

Understanding the Culture of Slave Commodification,
1820-1860

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I. INTRODUCTION

*“Robbed of the markers of their social existence, the violence of commodification signaled to captives—stripped of material adornment, physically displaced, torn from the social embrace of kin and community—that they had been doomed to social annihilation”¹ (Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*)*

At the height of the slave trade in the United States, the slave was not recognized as a human being. The black silhouette that stamped advertisements and pamphlets, that posed on auction blocks and was objectified by the gaze of the buyers, was not recognized to be that of a mother, a father, or a child. Instead, the slave was likened to a market good, an object of trade. Literature such as a Stephanie Smallwood’s *Saltwater Slavery* and Walter Johnson’s *Soul By Soul* document the process by which the slave was transformed into a commodity, ripped from home, exposed to the Middle Passage and subsequently a new world. The study begins with the idea that to commodify is to recognize someone or something as a product that can be bought or sold. For slaves this process entails being stripped of all human signifiers, and being likened to a marketable product. Although numerous studies have focused on the slave as a commodity², less attention has been paid to the methods and conditions by which slave owners and the slave market at large came to regard the slave as a commodity. By analyzing the deeper culture of slave commodification the paper argues that the American slave market allowed buyers and sellers to detach themselves from the immorality of the process, thus giving way for economic and social growth.

II. GROUNDS FOR COMMODIFICATION

¹ Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage From Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) 60.

² Stephanie Small’s *Saltwater Slavery*, and Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death* discuss the status of the slave as a commodity at length.

Be it enacted, by the governor, council and burgesses of this present general assembly, and it is hereby enacted by the authority of the same; That from and after the passing of this act, all negro, mulatto, and Indian slaves, in all courts of judicature, and other places, within this dominion, shall be held, taken, and adjudged, to be real estate (and not chattels;) and shall descend unto the heirs and widows of persons departing this life, according to the manner and custom of land of inheritance, held in fee simple. (Anne I, Queen of England)³

Recent scholarship has largely accepted the relationship between the presence of racial superiority and outright racism in the American institution of slavery. Yet, glancing back to mid 18th century Virginia where the concept of slave commodification was in full force, argument for the roots of slave commodification can be made outside of the realm of race. Many of the sources of slave commodification are indirect consequences of the American Revolution: the development of the domestic slave trade, decreasing agricultural production, and the economics of slavery. For most white Americans, the legacy of the American Revolution remains the image of patriotic Americans liberating themselves from the rule of Britain. Moral and enlightened, the legacy of the Revolution was beneficial to whites but would prove to worsen the situation of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the United States as it indirectly contributed to the domestic slave trade. After the Revolution, primogeniture,⁴ or the succession rights of the first-born child, was eliminated from law, which led to the dismantling of many large slave estates. Subsequently there were large numbers of slaves for sale, promoting buyers from the deeper South and the West to flood Virginia markets. Much of the moral sentiments revolving around the Revolution led to the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade, turning

³ William Walter Henning. The Statutes At Large: Being a Collection of All The Laws of Virginia, From the First Session Of the Legislature in the Year 1619. vols I and II. (New York: R & W & G Bartow, 1823)

⁴ Steven Deyle, Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life, (New York: Oxford University Press 2005) 35.

Virginia into a “major slave-trading region.”⁵ Additionally, the moral sentiments around the Revolution contributed to the end of the Atlantic Slave Trade, which meant that slaves would have to be purchased in the domestic market. Furthermore, the British defeat opened up westward expansion for America, which would require slaves to fill the labor for the new land.

The first slaves in Virginia arrived in 1619 at the port of Jamestown. By 1774, unique from other slave colonies, Virginia’s slave population was experiencing an unprecedented rate of natural increase, leaving the state with a significant number of slaves and surplus slaves.⁶ In 1803, with the push from Thomas Jefferson, Virginia law declared that slaves imported from abroad would be outlawed. While based on his selfish economic desires and not the well being of the slave population, this declaration was very difficult to enforce. Due to the high demand of slaves in the colony, slave smuggling and illegal importation continued to be practiced. Though violation of this law would result in the freedom of the slave and punishment for the smuggler, the profit incentive motivated men to continue. The incentive was so enticing that between 1800 and 1860, approximately 150,000 slaves were imported into Virginia.⁷ The slaves who were illegally brought into the United States and Virginia were not the only slaves being bought and sold within the colony. In fact, a domestic slave trade was beginning to accommodate the internal demand for slaves and slave labor. Two factors made the domestic slave trade especially lucrative and appealing to Virginians: The United States

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ United States. The Library of Virginia. *Slavery in Virginia: A Selected Bibliography*. By David Feinberg. The Library of Virginia, Feb. 2007. Web. 15 Apr. 2013.

acquisition of Louisiana Territory in 1803, and the growth of the cotton industry in the Deep South.

When Jefferson acquired the Louisiana Territory from the French in 1803 this vast area, 828,000 square miles, of land attracted many whites who migrated to the region with their slaves. This land, which doubled the size of the United States at the time, still demanded a significant number of slaves, and in order to “meet this demand recourse was had, principally, to the exhausted plantations of Virginia and Maryland.”⁸ Jefferson, who initially expressed desires of diffusion, resettling the slave population into the western frontier, hoped that the Louisiana Purchase would not become an area of accumulated slaves. In an 1807 letter to a friend, Mr. Gallatin, Jefferson wrote,

“I am glad to find we have 4,000,000 acres west of Chafalaya. How much better to have every 160 acres settled by an able-bodied militia man, than by purchasers with their hordes of negroes, to add weakness instead of strength.”⁹

Yet Jefferson’s hopes failed to come to fruition, as slaves who were already owned, and those who were circulating within the domestic slave trade were “sold down the river” to Louisiana territory.

Slave labor in the newly acquired territory was only hastened by the new agricultural demands. The tobacco crops had mostly run their course and prices had declined significantly. Towards the end of the 18th century cotton production was also in decline until Eli Whitney and the cotton gin revolutionized the industry in 1793. The cotton gin, which led to a surge in cotton production, increased the demand for slave labor as it was commonly believed that, “the white man could not endure work under a

⁸ Winston Collins, The Domestic Slave Trade of the Southern States (New York: Kennikat Press, Inc. 1969) 23.

⁹ Thomas Jefferson, The Works of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Townsend Mac Coun., 1884) 222.

tropical sun, while the organism of the Negro was especially adapted to it.”¹⁰ To coin the phrase of Winfield Collins, slaves and cotton were “inseparably associated,” and it was well recognized that the fruitful production of the crop was due to the presence of the slaves in the south. An 1859 article in the *Richmond Enquirer* made the equation that during the 19th century “the price of cotton it is well known pretty much regulates the price of slave in the South, and a bale of cotton and a likely nigger are about well balanced in the scale of pecuniary appreciation.”¹¹

The need for slaves for the domestic trade is evident in The Louisiana Purchase and high demand for slave labor. Occurring around the same time were changes in the status of Virginia as a slave colony and an agricultural producer. Primarily a tobacco-producing colony as a result of British influence,¹² much of the Virginia’s land had been depleted. While Jefferson pushed for the cultivation of more viable crops such as rice and olive oil, or even maple sugar because it would not require slave labor, the reality was that the value of Virginia’s land and slaves was quickly declining from its previous worth. Combined with a slave population that was too large for the state to utilize, Virginia began to see its plantations and value of slaves plummeting. In 1817, land in Virginia, for example, was valued at \$206,000,000 and slaves at \$300 each, and by 1829 these values had deteriorated to \$80,000,000 and \$150, respectively.¹³ Conversely, the value of land and slaves in Louisiana and the other states in the newly acquired territories southern, providing the perfect conditions for a symbiotic relationship between the two

¹⁰ *Richmond Enquirer*, July 29, 1859. As cited in Collins, *Domestic Slave Trade*, 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹² Christa Dierksheide, "The Great Improvement and Civilization of That Race" Jefferson and the "Amelioration" of Slavery, Ca. 1770–1826." *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6.1 (2008) 178

¹³ Collins, *Domestic Slave Trade*, 26.

regional markets. The Virginia Legislature of 1832 emphasized the value of slaves as determined by the demand of the southwest:¹⁴

It is probable that more people were sold from the Old Dominion now work in the fields of the plantations in the West than were sold to Virginia during the entire history of the international slave trade. The price of Virginia's slaves was determined not so much by the amount of wheat, tobacco, or cotton they might draw forth...but by their predicted valuation by the planters of Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, Alabama, or Missouri.¹⁵

Southerners, with no other place to turn besides the illegal Atlantic slave trade, embraced the cheap price of slaves from Virginia, producing an immensely profitable domestic slave trade between the South and the Border States. Ulrich Phillips, the Southern historian and economist of slavery, hypothesized the conditions under which slave labor was a profitable investment: “scarcity of, and a high price for, free labor; a system of agricultural organization and a set of crops that permitted the strict supervision of slaves; and a low price for slaves.”¹⁶ In recognizing the correlation between slaves and these variables, Robert William Fogel acknowledged Phillips as the first to stress the similarity between slavery and the stock market.¹⁷

In justifying the move further west and south, a plantation owner from the Chesapeake, Paul Cameron, explained the desirability of the migration in a correspondence with his father. He points out the following:

Crop not being all out, I could in no part of this immediate county have purchased lands for the settlement of all of our people on our plantation. I now get a plantation with 1100 acres open land, 2 new cotton houses, with good gins in each, 2 screws in good order, a mill sufficient for the care of the place...¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ As quoted in Roger G. Kennedy, *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. 2003) 109.

¹⁶ Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time On The Cross* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company Inc., 1974) 60.

¹⁷ Ibid., 67.

¹⁸ James Cameron. Letter to Duncan Cameron. 27 Nov. 1844. *Plantation Letters*. Nov. 2009. Web. 11 Dec. 2012.

Throughout the South, planters moved from the position of considering the slaves as part of the plantation community towards the mentality that slaves were another representation of property. A slave owner could liken the slave to a stock or a bond, an investment likely to accumulate wealth over time. In understanding the economic value of slavery and the slave trade, Southerners were well attuned to the fact that their livelihood rested on the labor of the slaves. James Huston in his text, *Calculating the Value of the Union*, identifies two Southern justifications for slavery and the slave trade in what he refers to as the social economy of slavery, or “the set of ideas and social practices that southerners used to justify their economic arrangements.”¹⁹ The first justification is the well-known racial superiority of whites over blacks, shielding whites from material deprivation.²⁰ The second justification was the free labor ideology, which credits “intelligent labor and social mobility via property acquisition.”²¹ However the irony in this second justification is that the South’s intelligent labor was obtained by virtue of their slaves. Clearly, slave owners had become dependent enough on the slave to see slaves’ fruits of labor as their own.

In their blurred distinction, Southern slave owners voluntarily, yet compulsively, came to regard slaves as a currency, as the ticket to their prosperity. Some might argue that they did so out of racism, and while this argument is not to be refuted, it is probably that racial sentiments on an institutional scale manifested from the dehumanization of blacks as a result of this precise commodification.

¹⁹ James L. Huston, *Calculating The Value of The Union: Slavery, Property Rights, And the economic Origins of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 38.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

III. MECHANISMS OF COMMODIFICATION

A. Transportation

In the midst of the Industrial Revolution, industrial developments enabled United States expansion, revitalization of the domestic slave trade, and provided further mechanisms for commodifying slaves. John Fitch and Robert Fulton introduced the steamboat, which in 1809 transformed the American economy, offering affordable, reliable, and a speedy means of navigating the rivers westward. Though developed on the Hudson River, “it was on the Mississippi that this innovation achieved its swiftest and most impressive successes.”²² As a result of the steamboat and its subsequent popularity, transportation costs plummeted.²³

The use of steam also brought about the production of steam-powered railroads in the U.S. Though the railroad was not as cheap nor as fast as the steamboat, “southern enthusiasm for railroads led to construction of more than 9,500 miles of railroad track by 1860.”²⁴ Though transportation enabled the easy movement of property, many slaves who were forced to endure the Second Middle Passage walked, chained together, to the South. The chaining of the slaves was to prevent all possibility of rebellion:

In the transportation of slave the utmost precautions were necessary to prevent revolt or escape. When a coffle or drove was formed to undertake the march of seven or eight weeks to the South the men would be chained, two by two, and a chain passing through the double file and fastening from the right and left hands of those on either side of the chain.”²⁵

²² Robert William Fogel, Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery (New York: Norton, 1989) 67.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Collins, Domestic Slave Trade, 101.

During the internal slave trade, many slave owners made the choice to purchase new slaves upon their arrival in the newly opened up states. Yet some chose to transport their slaves, which, though more time consuming, eliminated the risks of having to purchase and acclimate a new stock of slaves. The experiences of the slave, as well as insight into the thoughts of slave owners, are exposed in a series of letters between a father and a son, members of the Cameron family, a slave owning family from the Chesapeake region migrating to Alabama. The correspondence reveals that a man by the name of Mr. Laws agreed to transport the Paul Cameron's slaves to Alabama at a price of six or seven dollars per head. Though transporting the slave would not be easy, Paul wrote to his father, "they could not have rented any slaves better than their own and [he] would not buy any slaves from that part of the country."²⁶ Paul was particularly concerned with ensuring that his slaves were well taken care of during the move South. He even went so far as to report that "I stayed out with them both nights and reduced things to be a good system. I left them well organized both for the march and the encampment."²⁷ To have something go wrong during this migration would prove devastating to Paul, as each slave is valued at a significant amount of money.

Upon arriving in Green County, Paul reported that all of his slaves had arrived, with only one, Edmond, in poor condition. Yet, as he would come to see, the transportation of slaves was very damaging to their health and morale. In October 1846 he wrote, "At least one half of my efficient force are not capable of performing much labour. The least exposure of those who have been sick, produced a return of disease."²⁸ While Paul's attention to the care of his slaves may have caused their status as

²⁶ James Cameron. 27 Nov. 1844. .

²⁷ Ibid., 5 Nov. 1844.

²⁸ Ibid., 22 Oct 1846.

commodities to be questioned, the slaves were an investment with which he intended to make his living. In order to capitalize on this investment, the utmost care had to be taken to ensure that no slaves were injured or killed, thus leaving them incapable of performing their work. Real commodities such as food or spices could easily be packaged and transported. However, when dealing with the human commodity, the particularities and care taken by the owner should not be mistaken for personal affection for his stock. It was precisely because the slaves had become commodities that promoted such care from Paul.

B. Slave Auctions, Slave Markets

The slaves are seized upon and sold at public sale to satisfy the claims of creditors. In the advertisements of such sales or venues, men women, and children are indiscriminately huddled in the same category with wagons, barrels, boxes, poultry, crockery, sheep, farming utensils, oxen, house furniture, and the numberless et-cetera of live stock and moveables pertaining to a farming establishment."²⁹

Robert Evans Jr. identifies three means on hiring slaves: "personal contact between the owner and his agent, personal contact between an agent and the lessee, or by public auction."³⁰ Of these options, slave auctions were undeniably the most popular means of trading slaves. The market for slaves and their commodification was most clearly seen at the slave auctions and slave markets. However, prior to appearing on the auction block, slaves were encamped in slave prisons, where they remained until enough slaves were accumulated for a sale or a shipment. One prison of significance was the Franklin and Armfield prison in Alexandria, VA. A traveler described the prison as being

²⁹ British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade Throughout the World (1839) 45.

³⁰ Robert Evans, Jr. "The Economics of American Negro Slavery." *Aspects of Labor Economics*. 1962. 185-256

“situated in a retired quarter of the southern part of the city. It is easily distinguished as you approach it, by the high, whitewashed wall surrounding the yards and giving to it the appearance of a penitentiary.”³¹

While imprisoned and being prepared for sale, slaves were often well fed and relatively well treated, i.e. not physically punished, in order to make them more appealing to buyers. Collins pointed out that, “pains were taken to have them polish their skins and dress themselves in the uniform suits provided for the purpose.”³² Similar to the aforementioned case of Paul Cameron, the care that the slaves received was a preparation that would ensure the greatest reward to the sellers, not the slaves. Though the slaves certainly benefited momentarily from these conditions, it should be remembered that they were being prepared for sale. This process, which Walter Johnson refers to as packaging, equated the slave to a crop. The extent of their commodification was so pronounced that slaves themselves became concerned with preparing their outward appearances, hoping to be the first to be sold. Their efforts were noticeable enough that it seemed as if the slaves thought they were to share the profits of their sale.³³ Though not innately a commodity, through the extensive process of being marketed for sale, the slave internalized their condition, thus creating an environment of self-commodification. Johnson contributes to the discussion of this internalized commodification by noting that even before arriving at the trading posts in the American colonies, “at the littoral, captives discovered that they had passed the points of no return.”³⁴ At slave auctions and markets the slave, as any other commodity would be, was meticulously examined, being valued for worth. The

³¹ Collins, Domestic Slave Trade, 97.

³² Collins, Domestic Slave Trade, 102.

³³ Collins, Domestic Slave Trade, 103.

³⁴ Johnson, Soul by Soul, (64).

buyer would examine “teeth, eyes, feet and shoulders of both men and women. Scars or marks on the lash decreased their value in market, sometimes the sale would be lost for that reason.”³⁵ A traveler observed the customary procedures of an auction in 1855:

About a dozen gentlemen crowded to the spot while the poor fellow was stripping himself, and as soon as he stood on the floor, bare from top to toe, a most rigorous scrutiny of his person was instituted. The clear, black skin, back and front, was viewed all over for sores from disease; and there was no part of his body left unexamined.³⁶

Buyers were given significant leeway in examining the slaves, and would often inquire about the slave such questions as, “How old are you? What can you do? Who raised you? Why are you sold? Anything wrong with you?”³⁷ In the same way that a buyer would examine an agricultural or other product, the inquiry of the buyer is aimed at gaining an understanding of the quality of their soon-to-be investment.

Most public auction sales took place in warehouses, starting around 9:30 or 10:00 in the morning. At an auction, the most profitable slaves could sell for as high as \$1,000-\$1,200, with slave women averaged at \$300-\$500, and children from \$150-\$200.³⁸ The crowd size varied depending on the success of advertisements and notices, another critical element to the methods of commoditization. A journalist from Boston, visiting Richmond, VA in 1853, published an article in *The Liberator* expressing his reaction to witnessing a slave auction for the first time. He wrote:

I have been an eye-witness this morning to scenes such as have never been described, and never can. You and I have been told my some of the doughfaces of the North, that the evils of slavery are exaggerated. But they have not been half told. I have spent two hours at the public sales of slaves... These auctions are held

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co. 1931) 106.

³⁷ Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South*, 106.

³⁸ Ibid., 230

daily, and they each pay each other the courtesy to wait for each other... The usual 'Wall street honesty' is observed in the sales...³⁹

Slave auctions became such a normalized practice in the South that an observer noted that "the local trade was so common that they used slaves almost as currency."⁴⁰

C. Advertisements

The sale of slaves and their institutionalized commodification was spread through advertisements, posters, and newspapers. Advertisements are arguably the most effective method to sell commodities and by using advertisements to sell slaves, they in effect became commodities. These advertisements presented slaves like any other material item of trade. Such an advertisement could proclaim, "now receiving daily large supplies of Fresh negroes from the buying markets."⁴¹ If someone, completely ignorant about what a Negro was, were to read this advertisement they would unsuspectingly presume that it was some sort of food staple. Terminology such as "Fresh negroes from the market" was crucial for the commodification process that turned the slave into a commodity that could be purchased. Some advertisements even listed slaves amongst everyday items such as this advertisement listed in the *Virginia Gazette*:

The Attorney General's slaves and Household Furniture, which were advertised for sale at the next meeting of the merchants, will be sold the 25th of this month, by John Blair, James Cocke, surviving trustees.⁴²

To this extent, Steven Deyle observes that many slave owners began to use dehumanizing language towards their slaves, such as one owner in particular who instructed his slave

³⁹ "A Slave Auction in Virginia." *The Liberator* 25 Mar. 1853.

⁴⁰ Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 157.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴² *The Virginia Gazette* 10 Nov. 1775.

agent to “take the slave woman and her child to some market and cash them as quick as possible.”⁴³

Just as any other advertisement, the purpose of the slave advertisement was to market a commodity in such a way as to make it attractive to potential buyers. For this reason, advertisements would often exaggerate the skills and behaviors of the slave to make him or her seem more desirable. Advertisements would claim that their slaves were “comparable to none,” or “inferior to none,” as if it were a particular brand or product. Deyle notes that “while seldom flashy, local advertisements frequently employed the same types of effective sales pitches as those found in the notices placed by the large interregional traders.”⁴⁴ Attributes that were commonly marketed by slave owners or agents were language abilities, domestic skills, submissiveness, and age. Slave advertisements in Virginia also help to expose the magnitude of the domestic slave trade. While advertisements for selling slaves were extremely common, so also were advertisements for runaway slaves. Often these advertisements included whether or not other owners had previously owned the slave, information which has proven invaluable to historians who have been able to examine the high frequency of slave sales.

D. Slave Breeding

The final means by which slaves became commodities was in the practice of slave breeding. Here the objective of the slave owner was to reproduce the slave population by means of coerced sex. Fogel defines breeding as involving two main concepts: “1. Interference in the normal sexual habits of slaves to maximize female fertility through

⁴³ Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 158.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

such devices as mating women with especially potent men; 2. Raising slaves with sale as the main objective.”⁴⁵ Some historians such as Alfred Conrad and John Meyer have argued that breeding is a myth.⁴⁶ Many others have insisted that the evidence inconclusive or too limited to make a definitive assessment. Nevertheless, there are two primary pieces of demographic evidence in favor of slave breeding. The first observation is that the states which sold the greatest number of slaves had “fewer slaves in the age group fifteen to twenty-nine, and more at very young and old ages,”⁴⁷ than the slave-buying states. The second observation is that the slave-selling states had higher fertility rates than the buying states. This reproduction, aside from being grossly inhumane and a violation of the most sanctified right, is further evidence of the extent to which owners viewed the slave simply as a stock, with reproduction as a future investment. Reverend Philo Tower, in a recount of this slave breeding noted, “as much attention is paid to the breeding and growth of negroes as to that of horses and mules...It is a common thing for planters to command their girls and women to have children; and I am told a great many negro girls are sold off, simply and mainly because they did not have children.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, one observer recalled that, “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.”⁴⁹ Of the plantations that actively participated in slave breeding, the Border States made a particular business out of it. Particularly because breeding would not necessarily have maximized plantations profits, the aforementioned observations do not

⁴⁵ Fogel, Time On The Cross, 78.

⁴⁶ Alfred Conrad and John Meyer, "The Economics of Slavery in the Ante Bellum South." Journal of Political Economy (1958): 95-130.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 79.

⁴⁸ Collins, Domestic Slave Trade, 105.

⁴⁹ Deyle, Carry Me Back, 158.

guarantee the existence of slave breeding. Fogel concludes that, “no doubt such sexual abuses were encouraged by a legal system which not only deprived slave women of the right to legal remedy but sanctioned the right of slaveholders to manipulate the private lives of their chattel.”⁵⁰

IV. CULTURE OF COMMODIFICATION

The culture of commodification that played a fundamental role in the slave trade was not only projected upon the object of commodification, the slave. In the process of buying slaves, buyers and sellers become as much pawns of the culture as the slaves themselves. Though not victimized or marginalized, the culture of commodification used the spirit of capitalism as an incentive to entice buyers and sellers into the human slave trade. The two-way street of commodification did not affect slaves alone. It also worked to desensitize the buying and selling community. Through the methods of commodification the merchant ultimately viewed the slave as a mere inanimate product; human only in the capacity to perform labor but void of all emotion, mentality, and other physical human markers. In his 1845 slave narrative, Frederick Douglass recalled the experience of valuation during which the slaves were sized up for sale:

There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being and were all subjected to the same narrow examination. Silvery-headed age and sprightly youth, maids and matrons, had to undergo the same indelicate inspection. At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon slave and slaveholder.⁵¹

The culture of commodification during the 19th century was a direct byproduct of economic incentives. In the slave market capitalism, and individual’s pursuit of wealth,

⁵⁰ Fogel, *Time On The Cross*, 85.

⁵¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (New York: New American Library, 1845) 56.

worked primarily to desensitize the buyers and sellers from the reality of their investment in human stock. According to Johnson,

Buying people who had no evident social value was not a violation or an act of questionable morality but rather a keen and appropriate response to opportunity; for this was precisely what one was supposed to do in the market: create value by exchange, recycle someone else's castoff into objects of worth."⁵²

Given this understanding, did purchasers associate themselves as buying humans? Or had the slave been completely stripped of humanity from the vantage of the buyer? Perhaps the most accurate analysis of slave commodification that answers this lingering question is by Johnson, who noted,

On the one hand, they were to be transformed into exemplars of the category to which they had been assigned; but once the categories of comparison had been established and embodied, the slaves were supposed to become once again visible as individuals – comparable to all of those who inhabited the same category, yet different enough to attract a buyer's eye and seal the sale. This daily dialectic of categorization and differentiation was the magic by which the traders turned people into things and then into money.⁵³

Aside from the monetary gains of slavery, commodifying slaves and blackness also created a culture in which white identity came to be associated with power. Not only did whites enhance their economic status in the buying and selling of slaves, but they also elevated their social status by being able to determine the worth and value of blacks. Slaves were market goods that whites bought and sold, turning blacks into more of a currency and a product than a human. Through dehumanizing blacks, whites not only obtained legal ownership over them but they also forced upon blacks a status of inferiority. Particularly in the 18th century, a large portion of slaves were born into slavery and died in slavery just as their parents had. This lifetime of enslavement forced many slaves to see themselves in the same way that white saw them: as property. The

⁵² Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, 62

⁵³ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 119.

internalization of the slave status is evident in Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of a Slave* where he describes:

Indeed, it is not uncommon for slaves even to fall out and quarrel among themselves about the relative goodness of their masters, each contending for the superior goodness of his own over that of the others. At the very same time, they mutually execrate their masters when viewed separately.⁵⁴

This goes to show that slaves not only began to see themselves as property, but also that they came to see their masters as extensions of themselves. To quarrel about whose masters was the best was equivalent to the slaves fighting about who among themselves was the best.

V. CONCLUSION

This essay has demonstrated the mechanisms and sources by which slaves became a market commodity, primarily in mid 19th century Virginia. Closely examining this time illuminates a distorted perception on the part of the slave owning community, one in which the profitability of a slave turned him or her into a currency or an investment. In the wake of the American Revolution, the growth of the domestic slave trade and westward expansion produced a colossal demand for slaves, thus culminating into a culture of dehumanized advertisements and auctions; a culture in which the slave was sold just as easily and with as little thought as an item of furniture. In the process of buying and selling slaves, the slave owning community became desensitized, thus depriving themselves of one the most innate human emotions: compassion. The end result was the dehumanization of two parties: the slaves and those involved in the slave market. Primary source documentation of the time, primarily letters and newspapers,

⁵⁴ Douglass, 63.

reveals how widespread the commodification of slaves was in the South. That the commodification was a result of this perpetual culture and not an inherent sign of racial superiority is proved by the reactions of white Northerners observing slave auctions and prisons for the first time. Had commodification been a result of a racial hierarchy, first time observers would not have reacted with such shock and horror. That they did is evidence that the slave-owning culture and economic prowess of the South was the primary reason for slave commodification.

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