

The Old South

Edited by
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108 Cowley Road
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 0-631-21032-7 (hardback); 0-631-21032-7 (paperback)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10/12 Plantin
by Kaim Information Services Pvt. Ltd., Pondicherry, India
Printed in Great Britain by MPG Books, Bodmin, Cornwall

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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Publishers

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2001x

First published 2001

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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350 Main Street
Malden, Massachusetts 02148
USA

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY

ISBN 0-631-21926-9 (hardback); 0-631-21927-7 (paperback)

JAN 20 2001

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10/12 Plantin
by Kolam Information Service Pvt. Ltd., Pondicherry, India
Printed in Great Britain by MPG Books, Bodmin, Cornwall

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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18093

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One evening, when our master was with us, a thin, sallow-looking man rode up to the house, and alighting from his horse, came to us, and told him that he had come to buy a boy; that he wished to get a good field hand, and would pay a good price for him. I never saw a human countenance that expressed more of the evil passions of the heart than did that of this man, and his conversation corresponded with his physiognomy. Every sentence of his language was accompanied with an oath of the most vulgar profanity, and his eyes appeared to me to be the index of a soul as cruel as his visage was disgusting and repulsive.

After looking at us for some time, this wretch singled *me* out as the object of his choice, and coming up to me, asked how I would like him for a master. In my heart I detested him; but a slave is often afraid to speak the truth, and divulge all he feels; so with myself in this instance, as it was doubtful whether I might not fall into his hands, and be subject to the violence of his temper, I told him that if he was a good master, as every gentleman ought to be, I should be willing to live with him. He appeared satisfied with my answer, and turning to my master, said he would give a high price for me. "I can," said he, "by going to Charleston, buy as many Guinea negroes as I please for two hundred dollars each, but as I like this fellow, I will give you four hundred for him." This offer struck terror into my heart, for I knew it was as much as was generally given for the best and ablest slaves, and I expected that it would immediately be accepted as my price, and that I should be at once consigned to the hands of this man, of whom I had formed so abhorrent an opinion. To my surprise and satisfaction, however, my master made no reply to the proposition; but stood for a moment, with one hand raised to his face and his fore-finger on his nose, and then turning suddenly to me, said, "Go into the house; I shall not sell you to-day."

Asking Questions, Reading Bodies

Walter Johnson

When Richard Winfield went to the slave market to buy Elvira and Samuel Brown, he took James Calvitt, a more experienced slave buyer,

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along to help him see. As a witness remembered it, the sale went something like this: "The Negroes were called in and the girl was examined by Mr. Calvitt in the presence of Winfield. Winfield looked at the slaves. Calvitt asked the slaves some questions." Calvitt remembered the sale similarly. Winfield "looked" at Elvira and then Calvitt "put his hand where her breast ought to be and found nothing but rags." If he had been purchasing on his own behalf, Calvitt added "he would have made her pull her dress off." Soon after Winfield bought her, it became apparent that Elvira was mortally ill – the rags filled out a chest ravaged by consumption – and she died within a few weeks of the sale. Another witness to the sale drew a slaveholder's moral from the story: "Thinks Winfield a poor judge of slaves or he would not have purchased said girl. She is the first girl Winfield ever owned." The observers described the nonslaveholder's inexperience as a matter of insight: Winfield was a poor judge of slaves. Indeed, comparisons of the depth of slaveholder's insight with that of the nonslaveholders run through all of the descriptions of the sale: Calvitt "examined" while Winfield "looked"; Calvitt touched while Winfield stood by. Calvitt, by all accounts, could see things that Winfield could not.

Being able to see that way was a talent, and inexperienced buyers often took someone along with them when they went to the slave market. Friends, physicians, even other slave dealers went to the slave market "at the request" of uncertain buyers. These more experienced men examined the lots of slaves for sale in the market, reading their bodies aloud and helping buyers select the "likely" and the healthy from among them. The presence of these slave-pen guides hints at a masculine social world in which being a "good judge of slaves" was a noteworthy public identity, a world of manly one-upsmanship in which knowledge of slaves' bodies was bandied back and forth as white men cemented social ties and articulated a hierarchy among themselves. In the slave pens a white male public congealed through shared participation in the inspection and evaluation of black slaves. And as these white men watched one another examine and choose slaves, and as the slave-pen mentors helped inexpert buyers choose slaves, they daily reproduced and passed on the racial "knowledge" by which Southern slavery was justified and defended.

A savvy slave buyer knew enough to try to look past the fancy clothes, bright faces, and promising futures lined up against the walls of the slave pens. Mississippi planter John Knight was presumably passing on the opinion of the "old planters" upon whom he regularly relied for advice when he sent his slave-market wisdom to his father-in-law. "The fact is," Knight wrote, "as to the character and disposition of all of the slaves sold by the traders, we know nothing whatever, the traders themselves being

generally such liars. Buyers therefore can only judge the *looks* of the Negroes." The effects of the traders' practice – the invisibility of slaves' origins and the obscurity of their histories – and their reputation for dishonesty limited buyers' options as they tried to see through to slaves' pasts and prospects. The conditions of the trade, the material context of the slave market, enforced a blinkered gaze upon the buyers: in the absence of reliable information about individuals' history or character as a slave, the buyers began with the physical coordinates of the people who stood before them in the pens.

The axes of physical comparison used by the buyers were pre-figured in the traders' practice. Slaves in the market were advertised by their sex, racial designation, age, and skill, and they were lined out for sale according to height. They were arrayed as physical specimens even as their origins, attitudes, and infirmities were covered over by the traders' arts. As is well known, buyers preferred darker to lighter people for work in their fields and lighter to darker people to do skilled and domestic labor; they generally preferred slaves of "prime age" (between fifteen and twenty-five), although skilled slaves reached their prime at a later age (around thirty-five); buyers favored men for work outdoors and women for domestic service; and they apparently paid higher prices for slaves based upon their height. As telling as they are, however, these broad correlations tell us very little about what buyers saw when they looked at slaves, about what was behind the "singular look" which so impressed Joseph Ingraham. What did skin color, or sex, or size mean to slaveholders?

Asked to explain what they looked for in a slave, most slave buyers would have responded with the word "likely." Today the word means probable, but as slave buyers used it was as much a description as it was a prediction. As they singled out the "likely" from among the many they saw in the pens, slave buyers made detailed inspections of people's bodies which went well beyond the traders' advertisements and the age, sex, and racial designation that were commonly recorded on an Act of Sale. The standard slave inspection, as one buyer described it, went like this: "my inspection was made in the usual manner: their coats being taken off and the breast, arms, teeth, and general form and appearance looked at." The whole process, according to another buyer, might take anywhere from a fifteen minutes to a half an hour. And the inspections, at least at the outset, were public. . . .

As the slaves were paraded before them, slave buyers began by reading the slaves' skin color, groping their way from visible sign to invisible essence. No doubt buyers were seeing skin color when they described a slave as "a Negro or griff boy," "a griff colored boy," "dark Griff color," or "not black nor Mulatto, but what I believe is usually called a griff

color, that is a Brownish Black, or a bright Mulatto." But in describing the blurred spectrum they saw before them, buyers used descriptive language that was infused with the reassuring certitudes of race. The words they used stabilized the restless hybridity, the infinite variety of mixture that was visible all over the South, into measurable degrees of the binary opposition between black and white. They suggested that slaves' skin color could be read as a sign of a deeper, measurable set of racial qualities.

In the antebellum slave market, the buyers of field slaves boiled blackness down to a question of physical vitality. Slaveholders' broadest concern was with what they called "acclimation," and they endlessly expressed their preference for slaves who had survived the transition to the harsh conditions of lower-South slavery. John Knight looked to the swampy eastern shore of Maryland, which he thought would better prepare slaves for Louisiana slavery than the "more healthy" regions elsewhere in the upper South. Others would only buy slaves from Louisiana or Mississippi, the "Creole" slaves whom one slaveholder estimated were worth a full quarter more than slaves born elsewhere. In the absence of certain information about origins, however, skin color often served as a stand-in for acclimation. There are a litany of statements to the effect that the "blackest" slaves were the healthiest. From the published writing of Louisiana doctor and racial theorist Samuel Cartwright – "All Negroes are not equally black – the blacker the stronger" – to the slave-market wish list sent by John Knight to his father-in-law – "I must have if possible the *jet black* Negroes, [they] stand this climate the best" – white men in the antebellum South talked to one another as if they could see slaves' constitutions by looking at their complexions.

So far did slaveholders go in associating "blackness" and healthfulness, that they believed that slaves changed color when they got sick. "Cannot tell her color because she did not look sharp," remembered Maria Piaja of the dying Mary Louise. According to Dr. G. E. Barton dark-skinned slaves got whiter when they were ill. Barton bolstered his testimony that Elvira was consumptive at the time she was sold by referring to the observation which had led him to judge her unsound: "Her skin was of a whiter color than was natural from the ordinary complexion of the girl... a decided whiteness about the lips and lightness and paleness about the face... gums and eyes pale pearly white." This slave-market commonplace was built into a Law of Nature by Dr. Cartwright: "Deviation from the black color, in the pure race is a mark of feebleness or ill health." Blackness, then, was much more than a question of lineage. Indeed, blackness was much more than a question of color...

Fully grown, the slaves at the top of the traders' buyer-tracking tables would look like Edward, a man whom slave dealer Louis Caretta called "One of the best slaves in the state." Edward was, according to a man who saw him sold, "Stout and low statured. He was black and looked fat . . ." And, according to one who worked with him, "a big, strong, athletic fellow." Similarly, "the likeliest girl" slave trader A. J. McElveen "ever saw" was "Black, 18 years old, very near as tall as I am, no Surplus flesh, fine form." McElveen, indeed, seems to have weighed and measured every slave he bought. "She weighs 173 lbs, 5 feet 10 and three quarters inches high," he proudly reported of the woman. The value of these slaves was outlined by their full physical presence, their size and their strength.

Buyers ran their hands over the bodies of the slaves who stood before them, rubbing their muscles, fingering their joints, and kneading their flesh. Nathan Brown described a fifteen-year-old boy as "very interesting" after he had seen the slave placed on a table and walked back-and-forth so that those present could examine him "by feeling his joints." Similarly, Solomon Northup remembered that Theophilus Freeman "would make us hold up our head, walk briskly back and forth while customers would feel of our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about." The buyers were searching for taut muscles and hidden problems – broken bones, ossified sprains, severed tendons, internal injuries and illnesses. Listen to Joseph Copes apologizing for a slave he wanted to hire to a friend: "small of stature, but wiry, strong, and tough." Copes realized that the man's size was against him, and he tried to answer the objection he had imagined with a list of compensatory adjectives describing how the man would feel beneath a buyer's fingers.

The buyers took slaves' fingers in their hands, working them back-and-forth to insure they were, as Charles Ball remembered, "capable of the quick motions necessary in picking cotton." In his slave-market primer, "What Constitutes Unsoundness in the Negro?," Georgia slave doctor Juriah Harriss spent paragraphs on hands, advising slaveholders to look out for slaves who had lost "portions" of their hands or had manual "deformities arising from burns," both of which prevented "the dexterous handling of implements of labor." Asked to remember their "hands," slaveholders sometimes came up with missing digits: three different witnesses remembered that Tom was missing his right forefinger, although they differed upon which joint had been severed, the first or the second. Asked to remember William both his seller and his overseer remembered his hands. "Short arms and hands," said one. "His arms were short, hands small, and short fingers," said the other. Quite literally, these men remembered William as a hand too small to pick cotton.

In an action which many observers connected with the practice of the horse trade, buyers thumbed their way into slaves' mouths to look at their gums and teeth. The whiteness of sick slaves first appeared, according to Southern medical science, in their mouths. Samuel Cartwright saw the signs of "Negro Consumption" in the whiteness "of the mucous surfaces lining the gums and the inside of the mouth, lips and cheeks: so white are the mucous surfaces that some overseers call it the paper-gum disease." Cartwright's description suggests that he thought it routine for a slaveholder to pull back slaves' cheeks and finger their lips. And, indeed, slave trader A. J. McElveen referred to teeth again and again in the letters he wrote to his boss: "Very badly whipped but good teeth"; "Likely except bad teeth"; "very likely, has good sense, fine teeth." McElveen may have been choosing slaves by a disquietingly revealing criterion (and one drawn from the horse trade): the ability to chew their food as they aged. Or, more simply, McElveen may have been looking because he knew that buyers would. The rote practice of the market could produce its own standards of comparison: teeth did not need to be a commonly accepted sign of anything in particular to be compared to one another. . . .

The spectrum of slaves lined out against the walls by the traders and investigated by the buyers ran in two directions: men on one side, women on the other. The bodies of those bought to work in the fields were comparable, but not entirely fungible. W. H. Yos compared the men and women he found in the market, found the men "more likely," and put off buying women for another year – in the short run he could compare men to women, in the long run, he would have to have both. A similar perspective shows through John Knight's plantation plans, which stipulated that his slaves be "half men and half women . . . young say from 16 to 25, stout limbs, large deep chests, wide shoulders and hips, etc." Knight's list of body parts ran male and female attributes together, describing a body that was to be, like his slave force, half and half: men and women bought to work in the fields were comparable in any instance but they had to be sexed and balanced in aggregate. Having, like Knight, broken people down into parts, slaveholders could rebalance their attributes in the quest for slaves like those trader Samuel Browning called the "right sort" for the lower South. "Likely young fellows, stout girls the same and Black," was how Browning described the slaves who would sell best in Mississippi. Virginia trader Hector Davis similarly headed his slave-market tables with "Best young men" and "Best black girls." Likely young women were not the same as likely young men, but likely young black women might be. Being "black" made an enslaved woman look more like the men alongside whom she would work in the fields; in evaluating female slaves, the traders were imagining composite slaves,

matching the vitality they attributed to blackness with vulnerability they expected from femaleness to make a better slave. As well as comparing women to men, however, the buyers compared them to one another.

Buyers palpated women's breasts and abdomens, searching for hernias and prolapsed organs, they tried to massage the enslaved women's bodies into revealing their reproductive history and capacity. In the probing gaze of the slave pens women passed through their period of "prime" interest to the slave traders at an earlier age than men. Among slaves over the age of nineteen in the slave trade, males predominated; below that age, females did. Behind the aggregates lie the assumptions that slaveholder[s] inscribed upon the bodies they bought. When Hector Davis set up his parallel categories of "Best" for young men and young women, the men included were those aged nineteen to twenty-four, the (black) women were those sixteen to nineteen. A. J. McElveen made the terms of comparison explicit in a letter describing two slaves he had bought. "A boy large enough to plow," he wrote, outlining the labor against which a boy's body was to be judged, and "a Girl large Enough to nurse." These sex-specific age categories reflected different evaluations of which capacities of the human body made a slave useful: production and reproduction. Putting it scientifically, one might say that slaveholders emphasized full physical growth for males and menarche for females.

Putting it like a slaveholder would, one might say that they were concerned that their female slaves be "breeders." Even without the eugenic implications it has taken on in the twentieth century the word is an ugly one. It contains within it a history of crass incentives to reproduction and occasional unwanted matchings to which many slaveholders subjected their female slaves. The apparent absence of evidence that a large number of slaveholders focused solely on breeding slaves especially for the market should not obscure the fact that in their evaluations of the women they bought to work in their fields slaveholders reduced consideration of gender difference to the medical consideration of generative capacity. The condensation of femininity into reproduction was ultimately embodied in the figure of the enslaved nurse and midwife. As described by John Knight, such a woman would be "a good, sound, intelligent, middle-aged woman of experience, not only for midwifery purposes, but as a constant nurse for [the children on] my plantation. That they may be properly taken care of and attended to regularly especially in absence of their mothers at work in the fields." As he built his plantation, Knight was building a composite Mother: one midwife and nurse evaluated according to age and experience who would take care of the children produced by many women whose own bodies

would be evaluated solely according to their physical and reproductive capacity.

Repeatedly, in the parlance of the slave market, slaveholders "stripped" the slaves to the waist so that they might have a closer look: "stripped the girl and made a careful examination"; "examined the boy very particularly... stripped the boy and examined him... stripped all the boys... and this boy appeared to be the finest of the lot." Buyers and traders alike used the word "stripped" as if they had done it themselves, literally unbuttoned their slaves' clothes, and pulled them off: "I stripped the boy and examined him several times." Slave buyers began undressing their slaves by asking them to roll up the legs of their pants or lift up their skirts so that their legs might be examined for ulcers and varicose veins produced by incipient illness. As the slaves removed their coats and frocks and shirts, buyers inspected their naked bodies minutely, looking for what they called "clear" or "smooth" skin, skin unmarked by signs of illness or injury. Buyers avoided those whose bodies showed signs of diseases like scrofula – "the narrow chest, prominent shoulders... and relaxed muscular tissue" or evidence of the cupping and blistering used to cure a recent illness, like the "blister mark" discovered on the breast of a Virginia woman by a slave trader, or the marks on Dempsey's arm, "three scars of deep cuts which... had injured the arm and much weakened him."

More than anything, however, [buyers] were looking for scars from whipping. As Solomon Northup explained, "scars upon a slave's back were considered evidence of a rebellious or unruly spirit, and hurt his sale." As they worked their way from inflicted scars to essential character, buyers fixed slaves in a typology of character according to the frequency, intensity, and chronology of the whipping apparent on their backs: "not whiped"; "a little whipt"; "some scars upon her shoulders... produced by the whip"; "considerably scarred by the whip"; "the back of the girl had been cut pretty severely"; "he had many old stripes and scars on his body and head"; "she is very Badely whipped [but] the whipping has been done long since"; "she had marks of the whip not perfectly healed but did not appear to have been severely whipped." Looking at the scars, slave buyers created whole stories for the people who stood stripped in front of them: perhaps if the scarring was very light the offense had been minor, perhaps if it was very old the vice had been whipped out of the slave. The buyers thought they could read slaves' backs as encodings of their history....

The daily routine of the slave pens – the preparations, the examinations, and the constant contingency of being for sale to anyone who cared to buy – alienated slaves from their own bodies. William Wells Brown conveyed this experience with the image of slaves forced to dance

to a merry fiddle while “their cheeks were wet with tears.” For Brown, those tears marked the distance between two selves, one outwardly presented by the traders and one inwardly preserved by the slaves. Other slaves recalled a similar doubleness when they described the experience of being sold. J. D. Green, whose narrative was entitled *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave from Kentucky, Containing an Account of his Three Escapes 1839, 1846, and 1848*, remembered his slave market self being described as “above all free from the disease of running away” with no small measure of irony. John Brown remembered “not being very well pleased to hear myself run down” as a buyer tried to knock a few dollars off his price. Henry Bibb so distanced himself from his own sale that he described the time he spent in the New Orleans slave pens in the third person: “They were exposed for sale . . . they had to be in trim . . . they were made to stand up straight . . . they had to answer as promptly as they could and try to induce the spectators to buy them.” More than literal renderings of slaves’ specific thoughts at the time of their sale, these memories should be read as accounts of their double consciousness. Each contains a recognition of what a slaveholder saw – a dancing body, a pliant slave, a run-down little boy, a well-disciplined lot of slaves – alongside a marker of the slave’s separation from their buyers’ evaluation. They describe the divided meanings of salable bodies – once from without, once from within. . . .

The daily business of the slave pens, of course, was manipulating buyers. All of the feeding, clothing, caring for, and preparing had that single goal in mind, and slaves in the market were carefully instructed about how to present themselves to buyers – about what would sell and what would not. As the traders pitched them to the buyers, the slaves learned more. Charles Ball, for instance, heard two traders evaluating his potential. He was, they said in his hearing, worth about a thousand dollars “to a man making a settlement, and clearing a plantation.” Ball’s bodily vitality would be what a buyer was looking for. Other slaves picked up hints from the way that they were dressed. John Parker guessed that he was to be sold as a house servant because his market clothes set him off from the other slaves in the pen: civility rather than strength would entice a likely buyer. And light-skinned Henry Bibb . . . was told by his seller to “act stupid in language and thought,” to perform slave-market blackness in order to entice a buyer who might otherwise have been put off by his light skin. The traders’ pitches, threats, and hectoring promises charged their slaves with enacting the slave buyers’ fantasies. But they also provided slaves with a detailed account of buyers’ system of signs, of how slave buyers read appearances. By the time the buyers entered the pens, the slaves knew a lot about them. . . .

As the buyers began to bargain, the slaves could learn more. Slaveholders negotiated by attaching reasons to offers, and often slaves stood by as sellers and buyers argued back and forth about the value of a slave, anchoring their opinions in accounts of the hidden failings or evident advantages of a given body. Dennis Donovan remembered that he was standing with a slave named Ben, "talking with the boy," when Benjamin Huntington walked up and started to talk to him about Ben, asking "if he was a good boy" and whether he was healthy. The discussions they had in front of the slaves revealed the buyers' criteria, but they also occasionally revealed the buyers themselves. The buyers, after all, were trying to match their needs with a slave, to match, that is, themselves with the person they bought. Charles Ball remembered watching a buyer announce himself and his intentions for the person he bought: "a thin sallow man" rode up to the house where Ball's coffer was staying and said "that he wished to get a good field hand, and would pay a good price for him." The information that Ball overheard could perhaps have been divined by another method, but the knowledge obtained by Solomon Northup as he listened in on a slave-pen bargain was more precious: "One old gentleman, who said he wanted a coachman, appeared to take a fancy to me. From his conversation with [the slave trader] Burch, I learned he was a resident in the city." To Northup that piece of information held a treasured hope.

The more minute the buyers' attention, the greater the opportunity for the slaves. John Brown remembered that the buyers who asked him questions ended up giving him answers: "I was careful, however, to draw out the buyers, in order to learn what they wanted me for; which I judged by the questions they put to me." The argument might be extended indefinitely: Can you drive a coach? Cook a bird? Wield an ax? Have you nimble fingers for picking cotton? Strong arms for cutting cane? Breasts for nursing a child? All of these questions, asked in conversation and examination, were also answers, accounts of a buyer's needs, their purposes, and their origins. Buyers in the slave pens were trading information about themselves for information about the slaves....

When slaves looked at a particular buyer they could do so with an informed eye to their own future. Among the many poisoned outcomes faced by slaves in the pens, some were worse than others. As Charles Ball remembered it, the prospect that he would be sold to the rough looking man who was bargaining for his price, for instance, "struck terror" into his heart. Solomon Northup, by contrast, remembered hoping that the man who was examining him would seal the bargain. Northup had overheard that the man was from New Orleans and "very much desired that he would buy me for I conceived it would not be difficult to make

my escape from New Orleans on some northern vessel." John Brown similarly wanted to be sold to a man from up the Mississippi River because upriver was the direction of freedom. And Henry Bibb wanted to be sold to an Indian because he thought it would be easier to escape from an Indian than a white man. Besides, the man "wanted me only for a kind of body servant to wait on him – and in this case I knew that I should fare better than I should in the field." Writing *Clotel*, William Wells Brown neatly summed both the signs of difference between buyers evident to slaves in the pens and the social character of the process of interpreting those signs. In the voice of Mrs. Devant, Brown described a slave's perspective on a buyer like this: "I observed a tall young man, with long black hair, eyeing me very closely, and then talking to the trader. I felt sure that my time had come, but the day closed without me being sold. I did not regret this, for I had heard that foreigners made the worst of master, and I felt confident that the man who eyed me was not American."...

Slaves were the information brokers in the slave market. Anonymous, they stood at the center of the slaveholders' bargains, between imperfectly known pasts and unpredictable futures, between traders who depended upon them to market their market selves and buyers who relied upon them to reveal their "real" ones. They knew what the traders wanted them to say and what the buyers wanted to hear. And they knew whether they fit the traders' representations and the buyers' expectations – whether they were sickly or skilled, whether they had thoughts of escape or revolt. Using these pieces of information, slaves could create themselves in the slave market, matching their self-representations to their own hoped-for outcomes. Sometimes, at enormous risk, they shaped a sale to suit themselves.

Their choices were hedged by violence on either side. Most slaves probably did not believe the traders' pledges to sell them to good masters if they were well behaved – they knew that prices meant more than promises in the slave market. But they also knew that they would be punished if the traders could tell that they were not representing themselves as they had been instructed. The traders' present threats, however, had to be balanced with the knowledge that dissatisfied buyers might hold slaves responsible for the answers they gave in the pens. Caught between the traders and the buyers, the slaves made tacit alliances that were both necessary and risky. Interviewed in 1892, L. M. Mills described his own slave-market dilemma in the third person: "When a Negro was put on the block he had to help sell himself by telling what he could do. If he refused to praise himself and acted sullen, he was sure to be stripped and given thirty lashes. Frequently a man was compelled to exaggerate his accomplishments, and when his buyer found out that he

could not do what he said he could he would be beaten unmercifully. It was pretty sure a thrashing either way." Like Mills, slaves in the pens were interposed between bargainers – presented on the one hand and examined on the other – who made their expectations and intentions brutally clear. And like Mills, slaves in the market had to calculate their behavior: discouraging a sale might lead to an immediate beating, encouraging it too much might lead to violence down the road. L. M. Mills described shaping one's own sale as a dangerous necessity, a Hobson's choice – "a thrashing either way." And yet he also described a situation in which the business of slaveholders was *necessarily* done through the agency of their slaves, a situation of great danger, but also of opportunity. . . .

Small signs meant a lot in the slave market. Buyers, remember, were searching for vitality and responsiveness, and often used the words "lively" or "active" to describe the slaves they desired. To manipulate the buyers' minute attention, traders tried to discipline their slaves into postures of strength and readiness. Whether intentionally or not, the slaves sometimes undermined their efforts. As Henry Thomas explained about why he was so long in selling in New Orleans, "nobody there liked my countenance at all – no one would give a cent for me." Lucy, whose owner thought her "low spirited situation" responsible for his inability to sell her, was sent home from the slave market unsold. "Assure her," the owner wrote to the slave dealer, "that I will keep her myself or sell her in Falmo." Unwilling or unable to sell herself, Lucy was returned to the neighborhood where she would be happier and presumably more salable. Lucy's depression – her murdered soul – was a recognizable enough feature of the slave pens to be a commonplace explanation for difficulty in selling a slave. As John Brown remembered it, "A man or a woman may be well in every respect, yet their value be impaired by a sour look, or a dull vacant stare, or a general dullness of demeanor." . . .

At times, the slaves' role in undermining their own sales drove the traders to distraction. "I heard Coleman tell some men who were looking at him the reason his hair was out it was because he had been cupped. You must stop that. I forgot to tell you in Montgomery. I never was able to find the cup marks," wrote one exasperated Virginia trader to another in the 1850s. Similarly, from South Carolina in the same decade: "Mr. Oakes, James is cutting up . . . I could sell him like hot cakes if he would talk Right. You may blame me but I tell nothing on him but the fact and Dr. Weatherly will tell the same. The boy is trying to make himself unsound. He says he wore a truss in Charleston. I think it would be best to see his former master and know the facts." Or from New Orleans: "I have just got rid of your man Lawson . . . the hardest

selling Negroe I ever sold and the worst talker he stuck out to the last that he was not healthy." Searching for signs of a disease they thought they might never find, these traders found themselves caught in the trap they had set for the buyers: unable to trust the slaves but uncertain about dismissing their answers.

Questions about skills and experience further involved slaves in determining the outcome of their sale. "The boy says he can make a panel door," gushed one expectant slave dealer about the self-proclaimed skill which he thought made Isaac salable. John Jones, apparently, was less forthcoming. "I was convinced that John Jones has been deceiving us with respect to his qualifications," wrote John Knight about his suspicion that the recently purchased Jones had under-represented himself in the slave market, and, he proudly continued, "one of the new hands just arrived . . . says he knew John well and that he has always been employed in shoeing horses, stamping plows & was a good hand at such work." Whether Jones lied because he had simply tired of being a blacksmith, wanted to reduce his value, or to avoid sale entirely, it was only the untimely appearance of a history he thought he had left behind that prevented him from living out his life in the role he had chosen in the slave market. . . .

Other slaves challenged the buyers to back their expressed concern for slaves' families with their behavior in the slave market. Joseph Ingraham overheard a slave in the Natchez market asking a buyer "would you be so good as to buy Jane?" and pointing out his wife so that the slaveholder could examine her for himself. Slaves' requests to be sold with their family members were often edged with desperation: "Please, master, buy Emily. I can never work anymore if she is taken from me; I will die," Solomon Northup remembered Eliza saying as she pleaded to be sold with her daughter; "Oh! master, master! buy me and my children with my poor husband - do, pray," J. D. Green remembered a woman calling from the auction stand where her husband, Reuben, had just been sold. This was not freedom: slaves like Eliza were forced to retail themselves according to one of the governing fictions of the slave market - that the buyers were there to rescue them from the traders. But it was hope: some, like the unnamed man in the Natchez market were saved from separation through their own intervention. Others, like Eliza and Emily, like Reuben and Sally, were beaten apart. . . .

The history of the antebellum South is the history of two million slave sales. But alongside the chronicle of oppressions must be set down a history of negotiations. To be sold with family members rather than apart from them, to be sold to a rich buyer rather than a poor one, to be sold into the anonymity of the city rather than the isolation of the country, for the house rather than the field - all of these were outcomes

sought and obtained by the slaves in the pens. Placed on a scale between Slavery and Freedom or judged according to a theory which accepts revolution as the only useful goal of resistance, these slave-shaped sales do not look like much: as many comfortable skeptics have put it, "after all, they were still enslaved." But placed between subordination and resistance on the scale of daily life, these differences between possible sales had the salience of survival itself.

The antislavery of the slave pens, of those who opposed slavery where they met it, where distance or surveillance or attachment made escape impossible, where state power and a hopeless deficit of armed force made rebellion suicidal, transmits today an important reminder about the extent to which the histories of domination and resistance are inextricably intertwined. They are two sides of a single history. The worshipful admiration of the aesthetics of domination which has seethed through so much recent work in the humanities – the thrilling fear that the world is built out of the phantasmic dreams of the powerful, their language and categories and objectifying gaze – must be cooled with the recognition that dreams, even the dreams of powerful people, must be made material if they are to come true. And, in the slave market, slaveholders' dreams could not come true without slaves: without people who could look back, estimate, manipulate, and sometimes escape.

Study Questions and Further Reading for Part V

- 1 Did the image associated with slave traders accord with the reality? Why could masters simultaneously demonize and tacitly endorse the slave trader?
- 2 Why did slave traders do the job that they did?
- 3 At the point of sale, slave traders used a variety of techniques to assess the market worth of a slave. What were some of these devices and how were their decisions shaped by the slaves themselves?

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