The Price-Current of Human Flesh: American Slavery, The Female Body, and Capitalism

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Understanding the commodification of the Black body –especially the Black female Body – has only been a prominent academic project for the past couple decades.[1] The history of the interplay between the Black female body and capitalism is a story that stretches back much further; to the roots of American agrarian capitalism and the slave women that were both exploited for their labors and exploited by the product of their labor which allowed capitalism to solidify as the mode of production.

This exploitation was not only raced, but also gendered: the bodies of women bound by slavery work as physical sites of excavation that have been used *against* Black women both historically and contemporarily. For example, Bell Hooks traces the contemporary Black American female understandings of cleanliness and modesty to the auction block.[i] Deborah Gray White connects the hypersexualized "Jezebel" characterization of Black women in slavery with the struggle of contemporary Black women to be recognized beyond stereotypes of promiscuity, and then further destroys the characterization by tracing its roots back to the shabby clothing worn by female field slaves and the white male association between nakedness and sexual availability.[ii] Claire Robertson takes note of the ownership of the female slave body, as well as its reproductive capacity, and considers briefly how a re-understanding of enslaved African women could have "contemporary implications for welfare policy."[iii]

Given the interconnectedness of body politics, social politics, and economic politics, it only makes sense to address them all together. The meeting of slavery and capitalism created, then, two women's "bodies" worth unpacking[2]: the (re)productive body and the fetishized body.

The (Re)Productive Body

The labor of reproduction under slavery was complicated, in part because of the question of whom the labor was for. Contemporary Western understandings of reproduction centers in the individual female body, and the rhetoric of reproduction accentuates this situation: *choice*, birth *control*, family *planning*. Under agrarian capitalism, however, the labor of reproduction was viewed more literally as the production of labor. In New England, prior to industrialization, subsistence farming was a family-centered practice. The more children a family had, the more labor they had.[iv]

[1] This is attributable to both racism within Feminist studies and sexism within Black studies. Additionally, the "body" has become an important theme through poststructuralist Feminism and queer studies, with titles likes *Bodies That Matter*, *The Lesbian Body*, and *Revolting Bodies*. Contemporary race scholars have taken on gender through the body lens (which becomes tempting, if not crucial, when starting with the understanding that gender and race are constructs and should be treated as such), E. Frances White's *Dark Continent of Our Bodies* and Dorothy Robert's *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty*.

[2] The two bodies I outline are not in anyway intended as an inclusive understanding of slavewomen's plight. The body framework is not mutually exclusive, and does not pit certain types against others. The reproductive body can become the fetishized body. For example, it is in the language and lens used by both primary and secondary researchers, and in the history itself. This is also not intended as a reproduction of Deborah Gray White's Jezebel and Mammy, and I was originally working with three "bodies" – the third the "victimized body" (specifically subjected to violence), but the victimized body collapsed itself easily into the fetishized body. The emphasis on bodies is not intended to further dehumanize, but instead to understand the desires, demands and costs carved into these women's bodies.

In the southern United States, small family farms gave way to large capitalist plantations, marginalizing – though inarguably to very different degrees – both white small farmers and enslaved Blacks. Comparing southern plantation-capitalism with budding northern industrialism, one economic historian claims both institutions were based on class division, but the power of southern slaveholders who "formed the core of southern agricultural societies" was unparalleled.[v] Eric Williams, in fact, argues that attempts at understanding Black slavery through anything other than "the creation of an inferior social and economic organization of exploiters and exploited" is to deny a "fundamental fact."[vi] A *New York Times* article on the 1861 census unintentionally emphasizes the links between enslaved (re)productive labor and free (re)productive labor by reporting that "Virginia retains her old preeminence as the breeder of slaves for market, in which noble occupation she is apparently closely followed by South Carolina,"[3] and yet "among the *free colored* population the increase is very small.[vii] While the census puts people into statistical bodies *intentionally*, the link between production and slavery can by gleaned from the given data. For enslaved African women, (re)production was demanded and rewarded (with some respite). For quasi-free Africans in America, especially as agrarian southern capitalism met the birth of northern industrial capitalism, children transformed into economic burdens.

Given, then, that slavery was an economic system that thrived with debt to its inequities, the laborers drafted into the institution had to be drafted through force and precedent. Plantation-capitalist Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1819, that "I consider the *labor of a breeding woman* as no object, and that a child raised every 2 years is of more profit than the crop of the best laboring man" (emphasis added).[viii] The gendering and racing of labor is specifically played out with the construction of this new "creature" – the breeding woman. While a contemporary white feminist might jump at Jefferson's acknowledgement that pregnancy and childbearing is indeed labor, and as such is valuable, this would be shortsighted. Slavewomen were not any more humanized in the slaveholder's perspective through reproduction. Instead their labor was treated entirely as labor, their children's bodies weighed against cotton and tobacco.

The economic role of reproducing women was further confused for slave owners who wanted to accommodate mothers and ensure the health of infants through allowing breastfeeding. While plantation-capitalists wanted to keep their future profit healthy, this came at the cost of immediate field help. In some cases, owners compromised by allowing infants to accompany their enslaved mothers through domestic or field work, theoretically getting the best of both bodies (the mother, who is located here almost exclusively as the maternal breast, as well as the owned-infant's body).[ix] Besides the long-term economic benefits to be found in preserving some extent of infant-health, Marie Jenkins Schwartz also points out that taking these steps "enabled owners to think of themselves as humane and enlightened managers, or even paternal figures, rather than as the cruel and despotic creatures that inhabited the pages of abolitionist tracts."[x]

Plantation records that directly relate (re)production to production list the cotton-picking rates of enslaved women as they correspond to childbirth. The average woman picked 73.2 pounds of cotton 9-12 weeks before giving birth, 67 pounds of cotton 1 to 4 weeks before giving birth, and 31.3 pounds of cotton the week in which she gave birth.[xi] Two to three weeks after giving birth, the pounds picked were decreased to an average of 8.6 pounds per day, but by 8 to 11 weeks after the women were picking an average of 80.6 pounds of cotton a day, more than they were picking three months before giving

[3] The tone and language (i.e. "noble") is sarcastic here, the piece goes on the talk of this "disgusting traffic." The language of the feminized Virginia as a "breeder," however, is less laughable.

birth.[xii] Compare this with the modern maternity leave in Great Britain, of 26 weeks.[4] Even more telling than the numbers themselves, are the existence of the data: for productivity to have been recorded in terms of childbirth it must have been without qualms that plantation-capitalists understood the bodies of enslaved women as chartable reproductive units.

The most extreme interference between slave owners and reproduction provide the most extreme examples of the (re)productive body archetype. A physician of the time insisted that enslaved infants should be fed only molasses and oil for their first ten days of life to provide safety from various diseases. During this time, the lactating mother's milk was "to be drawn off" by the nurse, the midwife, another and older child, or by a puppy.'"[xiii] The extreme animalization of the Black female body – the inconceivable demand that she nurse a puppy as if it were her child, for the profit of the plantation-capitalist – exemplifies this linkage of body, profit, race and gender.[5] Not only was it assumed the white male physician could better care for children than their mothers, it was also implicit that disease and harm came to infants through the Black female body (as opposed to the institution of slavery).

The commodification of enslaved women's bodies for (re)productive purposes also showed in the ways these "bodies" were marketed. An 1856 magazine article explained that "every man is worth not merely what he can do in the course of his life, but what he can fetch on any one day of his life, at an auction."[xiv] Were the piece to take gender into account, it might go on to discuss how this "worth" at auction could be determined not only by strength at field or domestic labor but also through the reproductive body of the enslaved woman in question. One twenty-year-old woman for whom a type of classified advertisement was placed in the *Charleston Mercury* was distinguished as being "very prolific in her generating qualities… [she] affords a rare opportunity to any person who wishes to raise a family of strong and healthy servants for their own use."[xv] The human qualities of the woman are eliminated; even the human potential in *childbearing* is transformed into the capitalist (re)production construction of "generating qualities."[xvi] The individualism and sexualized ownership implicit in "for their own use" is also telling of how the body is framed through slavery.

As *The Colored American*, which reprinted the advertisement for critique, comments: "the heiresses of southern plantations, making calculations upon the increase of their 'live stock' of human beings, with the same cool and self-satisfied *non chalance* with which a northern farmer speaks of the increase of his pigs and poultry!"[xvii] An advertisement several years later, in *The Georgia Constitutionalist* for "Five Negroes, 3 Women, 1 Fellow, and one small child," is followed with commentary that "the value of this property will depend [on] whether the woman be young and *likely*" (emphasis in original).[xviii] An advertisement in the intriguingly titled *Mississippi Free Trader* answers this question of reproductive "likeliness" upfront, hawking "A likely negro woman, acclimated."[xix] The evidence of (re)production serving as selling points of enslaved Black women are numerous and telling.

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[4] From www.dti.gov.uk/er/matleafr.htm. Paid maternity leave in the contemporary United States is more tricky and dramatically less; while all women are technically allowed 12-paid weeks of leave before or after birth, these rights are dependent on the size of the corporation (smaller and decentralized businesses aren't held to this), the length of time of employment, the number of sick-days and vacation taken, and the work being full-time. I choose the UK's statistics here because of their *comparatively* socialist welfare state and because of the links that highlights between gender, race and capitalist-exploitation.

[5] It is noteworthy that Schwartz goes on to say the slave women subjected to this "health plan" quietly rebelled, and somehow breastfed their infants. One wonders if there isn't another contemporary connection to be made between the Black female body and profit in the distribution of unapproved and undesired birth control mechanisms to the most impoverished women in the country.

At the same time, the sale of enslaved Africans "so disrupted the peace and efficiency of the slave workforce" that some slaves were sold as family units, perhaps as in the case above.[xx] One historian cites evidence that proves the selling of family units, like other (re)productive questions around slavery, was less about the humanity of slave-holders or even their recognition of humanity in their enslaved, but instead about profit. She quotes the advice that "when you buy several small parcels & throw them all together among strangers they don't assimilate."[xxi] These "parcels," of course, are humans.

The Fetishized Body

Related to the use of the enslaved female body for (re)production is the use of the enslaved female body for sexual abuse: the fetishized body.

A starting consideration is the story of slave master Ellen Borden who sought revenge for the infidelity of her husband by assaulting and murdering the slave he raped.[6] The abuse of someone within her control, given the power dynamics between Borden and her husband, is both despicable and understandable. What is important here is the portrayal of the violence inflicted onto the unnamed female slave, the ways in which it is centered in the physical, and the sexual. The report of the woman's death follows:

> She was first tied and whipped, then boiling water was poured over the abdomen and legs until the skin was scalded off and the fatty tissue cooked, leaving her muscles bare; she was then taken into a smoke house and locked up, and probably on the next day the remaining injuries were inflicted which put an end to her misery. The last injuries were the hanging of the Negro by a rope attached to a joist in the smokehouse and a severe blow on the temple with some sharp pointed instrument which pierce the skull.[xxii]

The extreme details given not only report the murder, but also situate it firmly in the visceral. Another report, referring to the mistress this time as Mrs. Baolton, but which seems to be of the same incident: "It appears that Mrs. B., exasperated by jealousy, whipped the woman, who belonged to her husband, scalded her, knocked her in the head with a spade, and finally hung her."[xxiii] In either description, sexual revenge is not merely taken on by the body, it engulfs the body.

Moving away from direct sexualized violence, momentarily, we are left with the institution which bred it. The ways in which slavery, which by definition was an institution of using humans as uncompensated labor, has fetishized[7] the slave woman's body are demonstrative of the dangerous intersection of economics and social hierarchies.

The "Fancy Trade," where lighter-skinned slaves were sold to white plantation-capitalists specifically for sex is an example of the Fetishized Body.[xxiv] "Fancy," apparently a popular adjective for clothing and cloth at the time (one 1850 advertisement from *The National Era* lists fancy cassimeres,

[6] I am not trying to diminish the agency of enslaved African women by suggesting consensual sex with a master is impossible. Instead, it is a question of power, and whether consensual sex can occur in situations with such imbalanced power dynamics. I believe that it cannot.

[7] Throughout this section on the fetishized body I am playing with both sexual and asexual definitions of fetish. One of the more interesting and least vernacular definitions of fetishism is "an object that is believed to have magical or spiritual powers" (www.dictionary.com). This sort of fetish is interesting, especially when analyzing the fetish of white slave holding women (maintaining, perhaps problematically, a heterosexual framework) with regards to their / their husband's slaves. The obsession, say in the case of Ellen Borden, must be considered not only for rage at her husband, but also a fear of perceived power in the unknown.

fancy-figured alpacas, mohair in fancy colors and fancy ginghams),[xxv] is even more dangerous then. Signifying both desire and commodity, the situation White retells of a slave keeper selling "a handsome woman" for fifteen hundred dollars reminds how intensely intertwined capital and human sexuality are.[xxvi]

Maintaining order on plantations when sexual exploitation was part of daily life required an adjustment to the ways in which family was constructed. While changes in the mode of production (family farming to large scale agrarian capitalism) occur at the expense of traditional family structures[8] on plantations, historians have argued that the sexual exploitation of enslaved women that was claimed paternalistic was actually so only in the extent to which it was incestuous. "It becomes clear," Carolyn J. Powell writes, "that the supposedly paternalistic, and in reality, dominant position of the slave master over the slave woman has always been in large part a sexual one. Moreover, paternalism…grew out of the necessity to discipline and morally justify a system of exploitation."[xxvii] To unpack this analysis: the paternalistic attitudes of slave masters existed only to make atones, emotionally, for the slave holders. Here, too, the bodies of enslaved women become objects – what Powell says has always been sexual (as power and dominance can be tied up with sexual power and dominance, as the contemporary S/M community illustrates) has been portrayed as fatherly and nurturing only to the extent to which the female slave's body alleviates the moral burden of human ownership.

Since White cites New Orleans as the hub of the "fancy trade," an 1854 article in a New Orleans newspaper writes, "…it is a lamentable truth, that men occupying high and responsible positions are obnoxious to the charge of living in open concubine with slaves and free persons."[xxviii] What is interesting here, however, goes beyond the sexualizing of Black women (enslaved and quasi-free) and into a critique of "amalgamation," or interracial sexual relations. The New Orleans narrator is not concerned for the concubines but for "the present tone of public morals."[xxix] More to the point, within the fetishized body produced by the "fancy trade" and related concubinage, is the fetishization of skin.

What constituted this "handsome" or light-skinned body? White specifies that the "fancy trade" was the sale of "light-skinned black women."[xxx] The rape of Black women, both abhorred and expected in American society of the 19th century,[9] was heavily tied into a fetishization of skin pigment. The New York Evening Post reported in 1838 that:

> …on the day previous to the mob, a colored man (very light) as seen walking arm and arm with two colored women, (much darker than himself) and some young men immediately exclaimed, "amalgamation and generation," and it was with difficulty that these respectable persons escaped without injury. When the "gentlemen" were informed that the mulatto was brother to the colored women who were walking with him, they appeared to be much mortified.[xxxi]

The article was clearly intended to embarrass the racist citizen, both the "gentlemen" of the anecdote, and the readers who could identify that judgment in themselves. However, the emphasis on skin color within the anecdote negated this purpose. By giving the attention given in the parentheticals, female color is fetishized and the history of rape in slavery (the "mulatto" brother) is shown as less

[8] This was because families that were once independent now struggled against large plantations, and had to either send members outside of the family productive system to make money, or had to struggle in relative-poverty. This is not to excuse poor planters, however, who despite their own plights often still *aspired* to be slave owners.

[9] And perhaps the 21st century.

prominent than the history of fetishizing the Black female body as sexually available – even in the North.

Another incidence of this is a poem published in the abolitionist paper *The Liberator* by white English writer Jane Ashby. Her call to end Southern slavery is focused not on the evils of slavery, but on the sexuality enslaved women.

> White matrons of the Southern States, who tremble at your frown?
> Your husbands' darker concubines! Is that your marriage crown?
> To live among each wretched ones, of sanctity deprives
> The tie that binds in wedlock Southern husbands and their wives.[xxxii]

Ashby's plea emphasizes the sexuality of enslaved Africans, whether consensual or not, to the extent that any slave woman might be one of these "darker concubines." The wretched are not the husbands, but the women destroying marriage and therefore proper Christian femininity. White women were clearly as guilty of fetishizing the enslaved African women, disembodying their reality and then focusing on their bodies. Given the mentality cultivated, it is almost understandable how a woman like Ellen Borden could transfer her marital angst onto the flesh of one of their enslaved women.

As the poem goes on, it attempts to move towards liberating enslaved women (Black men, as they apparently were no sexual challenge, were not problematic.), but does so only in a fashion that aggrandizes the white woman and reinforces savior-victim narratives. "Does that careless mother, who at slavery connives, / Rear her daughters but for harem-chiefs, not pure and holy wives?"[xxxiii] An implicit contrast between pure white womanhood and the "othered" Black womanhood is evident. Another article, this one after the technical abolition of slavery, reiterates this "moral" argument, claiming Black women's morality is "necessary because the system of concubine under slavery had taken deep root in the social structure of the South."[xxxiv] In a sense, the entire white-perceived immorality of a race is positioned on the Black women's bodies, and therefore atonement is placed on these bodies as well.

To return, however, to the specific fetishization of the skin, is the case of a Mr. Simms, a Georgian runaway slave. What is relevant about his story is that it was his wife – "handsome and nearly white" – who apparently gave Simms escape plan away to the White man for whom she was a sexual concubine.[xxxv] The fetishization of her light skin in an article where it is apparently irrelevant (the lengthy piece makes no other references to pigments), and even the definition of its color not as light but as "nearly white," suggesting black draws attention to the woman's body. Sexualized as concubine, skin near-white, she is portrayed as a "race traitor." Without details outside of her fetishized body, it is difficult to draw any other conclusion.

The relationship between enslaved African women and the profits made off of them is a relationship inscribed onto the body. Enslaved Black women, when imagined as child bearers and concubines, and when understood by their skin shade, uterus, and breasts, in addition to the "masculine" physical labor expected from their bodies, became not only the abject, but also the unhuman.

Notes

[i] Zillah Eisenstein, *Against Empire: Feminisms, Racism and the West*, Zed Books, 2004.

[ii] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves In the Plantation South*, W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 1999, 27-28.

[iii] Claire Robertson, "Africa Into the Americas?: Slavery, Women, the Family, and the Gender Division of Labor," in *Black Women and Slavery in the Americas: More Than Chattel*," Ed. David Barry Gaspar & Darlene Clark Hine, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1996, 9.

[iv] D'Emillio " Capitalism and Gay Identity."

[v] Joseph P. Reidy, *From Slavery to Agrarian Capitalism in the Cotton Plantation South: Central Georgia, 1800-1880*, The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1992, 6-7.

[vi] R. Guerra, *Azucar y Población en Las Antillas*, 1935, quoted in Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, Russell & Russell: New York, 1961.

[vii] "Facts From the Census," *New York Times*, 27 September 1861, 4:3.

[viii] Jefferson quoted in Wilma King, "Suffer with them Till Death: Slave Women and their Children in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Black Women and Slavery in the Americas: More Than Chattel*," Ed. David Barry Gaspar & Darlene Clark Hine, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1996, 147.

[ix] Marie Jenkins Schwartz, "Oh How I Ran: Breastfeeding and Weaning on Plantation and Farm in Antebellum Virginia and Alabama," in *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, Ed. by Patricia Morton, The University of Georgia Press: Athens, 1996, 243-4.

[x] ibid., 242.

[xi] Table 3: "Daily Cotton-Picking Rates of U.S. Women Slaves before and after Giving Birth," in Richard H. Steckel's "Women, Work, and Health Under Plantation Slavery in the United States," in *Black Women and Slavery in the Americas: More Than Chattel*," Ed. David Barry Gaspar & Darlene Clark Hine, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1996, 51.

[xii] ibid, 51.

[xiii] ibid, 246.

[xiv] Frederic Law Olmsted, "A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; with remarks on their Economy," *The Living Age*, New York, 20 September 1856, 734.

[xv] E.J., *The Charleston Mercury*, 16 May 1838, reprinted in *The Colored American*, New York, 11 August 1838.

[xvi] ibid.

[xvii] "Most Detestable," *The Colored American*, New York, 11 August 1838.

[xviii] "Slavery As It Is," *The Colored American*, New York, 12 June 1841.

[xix] *The Mississippi Free Trader*, qtd. In *Fredrick Douglass' Paper*, Rochester, 5 November 1852.

[xx] Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight For We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina*, University of Illinois: Urbana, 1997, 56.

[xxi] ibid, 56.

[xxii] "Shocking Cruelty to a Negro: Inhuman Conduct of A Woman," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Rochester, 12 October 1955.

[xxiii] "A negro woman was killed," *Provincial Freeman*, Chatham, Canada West, 3 November 1855.

[xxiv] White, 37.

[xxv] "Fall and Winter Goods," *The National Era*, Washington D.C., 8 August 1850, 127.

[xxvi] White, 37.

[xxvii] Carolyn J. Powell, "In Remembrance of Mira: Reflections on the Death of a Slave Woman," in *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past*, Ed. by Patricia Morton, The University of Georgia Press: Athens, 1996, 55.

[xxviii] *Commonwealth*, reprinted in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Rochester: 24 March 1854.

[xxix] ibid.

[xxx] White, 37.

[xxxi] "Amalgamation – A Philadelphia Anecdote," *N.Y. Evening Post*, reprinted in *The Colored American*, New York, 14 July 1838.

[xxxii] "An English Woman's View of Slavery," *The Liberator*, reprinted in the *Provincial Freeman*, Chatham, 5 January 1856.

[xxxiii] ibid.

[xxxiv] Bishop R. H. Cain, "The Progressive Movements of the A.M.E. Church in the South," *The Christian Recorder*, Philadelphia, 12 August 1880.

[xxxv] Theodore Parker, "The Like and the Different," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Rochester, 8 April 1852.

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