached, traders, merchants and financiers aimed to capitalize on the rising planter interest in women.

I. Supply Side Actors in the Market Sphere:

The slave trade, fueled by its lucrative hold in the American South, depended upon the deeply profitable slave market and its central supply side actors: the merchant, the trader and the financier. Merchant companies largely served as middle-men responsible for the acquisition of slaves along the African coastline, from the Caribbean Islands, and from the older slave-states along the Atlantic seaboard, and their transportation to the market in New Orleans. Funded by Northern financiers, merchants largely served as shipping enterprises and profited from the sale of slaves to traders. Financiers also provided the capital for the acquisition of slaves, be it for
merchants, traders or slave owners. In turn, they facilitated the transportation of cotton and sugar to distant markets. Despite their physical distance from the market, these individuals and institutions invested heavily in the slave trade and, in turn, received enormous profits from investing in slave and plantation futures. Lastly, traders purchased slaves from merchants and sold them—often at auction—to planters within the New Orleans market. Fundamentally, for the trader, the merchant and the financier, the incentive to participate in the slave trade arose from the profits that they could accrue in the process and, as noted by Edward Baptist, the purpose of the supply side of the slave transaction was a capitalist one. The slave market “turned people into numbers, the values of their bodies and labor into paper, chopped them, recombined them by legislative fiat, carried them… and sold them.” In other words, for merchant, financier and trader, slaves were little more than numbers in account ledgers and bills of exchange that could be swapped and sold in the New York, Liverpool, and London exchanges.

In both the domestic and international slave trades then, it was the supply side that most consistently and violently attempted to obscure the humanity of the slaves they sold; this notion rang particularly true for traders, who owned and controlled slaves—a task which included turning actual bodies into prices—within the market before auctioning them to the highest bidder. Traders held only temporary ownership and a transitory mastery over enslaved bodies and due to the temporal limits of this relationship, the interactions between traders and slaves were largely confined to initial purchase, containment within slave pens, and forcible sale to planters. Traders, unlike planters, never reaped the physical benefits of a slave’s productive or reproductive outputs, but instead profited through the strategic purchase, the speculated worth of

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5 Ibid.
future labors and the resale of human bodies. Still, despite their limited interaction with the enslaved, as Laurence Kotlikoff argues, the trade in slaves was a lucrative one and represented the height of capitalist endeavor at the turn of the nineteenth century as “careful, calculating transactors operat[ed]” within and thus embodied “a highly developed market in human beings.”6 Importantly, their singular focus on profits through sale dictated their interactions with the men, women, and children who crossed their paths.

Some have argued that the coupling of calculative pricing in a competitive market and the perceived inhumanity of the traders led to the development of a “highly competitive and economically ‘rational’ market” that “differ[ed] in few respects from a market in livestock.”7 In other words, the slave market operated based on supply and demand, much like the market in commodities or livestock, and resulted in similar price fluctuations. Nevertheless, the slave market was no simple site of exchange and it could not mask completely the (in)humanity of its daily practice: it was human beings who were being inspected and traded, securitized, evaluated and priced. As enslaved women were put on display—poked and prodded, tested for signs of fertility and divested of their dignity if not their progeny—it was in fact their humanity that was put up for sale, exposed to the everyday brutality of the peculiar institution.8

During the years prior to 1808, the already gendered market experience took on particular significance for women as traders recognized a growing demand for female slaves and capitalized upon their feminine attributes, which were of increased value as the abolition of the Atlantic trade came and went. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, traders began to ascribe monetary value to feminine capacities (like reproduction) that were previously seen as

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7 Kotlikoff, “The Structure of Slave Prices in New Orleans,” 517.
undesirable and fundamentally threatening to a woman’s role as a laborer on plantations. As the nineteenth century opened, women were, however, increasingly subjected to traders who willingly and necessarily treated their bodies—and in particular their capacity to reproduce—as market items whose value increased dramatically after the possibility of African-born slaves was cut off. For women, this new paradigm meant that the process of inspection and sale held specific physical and psychological ramifications. Traders and planters alike sought out able-bodied women and began to look for the new signs of what they deemed inferior qualities: infertility, sterility, venereal disease and “fallen wombs.” In other words, just as the inhumane Atlantic slave trade neared its end, traders and planters alike began to seek out slaves for their humanity: trading the very essence of enslaved womanhood, the womb, and lowering prices for women they deemed unlikely to reproduce. While pregnancy continued to represent an undesirable characteristic for buyers seeking the immediate labor value of those they purchased, infertility was increasingly perceived as a detriment to the future value of a slave. As traders came to focus upon this lucrative ability to sell fertility—and thus the future of slavery—they commodified and repackaged motherhood, the human characteristic they had once ignored and despised. By commodifying reproduction, motherhood became “a colonized concept—an event physically practiced and experienced by women, but occupied and defined, given the content and value, by the core concepts of patriarchal ideology.” Of course, while these dramatic market fluctuations were occurring, enslaved women continued to live their lives, maintaining and crafting their own senses of identity, femininity and family while traders and planters slowly awakened to the value of enslaved female bodies. Their lives went on, no matter the market’s

9 Kotlikoff, “The Structure of Slave Prices in New Orleans,” 505.
10 Ibid.
fluctuations; and as we will see, just as the vendue gave new meaning to their everyday experiences, they would come to shape the supply and demand of the marketplace.

These market forces determined the actual shape of the New Orleans market, as exemplified by the fluctuations in pricing and the rising number of women imported. Throughout the legalized Atlantic trade, the import of slaves was entirely dependent upon the types of slaves that could sell at a profit within the market. Thus, a series of quotas defined the ideal characteristics of a shipment of bodies. Demand was measured by traders, who relayed the information to merchants responsible for purchasing slaves from willing sellers, either along the African coastline, within other colonies or at ports throughout the Atlantic.\textsuperscript{12}

In making such purchases, traders constantly worked toward their own profits. Each slave a trader purchased—from either merchants or other traders—did not represent a random selection “but rather was the result of profit maximization.”\textsuperscript{13} This abstraction of a slave’s humanity persisted as traders commodified slaves by inscribing value to the qualities they considered desirable and profitable, a process that began the moment they placed an order with slave merchants. This was matched and made real through the physical domination exercised by traders in the marketplace. From distant port to auction block, traders asserted power over slaves, inscribing slave bodies with their own ideologies of profit, family, femininity and paternalism.

As a result of their purely monetary interest in slaves and the trade as a whole, traders also aimed to augment the price of each slave by feigning the health of their slaves, hiding malnutrition, disease and deformity in order to create the appearance of health. The power that traders asserted in the marketplace and inscribed on slaves’ bodies was often made manifest in


\textsuperscript{13} Baptist, “Toxic Debt,” 126.
their efforts to maximize profitability by minimizing overhead and superficially concealing characteristics that were considered to be undesirable. This desire to maximize profits permeated the treatment and conditions within the market, largely by encouraging traders to superficially fake the quality of care and the health of the enslaved during their temporary housing in slave pens.

The slave pens served as an extension of the slave trade and endeavored to prepare slaves for sale. The pens were high-walled, single-story buildings (often without windows) that crammed bodies into the dirty, decrepit space. Still, it was constantly in the best interest of the trader to maintain—and not detract from—the value of the enslaved body because their livelihood depended upon the perceived health and capacity of slaves. As noted by Walter Johnson, “[t]he daily business of the slave pens, of course, was manipulating buyers” by crafting an impression to lure a planter into buying a slave.14 “All of the feeding, clothing, caring for, and preparing had that single goal in mind.”15 As such, a balance was struck: traders were forced to keep slaves alive and moderately healthy, while keeping housing and care of slaves as inexpensive as possible. The resulting conditions within the slave pens were deplorable by all accounts, defined by high-walled, stench-ridden, cramped rooms in which slaves were forced to live, sleep and await sale.

Despite these conditions, the slave pens—owned and operated by trading houses and merchants—hosted the critical transformation of slaves to saleable commodities. By providing rations, moderate medical care and new clothing, pens housed slaves until they looked healthy enough for the auction block. Traders had a strong economic interest in “remov[ing] all traces

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15 Ibid.
of...not only a hard journey, but also a lifetime of deprivation.”

Former slave John Brown noted of the New Orleans market that slaves arrived at the pens “in various states of fatigue and condition” and would remain for weeks or months until the slave—and often the fluctuating market—had improved in condition. Traders allowed expenditures like medical care, increased rations and clothing in the name of augmenting the profitability of each sale. These bodies, “greased to hide blemishes and hair painted to disguise age” were displayed to prospective buyers and subsequently placed on the auction block, subject to the Traders instructed slaves to behave a particular way while physically and psychologically scrutinized by planters in order to appear docile, jovial and well behaved. Though slaves in theory did not gain anything from such interactions, the threat of violence and punishment from traders served as incentive to engage planters and appease traders. A trader’s livelihood was very much tied up in a planter’s perception of the physical and mental quality of a slave.

The deplorable slave pens that played host to a slave’s transformation from downtrodden, malnourished body to saleable body stand in stark contrast to the deeply incongruous display of ostensibly healthy, jovial slaves in the theatrical tradition of auction. Following the process of preparing a slave for sale, traders still had to sell their slave lots, and they worked constantly to obscure the brutality of their cost-saving tactics from their potential buyers, all in the hopes of selling every single slave in each lot (in order to prevent economic loss). In the scope of auction, slave women were made to perform, engage, and obey their potential buyers. Stripped from the waist up, female bodies became the domain of the audience’s intrusive gaze and the auctioneer’s

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crass banter. As the audience viewed her semi-nude body, they assessed her feminine form, the fecundity of her womb, and the health of her breasts under the guise of pseudoscience. In the moment of auction, sellers and buyers simultaneously abstracted her humanity and auctioned it to the highest bidder. Listed amongst advertisements for dry goods and runaway slaves, traders promoted each auction widely and publicly, inviting slave owners from across the burgeoning American South. These auctions connected the supply and demand sides of the slave trade by serving as the locus through which each enslaved body passed. The auction serves as a direct microcosm for the capitalist nature of the slave trade and as each body was reduced to a price and debated publicly, “the moment of sale exposed the very essence of human bondage.”

There is overwhelming evidence that suggests that the majority of slave transactions occurred in an oral ascending auction. By definition, such an auction consisted of a continuous raising of the price until one bidder remained. While the rules of the auction remain largely unknown, a defined code of conduct permeates the anecdotes of slave auctions in New Orleans. Traders brought slaves from pens to the large, ornate halls for inspection by prospective buyers prior to auction. In these spaces, slaves interacted with their prospective owners in a variety of ways. Owners were presented with auction catalogs—the initial step in the abstraction of people into prices—that detailed the qualifications, disclaimers and estimated price of each person. As prospective buyers gossiped and perused the buyer’s guides, the enslaved were dressed up for the occasion: traders dressed them in new clothes, greased their skin and painted their hair, ensuring that the bodies on view matched the catalog description and estimated price as nearly as possible.

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possible. At the turn of the century, these auctions often took place outside the parish courthouse, though many occurred in the auction rooms of slave trading houses. The Exchange on Esplanade also witnessed many smaller auctions, often consisting of auctioneers, slaves, and bidders clustered on a sidewalk. As time progressed, the site of the slave auction moved to the famed St. Louis Hotel between Chartres St. and Royal St. In each of these places, traders sought to convey an ornate pageantry, highlighting the wealth that exchanged hands and the public and grandiose nature of the slave trade within New Orleans. Countless accounts describe the city’s role in the slave trade as not only the busiest and most profitable hub of the trade, but also as the “most…picturesque… the modern Delos of the trade.”

Beyond the abstraction of humanity and the displayed performance that cohered in this process, traders often sold slaves in groups, further diminishing white perceptions of slave individuality. As noted by Kotlikoff, roughly 40% of slaves sold from 1803-1812 were ultimately sold in groups, reflecting the emergent plantation economy that was sweeping across the Southwest. The average sale consisted of roughly 1.4 individuals. In analyzing such statistics, one assumes that natural groupings and units would be desirable to planters and thus lucrative to traders. Planters, it might be assumed, valued the sanctity of the family unit as abolition neared for its critical role as “an administrative and organizational unit, as an instrument of education, as an enforcer of discipline, and as a producer and protector of new slave offspring.” Under this assumption, a planter would, in theory, have a strong economic impetus to preserve family ties and preferably entire families. As noted by Kotlikoff, “[i]f these

22 Berlin, Generations of Captivity, 172.
26 Fogel and Engerman, Without Consent or Contract, 47.
economic factors were important, one would rarely expect to observe the breakup of families in the slave market; in addition, one would observe premiums paid for slaves sold in family groups relative to slaves separated from their families.”27

The evidence, however, is to the contrary. The only family bond that New Orleans’ legislation honored was between mother and infant, largely because such separation often guaranteed the death of the child. Early Louisiana legislation regarding the slave trade conflated motherhood and family, recognizing only the relationship between mother and child as valid and unbreakable during sale. Evidence shows that the overwhelming majority of the aforementioned group auctions were mother-child sales. In Kotlikoff’s broad analysis of New Orleans market behavior, nearly all sales of family groups (over 90%) consisted of a mother and her young child.28 Other familial ties like marriage, fatherhood or between siblings were not recognized by Louisiana legislature or by traders and these ties were willingly separated, emphasized by the troubling fact that less than 4% of such sales included a father. 29 While the mother-child sale constituted the majority of group sales, traders often disregarded the 1806 legislative mandate and readily separated mothers from their children of any age. This willingness to divide families embodied the full control of slave traders, who focused on profit, not the preservation of family. One anonymous account of the New Orleans market noted the hypocrisy of one trader who cherished his own family and willingly disregarded such bonds in the slaves he sold.

27 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
Sometimes he sell the babes from the breast, and then again he sell the mothers from the babes and the husbands and wives, and so on. He wouldn’t let ‘em holler much when the folks be sold away. He say, ‘I have you whipped if you don’t hush.’ They [the slave trader and his wife] sure loved their six children, though. They wouldn’t want nobody to sell them.\(^{30}\)

This practice ostensibly counters the rising interest in family as the root of crafting a self-perpetuating slave population. However, in actuality, such practices reveal the fundamental goal of traders: profit. Despite the fact then that reproduction became a central focus in this era, pre-existing maternal or familial bonds were most often disregarded because children were not immediate sources of labor to a prospective buyer. As a result of traders’ persistent interest in generating profit, the tactics and patterns exercised by traders (be it preserving families, dividing them willingly or increasing the number of women imported) reflect the fact that traders interpreted the desires of planters and worked solely toward the goal of profitable sale.

Furthermore, planters rarely aimed to purchase children because they were not a viable source of labor immediately and children therefore remained in the possession of traders for extended periods. In addition to elderly slaves and nursing mothers, children were referred to as a part of the “‘trash gang’” of slave laborers and were deemed “‘quarter-hands.’”\(^{31}\) Selling mother-child groupings was profitable to traders for this reason and, as a result, traders often included children in sales without changing prices; the rare desire to maintain the sanctity of the family was often economically motivated. Thus, “there is clearly no proclivity on the part of [traders] to sell entire slave families together,” and, as such, traders entirely disregarded the sanctity of a slave family and only kept families together when it was deemed profitable.\(^{32}\)


\(^{32}\) Kotlikoff, “The Structure of Slave Prices in New Orleans,” 512.
only noted examples of such profit stems from the premia paid for man and wife with children, not for any other familial tie.\textsuperscript{33}

While Fogel and Engerman asserted that the family unit served as the basic unit of organization because it was “to the economic interest of planters to encourage the stability of slave families,” thus resulting in premia for an entire family in the slave trade, the realities were quite different.\textsuperscript{34} Instead, not only did traders discount the price of slaves sold in groups (in order to rid their stock as much as possible with each sale), but offered further discounts for the family unit. If traders or planters had valued the integrity of a family, family units would have received a premium, not a discount. According to Charles Calomiris and Jonathan Pritchett, the price discount for families “based on unobserved heterogeneity,” suggests that family members, if sold singly, would have commanded lower market prices than the unrelated slaves who were not sold in family groups.\textsuperscript{35} Traders often packaged undesirable slaves with more desirable slaves in order to rid themselves of multiple bodies in one sale. Such group sales often included children, elderly and the sick as a direct result of the \textit{Acts Passed at the First Session of the First Legislature of the Territory of Orleans} (1806), which explicitly put forth laws and regulations on slavery under the so-called Black Code. Under Section 8, “disabled through old age or otherwise, and who have children, such slaves shall not be sold but with such of his or her children” while Section 9 banned the sale of a child under ten years without his or her mother.\textsuperscript{36} The rules notwithstanding, traders often separated families in the name of profit. The separation of families held painful ramifications for the slaves in question, but such separations have largely been remembered

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Fogel and Engerman, \textit{Time on the Cross}, 5; Calomris and Pritchett, “Preserving Slave Families for Profit: Traders’ Incentives and Pricing in the New Orleans Slave Market,” 986.
\textsuperscript{35} Calomris and Pritchett, “Preserving Slave Families for Profit: Traders’ Incentives and Pricing in the New Orleans Slave Market,” 1009.
\textsuperscript{36} Territory of Orleans, \textit{Acts Passed at the First Session of the First Legislature of the Territory of Orleans} (New Orleans: Bradford and Anderson, 1807), 153.
through the simple ledgers and records of traders, who often relegated family ties to the marginal notes of each sale.

Through the most basic analysis of trader tactics, as embodied by extensive records, certificates and guarantees—it is evident that traders primary goal was to fulfill demand. To traders, “slavery looked like this: a list of names, numbers, and outcomes” meticulously recorded like crop outputs.\(^37\) The scrupulous recording reflected a trader’s economic incentive to participate in the trade, documenting the scale of profit and the stark commodification of the trade itself. As described by Vincent Brown, this interest in documentation “make it difficult to avoid thinking and writing in terms consistent with commercial accounting—‘volumes,’ ‘distributions,’ ‘rates,’ and so on—which make commodified people appear nothing more than commodities.”\(^38\) Furthermore, the ledgers highlight the key goals that traders worked toward and that fundamentally shaped the supply and demand for the import of slaves into New Orleans.

By improving the health of a slave—at least on the surface level—traders increased their reputation by selling high quality, \textit{prime}, guaranteed slaves. Profit was thus intimately linked to reputation. Planters thoroughly inspected each slave they were interested in prior to auction in order to determine the health of the slave and, in many cases, to judge their character. Traders strived to sell high quality slaves in order to garner the greatest possible profit and focused largely upon the somewhat arbitrary moniker of \textit{prime}: a term consistently tied with legal guarantees, warranties and certificates.\(^39\) Health and disposition represented the two prevalent divisions of exceptions to such guarantees, frequently citing specific characteristics of men, women and children as cause to lower prices or minimize guarantees. Planters and traders alike sought \textit{prime} slaves because they could often be guaranteed. \textit{Prime} status, then was often linked

\(^37\) Johnson, \textit{Soul by Soul}, 45.
\(^39\) Kotlikoff, “The Structure of Slave Prices in New Orleans,” 505.
to the purported quality of the trader and his reputation, and could not be faked without the threat of tarnishing one’s status as an honorable businessman. Each transaction held considerable risk for planter and trader alike; for planters, risk stemmed from the possibility of purchasing an “inferior and problematic” body, while traders could easily be labeled “dishonest” for giving such slaves a false prime rating.  

Furthermore, the pressure to maintain a good reputation led traders—and specifically well-established trading houses—to maintain a code of decorum and a somewhat honest relationship with the purchaser. Due to the inherent risk—that is, the possibility of death, disease, injury—of buying a slave, reputation played a critical role in “ensuring a good price” for a given slave. Still, reputation alone was not enough in a transaction of this size, as evidenced by the increased prevalence and importance of guarantees and warranties for the purchased slaves. Fundamentally, this interest in maintaining a slave’s health for sale did not necessitate increased benevolence toward the enslaved, and the process remained, on the surface, solely motivated by the profit principal.

While traders prescribed the conditions of the slave market and defined their own supremacy and wealth through the commodification of slave bodies, their power came at a cost, and was largely countered by American popular opinion, abolitionist ideologies, and even by planters and financial speculators; traders were reviled for doing “the dirty work of redistribution in the slaveholders’ economy… making a living in the space between the prices they paid and those they received.” Planters (who often perceived themselves as benevolent and paternalistic masters) came to vilify traders, who they imagined as the embodiment of the horrors of the slave

40 Choo and Eid, “Interregional Price Difference,” 488.
41 Ibid.
42 Johnson, Soul by Soul, 46.
trade. Such concerns were increasingly bound up in the brutal transactions that occurred daily in the New Orleans slave market.

Throughout the analysis of a trader’s economic incentives and records, it becomes evident that New Orleans represents a uniquely meticulous and reliable body of records. As noted previously, “[t]he records were created by a law requiring the registration of all slave sales in order to give legal force to an owner’s claim to title.”\textsuperscript{43} Within the aforementioned 1806 Black Code, Louisiana deemed slaves the legal equivalent of “real estates.”\textsuperscript{44} As such, slaves were “subject to be mortgaged, according to the rule prescribed by law, and they shall be seized and sold as real estate.”\textsuperscript{45} Within this definition, slave sales were also linked to extensive documentation that charted the age, sex, and place of origin of all slaves imported into New Orleans. Required by state law, these records are deemed reliable because they provided “both the seller and the buyer with strong motivations to accurately record the characteristics of the slaves sold” by protecting both actors involved in the sale through certificates of quality and warranties.\textsuperscript{46} Each bill of sale indicated the key information for each sold slave, while invoices indicated the key details of the actual sale, like the form and terms of payment, trader information, and whether the trader issued a guarantee for the slave.\textsuperscript{47} In the first half of the nineteenth century, eighty-four percent of slaves were fully warranted by traders, while the average warranty lasted about a year. This reflects the ways in which traders aimed to facilitate good business practices to cultivate a good reputation; a positive reputation was critical “in ensuring a good price” for slaves.\textsuperscript{48} The prevalence of guarantees also reveals their importance.

\textsuperscript{43} Fogel and Engerman, \textit{Time on the Cross}, 52.
\textsuperscript{44} Territory of Orleans, \textit{Acts Passed at the First Session of the First Legislature of the Territory of Orleans}, 154.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Kotlikoff, “The Structure of Slave Prices in New Orleans,” 497.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Choo and Eid, “Interregional Price Difference,” 488.
for the prospective buyer as a guarantee securitized their purchase and gave them the ability to return a slave for any undesirable, unobservable traits of the slave within the decided period of time. Guarantees, warranties, and bills of sale, however, further transformed person into commodity, reducing a slave’s life, future outputs and family to simple monetary calculations, shrouding the humanity that ultimately could never be fully extricated from each sale.

Through documentation, traders completed their total commodification and turned human beings in demarcations on a ledger. Through this gradual process of abstraction, traders abstracted the humanity of the female body and thus inscribed her with their own temporary ownership on slaves. Traders remained only interested in the profit margin between purchase and sale and as such, treated slaves as true commodities to be enhanced, marketed and sold. Through this, they enforced their own conception of racial hierarchy and the complete physical domination of women, whose bodies they made readily available to prospective buyers. By ignoring or obscuring their humanity, traders disregarded family ties, the sanctity of the human body and converted bodies in prices, ledgers, and commodities. This commodification fueled the creation of a fluctuating global market in slaves inextricably linked to and dependent upon the burgeoning financialization of commerce, industry and agriculture.

II. Finance and the Slave Market

In an era of currency and crop price instability, the worth of enslaved women went far beyond the New Orleans market, because slaves represented a more stable investment than land, bonds or bouillon. The Louisiana Purchase sparked a lucrative expansion westward and brought a large influx of banks and investors to New Orleans, changing the ways in which planters borrowed money and financed the region’s markets. Men and women came to the market to speculate on the value of the enslaved and their ability to fill particular labor roles, but the incentives for such speculations were diversified as slaves represented not only a labor force but
also as lucrative commodities, whose value—irrespective of future labor—rose and fell according to the vagaries of markets distant and near. In fact, much of the settlement of the Mississippi Valley was spurred not simply by the hopes of new planters, but by the rising interest of Northern and European financiers, whose capital facilitated massive investment in new agricultural endeavors like sugar and cotton. Through their investment, planters received small and large-scale loans (often brokered by local branches of distant banks) in order to expand their plantations—both in scale and labor—and to remain liquid while waiting for each year’s crops to mature. This process of distant capital maintaining southern plantations fixed southern slavery at the heart of nineteenth century capitalism: whether amongst New England’s merchants, New York’s bankers, or Liverpool’s industrial giants.

To these financial institutions, the slave market was a developed and lucrative commodity market, and financiers aimed to capitalize on the rising interest and worth of enslaved women. From their distant perches, these women were fungible, but massively valuable, commodities. This valuation further commodified the bodies of the enslaved by assigning not only prices, but also a presence within a fluctuating commodity pricing systems similar to that of crops or livestock. At the turn of the century, slavery represented the critical link between the local New Orleans economy and the expanding transnational economy, revealing “slavery’s intimate bonds and capitalism’s abstractions” to be “an interwoven system of commodity production and exchange.”

In the era of quickly increasing prices, slaves thus guaranteed profit. Slaves as paper commodities—futures bought and sold as purely financial entities—were entirely negated by the global financial system that from afar could ignore their humanity and measure their value in monetary terms. The financial system also assigned massive

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value to a woman’s ability to reproduce and perpetuate the lucrative institution of slavery well beyond the abolition of the Atlantic trade. In the coming era, slavery represented “the lifeblood of wealth accumulation and commodity exchange that carried [agricultural products] to factories across the world.” Simultaneously, the financial system at work and its individual actors vitally depended upon the value of slave ownership and the fungibility of slave bodies.

Slavery played a large role in the development of the American financial system and contributed to the tremendous wealth of many modern institutions like Brown Brothers & Co. (of Brown University), Wachovia or J.P. Morgan. Financial institutions, for the reasons noted above, were drawn to the burgeoning South, and from the institution of slavery, they built empires of wealth. As plantation agriculture exploded along the Mississippi River, ever more banking institutions, from London and New York, ventured south, bringing with them capital and dispensing bank notes—backed by gold, state subsidized promises, and, increasingly, crop and slave futures—to local producers and planters. To ease the risk of lending to planters who remained unsure of each year’s crops or who were only at the beginning of the enterprise, slaves became collateral against defaults, and were often the only things that stood between a planter and debtor’s prison. This assurance stood as the result of nearly a century of consistent increase in the value of slaves. As noted by Edward Baptist, questions of slavery’s morality did not matter to financiers; instead, they focused solely upon the “profitability and security” of such investments. Bankers “insisted that Louisiana loans, and the other ones modeled on them, were

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sound because the bank would pay the bonds back out of the profits generated by ‘this channel of commerce,’ one of the most profitable economic sectors on the planet.”53

As a result, banks and other financial institutions lent increasingly large amounts of money to planters on the make, all of whom used their property—land and slaves—as collateral for their expanding debt. For example, a prominent financier named Vincent Nolte, having made his fortune within the cotton market, often lent large sums of money to planters. In return, Nolte expected repayment with interest in the form of crops. As collateral, the planters guaranteed repayment in the form of their slaves; in one case, the contract designated repayment in the form of “90 to 100 head of first rate slaves [to] be mortgaged.”54 More importantly, by lending money to planters, trading slave-grown cotton, and securitizing both crops and slaves, distant financial institutions found themselves deeply embedded in the slave South. They, like planters and traders, assigned value to the bodies of the thousands of men and women who entered the marketplace each year. Their distance obscured this historical connection, but in each transaction, their hopes and dreams, fears and aspirations were inscribed on individual enslaved bodies.

III. “A Mournful Scene Indeed:” The Female Experience in the Market.55

Throughout this process, despite its brutality, slaves continued to define their own identity through the protection of their families and their bodies. The seemingly total control that traders held over the bodies of the enslaved disrupted and overturned prescriptions of family. Though the benevolence of traders and treatment of slaves varied greatly, traders ultimately “decided whether to keep families together or to ignore familial bonds, and their actions held

53 Ibid.
55 Solomon Northup, Twelve Years a Slave (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 82.
great consequences for enslaved people.” As a result, “every transaction could bring about loss and grief.” Within the confines of the slave market—walled, constrained and subject to the desires of traders and buyers—enslaved women struggled to maintain the sanctity of family both during their stay in the market and at the moment of sale.

As slaves awaited sale, they were housed in pens, either in family units or separated by sex. Women and children often lived together, offering a semblance of motherhood and family to dispossessed children. The experience of the slave pens and auction block, as noted by Ira Berlin, “were scenes from a recurring nightmare that had become a way of life” for enslaved families. In his narrative, a former slave named Thomas considered his own parents’ attempts to emotionally prepare their children for the inevitability of the auction block and their consequent separation. Though he “could ‘testify’ to the ‘deep and fond affection which the slave cherishes in his heart for his home and its dear ones,’” the former slave acknowledged the persistent fears of loss, separation and likely sale. With such fears came the parental responsibility to warn children of the “coming misery” and to warn their children of the “inevitable suffering [that was] in store” for them by speaking “of our being torn from them and sold off to the dreaded slave trader.” The separation, ownership and saleability of the family unit disrupted notions of parenting and specifically motherhood because it instilled both senses of helplessness and fierce determination in enslaved women. As noted by one narrative, “[n]obody respects a mother who

57 Ibid.
58 Belin, Generations of Captivity, 172.
59 Stephanie Camp, Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 93; Thomas Jones, Experience and Personal Narrative of Uncle Tom Jones; Who Was for Forty Years a Slave. Also the Surprising Adventures of Wild Tom, of the Island Retreat, a Fugitive Negro from South Carolina (Boston: H.B. Skinner, 1854), 8.
60 Jones, Experience and Personal Narrative of Uncle Tom Jones, 8.
forsakes her children.” In the walls of the slave pen, mothers remained mothers and cared tirelessly for their children by emotionally preparing them for sale, turning the space into a temporary domestic sphere, and fighting consistently to stay with their families.

For these families, the slave auction represented a particular breed of horror. Intrinsic to the sale and re-sale of men, women and children was the undeniable fact that bodies were subject to the desires of buyers and sellers. Motivated by supply, demand and profit, traders disregarded the sanctity of the family and willingly disrupted intimate family ties. Obscured by ledgers and stringent documentation, traders masked this atrocity under the umbrella of capitalist endeavor. For enslaved women, this disregard for family manifested in endlessly painful ways. As described in the fictional narrative of Martha Griffith Browne, the auction marked the moment of separation for the tale’s protagonist and her mother, scarring her youth and continued existence with “an aching heart” for the loss of her mother. Supply side actors, as well as slave buyers, tore families apart, inflicting horrible emotional trauma on enslaved women. In his account of being sold, Charles Ball described the ways his mother pleaded to remain with her son:

My poor mother, when she saw me leaving her for the last time, ran after me, took me down from the horse, clasped me in her arms, and wept loudly and bitterly over me. My master seemed to pity her, and endeavored to soothe her distress by telling her that he would be a good master to me and that I should not want any thing.

Clinging to Charles, his mother begged his new owner to purchase both her and her remaining children. His response was brief and harsh as he commanded her to “give that little negro to its owner.” Separated from his family from that moment onward, Charles confessed “the horrors

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63 Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, a Black Man, Who Lived Forty Years in Maryland, South Carolina and Georgia, as a Slave* (New York: J.S. Taylor, 1837), 17.
64 Ibid.
of that day sank deeply into my heart, and even at this time, though half a century has elapsed, the terrors of the scene return with painful vividness upon my memory."\(^{65}\) The auction represented the culmination of every fear of the ways in which the slave trade could disrupt the family. In the exact moment, buyers and sellers specifically “changed the lives of the enslaved people, determining where they lived and worked and whether they would ever see their families again.”\(^{66}\) This notion extended beyond the separation of family, however, because the slave trade bought and sold a woman’s future children as well by commodifying reproduction.\(^{67}\) Despite the horrors of buying and selling families—be they pre-existing or imagined in the minds of planters—women continued to make their own senses of selves as mothers known.

In addition to familial bonds, enslaved women in slave pens fostered networks in which women shared information, created a common identity and fostered lasting bonds. From coffle or slave ship to slave pen and beyond, enslaved people developed intricate and close-knit communities and networks. These networks largely occurred along gendered lines because traders separated men from women and children and provided myriad structures for the men, women and children that partook in them. First, slave networks created a shared experience amongst individuals brought from disparate regions, and largely stemmed from the fact that many West African societies placed a high value on such networks. Some slaves arrived directly from the African coast, while others were born and raised in the United States or the Caribbean. Regardless of where slaves arrived from, these ties fostered a distinct identity and shared experience amongst slaves within the slave pen. Second, these networks created support structures, or so-called networks of comfort that mitigated the horrors of being bought and sold, \(^{65}\) Ibid.  
\(^{66}\) Williams, *Please Help Me to Find My People*, 100.  
\(^{67}\) For further information on the separation of slave families through sale, please see Heather A. Williams’ *Please Help Me Find My People* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
as well as separation from family members. These networks resulted from living together for weeks, if not months, on end and softened the impact of the outright atrocities of forced migration and confinement. Through support structures and information exchange, these connections engendered enslaved women with a sense of community that carried over to and permeated plantation community structures as well.

Women further witnessed the totalitarian control of the market and the moment of sale through the experience of auction. At the moment of auction, women lost ownership of their bodies, including their reproductive capacity. This ownership of the female form held devastating consequences for women as the auction block brought with it the physical violation of enslaved women—both in the market and after sale. Furthermore, in that moment, “that which was private and personal became public and familiar” as women were judged for their physical attributes and particularly their ability to reproduce. Often, women were “exposed and handled” before and during the auction in order to reveal each inch of her body and to assess her reproductive capacity. To add to this flagrant humiliation and complete dehumanization, traders demonstrated other characteristics of the slaves on the block. As described in one narrative, “[t]hey ‘xamine you just like they do a horse; they look at your teeth, and pull your eyelids back and look at your eyes, and feel you just like you was a horse.” In their inspections, slave buyers “kneed women’s stomachs in an attempt to determine how many children a woman could have.” If a potential buyer felt unsure about the reproductive capacity of a woman, she was taken to a separate, private room with the prospective buyer and a physician.

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68 Deborah G. White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 32.
69 Ibid.
70 Fisk University, Social Science Institute, *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves* (Nashville, TN: Social Science Institute, Fisk University, 1945), 262.
71 White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, 32.
Though largely undocumented by actual participants, this sphere hosted dreadful violations of the female body in the pursuit of confirming her reproductive capacity.\footnote{Ibid.} Under this veil of pseudoscience, traders, auctioneers and slave buyers also subjected women to indecent treatment on the auction block. As re-told by one historian, one auctioneer commanded, “[s]how your neck Betsey. There’s a breast for you; good for a round dozen before she’s done child-bearing.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Women were able to further resist the terrors of slavery through understandings of family, identity, and slave networks. By defending their families and protecting their bodies, women occupied a double existence. Stripped, commodified and sold, women were seen as property while they constructed their own identities in private. Each slave was a woman: a bastion of maternity, femininity and strength who undermined and counteracted the subjection of supply side actors. As a political entity, the enslaved female embodied these coexisting processes. As we will address in the coming chapter, these women further fought their enslavement within the marketplace by engaging and resisting their prospective buyers. Physical resistance, in addition to the perseverance and preservation of feminine ideals, furthered the resistance of women because it was “forged in the conditions of enslavement [and] gained some significance from that same source.”\footnote{Camp, Closer to Freedom, 7.} Despite the ways in which supply side actors constantly attempted to abstract and sell humanity, enslaved women countered their subjection by maintaining their identities as women and mothers in the face of the atrocities of sale. Perhaps the most horrific example of resisting sale and separation from a child comes from a legend told to former slave Lou Smith as a child. According to his mother, there was an enslaved woman “who was the mother of seven children, and when her babies would get about a year or two of

\footnote{Ibid.}

\footnote{Ibid.}

\footnote{Camp, Closer to Freedom, 7.}
When her fourth baby was born, the mother and child were both sent to market and fearing the atrocities of another separation, “one day she said, ‘I just decided I’m not going to let ol’ master sell this baby; he just ain’t going to do it.” She proceeded to kill the infant in order to protect the child from the horrors of bondage and to protect herself from the sadness of parting with another child. Though an extreme example, such narratives reveal the deep-seated anxieties associated with the threat of sale and the desperate ways women could resist and combat their imminent separation from family members.

The sheer (in)humanity of the market becomes evident in the narratives of separation and the willingness of supply-side actors to deny and destroy the human characteristics of enslaved women. Traders persistently converted humans into commodities—in slave pens, on paper, and within their own psyche—because they were motivated by profit alone. The lucrative nature of female slaves in this era of expansion, financialization and abolition created an increased dependence of supply side actors in their bodies, femininity and families. This valuation of and investment in the slave trade inscribed enslaved women with value and it was this perception of value that shaped the market itself. As the industry of creating a self-perpetuating slave population came to the forefront of the supply side in the first decade of the American nineteenth century, financial institutions depended heavily on bodies they would never interact with because their futures and outputs were financially stable and all but guaranteed to appreciate. The notion that slaves represented a more stable investment than other commodities, land or bouillon thus subjected enslaved women to the ruthless commodification of the market while simultaneously assigning great value to their role on the plantation. By profiting from their intrinsic value, traders and financial institutions created a dependence on the bodies they sought to reduce to

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76 Ibid.
monetary value. In essence, this critical valuation, in addition to the continual process of resistance and self-making that occurred within the markets, made women critical to the institution that constantly aimed to strip them of humanity.
Chapter Three:  
Inspection, Negotiation and Sale: Buyers in the Marketplace

The sale of slaves brought planters and prospective buyers from across the growing American South to New Orleans to witness and partake in grand auctions. According to a former slave, traders painstakingly prepared each slave body in anticipation of the buyers’ arrival and inspection. “When the traders knowed men was comin’ to buy, they made the slaves all clean up and greased they mouths with meat skins to look like they’s feedin’ them plenty meat.” For this inspection, traders “lined the women up on one side and the men on the other. A buyer would walk up and down ‘tween them the two rows.”

For women, this moment meant a particular breed of atrocity as prospective buyers assessed their strength, reproductive capacity and character. While traders perpetually abstracted the humanity of slaves by turning slaves into saleable commodities, buyers aimed to purchase the human characteristics of women: femininity, maternity and future labor. In recounting one sale, one narrative described a buyer as he walked between the rows of slaves and “grab[bed] a woman and tr[ied] to throw her down and feel of her to see how she’s put up.” In this moment, the buyer asserted his first symbol of physical domination over his slaves and assessed the strength of the woman. The buyer, satisfied with this display, then asked, “‘[i]s she a good breeder?’”

By considering a woman’s reproductive capacity, slave buyers sought to buy a woman, the fruits of her labors and her progeny; traders effectively obscured this humanity by assigning prices to feminine and human characteristics while buyers pursued these human characteristics.

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
In the era of the abolition of the Atlantic trade, this interest served both an economic and philosophical purchase as planters aimed to create a self-perpetuating slave population. Planters, at the moment of purchase, bought their own perceptions of race, gender, status, and paternalism.

I. Slave Buying: Incentives and Implications:

The second interaction within the slave market occurred with the introduction of a third party: the buyer. In coming to the market, the goal of the buyer was to inspect, negotiate and purchase slave bodies within widely publicized, public auctions. Backed by Northern financial institutions, this financial transaction facilitated the acquisition of slaves, but also represented the first act of physical and psychological domination of the slaves being purchased. Buyers of variant backgrounds came to the New Orleans market to fulfill voids of labor—be it agricultural, domestic or urban. As a port city, New Orleans represented an easily accessible site for Southern buyers, foreign merchants and traders in other regions and thus represented a growing center of the international and domestic slave trade. United by a common goal, prospective buyers came to the market with specific, expensive purchases in mind. From inspection to auction, buyers sought specific traits in the slaves they purchased, and as enslaved women came to the forefront of planter aspirations to expand their own labor supply—and, in theory, create a self-perpetuating slave population—prospective buyers began to seek enslaved women. As we will come to see, each purchase represented a uniquely atrocious process of speculation, inspection and transaction.

In the era of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade, the threat of not replenishing the slave force also shifted the ways in which planters perceived the worth—monetary and ideological—of the female. Following abolition, slave futures arrived not by ship, but in overland coffles and—more often than not—in the form of enslaved women. Not only did purchasing a female slave guarantee a certain quota of labor, but it also promised the production
of more bodies. While purchasing a slave provided economic benefits that necessarily and intentionally equated slaves to a particular sum of money, it was their very humanity that increased the prices that women fetched and made the slave trade a viable and lucrative business.

Every step of the process of sale aimed to display the ideal traits of each body up for sale. In doing so, a human body was perpetually (and increasingly) broken into marketable human characteristics. Within the confines of the marketplace, buyers engaged with the enslaved men and women whose bodies they wished to purchase. Their initial interaction occurred in a type of line-up, where side-by-side individuals were stripped down and rendered, slowly, into the commoditized form. There, buyers—be they planters, merchants, or small farmers on the make—emplotted their hopes and dreams on the bodies of the enslaved. Day after day, buyers came and went, examining each body for blemishes and illness. In the moment of sale, traders and buyers undressed, inspected and unmasked female slaves in order to display their bodies; in turn, this process fundamentally used humiliation as a tactic of subjection. Men, women and children “were separated from friends and relations, publicly demeaned by being forced to display their physical fitness in any number of silly acts of agility, physically violated by a host of semisexual examinations, and reduced to the status of property.”

As noted by Ira Berlin, the roots of slavery and its trade did not have “its origins in a conspiracy to dishonor, shame, brutalize, or otherwise reduce black people’s standing on some perverse scale of humanity—although it did all of those at one time or another.” The moment of sale provides a clear insight into this wretched humiliation and the intentional abstraction of slave humanity.

The process of inspection, auction and sale, shrouded in tradition and perverse theatricality, represented an atrocious “pageantry” defined by negotiated valuation and violation

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of slave bodies.\(^7\) As noted by an abolitionist writer, slaves were “subject to inspection at the mart” for days on end, though “that did not preclude more of it at the sale.”\(^8\) While some purchases occurred within sale-rooms and pens, most occurred at auction. Upon the block, the transmutation of people into commodities was solidified, as the intrusive gaze and whispered proddings were given voice and value by the audience and the audacity of the auctioneer. The auction block represented the culmination of the humiliation and objectification of the bodies in the market. In this moment, the body was reduced to a number in flux as white men competed to assign a price tag to a human body. Almost paradoxically, it was a woman’s unique capacity—her sexuality, reproductive capacity, and femininity—at auction and in that exact moment, the body represented an investment predicated on humanity: a single price by which the entire rest of his or her life would be gauged. This price tag never left the body as each planter endeavored to profit from each purchase and it was at this precise moment that a slave’s future was determined. For women, these atrocities adopted a particularly brutal manifestation as the sexuality, “lewd desires and pecuniary interests” of planters contributed to the intensive observation and inspections of the marketplace.\(^9\) Over time, reproductive capacity became a critical portion of this speculation as well.

Regardless of the specific drive of each buyer, the enslaved body represented myriad ideals, not least among them, were the economics of slave holding. Purchasing a slave represented a stable investment that appreciated over time and could be sold for profit. And it was this appreciation in value, the future lives of slaves—the promise of which not only predicated social and political power in the Deep South, but also was the primary basis of capital


accumulation—that prospective buyers looked to purchase in the slave market. Such futures could take numerous forms, as prospective buyers imagined and transmuted black bodies into bales of cotton, social stature, and future credit. Slaves, if considered a commodity, fluctuated in relative market value. In an era of currency instability, purchasing a slave was a sound investment with virtually guaranteed returns. Buyers, then, did more than just consider an individual’s potential labor-value; they also carefully weighed the potential future value of their human purchases—in the market, as a natural producer of slaves, and as collateral for future credit demands. As noted in *DeBow’s Review*, “‘[slaves are] the first use for savings, and the negro purchased is the last possession to be parted with. If a woman, her children become heirlooms and make the nucleus of an estate.’”\(^{10}\) Slaves not only represented a viable investment, but possibly the single most stable option in an era of commodity power and uncertain currency. Furthermore, buyers’ economic incentives served as an insight into the psychological implications of slave ownership and the slave trade.

In the most immediate sense, slaves provided a labor source. In the early nineteenth century, however, the form and scope of labor was in a state of flux. As noted by Ira Berlin, while many Americans increasingly recognized the obvious “moral stench” of the slave trade, their pretended outrage could not overpower the underlying principle of slavery and the goal of American slavery “to commandeer the labor of the many to make a few rich and powerful.”\(^{11}\) As sugar and cotton expanded within the South, the scale of the slave trade increased as slaves were imported from former tobacco and cotton plantations. Settlers and their families, driven by hope and the promise of land, sought to make their fortunes through agriculture. The settlement of the Lower Mississippi Valley, the massive growth of the cotton industry, and the burgeoning sugar

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industry were then largely aspirational: dreams that could only be realized through the purchase of enslaved men and women. Each investment in the new territory—whether land or slaves—promised some lucre: crop futures, titles to land daily increasing in value, and of course slaves, which, because they enabled all of this, promised the greatest stability of return. Coupled with this process, however, was the growing sense that planters were desperate to create a self-perpetuating slave population. Furthermore, American industry increasingly depended on slave labor in its expanding agricultural and industrial endeavors.

Dispersed throughout Louisiana and the entirety of the South, slaves were selected for different types of work. For women, this work varied from that of men because slaveowners often created and followed a loose sexual division of labor. This division of labor varied based upon the size of plantation, the crop it produced, and the degree of specialization of laborers. Certain types of training like carpentry, stonemasonry, milling and shoemaking were, for the most part, reserved for men. Similarly, arduous physical tasks like chopping wood, clearing land and plowing were also considered the male domain. By comparison, daily fieldwork on plantations was deemed a universal task appropriate for men, women and children. In this circumstance, slave owners “abandoned notions of female difference and fragility when these conflicted with the profit motive.”

Agriculture—as a labor-intensive industry—utilized all laborers; such work depended more upon the availability and strength of the bodies than gendered difference. One observer, upon visiting a plantation in Louisiana, declared in shock that men and women “promiscuously run their ploughs side by side, and day after day… and as far as I was able to learn, the part the women sustained in this masculine employment, was quite as

13 Ibid.
efficient as that of the more athletic sex.”  

On another estate, the same observer witnessed forty of the “largest and strongest” working women who “carried themselves loftily, each having a hoe over the shoulder, and walking with a free, powerful swing, like chasseurs on the march.”

Women often adopted the work typically deemed masculine.

However, other forms of labor—including domestic work like childcare, cooking and maid duties—were specific to women and occupied a strictly female sphere. Women were often trusted with the upbringing of white children, often serving as a wet nurse and nanny throughout adolescence. On smaller plantations, one woman served as both cook and maid; whereas, on larger plantations, multiple women could fill these roles. In this sense, a certain trust was given to black women as they were relegated to the domestic sphere, often coexisting and cohabitating with their white masters. The labors that women performed shifted over time and largely reflected the impetuses of slave ownership—specifically over female bodies.

In this trade in humans, it is easy to lose sight of the humans within it and the sheer barbarity of such transactions. Buyers were not dealing in crop futures or currency because the commodity at hand was intrinsically human. Within the context of this financial transaction, buyers revealed their own understandings of race, gender, and morality, all the while crafting their own identities, defining Southern constructs of family and forming a self-serving social hierarchy of slaves, traders, and buyers. In the years leading surrounding 1808, buyers defined femininity along economic, gendered and racial lines, proving traders inscribed the financial transaction of purchase with personal understandings of race, gender, domesticity, and supremacy. Though this paternalistic and benevolent self-perception existed throughout the history of the trade, the threat of the abolition of the importation of slaves in 1808 provoked a

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new consideration of paternal instinct, as planters turned to women as the source of a self-
perpetuating population.

At the core of the plantation complex was a planter’s self-perception of his own
paternalism. Finding its roots in theories of racial hierarchy and African inferiority, paternal
instinct aimed to support proslavery principles by deeming slavery a mutually beneficial
relationship between slaves and owners. Within the logic of paternalism, slaves were naturally
dependent upon their masters, who bequeathed to them civilization, purpose, and care in return
for their labors. At the heart of this societal conception was the idea that masters were
benevolent, pitiful and kind toward their slaves. This self-perception became central to the
identity of planters who clung to pro-slavery rationale and rhetoric. This ideal of benevolence,
though largely imagined, worked in conjunction with the notion that punishment, sale and
violence were necessary actions working toward the goal of helping inferior beings toward
civilization and socialization. The act of splitting up family through sale and the brutal
punishments on the plantation became matters of necessity, something planters did only in the
most extreme circumstances.16

At the turn of the nineteenth century, this perception increasingly came to recognize a
semblance of humanity within slaves. According to Joyce Chaplin, slavers adopted “progressive
notions about how to treat blacks” by at once recognizing their humanity and denying their
equality.17 Planters continued to view slavers as lesser humans and to construe the trade as a
benevolent, paternalistic practice done for the benefit (and betterment) of the enslaved.
Furthermore, historians have posited that the idea of paternalism was “the product of intimate
contact between African American slaves and resident southern slaveowners and was

16 Michael Tadman, Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South
(Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 111.
South,” Journal of Social History 24 (1990), 300.
‘enormously reinforced’ by the decision to close the international slave trade.”\textsuperscript{18} In other words, the rising interest in humanity reflected the fact that the slave population would remain finite (in theory) after 1808.

Under this self-perception, slavers believed that they embodied “the interlinked claims that masters were emotionally attached to their slaves, encouraged the institution of the family among them, and sold slaves (especially to traders) only in the most extreme of circumstances.”\textsuperscript{19} In a similar way, the slaveholder acknowledged and transferred his own disdain for the slave trade to the trader. Within the minds of planters, a dichotomy existed between “the paternalistic planter, who supposedly abhorred the thought of parting with his people” and “the imagined slave trader…responsible for enticing individuals to part with their slaves against their will; he was the one who tore slave families apart and caused all of the other evils associated with the institution.”\textsuperscript{20} While “the trader did not even pretend to have a paternalistic relationship with his slaves,” planters continued to view themselves as benevolent and paternalistic masters.\textsuperscript{21} By assigning the blame of slavery to the trader, slave holders denied their own guilt in order to justify their own behavior. As noted by one mistress, sale came only from necessity and when she contracted one trader to help her facilitate a sale, she claimed that she had wanted to sell them for years, but simply had not had the heart to do so. The separation of families, she argued, “was my concern for them that I never should have had the resolution to have done it had I been on the spot for it requires more courage than I am mistress of to stand against their entreaties.”\textsuperscript{22} She therefore depended on the slave trader to separate and sell her slaves and, in the long run, the

\textsuperscript{18} Jeffrey Robert Young, \textit{Domesticating Slavery: The Master Class in Georgia and South Carolina, 1670-1837} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 152.
\textsuperscript{19} Tadman, \textit{Speculators and Slaves}, 111.
\textsuperscript{21} Deyle, \textit{Carry Me Back}, 237.
\textsuperscript{22} As quoted within Williams, \textit{Help Me To Find My People}, 96.
sale was exceptionally lucrative for her as “[t]hey [had] more than doubled the interest for I think they have sold most extravagantly high & I am so happy that it is over for though at this distance I felt senseably [sic] when the day arrived that they were sold.”\textsuperscript{23} Despite this rising rhetorical interest in humanitarianism, “slavery remained brutal” as “racial distinctions between supposedly benevolent planters and supposedly needy, grateful slaves became more important than ever before.”\textsuperscript{24}

Through the lens of modernity, the idea of paternalism is deeply flawed as it coincided with the atrocities of the slave trade and plantation life. As noted by Walter Johnson, the moniker of paternalism “seems a patent fraud, a counterfeit worn threadbare by repeated gullible acceptances” in which paternity (and family altogether) have been replaced by the perverse and sadistic perceptions of masters.\textsuperscript{25} Slaveowners continued to view their slaves as inferior, if not as chattel or fungible commodities. The self-perceptions of the rising planter class aimed to recreate and reinforce social and racial strata. With each purchase, white men enforced their social and cultural domination over black bodies, female bodies, and entire families. The ownership of a slave represented not only wealth accumulation, but also the social capital that permeated and defined Southern society. Owning slaves embodied different fantasies for each planter. For some, purchasing a slave promised social mobility and the prospect of wealth within the frontier economy; for others, a slave family represented an investment to be passed down from generation to generation; for others still, the slave body came to reflect the lewd desires of their prospective masters.

At the moment of sale, buyers purchased far more than just a commodity. Buyers sought and purchased ideals of domesticity and femininity. As noted by Martha Griffith Browne, it was

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Young, Domesticating Slavery, 149.
her protagonist’s value as a domestic servant that separated her from her mother though she
“longed and begged to be sold with her.”\textsuperscript{26} Though her mistress willingly sold her mother, she
refused to sell them together she “considered [Martha] too valuable as a house-girl.”\textsuperscript{27} Tied up in
the value of a domestic female slave was a Southern conception of racial hierarchy on the
plantation, in the household and in the South. In buying slaves, planters purchased their own
superiority and asserted their own status as a landed gentleman and the head of house. This
social capital permeated all realms of the institution of slavery as well as the slave trade. Though
traders and buyers often denied and ignored the sanctity of the slave family in the moment of
sale, family served as the basis of organization on plantations. Enslaved women alone held the
capacity to create these families through reproduction and slave buyers purchased the notion of
family and reproduction. Thus, the interest in women was inextricably linked to the desire to
create and mirror family life on the plantation. As noted by Michael Tadman “[a]t the very core
of the proslavery ideology was the insistence that masters sponsored and encouraged the family
institution among slaves,” when, in actuality, slavers only kept families together when it was
economically viable or in order to perpetuate a plantation’s own slave population.\textsuperscript{28} Slave buyers
purchased the aspiration of such families when they bought enslaved women because for each
slave owner, no matter their societal standing, the slave family—imagined in the guise of a
female slave on the auction block—was a guarantor of future returns.

It is crucial to note the fundamental economic and societal basis upon which a family
unit’s worth was cultivated: the children of a slave were the rightful property of the owner. When
a woman was sold, so too were her future children. However, this did not result in the sale of
family units unless it was an economically viable action. Instead, the economic viability of the

\textsuperscript{26} Browne, \textit{Atutobiography of a Female Slave}, 310.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Tadman, \textit{Speculators and Slaves}, 3
slave family often came from the controversial and contested idea of slave breeding. Regardless of whether slave breeding existed as an antebellum Southern institution, buyers sought reproduction amongst their slaves. As noted by one narrative, a slave buyer would select a female slave and then “they’d pick out a strong, young nigger boy ’bout the same age and buy him. When they got them home he’s say to them, ‘I want you two to stay together. I want young niggers.’”29 The commodification of the family unit and of motherhood clung to imagined family ideals in the marketplace and on plantations but this did not apply to maintaining pre-existing families at the moment of sale as slave sale readily destroyed families.

As noted by Solomon Northup, slave buyers willingly separated slave families. When one man came to the market to purchase a male slave, he designed to buy Randall, a “little fellow [who] was made to jump, and run across the floor, and perform many other feats, exhibiting his activity and condition.”30 Throughout the process, his mother wept loudly, and “besought the man not to buy him, unless he also bought her self” and her daughter as well.31 “The man answered that he could not afford it, and then Eliza burst into a paroxysm of grief, weeping plaintively. Freeman turned round to her, savagely, with his whip in his uplifted hand, ordering her to stop her noise, or he would flog her. He would not have such work—such snivelling; and unless she ceased that minute, he would take her to the yard and give her a hundred lashes. Yes, he would take the nonsense out of her pretty quick…”32 Despite her pleas and tears, purchasing the family was not economically viable for the man and he therefore only bought the young boy. “The bargain was agreed upon, and Randall must go alone.”33 Taken from his mother and sister, the boy was shipped away with the buyer. Of course, in many cases like this, economic

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29 Rawick, ed. The American Slave: Texas Narratives
30 Solomon Northup, Twelve Years a Slave (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 80
31 Ibid.
32 Northup, Twelve Years a Slave, 81.
33 Ibid.
incentives separated families, meaning that the fate of family units—and in many ways their very construction—hinged on the financial calculations of buyers and traders. In other words, the family and women’s bodies were valued, and to a large degree defined, by the market calculus of would-be slaveowners. All this, despite the crucial social and cultural role that family increasingly played in the American South.\textsuperscript{34}

Not surprisingly, a woman’s entry in the domestic realm of the plantation also served the fetishized, sexualized concepts of white dominion over black women. Paternalism was often coupled in theory with the sexualization of the black female body. Despite the family-oriented, paternal desire to subordinate, pity and in turn support the enslaved bodies that men owned, the slave trade was also historically linked to the sexual proclivities of men and the tendency to convert these bodies into fetishized objects. This “relentlessly sexualized” vision of the trade emphasized subordination along racial and gendered lines by forcing slaves into a doubled commodification as black women.\textsuperscript{35} This notion, as well as the treatment of these women on the plantation, further undermined the family unit and the stressed a sexualized vision of physical dominion. In order to create the family that planters imagined themselves to be the head of, they required female bodies to recreate the black female. This commoditized black female sexuality. Which was then doubled down on by the fetishization of black female bodies as object of desire for white planters.

Often, many women on the plantation became the victims of their masters whose dominion over their bodies extended well into the realm of sexuality and family. This sexualization of the female body commenced in the moment of inspection and sale, but existed throughout the history of slavery and resulted in the notorious tales of concubinage, rape and

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{35} Baptist, “Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States,” 1621.
children being enslaved by their own biological father.\textsuperscript{36} A separate type of slave also commonly existed on the plantation: the ‘fancy girl.’ Purchased as a concubine for the owner, these women often occupied the domestic sphere and served a predominantly sexual role. Such ‘fancy girls’ garnered prices three times that of women sold strictly as field laborers. These women—predominant in French, Spanish and American eras in New Orleans—were consistently judged along aesthetic lines. Often, the rhetoric used to describe them in correspondence only lightly veiled the horrific potential each sale implicated. In one undated account, written in New Orleans to a Richmond trading partner, one man referenced one such woman: “‘[t]he fancy girl, from Charlattsville (sic), will you send her out or shall I charge you $1100 for her. Say quick, I wanted to see her… I thought that an old Robber might be satisfied with two or three maids.’”\textsuperscript{37} The implication is clear: the girl is a sexual object to be passed among men. Within the house and throughout the plantation, rape was common. Often, this form of physical assault, in addition to the traditional forms of physical abuse (e.g. caning, whipping, etc.) served both a threat against disobedience and a form of physical punishment.\textsuperscript{38} This totalitarian control, fetishization and inscriptions of white, Southern domesticity commenced in the inspection and auctions of the

\textsuperscript{36} As noted by Dorothy Sterling, New Orleans also played host to a unique practice known as \textit{placage}. Stemming from French colonial roots, the practice consisted of literally ‘placing’ a free women of color into the ‘protection’ of a white male. Often light-skinned, educated and celibate, these women were be introduced into New Orleans society within \textit{quadroon balls} in search of such a ‘protector.’ These women represented a distinct caste apart from traditional urban slaves and were rare from Africa. Most were born within the colonies and were never treated as traditional slaves (as the aforementioned ‘fancy girls’ often were), but strictly as objects of companionship and sexuality. The resulting relationships often lasted briefly, resulted in children considered \textit{gens de couleur libres} and guaranteed the woman “comfortable circumstances” of continued financial support. Though these women were similarly subject to sexual violation and forced companionship, they are historically cast as a sect separate from the slave women encountered within this project. For further information, see Dorothy Sterling, \textit{We Are Your Sisters} (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984).

\textsuperscript{37} Edward Baptist, “‘Cuffy,’ ‘Fancy Maids,’ and ‘One-Eyed Men’: Rape, Commodification and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States,” \textit{American Historical Review} 106 (2001), 1644.

\textsuperscript{38} Baptist, “Rape, Commodification, and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States,” 1619.
slave market. As noted by Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei, femininity “singled them out for special exploitation and abuse under slavery;” on the plantation, slave owners and overseers used rape as a threat in order to “demoralize, dehumanize, and control slave women.” The prevalent atrocities of rape and sexual assault permeated every spectrum of slavery, but commenced within the trade itself. Such violations were emblematic of the atrocities that took place within the markets, including that of New Orleans. In many senses, the notion that “commodification swelled its actors with the power of rape” began in the initial interactions between prospective buyer and slave.

The ritualistic stripping of the female bodies reflected this humiliation and instilled the slave market with initial “symbols of sexual dominance.” At public sales, women were paraded onto the stage, stripped to the waist, and offered to prospective buyers for further inspection. Within these inspections, “interested parties were given the opportunity to physically examine every aspect of the female’s body, commonly groping and placing fingers and hands in selected orifices.” The moment of inspection (at sale or before) was theatrical and humiliating. The physical stripping of female slaves represented a frequent and violating form of inspection. This stripping—permissible under the guise of science—aimed to reveal the physical attributes of a slave, display any signs of illness and measure her reproductive capacity. It was, without a doubt, inextricably linked to the fact that black women represented deeply sexualized forms and fetish objects for many men who purchased them. In the case of one woman named Pauline—a “statuesque quadroon beauty with flashing black eyes and pale golden skin with whom her master had become violently infatuated”—the master fundamentally purchased her beauty and

41 Walker, No More, No More, 78.
42 Ibid.
sexuality in the moment of sale. In this exact moment, buyers revealed the “dual invocation of slave as property and person [in] an effort to wed reciprocity and submission, intimacy and domination, and the legitimacy of violence and the necessity of protection.”\(^{43}\) The paradoxes of ownership thus culminate in the moment of sale because buyers are at once perceiving value in the humanity—be it sexuality, maternity, domesticity, etc.—and purchasing it. Furthermore, the economic and social implications of these purchases cannot be separated because “white males owned their black female sexual partners” and purchased them at market.\(^{44}\)

Though humanity was willingly parceled and auctioned daily in the market for slave buyer consumption, neither the slave trade, nor its actors, were humane to slaves. On ledgers and within official records, black bodies were transformed into commodities, reduced to prices and future values. This commodification rested in the moments of inspection and auction as traders simultaneously obscured the humanity of slaves and sold the human characteristics of enslaved women. In actuality, the perceptions and self-perceptions of oppressive actors—and perhaps, more importantly, human interactions (and not simply abstract market forces) drove the trade. For every party involved, the principal racial, socioeconomic, and fundamentally sociosexual understandings played a critical role in the treatment of enslaved female bodies within the context of the slave market. The female body served as a space upon which slave prospective buyers inscribed and then purchased their notions of whiteness, masculinity and family. Through this oppressive and objectifying process of trade and commodification, self-perception defined the physical and psychological treatment of slave women within the market, and was central to the process of valuation. The moral justification for the trade by slave owners deemed that they were not malicious by nature, but rather, they were deeply misguided and desperate in the face of an inhumane trade. Through analysis of such perceptions, it is evident that the study of “‘[n]egro


\(^{44}\) Ibid.
speculation’… unlocks much of the mental world of masters, but seems to be equally important in penetrating the world of slaves.”

The single transaction of slave sale served as a vehicle for the wants, desires and understandings of buyers. In the moment of sale, buyers purchased the sexuality, domesticity and maternity of women—in essence, their humanity. In this commodification and sale of human characteristics, women were at once valued for their humanity and reduced to the price they fetched. This moment also represented a distinct experience for women because it embodied a woman’s “actual and imagined reproductive labor and their unique forms of bodily suffering (notably sexual exploitation) that most distinguished their lives from men’s.” In this paradox, enslaved women resisted and denied the ideas of race, gender and society that slavers projected onto their bodies.

II. The Slave Experience: Female Slaves, Self-Perception and Resisting the Master:

Within the confines of the market sphere, too, a dueling identity-making occurred. By forcing slave women to view themselves as racialized and sexualized beings, self-valuations of femininity, freedom and family were also constructed. Slaves crafted their own self-perceptions in response to their own captivity and existed within the parameters of bondage set forth by planters. In this sense, agency, resistance and independence were exercised within, and not outside, the constraints of slavery. The marketplace—and particularly the processes of speculation, auction and sale—represented the pinnacle of such physical and psychological commodification and constraint. In this sphere, “slaveholders strove to create controlled and controlling landscapes that would determine the uses to which enslaved people put their

45 Tadman, Spectators and Slaves, 9
bodies.”47 For slaveholders then, the marketplace represented a moment of aspiration and future, while the moment represented a disparate sentiment for the slave.

While traders abstracted a woman’s humanity and buyers aimed to purchase these human characteristics, both parties fundamentally reduced enslaved women to price tags. However, “[e]nslaved people…had their own ideas, quite different from the masters' ideas about what slaves represented and meant in their own market world. They could not only stand up and rebuke but could resist and even kill the creators of the conditions that made them commodities.”48 Enslaved women resisted their potential masters in the marketplace in two critical ways. First, women physically fought off her oppressor. The accounts of such resistance by supply or demand side actors are few and far between and instead stem from the few slave narratives from this era. Regardless of the specifics of the interactions of resistance, one theme is consistent: enslaved women who fought back received violent and immediate retribution. According to one account, one woman named Martha Dickson retaliated against a prospective buyer in 1809. As he examined every inch of her body, the woman became increasingly infuriated. At one point, he forcibly opened her mouth and put his fingers inside. Immediately, “‘she bit his finger to the bone’” according to an account by a fellow slave in the market.49 In response, the bleeding man beat the woman to the ground and kicked her in the stomach, killing her unborn child. Physical resistance, though not unheard of, was rarely documented and always ended in punishment. However, a second type of resistance occurred daily in the market sphere: that is, the preservation of the inner self.

At sale and beyond, each woman fought to maintain her inner identity and conceptions of personhood. By bringing cultural concepts of family, femininity and bondage to the marketplace,

47 Camp, “Pleasures of Resistance,” 534.
women assigned a separate form of value to their lives. This value—devoid of price tags or auction blocks—represented the ways in which women continued to fashion their senses of self in spite of their bondage. Women, as noted by Stephanie Camp, experience “oppression through the body” and “the body becomes an important site not only of suffering but also (and therefore) of resistance, enjoyment, and potentially, transcendence.”\(^{50}\) Through subtle resistance, women transferred and crafted their own senses of religion, community and femininity within the finite space of the slave pens. Women carried with them defined senses of morality, heritage and family as well, forming bonds amongst each other and recreating a domestic space to help their families cope with imminent sale and the likely separation such sales brought. This creation of community “meant survival—emotional, psychological, and often physical survival.”\(^{51}\) By surviving the slave experience and bringing concepts of race, gender and hierarchy to the auction block, enslaved women more than any other enslaved group resisted the “constant assaults from the white world, which did everything it could to make them ‘good slaves’” because it was women who remained responsible for the family and the integrity of the female body.\(^{52}\) The enslaved woman, in her subtle resistance to encroaching powers, reflected the constant project of self-making in the market. Thus, regardless of their enslavement, women exercised agency and lived their lives apart from bondage. In the moment of sale, women protected their inner selves even if physical resistance was not an option.

In engaging buyers (and in order to placate sellers), women purported one face and protected another. To her potential master, she “was to seem accommodating and tract-able…smiling and ready to please.”\(^{53}\) At the threat of physical violence, she acted like a sweet, docile
and willing servant. Traders aimed to feign this good demeanor by threatening slaves with physical violence. Words and phrases, memorized before each inspection, created a mask of happy submission for the consumption of buyers in order to guarantee “buyers would never hear the rebellious spirit that lurked beneath a newly greased skin.”\(^{54}\) One buyer noted the decidedly eager nature of female slaves in the New Orleans market, including one who shouted “‘[a]chètez moi. Je suis bonne cuisinière et couturière. Achètez moi!’”\(^{55}\) Though to the buyer this eagerness seemed to stem from the slave’s disdain for confinement, the plea likely reflected horrific treatment in the slave pens and masked the fears and atrocities of sale. By masking such fears, an enslaved woman maintained her inner self. This skill mastered by enslaved women represented “protection of the inner person.”\(^{56}\) In this sense, a “black mother taught her daughter to develop two faces.” She purported one face to her potential buyer in order to protect her physical body from the hand of traders and buyers. Simultaneously, “she was to have a secret place inside herself full of self-respect… there was nothing dishonorable in deceiving the slaveholder.”\(^{57}\)

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\(^{54}\) Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery*, 39  
\(^{55}\) Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South*, 321.  
\(^{56}\) Harris, “Dehumanization of Slave Women,” 2.  
\(^{57}\) Ibid.
Epilogue:

Throughout this narrative, the point of sale represented a solitary economic transaction with deep moral and societal implications. In peeling away the layers of slave pens, inspection and the auction block, supply and demand side actors etched the bodies of women with their own the wants, desires, and understandings. These women—auctioned as commodities, laborers, mothers—were simultaneously denied recognition of their humanity and parceled and sold for their decidedly human characteristics. As the abolition of the Atlantic trade came and went, women became the perceived source of new labor and, in turn, a self-perpetuating slave population. In the market, their value as productive, as well as reproductive, laborers became a focal point for buyers and sellers alike, assigning a monetary sum to the most intimate female possessions: femininity, maternity, and sexuality. Their subjection and commodification did not begin in the market, nor did it end upon exit, but the market regardless stands as a microcosm for the brutality, theatricality and atrocity of life as an enslaved woman.

Often, women have been an afterthought in the study of slavery, conflating male narratives and histories with that of women and children as well. In actuality, women experienced slavery—and specifically the slave trade—in a deeply biased way as a result of their double subjection. The central era of this study brought the female body to the forefront of trader, financier, merchant and planter minds as a lucrative commodity and investment. Inherently, this status as commodity—though a highly valued commodity—fundamentally monetized and assigned a price to the female body and, in doing so, represented a failure to recognize the sheer humanity of the enslaved population. This project largely focuses on the ways in which the abolition of the Atlantic trade coincided with a rising interest in the feminine characteristics of enslaved women: femininity, reproduction, and domesticity. These central
characteristics served as the roots of a woman’s identity, self-valuation and resistance. However, these traits simply cannot be extricated from the economic terms in which traders and planters considered these women.

As a result, this study attempts to remarry the social and economic histories of slavery through the lens of the slave market in New Orleans. By using the central transaction of sale as a spatial and temporal framework, it becomes evident that such monetary transactions were inscribed with traders’ and planters’ conceptions of race, gender, family and class. The marketplace, as the host of these interactions, represents the cross section of a vast constellation of social and cultural understandings of largely disparate groups; northern financiers, urban traders, planters in the expanding west, and slaves united and interacted in this sphere of commerce, thus inscribing each transaction with much greater implications. These actors obscured the humanity of enslaved women by reducing their existence to notes within ledgers and price tags; the nuanced modes of valuation placed enormous monetary worth on the human characteristics of the bodies of enslaved women, ultimately placing their humanity on the auction block. This paradoxical process also extended to the rising world of finance in the early 19th century, whose existence both further subjected enslaved women, but also depended heavily on their worth as both paper commodities and bodies capable of sustaining the institution of slavery.

Historians tend to extricate the rise of American capitalism from the study of slavery, despite the fact that the two processes occurred contingently. This project not only aims to remarry the social history of slavery to its economic components, but also contends that the American capitalist model depended heavily on its roots in slavery. In other words, slavery was a central component in the development of the American economy and international commerce. The flow of capital from the North that funded slavery’s expansion circulated crops abroad and generated massive revenue for northern financiers, ultimately blurring the lines between a
capitalist North and slave South. That is not to say that America was not operating in a free market capitalist model, but rather, that this model relied on the large segment of society that was forced into unfree or coerced labor. Thus, in echoing scholars like Seth Rockman and Edward Baptist, this project states that the burgeoning financial realm embraced and succeeded in part due to the practice of slavery. The market sensibilities of traders and buyers alike also reflect the intertwined nature of finance and the slave trade using the slave market as a site of commodity import, price fluctuation, and exchange. In this formula, the market further serves as the one locus in which financiers, traders, merchants, buyers, and slaves co-existed and contributed to the global market.

The deeply intertwined nature of slavery, finance and agriculture also set the stage for the consequent economic booms and busts of the nineteenth century. Beginning at the turn of the century, America’s cotton kingdom pushed westward rapidly. By the 1820s, slave-grown cotton brought immense wealth to the new states of the South and pushed the boundaries of the nation westward under the drive of economic and agricultural ambition. The expansion of cotton and its inextricable links to northern finance, however, occurred on the backs of enslaved men and women and fueled the Industrial Revolutions in the North and in Great Britain. This interdependence of economies linked disparate markets, nations, and commercial endeavors because, as noted by James Oakes, “behind every task assigned to every slave stood the mill owners and factory hands of Old and New England.”

In this era, unsurprisingly, the domestic market in slaves flourished, expanding the New Orleans market well beyond the scope of its international predecessor well into the nineteenth century. This rapid growth of slavery, agriculture, and finance was not without economic turmoil. In the coming years, the boom-and-bust cycles of a free market economy resulted in subsequent economic crises in the forms of the

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Panics of 1819 and 1837, both of which were deeply affected by the expansion, and financing of plantation based slavery.

The New Orleans market, though a finite temporal and spatial location, encompassed the roots, history and trajectory of slavery. From each sale, one can view the driving forces of a new planter class expanding westward, the profit drive of traders, the deep-seated racism and perceived paternalism of Southern society and the rise of American capitalism. The market embodied the intimate bonds of capitalism, paternalism, racism, and resistance in the early nation. These implications—economic or otherwise—were inscribed into the enslaved bodies, who carried this nuanced price tag and their own conceptions of identity through each transaction they navigated. Slave bodies were simultaneously an economic basis and deeply human actors; to separate such distinctions is to relegate the slave experience to one academic domain, when, in actuality, the narrative belongs in the interwoven network of economics, social history and national memory. In this sense, slavery—as a study and an experience—is at once a capitalist endeavor and the most atrocious human experience.
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