MAKING ANIMALS, MAKING SLAVES: ANIMALIZATION AND SLAVERY IN THE ANTEBELLUM UNITED STATES

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INTRODUCTION: AM I NOT A MAN?

“Animals whom we have made our slaves we do not like to consider our equals.”

—Charles Darwin

In the summer of 1833, something extraordinary happened—Parliament voted to end slavery in the British Empire. After three readings in the Commons, the approval of the Lords and the receipt of royal assent, a date was set for abolition: August 1, 1834. By the time it concluded, the campaign to end slavery in the British Empire had revolutionized mass politics, involving an astounding proportion of the British population on a political question whose resolution would have previously fallen into the hands of elites.

The British abolitionists—William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, Josiah Wedgwood, Thomas Clarkson and others—who led the decades-long campaign to end slavery in the empire developed powerful arguments against slavery. They chronicled its horrors. They defied Christians to square chattel slavery with the compassion they saw as essential to their religion. And they campaigned, hard—campaigned like nobody had before, with slogans, pamphlets,

1 Charles Darwin, Notebook B (1837-1838): 231
2 Adam Hochschild estimates that petitions to end the slave trade included more signers than voters, almost half a million—an unprecedented level in a society where only 250,000 people had signed petitions of any sort in the twenty year period around the American Revolution. For more on the process of British Abolition generally, see: Adam Hochschild, Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005). For noted statistic, see: Hochschild, 230-231.
children’s books, buttons, petitions and medallions produced to a scale befitting the institution they sought to vanquish: Slavery.\textsuperscript{3}

These abolitionists were propelled by the tailwind of the enlightenment, whose intellectual tradition largely sprung out of the minds of British giants like Locke and Hume. They argued, to great effect, that slavery violated the most basic elements of religious conscience and human rights, now dogma but at the time a relatively young invention. Perhaps the most iconic remnant of their campaign makes this case well. It is a medallion, set into clay in 1787 by Josiah Wedgwood. At its center, a black slave, chained, stoops and holds up his chains. To the medallion’s viewer, he puts a provocative question: “Am I not a man and a brother?” The implication of the medallion, which was enormously popular, reproduced by the hundreds, printed into broadsides, even worn as jewelry, was clear (Ben Franklin called it “equal…to the best written pamphlet.)\textsuperscript{4} It is really asking: “How can one enslave a fellow human?”

The success of abolition in Britain sent shockwaves across the Atlantic. In the United States, where westward expansion continually threatened an uneasy armistice in the battle over slavery, abolition’s British victory sparked to life a roaring abolitionist machine. That machine borrowed from Britain many of its arguments and the essentials of its political playbook—slave narrative, pamphlets, lecturing circuits, children’s literature and a vital corps of passionate women. Only several months after Wilberforce’s legislative triumph, William Lloyd Garrison convened the delegates of the first National Anti-Slavery Convention who founded the American Anti-Slavery Society. The powder-keg was ready to explode.

\textsuperscript{3} Hochschild discusses the political innovations and techniques attached to the abolitionist campaign in Britain. See especially: Hochschild, 6-7, 106-108, 126-129, 158-159, 352-353.
\textsuperscript{4} Franklin quoted in: Hochschild, 129.
But even as a reinvigorated commitment to natural rights for blacks rolled onto American shores in the 1830s, another war was raging—one over the humanity of blacks in general and black slaves in particular. Maddeningly entangled with natural science, black humanity’s place within the natural order had been a topic of debate in the United States as early as the nation’s founding, when Thomas Jefferson and other natural philosophers touched off a series of debates about the natural order. These debates were destined to transmogrify into racial science.

American slavery, meanwhile, grew and changed, travelling southwards and westward into the rising cotton kingdom, as Maryland and Virginia drained.

In the decades after Jefferson’s death, the new defenders of American slavery—no longer Virginians and founders, but scientists and slavers in the Deep South—would wage war on black humanity, preferring to think of slaves as like animals. These thinkers assigned slaves and animals similar places in the natural order; it was as natural to possess slaves as it was to possess cattle, in their account. Slaves and abolitionists scrambled to rebut. Sojourner Truth demanded to know: “Ain’t I a woman?” And while pro and anti-slavery forces rained polemic texts on one another, slavers in the south put their ideas into practice, as the notion that slaves were animals leapt off the page and onto the plantation.

The literature on science, slavery and abolition has amply addressed these outlines. Among others, Adam Hochschild addresses the revolution—both in ideology and technique—that was the British campaign for abolition. And Edward Baptist had now monumentally contextualized the transformation of American slavery from a mid-Atlantic tobacco enterprise to a financial empire built on cotton and violence deep in the American South. Meanwhile,

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5 Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*.
scholars of all stripes have attacked the legacy of Thomas Jefferson, and contemporary America’s true lightning rod, and his science. And they have paid close attention to his great French adversary, the Comte du Buffon, and his theories. They sketch the world into which this thesis dives.

Meanwhile, a gargantuan literature has emerged around the practices and philosophies of slavery and abolition in the United States. Thousands of monographs from leading scholars consider where and when racism emerged and why. They consider how the lives of slaves transpired. And they produce dazzling findings—many with direct bearing on the question of slave humanity and slave “animallity.” In particular, Winthrop Jordan’s celebrated White over Black pulls out a thread of racism that involves the comparison of blacks and slaves to apes (Thomson notices the same in Jefferson’s writing.)

More contemporary authors have taken direct stabs at the question of the animalization of slaves. David Brion Davis, who studies slavery in general but in particular the threat various abolitionist and abolitionist-enlisted philosophical movements posed to the peculiar institution, devotes a good deal of attention to the idea that slaves are “animalized” in the United States in the introduction of his most recent book—The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation.

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8 In particular, see: Keith Thompson, Jefferson’s Shadow: the History of His Science. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); and Allen Lee Dugatkin, Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose: Natural History in Early America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.)
But Davis performs more observation than analysis, noting that animalization may present an important trend in American slavery without devoting the attention of his book’s argumentation to the phenomenon. Many of Davis’ students have addressed this thread of thinking; however, they too operate on the periphery. Mia Bay notes and documents the relationship between slave thought and the status of animals; and Karl Jacoby analyzes the Aristotelian line of thought on the natural slave through history. Neither attempts to treat American thought and practice on animals and slaves as their core object of study.

There are exceptions to this trend, but they are not furnished by historians. Rather, several philosophers and the occasional acolyte of Peter Singer have drawn the comparison between thought related to animals and American slavery at length. But this literature has preferred drawing moral conclusions to analyzing a historical phenomenon and its actors; it draws insightful parallels between the treatment of animals and the treatment of slaves, but rather than inquire into their significance, focuses on decrying what it views at the inhuman treatment of animals.

A number of articles and dissertations tackle significant pieces of this puzzle. In particular, a significant scholarship has sprung up addressing the depiction of slaves as pet-like in sentimental abolitionist literature, alongside a literature analyzing and bringing to light slave folklore that imagines slave narrators and characters as animals. Meanwhile, the literature on

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animals, the archeological literature of slavery and related elements of the secondary literature
are burgeoning. But this is a secondary literature composed of puzzle pieces rather than
syntheses for the reader interested in how the intellectual and practical battles over whether or
not slaves were animals played out.

The same could be said of the primary literature. The study of slavery in the United
States, especially in the nineteenth century both suffers and benefits from the enormity of the
primary source base. There are thousands upon thousands of slave narratives, abolitionist texts,
drawings, scientific tracts, plantation records and any other type of source imaginable. Some
sources—the narrative of Frederick Douglass, for example—are canon, while other receive less
attention. But in their totality, they permit an author to assemble almost whatever mosaic the
author prefers, so long as they remain keenly aware of the biases that riddle sources often geared
towards securing or forestalling abolition. They deny the author, however, the convenience of
reviewing any really significant portion of their source base. Surprises lurk everywhere.

The goal of this thesis is to begin to assemble the puzzle pieces on animalization and
slavery. It begins by examining the connections between natural science, thought on animals,
thought on slavery and the practice of slavery at the dawn of the republic—Thomas Jefferson
serves as the touchstone. It then adjusts focus to the 1830s onward, when rhetorical (and later
literal) wars over slavery in the United States reached fever pitch. The thesis first addresses the

N. Fielder, “Animal Humanism: Race, Species and Affective Kinship in Nineteenth Century Abolitionism.”
American Quarterly. 65(2013); and Spencer D. Keralis, “Feeling Animal: Pet-Making and Master in the Slave’s
Friend,” American Periodicals. 22(2012). On the topic of slave folklore, see: Joyner, Charles W., “The Trickster

15 That the sources permit such a wide range of latitude to the author is a bold claim. I mean to suggest that the source
base is so large that authors might easily read it for a particular argument and, among some obscure sources, find
sufficient fodder to make their case appear sound. For this reason, as I discuss in my “Note on Sources,” I focus on
the major sources—either the most influential texts of the era or the most carefully analyzed collections of sources
(i.e. Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the narrative of Frederick Douglass, or the WPA slave narratives.)
ways in which different groups talked about slavery and animals as related topics in the
nineteenth-century United States. It then examines how talk became practice, the ways in which
slavers, who often advocated for the quasi-animal status of their slaves, made that status so by
force and habit.

The problem at the heart of this thesis remains that put forward by Wedgwood—a man
asks “Am I not a man and a brother” and it is not clear to all that the answer is yes. What
ideological and practical techniques allowed slavery? How were they defeated? It focuses its
analysis on a single possibility: that in the course of making out slaves not to be humans, the
advocates and practitioners of slavery in the nineteenth-century United States verged on
transforming them into something else entirely: animals.
I

JEFFERSON

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

—Thomas Jefferson

“The first difference which strikes us is that of colour. Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarfskin, or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us.”

—Thomas Jefferson

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
I am large, I contain multitudes.

—Walt Whitman

THE ELEPHANT

Departing Philadelphia in the summer of 1797, a 3000 pound, four-year-old elephant made a whirlwind tour of the east coast. Where the elephant travelled—Providence, Salem, Cambridge—broadsides went up. They gushed over the oversized pachyderm, describing its habits and intelligence in seemingly impossible terms. The elephant, according to these advertisements, “[drank] all kinds of spirituous liquors; some days, he has drank 30 bottles of porter, drawing the corks with his trunk.” Visitors, who could pay a quarter dollar to see the

16 United States Declaration of Independence.
17 Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia. (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1788 [1781]). Query XIV.
18 Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” in Leaves of Grass, 1855.
20 “The Elephant,” (no. 32074); and “The Elephant,” (no. 32076) (This comes from a portion of the text identical across the two broadsides.)
humongous curio (an eighth for children), were warned that the elephant had a nasty habit of eating “papers of consequence” and admonished that they should bring none.  

The handlers and their elephant were bound ultimately for Cambridge, Massachusetts to attend a commencement. Although the broadsides do not specify, it is not difficult to guess which. By virtue of its sheer size, the elephant stood at the center of an unfolding debate about natural science. This inquiry is bound for its two poles: Montmard, a forested suburb of Paris, the buzzing home of the Enlightenment, and for a plantation perched on a windswept mountaintop in Virginia: Monticello. These two sites were home to two intellectual giants who helmed opposite poles of a debate about animals and the environment, each of whom would invoke the elephant in their argument. The first was a Frenchman and a naturalist: Georges-Louis Leclerc, the Comte de Buffon. The second was an American and a planter: Thomas Jefferson.

BUFFON

Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon was born Georges-Louis Leclerc in 1707 in Burgundy, France. A family of lawyers, the Leclercs used a sizable inheritance to purchase the town of Buffon, a corresponding title and to send their son, Georges-Louis, to school. A prodigious social climber, Buffon secured admission to the French Royal Academy on the basis of a paper on probability. In 1739, he became the intendant of the Royal Botanical Garden after intensive botanical experimentation in the forests of Montmard and an aggressive lobbying campaign for the job. As intendant, Buffon embarked upon a project that would occupy him for

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21 “The Elephant,” (no. 32074); and “The Elephant, ” (no. 32076.)
22 In 1797, there were considerably fewer colleges and universities in Cambridge, Harvard College, of course, being the oldest.
the rest of his life and make him one of the most celebrated figures of the French Enlightenment:

A thirty-six volume account of the natural world.23

Buffon, although he is hardly known to us, was immensely popular in his time. At his death, France convulsed in grief. Twenty-thousand mourners attended his funeral.24 The French erected a massive statuary likeness in the royal gardens (jardin du roi).25 Emile Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin*, which was published over eighty years after Buffon’s death, features an uncultured buffoon—Camille—who tries to improve himself by reading the essential works of science, fiction and philosophy: Buffon, specifically.26 One historian ranked Buffon’s most famous work, his many-volume *Histoire Naturelle, Générale et Particulière*, as one of the two most important works of its type to emerge in the eighteenth century.27 The other, in his telling, was Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*.

Buffon, whose appeal transferred overseas, also headlined the advertisements for the elephant’s traveling show, which began with an appearance of the massive mammal onstage in Philadelphia. Those print broadsides began: “The elephant, according to the account of the celebrated Buffon, is the most respectable animal in the world.”28 (Buffon’s celebrity being such that no further explanation was required.) That was not a bad characterization of Buffon’s views. Buffon had a preoccupation with size, which was essential to how he evaluated the success or

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24 Dugatkin, 16.
25 Dugatkin, 16.
28 “The Elephant” (no. 32074); and “The Elephant” (no. 32076).
failure of species and environments. In *Histoire Naturelle, Générale et Particulière*, Buffon laid out view of the natural world to which Jefferson would respond and upon which Carter and Wilkinson, the publishing house responsible for the print advertising of the elephant’s American odyssey, would rely.

That view, proto-Lamarckian\(^{29}\) and extremely influential, might be simplified along the following lines: Animals (and people) evolved in response to their environments. In unfavorable environments, which were usually wet and cold, people and animals alike degenerated and transmogrified. In favorable environments, by contrast, they could achieve their ideal forms.\(^{30}\) Ideal forms, it continued, were large and virile. Degenerate forms were small and sterile. Crowds in Providence, Philadelphia, Salem and Cambridge no doubt understood this view when they flocked to see the largest animal then known to man—an elephant.

In Buffon’s account, it was exposure to the environment itself that transformed organisms. As a consequence, people and animals more directly exposed to nature transformed more quickly. These organisms served as bell-weather—potent signs of what was in store for more insulated inhabitants of any ecosystem. Buffon explains:

> In brute animals, these effects are greater and more suddenly accomplished; because they are more nearly allied to the earth than man; because their food being more uniformly the same, and nowise prepared, its qualities are more decided and its influence stronger; and because the animals, being unable to clothe themselves, or to use the element of fire, remain perpetually exposed to the action of the air; and all the inclemencies of the climate….when forced by men, or by any revolution on the globe, to abandon their native

\(^{29}\) Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, a French naturalist who came after Buffon but before Darwin, is most famous for his flawed theory of evolution. Lamarck, although he understood that evolution occurred across generations and tended to produce more and more complex organisms over time, believed that the exposure of an organism altered that organism; that organism could pass on those alterations, Lamarck reasoned, which would accumulate over time. The most famous illustration of this concept is a Giraffe, which in Lamarck’s account would grow its neck longer by reaching for higher fruit, then have offspring with long necks as a result. This is the theory of “use and dis-use” as opposed to natural selection, which Darwin pioneered several decades later.

\(^{30}\) For a concise account of Buffon’s theories, see: Egerton.
soil, their nature [have] undergone changes so great, that, to recognize them, recourse must be had to...experiment and analogy. \(^{31}\)

Buffon’s notion that people and animals could transform if they were transplanted to new environments had enormous contemporary relevance in the late-eighteenth century. Then as now, the world grappled with the effects of a global biological reshuffling, with an even more unclear view as to the potential consequences. Europeans had arrived and multiplied in the Americas, bringing old world flora and fauna from Europe and African slaves and diseases from Africa. \(^{32}\) In the Caribbean, these Europeans were desperately fearful that the hot, putrid environment would lead them to moral depravity. \(^{33}\) It was, however, inhabitants of British North America, who were then bleeding and dying at Bunker Hill, Lexington and Yorktown for independence from Britain, who faced perhaps the most uncertain future when Buffon’s theories exploded onto the scene. \(^{34}\) It was also they against whom Buffon directed his most withering attacks.

Buffon counted the young nation among the world’s unfavorable environments, in large part because of the impression that the American continent housed significant inland water and suffered from colder temperatures than Northern Europe (this was of course untrue). \(^{35}\) Buffon assessed American wildlife as puny and America’s prospects as grim. He was no more

\(^{31}\) Buffon, quoted in: Egerton, 153.

\(^{32}\) For a thorough discussion of this process of biological transportation and transformation, see: Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900.* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986.)

\(^{33}\) A number of authors take on the challenge of exploring moral responses to the Caribbean climate. See, as one example: Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972.)

\(^{34}\) Because Buffon serialized his *Histoire Naturelle*, it is somewhat complicated to suggest that it appeared during the American Revolution. It began printing before the Revolution, printed during the revolution, and continued to print after the Revolution. Nevertheless, the basic contention is strong: Buffon’s theories were most important at a critically uncharted moment of American history.

charitable to America’s indigenous human inhabitants, writing: “The organs of generation (of the savages) are small and feeble. He has no hair, no beard, no ardor for the female.”

Buffon’s theory of the natural world implied that America’s new European inhabitants, creoles, would soon become, like the natives, feeble and impotent, victims of their environment. For a young republic—one desperately trying to build a critical diplomatic relationship with Buffon’s home country, France—the naturalist’s verdict offered a dire prognosis, and one with a broad following. Legions of naturalists in Prussia, Britain, France and elsewhere spouted Buffon’s basic thesis about the Americas. Early Americans, insistent that Buffon was wrong and that they were destined for prosperity, responded forcefully to his libels. At the fore of America’s frenzied objectors: None other than Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson responded aggressively and exhaustively, evidently believing disputing Buffon’s theories part and parcel of his work building a nation. He corresponded with James Madison as he considered how precisely to build his case. And then, *deus ex machina*-like, for the present story at least, the perfect opportunity fell into Jefferson’s lap. In 1780, the French Secretary to the Continental Congress, François Barbé-Marbois, distributed a twenty-two-item survey to representatives from each of the 13 states, which he asked them to complete and return to France. The French, at the time, hungered after information about the new world. From Virginia Barbé-Marbois chose Joseph Jones. Jones scribbled down the French diplomat’s

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37 This theory was generally known as Creole Degeneracy, and propounded by Buffon’s disciples including: Abbé Raynal, Abbé Cornelius de Pauw, William Robertson. Many of these writers were much more explicit than Buffon on the count that degeneracy was not just an animal affliction. Cornelius de Pauw writing: “The Europeans who pass into America degenerate, as do the animals: a proof that the climate is unfavorable to the improvement of either man or animal. The Creoles, descended from Europeans and born in America…have never produced a single book.” See: Dugatkin, *Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose*, 30-31.
38 Dugatkin, 48-49.
questions and passed off the survey to Jefferson, who he thought would deliver more thoughtful responses. While the British invaded Virginia, Jefferson wrote out his twenty-two answers, added one, billed the twenty-three questions as queries and produced the only book he would ever publish: *Notes on the State of Virginia.*

*Notes* is usually read as a meditation on America. And certainly Jefferson’s views on the republic and its faults and virtues saturate the text. But Jefferson designed *Notes* with a particular purpose in mind: rebutting Buffon. Jefferson, who had a keen sense of audience, was not enticed to publish his text until he arrived in France, Buffon’s homeland, and even then published anonymously. That too is why its longest section—query VI, “productions mineral, vegetable, and animal”—functions as a point-by-point attack on the then aging French count.

In that query, Jefferson advances a series of arguments against Buffon, but two in particular stand out. First, Jefferson doubts Buffon’s evolutionary pedigree—he skewers the notion that animals (or people) can change so dramatically. Jefferson writes:

> The truth is, that a Pigmy and a Patagonian, a Mouse and a Mammoth, derive their dimensions from the same nutritive juices. The difference of increment depends on circumstances unsearchable to beings with our capacities. Every race of animals seems to have received from their Maker certain laws of extension at the time of their formation. Their elaborative organs were formed to produce this, while proper obstacles were opposed to its further progress. Below these limits they cannot fall, nor rise above them. What intermediate station they shall take may depend on soil, on climate, on food, on a careful choice of breeders. But all the manna of heaven would never raise the mouse to the bulk of the mammoth.

Outside influence—even breeding—Jefferson tells us, cannot overcome the essential nature of any given species. These are fixed, unchanging. Environmental influence, by contrast, is weak.

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39 This reconstruction relies upon: Dugatkin, 65-66.
Jefferson’s second line of attack is somewhat more amusing. Buffon accuses America of having small animals. Jefferson responds that American animals are big—impossibly big even.

Jefferson, in Notes, discusses the continued existence of the American Mammoth, perhaps the largest extinct animal then believed to still exist. Jefferson, who like many contemporaries doubted the proto-evolutionary consensus emerging among European naturalists, found extinction a difficult concept to stomach and showed no signs of believing it. As a result, Mammoth bones found in America seemed sufficient, along with offhand reports of large interior mammals, to prove the behemoth’s existence.\footnote{Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia Query VI, 44.}

Less far-fetched, Jefferson listed the sizes and weights of American animals he and his fellow nature-enthusiasts had measured in a table. The table compared the established sizes of similar animals in the United States to their European counterparts, showcasing animals that were \textit{larger} in the New World than the Old.\footnote{Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query VI, “A comparative View of the Quadrupeds of Europe and of America,” 49-52.} That table, drily titled “A comparative View of the Quadrupeds of Europe and of America,” seemed to prove what Jefferson claimed: When Buffon, who never travelled to the New World, saw in American animals a future of diminution and depravity for the young nation, he was wrong.\footnote{Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query VI, “A comparative View of the Quadrupeds of Europe and of America,” 49-52.} But these were just words on paper, anonymously brought to a Parisian printer in 1785 when Jefferson served as minister there. To really prove his point, Jefferson began desperately assembling a menagerie of American megafauna to awe Buffon into submission. With the help of a near-army of political associates on the other side of the ocean, Jefferson began to search desperately for a bull-moose.\footnote{Thomas Jefferson, Letter to John Sullivan, quoted in: Dugatkin, \textit{Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose}, xi.}
moose, as life-like, statuesque and imposing as possible, would no doubt disabuse the count of
his damaging line of attack.

A moose proved hard to find. Jefferson was first able to secure only mammoth bones and
the pelt of a panther (Buffon had misjudged the size of America’s big cats, in Jefferson’s
account.)45 Without a moose, panther pelts failed to convince Buffon, so Jefferson sent out a
“Moose survey,” querying leading Americans on what they knew of the American Moose and
whether they could acquire one.46 Appreciative of the idea that natural science could constitute a
national priority, America’s upper crust took Jefferson’s inquiry seriously.47 The generals,
signers of the Declaration of Independence and delegates to the continental congress with whom
Jefferson corresponded distributed his survey to hunters and woodsmen and gathered as much
information on the moose as they could, helping Jefferson in his quest to secure a specimen.48
Finally, in 1787, Jefferson got his hands on a stuffed moose—putrid, peeling but nevertheless
towering by the time it completed its briny transatlantic voyage to the French capital.49
According to one unverifiable account, Jefferson overawed Buffon with his hairy American
colossus, and Buffon instantly repented.50 Whether or not this story holds water, Buffon died
shortly after, in 1788. He would never admit his error in writing.

That Jefferson got caught up in a years-long dispute with a French naturalist during the
American Revolution and its immediate aftermath—times of unquestionable importance for the
future of the nation and the men, like Jefferson, who made it—would be surprising if Jefferson

45 Dugatkin, 81-87.
46 Dugatkin, 90-95.
47 Dugatkin, 90-95.
48 Dugatkin, 90-95.
49 Dugatkin, 97-100.
50 Dugatkin, 97-100.
had not considered so much to be at stake. But he did. When Jefferson wrote, debates about the natural world implicated debates about the nature of man, the destinies of nations, the distinctions between people and the just political order. He could not separate reasoning about animals and reasoning about people. One French observer put the connection well in praising Jefferson: “You are indeed entitled to public esteem for uniting the knowledge of the naturalist to the wisdom of the statesman.”

The political and moral nature of discussions about the natural order was neither surprising nor new in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. That fusion dates at least to Aristotle, who reasoned that man was a ‘political animal’ because politics was the fulfillment of our highest nature; and that fusion endured with strength. Aristotle’s pronounced interest in classifying the natural world was not unrelated to his moral and political philosophy. Contemporary Aristotelians have tried to break down virtue, nature and biology into separate lines of though, but finding the results unsatisfactory have largely reneged. Even Hobbes (no scion of Aristotle) begins his treatment of the ideal political society by considering the fundamental nature of the individual—as a single member of the human species, as did many

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religious figures. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, debates about animals and the environment helped differentiate and ultimately set on a collision course with one another natives and European arrivals in New England.

Natural philosophy was neither unusual nor inconsequential, then, to Jefferson and his compatriots. Scientific observations, even extremely pejorative ones, could reveal natures. Nor were natural philosophy’s scrutinies or effects confined to animals. Even in the course of his dispute with Buffon, Jefferson began to consider various human natures with political consequences.

The first instance of this comes with Native Americans. Jefferson, needing to rebut Buffon’s unflattering characterization of natives in order to defend the promise of the American continent, describes natives in positive terms where it suited him in making his case. Buffon lamented the diminished sexual organs of native men, Jefferson countered that in fact they were quite large. That the men were virile and strong. Smart, even. Then, to Buffon’s emasculating picture, Jefferson presents a remasculinizing, attentive response. He chooses, however, a troubling place to write it: Query VI, “Productions mineral, vegetable, and animal” – not Query XI, “Aborigines.” In Jefferson’s world, reasoning about people, even at length, was sometimes most properly situated alongside reasoning about nature: minerals, plants and even animals.

Where might that suitability come from? For one, animals were a part of everyday life for most people until the industrial revolution. Animals were slaughtered on site for food

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(Chicago and meat packing had yet to happen), most families farmed or relied on their own animals for food, and exponentially more humans farmed before the industrial revolution than after.\(^{57}\) For Jefferson, the facility of thinking about some humans and animals together came perhaps in part from a racially narrow understanding of what constituted a man or human. Jefferson cites a “definition” of a man, which he characterizes as Linnaean, to which he compares natives favorably: “‘Homo sapiens Europæus.’”\(^{58}\)

What then, for Mr. Jefferson, of “Homo sapiens Africanus?” An entirely different species? A fusion? Something less than human? Notes on the State of Virginia does not offer an entirely coherent worldview on blackness and its position within the natural order (Jefferson, after all, embraced astonishing contradiction). But Notes does situate blackness there squarely—within the natural order, alongside the other problems of race, hierarchy and a just political society. And Jefferson’s analysis of black nature hints at profound political consequences.

It is in Query XIV—“The administration of justice and description of the laws”—that Jefferson’s wolf bares his ideological teeth. In the first instance, Jefferson treats black people far less charitably than he does natives.\(^{59}\) Perhaps because Buffon presents no political imperative to leap to their defense and Jefferson’s personal slaveholding (he owned over 100 slaves) does exactly the opposite. In fact the political imperatives behind Jefferson’s science are much more extensive than Jefferson’s personal slaveholding. Americans around the time of independence were beginning to frame a project of gradual assimilation with respect to natives, which required


\(^{58}\) Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query VI, 66

\(^{59}\) Jefferson’s is a reversal of Buffon’s position, who shows much greater sympathy towards black people than he does natives. See: Keith Stewart Thomson, Jefferson’s Shadow: the History of His Science. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 121-23.
them to possess a nature that was not beyond redeeming. By contrast, many planters viewed the assimilation of slaves as threatening to the hierarchies they had so painstakingly produced. Here may be a case of politics leading science, even in an era where science influenced politics.

Jefferson wastes no time establishing differences between whites and black people. He begins his examination of black people by discussing their appearance, which indicates a difference he emphasizes is: “real.” Surely, he insists, the appearance of whites is preferable to that of blacks. Jefferson explains:

“Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form…”

Jefferson has already brought out the core of his argument: Whites are better than blacks, in his view—more capable of emotion and subtlety, not condemned to monotony and drudgery.

Jefferson takes the argument even further, citing: “[Blacks’] own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species.” Jefferson, then, lets the reader know exactly where in the natural order black beauty is situated: somewhere between an orangutan and a white. The syllogism is rather straight-forward: Black men admire beauty in white women, who are preferable to their own women; orangutan males admire beauty in black women, who are also preferable to their own. It remains of course possible that there are

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intermediate species in this hierarchy, but Jefferson unquestionably situated blacks beneath whites by virtue of a comparison to an orangutan.

Moreover, Jefferson claims that this syllogism is natural, easy or fluid to make. He implies that the transference of reasoning about animals to reasoning about humans is valid. He asks, rhetorically: “The circumstance of superior beauty, is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?” In other words, moral principles that apply to animals can apply to humans. Reasoning about nature or a natural order has consequences for humans.

Jefferson then turns to “other physical distinctions” to prove “a difference of race.” Here Notes becomes an almost reflexively stereotypical (if occasionally innovative: “they secrete less by the kidnies”) litany. But it is not the precise characteristics Jefferson identifies that matter here; instead, what is important to understand Jefferson here is the belief that the moral distinction between blacks and whites at stake can be proven by a physical distinction, even an invisible one: Beauty, skin, kidneys. Jefferson is, in essence, reasoning by way of biology, nature.

Jefferson’s opposition to Buffon on issues of natural science in Notes affects questions of policy on which Buffon does not comment. In particular, Jefferson’s conviction that the nature of each species or race (recall Jefferson’s throwback to Homo sapiens Europæus) was fixed rather than malleable—subject to change or evolution as in Buffon’s account—means that the condition of blacks was fixed by nature indefinitely. Jefferson’s writing confirms this account. Jefferson

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63 Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XIV, 148
64 Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XIV, 148.
65 Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XIV, 148.
laments that, despite coexistence of black people and white people (from whom, he presumes, black people could have learned) in America: “never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never seen even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture.”  

Jefferson in Notes is responding to the prospect of emancipation, literally. Jefferson begins and concludes his observations on blacks by discussing proposals for emancipation, on which observational method evidently bears. He argues, by impugning blacks and suggesting that they can never achieve at the same level as whites, that emancipation, absent the deportation of all blacks to Africa or elsewhere (think here of the American Colonization Society) would be foolish. He writes: “This unfortunate difference of colour…is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people.” The prospect of coexistence for blacks and whites, who can never, it would seem, become equal, is grim in this account. In fact, Jefferson predicts a devastating racial conflict would ensue: “and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.”

Jefferson concludes his examination of race with a question, a plea that the reader forgive him. After all, he is merely responding to nature. More precisely, Jefferson is a natural philosopher, responding to human difference as one would animal difference: “Will not a lover of natural history then, one who views the gradations in all the races of animals with the eye of philosophy, excuse an effort to keep those in the department of man as distinct as nature has formed them?”

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66 Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XIV, 149-150.
67 Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XIV, 154.
68 Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XIV, 147
Notes on the State of Virginia usually poses a challenge to biographers of Jefferson—a blot to be explained or dealt with. To them, Notes is that nasty moment in which the hero of the story turns and betrays the ideals set down before: That all men are created equal. But in fact Notes represents a line of reasoning that, if in open conflict with other portions of Jefferson’s oeuvre, does not go away—an outwardly reluctant ideology of slavery. This pro-slavery ideology inhabits the grounds of Monticello, Jefferson’s now disguised plantation.

MONTICELLO

Above a blustery Virginia mountaintop, the polymath Thomas Jefferson breathed into being a world of his own creation: Monticello. For decades, Jefferson reworked a small plantation home into a marvel of neoclassical design. He cut square holes into the walls of his home so that beds could be shoveled into nooks between rooms, rather than occupy space. He dug up and lined with brick a fish-stocked pond in front of the main house on the estate, in order to provide himself year-round access to fresh fish. At the suggestion of the painter Gilbert Stewart, Jefferson painted the floors of the main living room grass-green, to commune his house with the nature that surrounded it.70 Jefferson lavished attention on Monticello’s every detail.

America has also generously given its attention to Monticello. Jefferson’s iconic home has graced the two-dollar bill and is now stamped solidly into the back of every nickel. Postage stamps bear its likeness. And Monticello hosts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.71

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71 In 2011, Monticello attracted 440,000 visitors, down from a peak of almost 700,000 in 1976—America’s bicentennial—but more than its roughly 300,000 average since opening to the public in the 1930s (a figure which in turn suggests that Monticello has hosted roughly 25 million visitors.) See: Thomas Jefferson Foundation, World Heritage Site Periodic Report, Monticello and the University of Virginia, 2003; and J. Freedom du Lac, “Struggling to Attract Visitors, Historic Houses May Face Day of Reckoning.” The Washington Post. December 22, 2012.
Those visitors see only what remains of Monticello—a solitary, hulking house, observing from its vantage point young Virginia, stripped of dozens of slave cabins and shacks that made up a proto-industrial shanty-city. If they explore the grounds, they will find trees, plants, a greenhouse, a cemetery. This was Jefferson’s manufactured natural paradise on top of the hill—the big house of Monticello’s plantation.

The visitor to Monticello today will find especially picturesque Mulberry Row. The name—Mulberry Row—reflects the place now: Sprawling, luxurious mulberry trees line a soft-shaded dirt stretch about 200 feet from the main house, on the precipice of the hill. The path, thronged with gaggles of brochure-laden guests, offers stunning vistas of rolling Albemarle. Perhaps, a visitor might well assume, a site for walking-contemplation, like the paths of Oxford or Darwin’s sandwalk. Today, a single jarring structure fractures that impression—a rough wooden storehouse. Around 1800, that storehouse would have been one of many structures along Mulberry row, which bustled with the activity of a 5,000 acre plantation rather than with the tranquil air of a historical home. Tucked away behind the Mulberry trees, storehouses, a nailery, a blacksmith, a smokehouse and slave quarters flanked Jefferson’s Roman paradise. At any time, Jefferson kept over 100 slaves at Monticello. Over his lifetime, Jefferson owned over 600 slaves.

Mulberry Row, although the focus of the Jefferson Foundation’s contemporary efforts to bring slavery at Jefferson’s home plantation to light, constituted only a portion of slavery’s infrastructure on Monticello. Slave quarters, wheat and tobacco fields and the homes of

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overseers, uncovered by meticulous archaeological exploration, pockmark the forested slopes of Jefferson’s mountain. But these outlying structures, which reveal the scale of Jefferson’s enterprise, are barred to visitors. They have also deteriorated to almost nothing. Like the structures of Mulberry Row, outbuildings were usually built only of logs, and have decayed to the point that their presence can only be interpreted by specialists. Slaves generally lived and worked in shoddy structures on Jefferson’s plantations. One specialist described Mulberry Row as almost certainly having looked like: “A relatively shabby main street.” Jefferson himself once described the process of erecting slave quarters as: “getting the stuff and putting it together.” That rough fabrication usually lasted only a matter of days.

But Monticello was as complicated as its master. Slaves occupied a variety of different roles. Some, such as the chef, lived in the home, although their presence was elaborately shielded from guests by a Rube-Goldberg-like system of lazy susans and dumbwaiters that gave the impression food appeared on the table by magic, not by the sweat of black bodies in the basement cookery. And yet, the same cooks Jefferson hid away trained in French cooking at the White House. Archaeological evidence indicates that some slaves ate better than others—in some slave quarters are scattered animal remains that one can only assume came from the table leftovers; in others, only the feet and other near-meatless cuts. Some slaves received

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77 Heath, Hidden Lives, 33.
78 Heath, 33.
79 Literally, Jefferson would pass empty bottles of wine into a hole in the wall and full bottle would return. The magic behind the trick: the slave holding an unopened vintage on the other side. For more on Jefferson’s cooks, see: Wiencek, Master of the Mountain, 16, 159-164.
80 Wiencek, 159-164.
“gratuity,” a meager pay; most did not. Almost certainly complicating the matter is the obvious fact of life at Monticello: some slave families were old, established and even miscegenated with the Jeffertson, like the Hemmings; most were not.

Jefferson ruthlessly imposed hierarchy on Monticello in the name of rational management. The slaves who performed best, he reasoned, ought to achieve greater responsibility and privilege. This mode of treatment, Jefferson shrewdly realized, would extract the greatest amount of work possible from his slaves by investing them in their own labor.

In the 1790s, Jefferson switched much of his agricultural output from tobacco to wheat. Tobacco was devilish to harvest; sensitive to the weather and the vicissitudes of the market; and rapidly depleted soil, ravaging Monticello. Wheat promised stability, but also diminished the importance of children in the harvesting process. Whereas Tobacco had required children with small hands and good eyesight to pluck worms deadly to the plants, wheat required skilled and strong workers to harvest and grind—but not children. For Jefferson, whose labor force was almost forty percent children, that posed a problem. He needed to find a way to extract productivity from his numerous young slaves.

Jefferson found a solution that his since been employed frequently in prisons: he created a nail factory or nailery on Mulberry Row. Jefferson employed boys between the ages of ten and sixteen from across Jefferson’s plantations in the nailery. Often he uprooted them from their families to bring them to Monticello.

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82 Stanton, Those Who Labor for My Happiness, 81-82.
83 Wiencek discusses the differences between wheat and tobacco cultivation and the reasons for the switch on Jefferson’s plantation. See: Wiencek, Master of the Mountain, 91-92.
84 Stanton, Those Who Labor for my Happiness, 78.
85 Heath, Hidden Lives, 16.
Jefferson devoted himself to the success of the nailery, which epitomized his management style. Jefferson, the master, watched the nailery scrupulously. He personally weighed the iron with which each slave boy began the process of making nails and weighed their nails again at the end, calculating the percentage of iron they wasted. Jefferson gave privileged positions at Monticello to boys who demonstrated craftsmanship and efficiency. Those who lagged met with the possibility that Jefferson would order them to the fields, where their prospects for pay, good food or manumission were all but obliterated.

For young boys, the nailery became a crucible. Each day as they carried their iron and shaped it between their still-growing fingers, their whole lives hung over their heads. Success or failure at their task determined whether the nail boys might scrap a bit of privilege from Monticello’s carefully built hierarchy. Pressure transfigured the nailery into a site of constant terror, situated only feet from Jefferson’s panoptic plantation home. Jefferson’s overseers whipped a sick nail boy until he could not lift his arms. When one nail boy, Cary, suspected another, Brown, of stealing his iron, he was so desperate to recover it that he grabbed a hammer and smashed it through Brown’s skull. Did Jefferson watch, from his sanctum sanctorum, as Brown’s small, fractured head crimsoned the dirt floor of his factory? Almost certainly he did not. Jefferson was likely in Washington at the time of the attack. But he did gloat over his nailery’s astonishing productivity. “Nail-making is to me in this country,” Jefferson wrote, “what an additional title of nobility or the ensigns of a new order are in Europe.”

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88 Wiencek, 122.
89 Wiencek, 121.
90 Which took place in 1803, while Jefferson was president.
Violence, terror, rape, grinding extraction—all had their places on Jefferson’s plantation. So did literacy, craftsmanship, pay, privilege, mercy and music. The same jealousies and pressures that led Cary to hammer in Brown’s skull led slaves to serve as Jefferson’s spies on would-be escapees and potentially to poison one another.92 Jefferson’s guests, and his overseers, whipped and raped slaves.93 Jefferson called his slaves his family—and not just those who illicitly were—and yet Jefferson gave away many of his most valuable slaves, often as gifts.94 Jefferson’s plantation like his writing echoes slavery’s dilemma: The insane union of extreme autonomy, closeness and wealth to control, pummeling poverty and terror.

Jefferson’s management style to some degree reflected a proposal from Notes, which itself must be admitted exists in a corpus that began with radical and full-throated opposition to slavery. Notes argues that Jefferson wants desperately to end slavery, but cannot. The fixed nature of blacks does not make emancipation possible.95 To release, Jefferson explains, “persons whose habits have been formed in slavery is like abandoning children.”96 In this telling, Jefferson’s plantation style becomes an effort in weeding out blacks who can have habits of self-sufficiency formed. But when such “habits” are finally achieved, the slaves become too valuable to be let go. So Jefferson prevaricates, wavers and fibs to protect his livelihood, wriggling away...

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92 Wiencek, Master of the Mountain: 111, 147.
95 Others, including Abraham Lincoln, would later adopt a modified version of this argument. They considered abolition to be a moral good, but believed that because black former slaves would never be whites’ equals they should be sent back to Africa—the colonization movement.
96 Jefferson quoted in: Stanton, 57.
from his more enlightened principles. Jefferson himself performed tremendous feats of intellectual acrobatics to justify his continued slaveholding. He even blamed his slaves for his own financial misfortunes.

Jefferson’s wavering, and indeed his negative evolution, made for contradiction after contradiction. When Jefferson writes in opposition to slavery, he on occasion makes an argument that would seem to fly in the face of Notes. In Notes, Jefferson relies on the premise that blacks are by fixed nature inferior, even animal-like. Jefferson’s other voice assails the notion that people could be treated like cattle—that is, held in slavery like Jefferson held his own slaves. This relies on the more familiar of Jefferson’s premise: That all men are created equal.

In his original draft of the declaration of independence, Jefferson launched an excoriating assault on slavery. He called it: “a market where MEN should be bought and sold.” The Continental Congress ultimately cut this line from the Declaration, largely because of its awkward placement. Jefferson included this comment on slavery in the grievances against King George III. He was trying to blame the British crown for forcing slavery on the Americans, and putting Jefferson into the unenviable and contradictory position from which he lacked the moral imagination to escape—of affirming the political rights of human beings while holding a whole class of humans in bondage.

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97 This argument—an economic one—is the basic argument put forward by both Stanton and Wiencek to explain Jefferson’s unwillingness to ultimately release his slaves. Although, they ascribe vastly different motives and degrees of agencies to the procrastinating slaver.
98 Wiencek, Master of the Mountain: 70-71
99 Wiencek, 9.
Despite this position, the young Jefferson made the seemingly rights-based argument that humans, ought not to be for sale and that slavery was an animalizing commerce. He continued this argument in other writings. Of fellow slavers he wrote:

“Nursed and educated in the daily habit of seeing the degraded condition, both bodily and mental, of those unfortunate beings, not reflecting that that degradation was very much the work of themselves & their fathers, few minds have yet doubted but that they were as legitimate subjects of property as horses and cattle.”

Slaves, this Jefferson tells us, are unlike horses and cattle; they are humans and not subjects or property.

One visitor to Monticello made a similar comment on Jefferson’s own treatment of blacks: “He considered them to be as far inferior to the rest of humankind as the mule is to the horse, and as made to carry burthens.” If this Jefferson—brave, fiery and fierce, if still failing to take personal responsibility—insists that blacks cannot be made into property because they are human, unlike animals, does slaver Jefferson, the Jefferson who emerges in flashes of anger and in terror on the mountainside, argue the opposite, in words or deeds? Did Jefferson make animals out of his slaves?

The simplest answer is that a deep tension existed at Monticello between the human and the sub-human—the animal. Certainly the traces of animalization, the process by which a human identity is displaced by an animal one, took root there. It appears, for instance, in accommodations. Slaves, especially field hands, were made to live in close proximity to animals—far from the plantation house. Unusually far by one account. A former overseer

100 Jefferson to Edward Coles, 1814, quoted in: Wiencek, 23-24. Edward Coles was a Virginia slaveowner who attempted to enlist Jefferson’s help to achieve abolition in that state. Jefferson refused and Coles went on to release all of his slaves, settle them in Illinois and become that state’s second governor.

101 Augusts John Foster, 1807, quoted in: Wiencek, 270.
claimed: “There were no negroe and other out-houses around the mansion, as you generally see on plantations.” Pens literally adjoined their homes and some of Jefferson’s slaves slept almost side by side with hogs and sheep. During the winter, much of the slaves’ work revolved around animals—sheering, slaughtering and salting. Slaves usually dumped animal refuse within or immediately adjacent to their homes (no such practice prevailed at Monticello’s mansion.) In one instance, archaeologists were unable to determine whether they had found a smoke-house or slave quarters: the dwellings for slaves and curing meat proved too similar to one another. The site ultimately proved to be slave quarters.

The role this physical compartmentalization may have played—animals and slaves living alongside and away—in allowing Jefferson to evade his own belief that humans ought not to be held as slaves should not be overstated. Many factors besides psychology control the arrangement and use of domestic and agricultural space. For instance, Jefferson gave extremely miserly rations to his slaves; as a result many needed to raise additional small-livestock, like chickens to escape starvation. But Jefferson seems to have grouped slaves and animals closely in organizing labor as well. One visitor observed that Jefferson had assigned: “four negresses,

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102 See, the account of the overseer Edmund Bacon in: Hamilton W. Pierson, Jefferson at Monticello: the Private Life of Thomas Jefferson : from Entirely New Materials ... (New York: Scribner, 1862), 38.
103 This is especially the case at Poplar Hill—one of Jefferson’s numerous plantations. There, archaeological evidence and oral history has suggested a large population of animal life in immediate proximity to the slave cabins. See: Heath, Hidden Lives: 42-43. One slave at the main plantation writes in his memoir: “The feedin-place was right by the house whar Isaac stayed. They raised many sheep & goats at Monticello.” See: Jefferson, “Life of Isaac Jefferson of Petersburg, Virginia, Blacksmith” Ch. 20.
104 Heath, 21.
105 Heath, 41.
106 See: Gerard W. Gewalt, “Jefferson’s Slaves: Crop Accounts at Monticello, 1805-1808” Journal of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society 13(1994): 19-38; Stanton, Those Who Labor for My Happiness, 61; and Wiencek, Master of the Mountain, 56-57. Gewalt explains that the Jefferson household often bought food—chickens, eggs and vegetables especially—from the slaves, where Stanton and Wiencek corroborate the meagerness of the rations Jefferson gave slaves and Wiencek makes the leap that slaves almost certainly raised animals because they needed to supplement their diets, given that the workday at Monticello could last as long as 14 hours.
four negroes, four horses, and four oxen” to work each quarter of Monticello’s grounds. The balance suggests a discomfiting equity.

Jefferson’s slaves seemed to reason by way of the animal label as well. Martha Jefferson Randolph, Jefferson’s daughter who called the slaves “creatures,” recalled that the stories and songs the slave told and sang usually featured Mr. Fox and Mr. Rabbit. Likely, these were instances of a popular variety of slave folk-culture, in which animals, who represented moral slaves, tricked or outsmarted their nefarious human masters. Mr. Rabbit and Mr. Fox turned the usual animal tropes on their head; sure, Mr. Fox was a fox, but Mr. Fox also showed cunning. Mr. Fox literally outfoxed his masters, if the trope rings true.

But slaves who observed the animal aspects of their own conditions were not usually so carnivalesque. Ursula, a slave at Monticello, often sang about being a hare pursued by the big black horse of Shields—a Richmond policeman notorious for terrorizing blacks in their limited off hours. When one of Jefferson’s former slaves, previously Isaac Granger, then Isaac Jefferson, recounted being whipped for failing to open gates quickly enough before a very particular guest, Col. Cary, he recalled not just that the colonel had whipped him, but that he used his “horse whip.” In a fairly sparse memoir, this detail stands out. Whipping slaves, Jefferson noted coolly, “degrade[s] them in their own eyes.”

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108 Stanton, 22
109 For an outline of this type of tale among slaves—commonly fitted into the larger category of a trickster tale, common to many marginal oral cultures—see: Joyner, Charles W., “The Trickster and the Fool: Folktales and Identity among Southern Plantation Slaves” *Plantation Society in the Americas*. 2(1986)
112 Wiencek, *Master of the Mountain*, 120.
If Thomas Jefferson degraded his slaves to animals one way more than any other, however, it was through sale. Over the course of his lifetime, he sold or gave away over two-thirds of his slaves, 400 of the 600 he owned.\textsuperscript{113} At Jefferson death, a mass auction scattered all but five of the 130 remaining slaves to pay the estate’s debts.\textsuperscript{114} The auction block, where slaves were sold, often alongside horses or cattle as dealers tugged on their cheeks and opened their mouths to inspect their teeth, put man and animal on equal footing. One runaway Monticello slave, Peter Fossett, described his experience bluntly: “I was put up on the auction block and sold like a horse.”\textsuperscript{115}

As Jefferson’s slaves were sold, the landscape of the American South was transforming. Plantations invaded, trees and brush burned and fell in the dark loamy soil along the edges of the Mississippi and then, springtime—creamy white blossoms open, waiting amidst spiny thorns and murderous heat for plucking, black hands: Cotton. A shifting international market; roaring industrialization in Britain and New England; and the cotton gin, whose patent Jefferson granted with interest as Washington’s secretary of state, all heralded the arrival of King Cotton. And with it a new, deadlier phase in the human churn of slavery. To feed that hungry vortex, speculators repeated the scene that transpired at Monticello. At auction blocks splashed across the mid-Atlantic—Maryland, Virginia, Delaware—speculators bought black slaves to populate the land Jefferson’s aggressive purchase of the Mississippi Delta had blown open.\textsuperscript{116}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{113}{Stanton, \textit{Those Who Labor for My Happiness}, 70.}
\footnotetext{114}{Stanton, 70.}
\footnotetext{115}{Quoted in Wienczek, \textit{Master of the Mountain}, 4.}
\end{footnotes}
It is there, to slavery’s hot and dizzying climax and death, that the text is bound next. Jefferson wrote a book where a perverse view of nature prevailed and blacks seemed not quite human; he ran a plantation where the same might be argued to be true. But the world he made was much bigger. Across America in the nineteenth century, abolitionists, slavers, scientists and slaves were talking about nature, slaves and animals. And many of them took their cues from Jefferson.

Following in Jefferson’s footsteps, southerners would unite the naturalist and the statesman. They would look to Jefferson as a founder not just of their country, but of their science, which sought to physically distinguish black and white people in order to morally distinguish them. Abolitionists would look to Jefferson, too, invoking his principles of rights in response to the arguments put forth by slavers and allied scientists. And the animalizing tropes of Jefferson’s Monticello would develop from hints into extremes on plantations across the nation—where Jefferson’s hundreds of slaves scattered in the sales after his death. Jefferson was not the only participant in this early debate, but he was its most recognizable and complete representative: All across the country, people were talking in Jefferson’s wake and Jefferson’s world—debating slavery’s relationship to nature and for the matter what currency natural orders even possessed. What did they have to say?
II

TALK

“We no more think of a negro insurrection than we do of a rebellion of our cows or horses.”

—John H. Van Evrie, M.D. 117

“I heard many people say that we were a species of monkeys or baboons; and as I had never seen any of those animals, I didn’t know but they were right.”

—Sojourner Truth 118

“But words are things, and a small drop of ink, Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think.”

—Josiah Nott and George Gliddon 119

Sometime in the twilight years of American slavery—between 1851 and 1853 120—Louis Agassiz made a visit to Mobile, Alabama. Agassiz, a professor of zoology and biology at Harvard, travelled to the southern cottonopolis to meet with Josiah Nott, a southern scientist then collaborating on a volume celebrating the life of Samuel Morton. Morton was a recently deceased craniologist and racial scientist. When Nott and Agassiz met, Agassiz explained a

117 Van Evrie here speaks for hypothetical white statesmen and soldiers, and their conviction, according to Van Evrie, that slaves were so naturally subject to white rule that would never rebel. Van Evrie spent most of his life producing and distributing racist literature, especially related to then-popular scientific racism. Quoted from: John H. Van Evrie, M.D, *Negroes and “Negro Slavery”: The First an Inferior Race, the Latter its Normal Condition* (Baltimore: John Toy, 1854 [1853]): 23.


119 Prominent American racial scientists, quoting Lord Byron (from *Don Juan*, third canto) in the front-matter to: Josiah Nott, and George Cliddon, *The Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippencourt, 1854.) Nott is the primary author.

120 The precise date of Agassiz’s visit to Nott is hard to pin down. Nott remarks only that Agassiz visited him in Mobile “while [Nott was] engaged on this chapter” (Nott, 414.) Nott contributed the chapter as a way of memorializing Samuel Morton, who died in 1851, so it is unlikely the visit took place before then. By 1854, Nott’s chapter was in print as a portion of the larger work: *The Types of Mankind*. The process of editing, typesetting and printing, combined with some quoted correspondence between Agassiz and Nott, suggests that Nott completed his chapter by the end of 1853, yielding the possible dates for the two scientists’ encounter of 1851 to 1853.
remarkable finding to Nott: Black brains did not resemble white brains. According to Professor Agassiz, black brains never developed past white brains in boyhood; adult blacks, the professor claimed, possessed childish cerebra. What’s more, Agassiz told Nott that black brains bore “marked resemblance to the brain[s] of the orang-outan.”\textsuperscript{121} Agassiz offered to demonstrate, and Nott tried to find a brain which Agassiz could publicly examine. But, as Nott later lamented, “I was unable…to procure the brain of a Negro.”\textsuperscript{122} Nott had to settle for Agassiz’s comments on two live African-born men—with no autopsical brain viewing to confirm the primate connection.

Nott and Agassiz had wanted to unlatch the skull and peer into a black head to see what they could find. The pair, alternatively titled anthropologists (the moniker under which many of the eras racial scientists operated), ethnologists and comparative zoologists, were engaged in an activity common in nineteenth-century America: talking about blacks. Nott and Agassiz belonged to a school of scientists who believed they could probe black anatomy and discover the differences between blacks and whites. In their view and in the views of many of their colleagues, these differences might bring blacks closer to animals than whites, or even distinguish blacks as a separate species. In essence, they asked whether blacks were different animals from other humans, especially whites.

Nott and Agassiz, we will later see, concluded that blacks did differ from whites. In fact, they considered the key conclusion of their brain dissections and craniotomies to be inferiority.

\textsuperscript{121} Nott, \textit{Types of Mankind}: 415.  
\textsuperscript{122} Nott, \textit{Types of Mankind}: 415.
In particular, black proximity to inferior animals—their “orang-outan” brains, according to Agassiz—destined them for servitude.\textsuperscript{123}

All kinds of Americans were then dissecting blacks—in classrooms, in novels, in children’s books, in memoirs and on examining tables. Scientists occupied a prominent role in the national conversation on the nature of the black animal, but so did abolitionists, slavers and blacks themselves, all tussling over whether or not (or to what extent) blacks constituted humans. In a sense, these thinkers responded to Jefferson. Nott claims that ethnology was invented in his century—that is, the nineteenth century—and indeed the field and its world are preoccupied with questions that run through \textit{Notes on the State of Virginia}.\textsuperscript{124} Jefferson rather prominently compares blacks and orangutans; Nott makes explicit note of the comparison and of \textit{Notes}.\textsuperscript{125} Jefferson’s slaves compared their own treatment to the treatment of animals; so did hundreds of others.\textsuperscript{126} Jefferson made the same argument of slavers (that they treated their slaves like animals) in the context of abolition; as did many major abolitionists.\textsuperscript{127} And, as at Monticello,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{123} This point I will elaborate on later, but the titles of other “ethnological” works (now generally classed under the rubric of scientific racism) offer a preview for this argument. For instance, Van Evrie’s: \textit{Negroes and “Negro Slavery”: The First an Inferior Race, the Latter its Normal Condition}.
\item \textsuperscript{124} Historians also describe the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century as a period of exploding scientific knowledge and interest, especially about humankind. Larry Morrison describes the development of racial science before my period of interest—in the period before 1830. See: Larry R. Morrison, “‘Nearer to the Brute Creation:’ The Scientific Defense of Slavery Before 1830,” \textit{Southern Studies}. 19(1980): 228-242.
\item \textsuperscript{125} In \textit{Notes}, Jefferson cites the belief espoused in travelogues that orangutans courted black women, making reference to: “[Blacks’] own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species.” See: Jefferson, \textit{Notes on the State of Virginia}. Query XIV, 148. See also: Thomson, \textit{Jefferson’s Shadow: the History of His Science}, 121-23. As for the actual length of Jefferson’s shadow on American science in the nineteenth century, Nott’s own reference to Jefferson deals with \textit{Notes} and reads: “Ethnography might begin with Mr. Jefferson [sic]. His \textit{Notes on Virginia} contains this sentence: — “Never yet could I find that a Black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never saw even an elementary trait of painting or of sculpture.” I have looked, during twenty years, for a solitary exception to these characteristic deficiencies in the Negro race.” (Nott, \textit{Types of Mankind}: 456.)
\item \textsuperscript{126} Peter Foster, who will be quoted alongside other examples, writes of his sale by Jefferson: “I was put up on the auction block and sold like a horse.” Quoted in: Wiencek, 4
\item \textsuperscript{127} Jefferson, in his earlier abolitionist writings claimed of slavers that: “Nursed and educated in the daily habit of seeing the degraded condition, both bodily and mental, of those unfortunate beings, not reflecting that that
the practices of plantation managers often relied on imputing animal management onto slaves.\textsuperscript{128} They also occupied a world Jefferson helped to shape—the antebellum south. Jefferson writes the prologue to their debate.\textsuperscript{129}

Each of these groups slavers, scientists, abolitionists and slaves, wrestled with slave humanity and animal-ness in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. Each did so for different purposes. And, as differently-driven people are wont to do, they adopted different language and arrived at different outcomes. But they all hazarded the question at which Jefferson nibbled and Agassiz and Nott (the self-proclaimed ethnologists) attacked down to the brain: Did blacks occupy a different place in the natural order than whites? What did that place in natural order require of society?

**SCIENTISTS**

John H. Van Evrie had meant to publish a book, but he considered his topic too urgent to pursue a lengthy publication process.\textsuperscript{130} Instead, he released a pamphlet: *Negroes and “Negro Slavery”: The First an Inferior Race, the Latter its Normal Condition*. The year was 1853.

In 1853, the question of slavery was on everybody’s lips. Two proposals for admitting Kansas and Nebraska to the Union had died in the Senate. And a third, which would undo the Missouri Compromise and lead to bleeding Kansas, was in the works. Abolitionists and slavers degradation was very much the work of themselves & their fathers, few minds have yet doubted but that they were as legitimate subjects of property as horses and cattle.” Jefferson to Edward Coles, 1814, quoted in: Wiencek, *Master of the Mountain*: 23-24

\textsuperscript{128} For instance, in the spatial arrangement of dwellings, which pushed both slaves and animals to the far periphery of the plantations, even at unusual levels. Although, Jefferson does not furnish a developed or explicit example of this management philosophy, which is best embodied by overseers and others writing in southern journals, who will be quoted later.

\textsuperscript{129} In the Shakespearean sense: “What’s past is prologue.” *The Tempest*, Act II Sc. 1.

\textsuperscript{130} Van Evrie would eventually publish a book-length version of his tract, fleshing out many of his main arguments further. The book arrived a decade later, in 1863—when the fate of slavery in the United States was nearly sealed. The text of this chapter relies on an 1854 version of the 1853 pamphlet, which is a condensation of the 1863 book, for pagination and quotation.

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alike steeled themselves for a showdown; the question of slavery in the United States appeared to hang in the balance.

When Van Evrie sped the publication of his pamphlet, he understood it to bear on that debate—whether or not the United States should permit slavery. He and other racial scientists believed debates about nature, black nature specifically, mattered for politics and society, much like Jefferson did. Josiah Nott, the “ethnologist” whom Agassiz joined in Mobile around the time Van Evrie released his pamphlet, agreed. Nott, taking a cue from academic editors in London, insisted that his field of study ought to: “interest equally the philanthropist, the naturalist and the statesman.”  

As Nott explains:

Ethnology demands to know what was the primitive organic structure of each race?—what such race’s physical and moral character?—how far a race may have been, or may become, modified by the combined action of time and moral and physical causes?—and what position in the social scale Providence has assigned to each type of man?

The consequence of this physiological inquiry bears repeating: “what position in the social scale Providence has assigned each type of man.” In other words, physical distinctions between blacks and whites could serve as ordering principles for societies.

In Jefferson’s wake, Josiah Nott, George Gliddon, Louis Agassiz, John Van Evrie and their contemporaries assumed the serious task of cataloging the biological relationship between

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131 Nott, Types of Mankind: 49. Nott quotes the definition of ethnology given by “Mr. Luke Burke, the bold and able Editor of the London Ethnological Journal,” which reads: “a science which investigates the mental and physical differences of Mankind, and the organic laws on which they depend; and which seeks to deduce from these investigations, principles of human guidance, in all the important relations of social existence.”

132 Nott, Types of Mankind: 49.

133 Jefferson, recall, had speculated on possible physical differences between black people and white people. Of black people he hypothesized that: “There are [sic] physical distinctions proving a difference of race. They have less hair on the face and body. They secrete less by the kidneys, and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odour. This greater degree of transpiration renders them more tolerant of heat, and less so of cold, than the whites. Perhaps too a difference of structure in the pulmonary apparatus, which a late ingenious experimentalist has discovered to be the principal regulator of animal heat, may have disabled them from extricating, in the act of inspiration, so much of that fluid from the outer air, or obliged them in expiration, to part with more of it.
blacks and whites.\textsuperscript{134} They debated astonishingly fundamental questions: Did blacks and whites belong to the same species, for instance. Could blacks and whites have both descended from Adam and Eve, or were they too different to share lineage?

Even as a flurry of urgent pamphlets and books—\textit{Negro-mania}, the \textit{Crania Americana} and others—attempted to answer these questions while the union shredded on the issue of slavery, one work stood out for its importance: Josiah Nott, George Gliddon and Louis Agassiz’ monumental 1854 collection of essays \textit{Types of Mankind}.\textsuperscript{135} Despite the book’s length (\textit{Types} had heft at nearly eight-hundred pages), early printings of \textit{Types of Mankind} quickly exhausted: within three years of publication \textit{Types of Mankind} had sprinted through eight editions.\textsuperscript{136} Even decades after the publication of \textit{Types of Mankind}, Charles Darwin took note of its arguments. Darwin cites \textit{Types} (which he mostly rebuts) repeatedly in his influential \textit{Descent of Man}.\textsuperscript{137}

\textit{Types of Mankind}, despite its immediate popularity, suffered from a quasi-kaleidoscopic assemblage of disciplines. It’s key authors—Nott, Cliddon and Agassiz—were a surgeon and

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\textsuperscript{134} Large numbers of scientists took up the call, in addition to Nott, Gliddon, Van Evrie and Agassiz, examples include: Samuel Morton (Nott and Gliddon’s mentor and an early practitioner of craniotomy); Henry Hotze, a confederate propagandist and translator who rendered racist European texts into English; Charles Caldwell and Charles Pickering, early advocates of the idea that different races had descended from different original pairs (and, by consequence, that not all humans descended from Adam and Eve); they had prominent European counterparts, too, including de Gobineau and Cuvier.

\textsuperscript{135} See: Samuel Morton, \textit{Crania American, or, A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America: To which is Prefixed an Essay on the Varieties of the Human Species}. (Philadelphia: J. Dobson, 1839.) Morton compiled the collection of human skulls on which Josiah Nott would later rely for his own craniotomy. See also: John Campbell, \textit{Negro-mania: Being an Examination of the Falsely Assumed Equality of the Various Races of Men} (Philadelphia: Campbell and Power, 1851.)


\textsuperscript{137} See, for instance (there are more references): Charles Darwin, \textit{The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex}, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1871): fn. 5, 6, 44 (vol 1).
craniotomist (one who studies skulls), an Egyptologist and a Harvard zoologist, respectively. But their talents meshed into an influential argument. The authors of *Types* argued, with varying venom, that blacks and whites were members of different species, who had different lineages. God, they reasoned, had created blacks and whites separately (only whites had descended from Adam and Eve) and through history the races had remained separate.

Evidence for the argument came in three flavors: physiology, craniotomy and Egyptology—the three great talents of the principal authors. Physiology and Craniotomy, in the views of the authors demonstrated the radical physical differences between blacks and whites (and members of other races, but as European counterparts observed, American racial scientists had a preoccupation with the differences between blacks and whites in particular that set them apart from their colleagues across the ocean.)

Egyptology placed these differences into history. In an era before carbon dating or any irrefutable ability to determine the age of human remains, Egyptian depictions of blacks, whites and others offered the oldest images of racial physiology. Some dated as far back as 5000 years and plaster the pages of *Types of Mankind*.

So arose the argument: Blacks and whites are radically different (physiology and craniotomy); such differences have remained unchanged since near the beginning of history (Egyptology, and a low, biblically influenced estimate of earth’s age); so blacks and whites can never be similar and never have been. The next step in this logic: Blacks and whites could not

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138 Some Americans even doctored European works in their translation to refocus them on establishing difference between black people and whites or to glaze over those works unfavorable points to pro-slavery arguments. Famously, Josiah Knott hired Henry Hotze, a polyglot and later confederate propagandist, to translate de Gobineau’s *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (Essay on human inequality.) Hotze rendered a translation that excluded de Gobineau’s negative representations of American slavery and the American environment. See: Lonnie A. Burnett, *Henry Hotze, Confederate Propagandist: Selected Writings on Revolution, Recognition, and Race* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008).
have descended from the same lineage and are not members of the same species. On the count of separate species for separate races, Agassiz explains:

The ground upon which [sic] animals are considered as distinct species is simply the fact, that, since they have been known to man, they have preserved the same characteristics….I am prepared to show that the differences existing between the races of men are of the same kind as the differences observed between the various families, genera and species of monkeys or other animals.  

Agassiz found the differences between black and white so stark that he withdrew and strengthened his original point of view almost immediately. “Nay,” Agassiz wrote just a few sentences later, “the differences between distinct races are often greater than those distinguishing species.” Here again was the theory, now supercharged: Blacks and whites have different physiology, and so are different species. This theory—of separate genetic heritage for separate races—and its variants are known as polygenism.  

Polygenism marked the great scientific claim of *Types of Mankind*, but *Types* didn’t stop at arguing that blacks and whites belonged to different species. The tome also characterized the nature of that difference—one of inferiority and superiority. The text viewed blacks as almost animals, suggesting that in the scheme of racial difference, whites emerged as more human, scientifically so.

Craniotomy, the examination of skulls, offered the most memorable technique for proving blacks inferior to whites. Using a collection of human skulls inherited from his mentor,

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139 Agassiz in: *Types of Mankind*: lxxiv.
140 Agassiz in: *Types of Mankind*: lxxiv-lxxv.
141 Modern science has discredited any notion of polygenism. Not only because it has disagreed with Agassiz’ view on what constitutes a species, but because 21st century genetics have confirmed levels of human similarity that undercut *Types*’ brashness. Among humans, genomes tend to vary little more than one tenth of one percent. The remaining nine-hundred ninety-nine thousandths of the human blueprint do not vary. The vanishingly small impact of race on this total genetic makeup, although it exists, bears no relation to the theories strewn about nineteenth-century thought.
Samuel Morton, Josiah Nott explained that larger white skulls accommodated bigger, better formed brains. Black skulls resembled monkey skulls in Nott’s view. Nott attached illustrations, which hammered home his point. Whites (usually classical) on top, monkeys at the bottom and blacks somewhere in between, when it came to skull shape. For pure human cranial capacity, Nott preferred a sliding scale from black to white—black at the bottom. Agassiz and his dissections of black brains, brains which he deemed childish in adulthood, concurred.\textsuperscript{142}

\begin{figure}
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\caption{Fig. 836, 837, 838.}
\end{figure}


Animal comparisons suffused \textit{Types}, especially between blacks and monkeys and blacks and draught animals. Of one South African tribe, which Nott called the “lowest and most beastly specimens of mankind,”\textsuperscript{143} Nott claimed: “[They] are but little removed, both in moral and physical characters, from the orang-outan….with woolly heads, diminutive statures, small ill-shapen crania, very projecting mouths, prognathous faces, and badly formed bodies.”\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{142} For more on Agassiz (and Morton) and brains specifically, see: \textit{Types of Mankind}: 466-474.
\textsuperscript{143} Nott in: \textit{Types of Mankind}: 182.
\textsuperscript{144} Nott in: \textit{Types of Mankind}: 182.
Describing the “comparative anatomy of races,” Nott explains exactly where the “lower races of mankind” fit into the picture—they are “connecting links [to] the animal kingdom.”\(^{145}\)


\(^{145}\) Nott in: *Types of Mankind*: 457.
Nott, Cliddon and Agassiz emphasized that the natural history of blacks could not be relegated to the past. Jim Crow had literally danced in Thebes and Alabama.\(^{146}\) In the authors’ view, black inferiority stretched from Nubia, Rome and Athens all the way to Mobile Alabama. (In the view of some scholars of Roman history and philosophy, so did the attendant belief that slaves were animalesque.)\(^{147}\) Nott even says so:

> Through it [a passage of Virgil] we perceive that, in the second century after c., the physical characteristics of a “field,” or agricultural, “Nigger” were understood at Rome 1800 years ago, as thoroughly as by cotton-planters in the state of Alabama, still flourishing in A.D. 1853. Time…has affected no alteration, even by transfer to the New World, upon African types.\(^{148}\)

Ironically, the purported timelessness of *Types*’ theory lent it urgency. Nott, Agassiz and Cliddon’s work mattered in the present because it argued against revising supposedly long-held understandings of black inferiority. *Types* asserted that nothing had changed as of 1854, even as the institutional context of black life in America was radically reworked by the abolitionist challenge to slavery.

Political types took note of their science. John C. Calhoun, while Secretary of State, had consulted with Gliddon on craniotomy. Gliddon provided Calhoun with copies of *Crania Americana* and Egyptological tracts, which Calhoun planned to use to argue that England should not interfere with American slaveholding—arguments which *Types* anthologized and sharpened.

*Types* still ostensibly ranked among the more “scientific” of the tracts relied upon to support slavery—it reported its data (however flawed) and explained its methods (however

\(^{146}\) See: *Types of Mankind*: 314. There the text, this time by Nott, discusses slaves dancing the “Jim Crow” in Egypt and the Southern United States.

\(^{147}\) See: Keith Bradley, “Animalizing the Slave: The Truth of Fiction,” *Roman Studies* 90(2000): 110-125. Bradley discusses the prominence of similar conversations about slaves in classical texts—some of which the authors of *Types* drew on. Bradley’s analysis suggests that justifications for slavery involving a natural order are as old as the institution itself.

\(^{148}\) Nott in: *Types of Mankind*: 306.
flawed). Van Evrie’s 1853 pamphlet, “Negroes and ‘Negro Slavery’: The First an Inferior Race, the Latter its Normal Condition,” which was reprinted as a book in 1863, bridged the divide between the covertly and nakedly political—between racial scientists and slavers. Where *Types* occasionally pulled its punches, Van Evrie (who was from Washington, DC) situated his in the title. Van Evrie even criticized Agassiz for being too tentative: “it is unfortunate that Professor Agassiz did not rise above the prejudices of Boston, and boldly grapple with the real question at once.” *(Agassiz did not harden his position on polygenism until *Types*.)*  

For his political outspokenness, Van Evrie received the praise of pro-slavery politicians. An insert in the 1853 edition of this supposedly scientific pamphlet includes accolades from Jefferson Davis (along with other pro-slavery senators); Professor De Bow, who published a pro-slavery journal, *De Bow’s Review*, and the *New York National Democrat*, another pro-slavery publication based out of New York City. In drawing taut the political connections that *Types* left loose, Van Evrie reasoned via draught animals:

> If the Creator had designed the horse for food, he would have created it differently, and, instead of the tough and stringy muscles so appropriate to strength and swiftness, would have constructed it with reference to human digestion. And if he had designed the Negro for the same purpose as the white or Caucasian man, he would have given him the same faculties—or rather we should say, he would not have been created at all, for the single fact that he exists is decisive of the will and intention of the Creator.

Van Evrie made an argument on which slavers pounced. He invoked a “continuous chain” of being—made up of separate and distinct links. Whites and blacks occupied different places on this chain. Blacks were inferior, like apes, monkeys or other animals, to whites. And

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149 For a contemporary evaluation of the science behind *Types of Mankind* (quite negative) and related theories see: Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981.)
150 Van Evrie, “‘Negroes and ‘Negro Slavery’:” 6.
151 Van Evrie, “‘Negroes and ‘Negro Slavery:’” 11.
152 Van Evrie, “‘Negroes and ‘Negro Slavery:’” 10.
so they had been created (by god) to serve different purposes. “Equality,” reasoned Van Evrie, “is an outrage to nature.”

SLAVERS

Slavers absorbed, digested and regurgitated the arguments scientists crafted in support of racial difference with verve—even style. Drawing on the support of scientists, slavers fused ideas of physiological difference between blacks and whites with a longstanding concept of a naturally ordered world to respond to the challenges of abolition and human rights. Slavery, the argument ran, was an important component of the natural order science had identified.

Take a startling example of this world-view: If the contemporary reader were to go to their nearest library, locate volumes of the Southern Cultivator—an agricultural digest from the Deep South—and thumb to the likely wilted pages of the October 1860 issue, they would find something that might surprise them. In that month, a slave overseer named Jno Pitts (possibly a misspelling of Jon, but perhaps not) wrote the Cultivator on the topic of the “best method of managing negroes.” After an extended preface, Jno (whom the reader may nevertheless think of as Jon) concludes:

The surest and best method of managing negroes is to love them. We know, from a thousand experiments, that if we love our horse, we will treat him well, and that if we treat him well he will become docile, gentle and obedient; he will be none the worse horse by this treatment; and we know the same course pursued has produced the same effect upon sheep, cattle, dogs, the lion, the elephant, bird, fish, and upon the white and black, male and female servants, and if this treatment has this effect upon all the animal creation on which it has been tried, why will it not have the same effect upon slaves? Let your slave see and feel of a truth that you are his friend….He will certainly be your friend.

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First, the reader might wonder why this slaver proposed to love a slave, and believed a slave might be their friend—after all, doesn’t slavery presuppose antipathy and servitude, not love and friendship? Second, the reader might be surprised to learn journals such as the *Cultivator*, even existed. But slavers in the nineteenth century often embraced a paternal combination of dominance and affection, arguing that their absolute and regularly violent mastery over slaves was part of a loving duty to improve their condition.\(^{155}\) Pitts, who resembled Xenophon who claimed that slaves should be given as much to eat as they wanted, just like work animals, was hardly something new under the sun.\(^{156}\) And such journals did exist, by the dozen.\(^{157}\) Advice like Pitts’ regularly splashed across their pages.

In their time, these journals worked as the equivalent of political trade publications—highly demanded publications that allowed southerners to exchange information and expertise on the management of their cotton kingdom and to defend their viewpoints. Chief among those viewpoints was the argument that slavery benefitted slaves—that it was good for slaves and slavers alike, a natural and proper consequence of nature.

That argument has roots as old as Aristotle (or more.) Aristotle wrote famously of the natural slave: the human being whose capacity was so limited enough that they could not achieve virtue on their own, and most fully realized their potential directed by other, more capable humans. That notion stuck over millennia—of intellectually, morally, or technologically

\(^{155}\) For underscoring the combination of dominance and affection as essential to human relationships of mastery over animals, especially pets, this thesis is in debt to: Yi-Fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). Tuan argues that dynamics of power, control and domination lay at the center of many human relationships supposedly predicated on affection and pleasure. Tuan focuses on pet-making, but makes nods to other practices, including paternalisms directed towards women, children and slaves.

\(^{156}\) Bradley, “Animalizing the Slave:” 1.

\(^{157}\) For several additional, prominent examples of southern reviews or journals devoted largely to slavery, agriculture and related fields, see: *Affleck’s Southern Rural Almanac and Plantation and Garden Calendar; American Cotton Planter*; and *Debow’s Review*. 

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They approach nearer to the nature of the brute creation, than perhaps any other people on the face of the globe. Let me ask if this people do not furnish the very material out of which slaves ought to be made, and whether it be not an improving of their condition to make them the slaves of civilized masters?\footnote{William Harper, Memoir on Slavery (Charleston: James Burger, 1838) 37}

To abolitionists’ claims of the cruelty of slavery, Harper responds in the same text: “Who but a drivelling fanatic, has thought of the necessity of protecting domestic animals from the cruelty of their owners?”\footnote{Harper, 22}

That slavers consistently put forward scorching Aristotelian rhetoric helps put slavery’s animal problem into a larger context. Aristotelian ethics focus on individual virtue and its achievement. They also reason about the purpose or value of a thing from its physical or intellectual nature—a watch, for instance, fulfills its purpose by keeping time well. In an Aristotelian ethical scheme, humans do not all possess equal rights; some are more capable, destined for politics and flourishing. Others are destined for servitude—natural slaves.

In the nineteenth century, the Enlightenment’s conflict with these ideals had erupted into all-out war. Many Enlightenment philosophies influential amongst abolitionists replaced individual virtue with universal human rights. Universal human rights, which apply similar ethical standards to all people, do not and did not jive well with the enslavement of humans. Facing a menacing new philosophical threat, slavers retained several weapons in their arsenal: They could double down on Aristotle, arguing that they helped blacks achieve superior virtue as slaves than as non-slaves; they could challenge the humanity of blacks, undermining the notion that rights accrued beyond the color line; or they could do both, as Harper does when he argues that blacks benefitted from slavery because, like animals, they are so nearly brutes. For those seeking to enslave or otherwise treat blacks badly, making them into animals became an important tool.161

Among slavers, plantation managers showed special flair for thinking and writing about slaves as animals.162 Jno Pitts was a manger. Another manager, John A. Calhoun (not C.) made the same human-cattle comparison in arguing for developing management techniques: [if] it is a matter to the interest of the northern agricultural societies to attend well to the improvement of their lands and the improvement and comfort of their stock…how much more important it is for us to turn our attention to the best means of governing our slaves.163 Calhoun had help from

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161 This argument deserves some elaboration. Slavers did not merely have to justify their practices to northerners or academics; they had to convince themselves and, on some level, slaves of their authority. To regiment slaves, slavers usually relied on violence. But slavers could not whip, beat or starve themselves into submission. They, like other practitioners of social violence, required moral justifications, both to maintain the political viability of slavery in a democratic system and to shield themselves from the traumas attendant arbitrarily hurting another human being. (See: Robert Cover, “Violence and the Word,” Yale Law Journal 95(1986): 1601, for a legal model of this concept).


professional racists as well. George Fitzhugh, echoing Harper and the scientific racists, wrote of blacks that: “not a single Negro was ever reclaimed from his savage state till he was caught, tied, tamed and domesticated like the wild ox or the wild horse.” In describing slavery, domestication and life as a draught animal furnished a solid animal analog to Aristotle—darker but better equipped to weather an Enlightenment assault.

ABOLITIONISTS

If it was slavers who relied on racial science to fortify fatigued Aristotelianism against the enlightenment’s attacks, it was abolitionists who hurled those attacks at their slaveholding counterparts. The two sides, abolitionist and pro-slavery, were locked in combat—parrying one another’s thrusts, and responding in turn with newly-cooked-up jabs. This was an argument. At stake: the future of slavery in the United States.

In 1852, in a newspaper called the National Era, appeared in forty serialized chunks a novel that would explode the slavery question and whet abolition’s appetite for national battle: Uncle Tom’s Cabin. With the timely assistance of an abolitionist print machine, Harriet Beecher Stowe saturated American life, selling hundreds of thousands of copies of her book in the first year of its life alone. With the aid of literary technique, Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin played out the argument over slavery for its hundreds of thousands of hungry readers. Stowe laid down a broad cast of characters—noble, sympathetic Uncle Tom; treacherous Simon Lagree; liberated

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164 Here I refer to the class of southern intellectuals who sprang up in the 1840s and 1850s to defend the institution of slavery and its predicates, for instance, George Fitzhugh, Josiah Nott and John. H. Van Evrie. I call them “professional racists” here (a term others have used, but not necessarily to apply specifically to those I name) because they made professional lives out of studying and arguing for the existence of profound and immutable differences between races.

Eliza; angelic Eva; ambivalent Ophelia; the list marches on—who, being characters in a novel, had the remarkable capacity of speaking to one another.

At a pivotal moment within the work, the naïve Vermonter, Ophelia, puts an unquietable question to Augustine St. Clare, her slaveholding southern cousin who opposes slavery: How, she asks, can he go on without freeing his slaves? St. Clare offers a rambling answer—he is ambivalent, and enjoys observing Ophelia’s reaction to his long explanations. He explains to her why his father, a less repentant slaver, held slaves. “My father,” St. Clare begins, “my father's dividing line was that of color…. [H]e considered the negro, through all possible gradations of color, as an intermediate link between man and animals, and graded all his ideas of justice or generosity on this hypothesis.” St. Clare runs down through his father’s reasoning. He continues describing his father’s thought: “There must, he says, be a lower class, given up to physical toil and confined to an animal nature.” This is a necessary feature of aristocracy, he explains—the few toiling for the many. He compares American slavery to the mills in England.

Here Ophelia, the abolitionist cousin from Vermont, interjects. “How in the world,” she asks, “can the two things be compared?” Waffling, St. Clare makes a deep concession. Slavery, he admits:

Is the more bold and palpable infringement of human rights; actually buying a man up, like a horse,—looking at his teeth, cracking his joints, and trying his paces and then paying down for him,—having speculators, breeders, traders, and brokers in human bodies and souls,—sets the thing [apart].

166 When referring to Uncle Tom's Cabin, I cite to chapter title and number in addition to page number, because a nearly limitless number of editions, many unpaginated and online, exist. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin, ed., David Bromwich (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009 [1852]): Ch. 19 “Miss Ophelia's Experiences and Opinions Continued,” 294.
167 Augustine St. Clare is meant to draw more sympathy from the reader than other slavers; so, Stowe has him speak to partially his father’s opinions rather than fully to his own.
168 Stowe, Ch. 19 “Miss Ophelia's Experiences and Opinions Continued,” 299.
169 Stowe, Ch. 19 “Miss Ophelia's Experiences and Opinions Continued,” 299.
170 Stowe, Ch. 19 “Miss Ophelia's Experiences and Opinions Continued,” 299.
Still defending, if with reluctance, what was by that point the south’s peculiar institution, St. Clare describes the effect slavery has on slaves. Slaves are degraded, he admits. Even religion (Stowe, like many abolitionists, was deeply concerned with religion), according to St. Clare, loses its effect such that:

It would do about as much good to set a chaplain over his dogs and horses. And the fact is, that a mind stupefied and animalized by every bad influence from the hour of birth, spending the whole of every week-day in unreflecting toil, cannot be done much with by a few hours on Sunday.  

The dialogue St. Clare and Ophelia pursue is remarkable, not just for the blemished characters who conduct it (St. Clare defends slavery and owns slaves, but with personal moral reluctance; Ophelia opposes slavery, but expresses profound racism over the course of the text) but for what it represents—a clash of ideas. Running like a thread through the dozens of arguments supporting and opposing slavery that Stowe replicates are arguments about slavery and the natural order. Stowe uses the word “animalized.” Her characters are deeply concerned about whether American slavery responded positively to a natural order in which Blacks resembled animals, or whether American slavery instead attacked a natural order in which all humans possessed similar rights and capacities. St. Clare, nearly at war with himself at Ophelia’s provocation, acknowledges both possibilities. He explains his father’s view that slavery is part of the natural order. And he concedes to Ophelia’s clashing view that slavery reduces slaves to animal-like status, animalizes them.

171 Stowe, Ch. 19 “Miss Ophelia's Experiences and Opinions Continued,” 300.
Stowe, despite the complications and inconsistencies that riddle her masterpiece, does a sharp job characterizing the arguments put forward by slavers and scientists to justify slavery. With St. Clare and Ophelia, who call slavery “animalizing” and a “violation of human rights,” she is similarly effective at characterizing the arguments with which abolitionists responded. And Stowe’s recourse to the animal does not stop with Ophelia and Augustine St. Clare. The novel’s great villain, Simon Legree, surveys slaves like animals. Stowe, narrating, concludes that Legree’s slave lieutenants “seemed an apt illustration of the fact that brutal men are lower even than animals.” Uncle Tom offers a clever retort. It is not the slave who are animals, he thinks, but those filled with greed—as he calls it, “unrestricted animal selfishness.”

Stowe’s fiction throws into direct confrontation the animal arguments made by slaves, slavers and abolitionists. It also met with wild popularity in the nineteenth century, suggesting the mainstream character of such discussion. This chapter has already turned its attention to slavers, who enlisted the support of racial scientists to argue that blacks fit into a lower stratum of a fixed natural order. What of the real, and not fictional, abolitionists—of Garrison, Leavitt, Olmsted, Beecher? Drawing on the assistance of former slaves, who furnished brutal accounts of enslaved life, and enlightenment philosophers, who formulated theories of human rights,

172 Uncle Tom’s Cabin, despite all it did to end slavery, embraced some negative stereotypes of African Americans. It even set their editorial tone, setting down for later authors notions such as the “mammy.” I devote attention to the issue of white abolitionists’ complex relationship to racism (separate from slavery) later in this chapter.
173 Stowe, Ch. 19 “Miss Ophelia's Experiences and Opinions Continued,” 300.
174 Stowe, Ch. 32 “Dark Places,” 452.
175 Stowe, Ch. 32 “Dark Places,” 454.
176 There is an obvious problem with even this brief list: it is lily-white; meanwhile, many of the nation’s most prominent abolitionists in the nineteenth century were black—Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Solomon Northrup, to name only several. This is because I want to focus separately on the arguments made by white abolitionists and former slaves, including many slaves-turned-free-abolitionists. The two categories, although they overlap significantly, make several arguments that distinguish them. In particular, when they do relate black people to animals beyond the level of cruelty black slaves sustained, they tend to do so for different reasons. I discuss this later.
abolitionists put forward the argument that slavery degraded slaves and treated humans as no more than animals.

William Lloyd Garrison, founding editor of the Liberator, a friend of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s and perhaps America’s best known abolitionist, put this argument on simple display in a preface he scribed for the narrative of Sojourner Truth. “Born a slave,” Garrison explained of Truth:

and held in that brutal condition until the entire abolition of slavery in the State of New York in 1827, she has known what it is to drink to the dregs the bitterest cup of human degradation...[to be] one thus placed on a level with cattle and swine, and for so many years [to be] subjected to the most demoralizing influences.177

In response to slavery’s brutality, Garrison unequivocally demanded immediate abolition. He was, in his own words, “defending the great cause of human rights”178 (emphasis mine.)

Garrison convinced other abolitionists to sign on to his theories, and to endorse his description of slavery as animalizing. In the winter of 1833, Garrison authored a statement on behalf of the National Anti-Slavery Convention—the convention that created the American Anti-Slavery Society (a large group, the Society had thousands of chapters and hundreds of thousands of members across America by the close of the 1830s.) Garrison’s stern statement decried that one sixth of the American population was “bought and sold like cattle.”179 And Garrison and the 62 delegates who signed his declaration abhorred the fact that slavers and the law “recognized...and treated [slaves]...as brute beasts.”180

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180 Garrison, “Declaration of the National Anti-Slavery Convention.”
Garrison and Stowe were by no means alone among abolitionists in presenting slavery as an institution that made animals of humans. In 1861, Frederick Law Olmsted, the famous landscape architect and progressive journalist, published an account of his travels in the South: *The Cotton Kingdom*. Three years prior, in 1858, Olmsted had received a major commission after submitting a winning design for a “central park” in New York City (parks, like abolition, Olmsted believed, signaled human progress.)\textsuperscript{181} In his Southern travelogue, Olmstead attempted to tear the cotton out of the eyes of the apathetic, trumpeting, like Garrison, the ways in which slavery animalized slaves. In *Cotton Kingdom*, he described one especially grim encounter with an overseer. Olmsted asked the overseer whether it bothered him to inflict violence, time and time again, to whip and to flog slaves. The overseer replied: “Why, sir, I wouldn’t mind killing a nigger more than I would a dog.”\textsuperscript{182}

Whether or not Olmsted reliably narrated the exchange, or even spun it out of whole cloth, it has stuck. The overseer’s detached reply to Olmsted’s question appears reproduced in dozens of accounts, scholarly and otherwise, stretching from the 1800s to the present day.\textsuperscript{183} And the overseer’s jaded admission underscores the arguments Olmsted, Garrison and other abolitionists made in the period. Why? Because the overseer is admitting in the most violent

possible way what Garrison claims: That slavery degrades slaves to the level of animals, degrades them to the degree where the overseer might slaughter them and rest at ease. Antislavery, by contrast, attempted to present slaves as humans.

There are echoes of Olmsted and Garrison deep into the literature of abolition. Susan B Anthony, in an 1863 address to the American Anti-Slavery Society, summed up the work of antislavery. She explained: “it was our distinctive work to educate the heart of the people of this nation into a full recognition of the humanity of the black man.” Lydia Child, a newspaper editor, board member of the American Anti-Slavery Society and popular author (Child first wrote the lines: “Over the river, and through the wood/to grandfather’s house we go) wrote to beg her readers to consider the cause of antislavery. She quoted at length the accounts of travelers who underscored the status of blacks vis-à-vis animals. Child in particular recites pages and pages from the Brazilian travelogue of a Reverend R. Walsh, which described the slaves by the wharfs of Rio di Janeiro as: “coiled up like dogs, and seeming to expect or require no more comfort or accommodation, exhibiting a state and conformation so unhuman, that they not only seemed but actually were, far below the inferior animals around them.” Child lingers on Walsh, unable to shake his repeated claim that the slaves received worse treatment than horses or mules.

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184 I cite several more examples. For confirmation from a scholar with a real grasp of abolitionism, however, see: Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*. In addition, Monica Reed develops a long list of examples of religious leaders in New England who rely on affirmations of slave humanity to counter arguments that slaves were animals or beasts. See: Reed, Monica C. “They are Men, and not Beasts: Religion and Slavery in Colonial New England.” PhD. Diss., Florida State University, 2013.


Angelina Grimke, noted feminist and abolitionist, describes the treatment of slave parents in a popular 1839 compendium: “Parents are almost never consulted as to the disposition to be made of their children; they have as little control over them, as have domestic animals over the disposal of their young.”\(^{187}\) That compendium, assembled primarily by her husband, Theodore Weld, fashioned Grimke’s argument to an even finer point: “slaveholders,” it said, “regard their slaves not as human beings, but as mere working animals.”\(^{188}\) It followed with its evidence for this claim, the language of slavery, which refers to slaves as “stock, brutes, breeders,” and their overseers as “drivers.”\(^{189}\) Then the assault intensifies. Weld declares, in the original capitalization, that:

Having shown that slaveholders regard their slaves as mere working animals and cattle, we now proceed to show that their actual treatment of them, is worse than it would be if they were brutes. We repeat it, SLAVEHOLDERS TREAT THEIR SLAVES WORSE THAN THEY DO THEIR BRUTES.\(^{190}\)

This consistent line of assault in the literature of abolition is not surprising. When slavers declared that blacks occupied a lower position in the natural order and flourished as slaves, abolitionists responded with the logical opposite: Blacks were humans, possessing human rights. It was slavers, in their view, who wrongly treated slaves like animals. But support for racial equality and support for abolition are not the same. And American abolitionists in the nineteenth century could be full of surprises. After all, Abraham Lincoln—who abolished slavery and freed the slaves—notoriously voiced consistent support for colonization: the idea the once free, blacks


\(^{188}\) Weld, Grimke and Grimke, 110.

\(^{189}\) Weld, Grimke and Grimke, 110.

\(^{190}\) Weld, Grimke and Grimke, 111.
should return to Africa.\footnote{Beyond supporting colonization in the Lincoln-Douglas debates and pushing the idea in Congress in 1862, Lincoln famously invited a black delegation to the White House (a presidential first) to promote the idea of colonization. His argument fizzled, but deserves quoting: “You and we are different races…. [E]ven when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the white race…. It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated.” Lincoln quoted in: Eric Foner, \textit{The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery} (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010): 224.} The American Colonization Society, one of the nation’s most significant proponents of African American colonization, counted large numbers of abolitionists amongst its members.\footnote{An extremely complex set of motivations strung together the supporters of the ACS. Some free blacks, who believed they would achieve greater freedom in Africa, supported the society (although other black people fought tooth and nail against colonization.) But for many whites who supported abolition, the rationale echoed Lincoln’s—that black people and white people would do better apart. For more on the notion of colonization as a solution to slavery and the American Colonization Society, see: Eric Burin, \textit{Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society} (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005); and Ousmane K. Power-Green, \textit{Against Wind and Tide: The African American Struggle Against the Colonization Movement} (New York: New York University Press, 2014.)}

In writings by white abolitionists, sentimentalism often bordered on the extreme.\footnote{For more on sentimentalism in abolitionist writing broadly, see: Susan J. Pearson, “‘The Rights of the Defenseless:’ Animals, Children, and Sentimental Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century America.” PhD. Diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2004.} In the course of making a case against slavery, abolitionists dreamt up new monsters—depictions of blacks that would sink into culture as stereotypes for generations. \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} makes for the most famous example. Uncle Tom himself sketches the caricature that is the loyal slave. Meanwhile, doting but clumsy “mammies” and other stereotypes abound. Without care, writings that attempted to end abolition or promote racial equality could undercut their own messages. Many of the stereotypes Stowe helped to found now underscore racial biases against black people in the United States: infantilizing, making monstrous, or otherwise presenting types rather than complicated people. The same goes for writings about the slave—slave humanity and animal-ness. Abolitionists undercut their own message of black humanity in their use of animals metaphors.
In 1835, the newly-formed American Anti-Slavery Society charted a bold plan: they would unleash a torrent of literature to convince Americans that slavery was wrong. Their most precious objective was to convince children. An editor with the Society claimed a slaveholder had told him that: “If you make children abolitionists slavery must come to an end.”

So the society churned out children’s books. From 1836 to 1839, the Society published a pamphlet called *The Slave’s Friend* in astonishing quantity—250,000 copies according to one author.

*The Slave’s Friend* made the usual recourse to the treatment of slaves as animals. In its first issue, *The Slave’s Friend* presented a dialogue in which a young boy, Charles, explained horrified to his father that he had seen slaves sold by the pound, “as they do pigs and fish.” But it also resorted to a different logic. Slaves were like pets or other animals, it suggested. Why, *The Slave’s Friend* asked its young readers, would a person treat a slave badly if they would treat a pet tenderly? Sometimes this parallel was drawn implicitly. Across the periodical’s pages, caged birds crooned in verse for freedom. One poem invoked a robin:

Away, pretty robin, fly home to thy nest,  
To make thee a captive, I would like best…  
But then ‘twould be cruel to keep thee, I know,  
So stretch out thy wings, pretty robin, and go,  
Fly home to thy young ones again

In some, the birds themselves spoke. Such a poem appeared in *The Slave’s Friend*’s third printed edition—“Little Bird’s Complaint.” A bird refers to the, “wiry prison, where I sing,” and thinks of freedom. It wonders why it was “stolen” into captivity and asks:

Kind mistress, come, with gentle, pitying hand,

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194 This exchange is quoted in: Spencer D. Keralis, “Feeling Animal: Pet-Making and Master in the Slave’s Friend,” American Periodicals. 22(2012): 121-138. It is also from Keralis that I source this account of the American Anti-Slavery Society’s print initiative in the late 1830s.
195 Keralis, 123.
Unbar my prison door and set me free;
Then on the white thorn bush I’ll take my stand,
And sing sweet songs to freedom and to thee.198

There is little doubt the image is effective, and lasting. What depiction of black suffering, after all, has had more staying power than the caged bird?199 And the parallels needn’t have remained implicit, either. A similar story of a caged starling, unable to go free, concludes with the narrator lamenting the costs of attempting to free slaves—300 lashes for one slave who aided a runaway.200

Abolitionist literature for children made similar comparisons involving all sorts of animals—hedgehogs, dogs (one story taught not to hit slaves, as one would not hit dogs)201, rabbits and squirrels, to name only a few.202 The issue following the one in which the starling ran, warned children not to step on worms, affixing to the warning the editor’s note: “When the Bible would represent to us a person that is weak, mean, and despised in the world, it compares him to a worm of the earth.”203 And the literature often situated pleas for freedom, like that of “Little Bird,” next to similar pleas from hypothetical slaves; the two were similar and analogous.204 If a child could understand why a small animal might seek freedom or despise pain, perhaps they could understand why a slave would seek freedom or despise pain, the texts reason.

199 Most famously Paul Dunbar, whose poem “Sympathy” was popularized by Maya Angelou. Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (New York: Random House, 1969.)
204 Fielder cites several works as examples of this uncomfortable juxtaposition: Ann Preston’s Cousin Ann’s Stories for Children (1849); and Eliza Cabot Follen’s Hymns, Songs and Fables, for Children (1831). Fielder, 493-495.
The trend runs on interminably: Slavers are like men who squash butterflies, or weasels who snatch chicks away from hens ("weasel-men," in the text.)

Stories comparing slave suffering to animal suffering appear in almost every single issue of *The Slave’s Friend* and are scattered across other less circulated elements of abolition’s children’s literature. Sympathy towards animals was a useful tool for these abolitionists; they could get children to accept important political goals, and develop affection rather than cruelty towards blacks and slaves. But they risked substituting cruelty with paternalism at the expense of black humanity. As slavers demonstrate and major scholars have argued, paternalism managed to situate dominance and affection together; pet-making, as the abolitionist view has been characterized, is the model case of this pairing. The lessons of this literature eerily echoed slavers’ more paternalistic tracts—“Let your slave see and feel of a truth that you are his friend….He will certainly be your friend.”

**Slaves**

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* did more than ignite a firestorm around the issue of slavery; it attracted controversy to the text itself and the author herself. Seeking to rebut the polemic raging around her, Harriet Beecher Stowe put out in 1853—only a year after the release of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—her own defense, *The Butterfly,* in: *The Slave’s Friend,* Vol. 1 No. 5: 8-9; and “The Weasel and Chicken,” in: *The Slave’s Friend,* Vol. 1 No. 5: 7-8. The comparison to weasels as a way to demean slavers is particularly interesting, because it represents the same move being made with respect to slaves, but with opposite intention. Here, abolitionists compare slavers to animals to underscore their lack of humanity. Meanwhile, abolitionist compare slaves to animals to attempt to garner compassion.


Tuan, *Dominance and Affection.* For instance, Tuan writes: “[A]ffection is not the opposite of dominance; rather it is dominance’s anodyne—it is dominance with a human face. Dominance may be cruel and exploitative, with no hint of affection in it. What it produces is the victim. On the other hand, dominance may be combined with affection, and what it produces is the pet.” Tuan, 1-2.

Pitts, “The Best Method of Managing Negroes.”
Cabin—an explanatory work: *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In her *Key*, Stowe attempted to document the abuses and patterns she ascribed to slavery. She wanted to corroborate her view of slavery with evidence. To what did she turn? Letters among slave holders, personal conversations, newspaper clippings, all the things one might expect. But Stowe also relied on slave narratives, many of them, which she often quoted in full in defense of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Stowe read from Solomon Northrup and Frederick Douglass, from Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs. Stowe and other abolitionists depended dearly on the voices of slaves to support their account of slavery’s evils.

In some cases, white abolitionists recorded and published the narratives of slaves who could not write. In even more cases, an abolitionist press carried narratives through the publication process. Slave narratives for abolitionists were powerful tools. An inscription at the front of one of abolition’s most influential American texts, Theodore Weld and the Grimke sisters’ 1839 *American Slavery as It Is: The Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, makes this perfectly clear. To open the compendium of testimonies, the authors select verse: “Behold the wicked abominations that they do!”

Slave narratives were central to establishing slavery’s animalizing character. White abolitionists regularly pointed to the scandal of the slave sale—families scattered, humans bought and sold as chattel (or, as the comparison usually ran, cattle)—to condemn slavery. They described the arbitrary terms of slave life; a master would die without a will, and scavenging

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209 See, for instance, the narratives of Rachel Parker and Mary Elizabeth Parker—free black women kidnapped and returned to slavery—in: Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Boston: Jewitt, 1854):Ch. 8, “Kidnapping,” 343-346. There are many editions of *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which sold over 90,000 copies in a month. I rely on a particular 1854 edition for my pagination, but cite chapter numbers as well.


slavers would value and divide up the slaves according to economic advantage. In part, white abolitionists could sustain their critiques because former slaves and black abolitionists spoke so eloquently to slave sales, too. Sales dominate as the most traumatic moments in the narratives of former slaves. Frederick Douglass’ narrative describes the scene of his own sale chillingly: “We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being.”

Douglass pulls no punches; the slave sale, which often occurred alongside the sale of animals, takes a broad-axe to the humanity of those on the auction block. In fact, slaves often compared themselves directly to the animals alongside whom they were sold. If white abolitionists, even fleeting ones (in the case of Jefferson), often recognized that slave sales brutalized and animalized slaves, slaves’ accounts confirmed that experience.

Douglass’ account may be the most famous piece of corroborating evidence, but by no means does it stand alone. Accounts from slaves regularly draw the slave-animal connection at the moment of the sale. One Jefferson slave recalled his punishment for fleeing Monticello: “I was put up on the auction block and sold like a horse.”

Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave who worked as a seamstress for Varina Davis (the sartorial wife of Jefferson Davis—a senator from Mississippi at the time Keckley sewed his wife’s dresses) and for Mary Todd Lincoln, wrote of

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212 Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (Boston: Anti-Slavery Society, 1845), 45.
213 Recall Jefferson’s youthful attack on slavery, cut from his first draft of the Declaration of Independence. Calling into question the notion that any human ought to be sold, Jefferson wrote that slavery was “a market where MEN should be bought and sold”—an abomination. Jefferson quoted in Wiencek, Master of the Mountain, 9.
214 Peter Foster quoted in Wiencek, Master of the Mountain, 4.
seeing a slave sold in her 1868 memoir, *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. Almost thirty years after the sale in question, Keckley recalled:

> When I was about seven years old I witnessed, for the first time, the sale of a human being. We were living at Prince Edward, in Virginia, and master had just purchased his hogs for the winter, for which he was unable to pay in full. To escape from his embarrassment it was necessary to sell one of the slaves. Little Joe, the son of the cook, was selected as the victim. His mother was ordered to dress him up in his Sunday clothes, and send him to the house. He came in with a bright face, was placed in the scales, and was sold, like the hogs, at so much per pound.\(^{215}\)

Like the hogs—an impression that endured over thirty years to make it into Keckley’s account.

> Sojourner Truth’s narrative makes a similar appraisal of her sale: “the never-to-be-forgotten day of the terrible auction arrived, when the ‘slaves, horses, and other cattle’ of Charles Ardinburgh, deceased, were to be put under the hammer, and again change masters.”\(^{216}\) And it makes a similar claim on the memorability of the slave’s comparison to the animal, which is foregrounded among all the details from that “never-to-be-forgotten” day. Later in the narrative another detail emerges: “she has an impression that in this sale she was connected with a lot of sheep.”\(^{217}\)

> There are more—many more. Mia Bay, who studies the war over black humanity latent in slave narratives (especially WPA narratives, which bear less deeply the fingerprints of

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\(^{216}\) Truth, 18. Sojourner Truth, it should be noted, did not write her own narrative. She dictated it to a biographer. So the reader received a moderated voice—a source that combines the content of the narration of a former slave with the desire of a abolitionist editor (although I cite an 1875 edition, the narrative portion of that edition, which includes addenda, dates primarily to 1850) to offer a grim portrayal of slavery. In fact Truth’s narrative implicates a problem with many of the more celebrated slave narratives: Their political purpose was to abolish slavery. But this chapter will make reference to popular, as opposed to celebrity, slave narratives collected in the 1930s, (and has already made reference to Keckley’s 1868 narrative), which cannot possibly be said to have as their objective the abolition of the then-abolished institution of slavery.

\(^{217}\) Truth, 26.
abolitionists) recounts dozens of slaves who relate their experiences to those of animals. They made critiques similar to those of the abolitionists, even if the political ideals motivating many white abolitionists may have failed to “penetrate the parochial world of the plantation slave.”

To many slaves, a formal logic of human rights merely codified what they already understood: “God Almighty nevah ment human beings to be lak animals. Us niggahs has a soul, an’ a heart, an’ a mine an we is’nt lak a dawg or a horse.”

And yet, even as slaves affirmed their humanity in a flood of narrative, the crushing experience of slavery often left more room for slaves to conceive of themselves as animal. As Sojourner Truth grimly explained: “‘I heard many people say that we were a species of monkeys or baboons; and as I had never seen any of those animals, I didn’t know but they were right.’”

In fact, slaves and former slaves constantly reckoned their experiences by way of the animal. In narratives of plantation life, slaves assume the role of animals, sometimes to underscore and other times to rationalize their inhumane treatments, sometimes to emphasize a wily and subversive but fundamentally good nature.

In 1891, a collection of South Carolina folk tales printed in Boston: *Afro-American Folk Lore*, it declared itself to be, *Told Round Cabin Fires on the Sea Islands of South Carolina.* One of the headlining stories was called “De Reason Br’er Rabbit Wears a Short Tail.” It explained a shifty encounter between a rabbit and a wolf. Brother (br’er) rabbit asks a wolf whether he’d like to go fishing the next day, and the wolf agrees. But when the wolf arrives to head towards the

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219 Bay, 138.
220 Charlie Moses, Mississippi narrative, Quoted in: Bay, 139.
221 Truth speaking to an audience in New York, quoted in: Diallo, 192.
river, brother rabbit explains that his family has plenty of fish already—a lie. So the wolf heads out to fish alone. Brother rabbit has concocted a plan: he follows the wolf to the river, watches from the brambles as he fishes until he bucket is full, and then launches a distraction, playing dead. The wolf bounds off to find help for the rabbit, and the rabbit steals the bucket of fish, which he brings to his family.

The consequences are dire. When the wolf realizes what has happened, he becomes enraged. The wolf hunts down brother rabbit and his family, readies a hatchet and lights a fire outside brother rabbit’s rabbit hole to smoke the rabbits out. He plans to decapitate brother rabbit when he emerges. Brother rabbit manages to vent the smoke outwards, blinding the wolf, who swings his axe imprecisely as brother rabbit emerge. Brother rabbit keeps his head, but loses his long tail—the reason for which brother rabbit “wears a short tail.”

This tail’s tale strikes the reader in a number of ways. Mischievous brother rabbit possesses supreme cunning, wiling even a wolf out of his fish. Brother rabbit is a trickster—an exceedingly common trope in African, African American and Native American folklore. In their cunning, tricksters possess a particular kind of power. But more astonishing is the wolf’s

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response. Brother rabbit, for the theft of some fish, nearly loses his head, not just his tail. The punishment hardly befits the crime.

The tale of brother rabbit’s tail does not stand apart; it typifies its school of folklore. Since the civil war, oral historians and enterprising publishers alike have collected a vast body of African American folk stories, usually forged on the plantation. Brother rabbit is amongst these stories’ most common and most sympathetic characters. Brother rabbit also represents the slave. He suffers constant danger, and survives by his wits and the skin of his teeth. In exchange for a minor transgression, he endures astonishing violence.

Brother rabbit’s misadventures are numerous. In one story, he pines endlessly for a long tail, and fulfills the ridiculous requests for the empty promise that he will receive a long tail. Brother rabbit experiences disappointment and swindle. In another, brother rabbit needs a ride across a river. Fibbing, he promises the alligator who trawls the creek a pine nut in exchange for a shuttle across. But as the alligator ferries brother rabbit across, he drops lower and lower into the water, positioning himself to devour brother rabbit. Brother rabbit leaps and escapes certain death. Other animals suffer similar heartbreak. A cat fails to guard a dog’s “free paper,” when the dog goes for a walk. The dog loses free reign of the yard and never forgives the cat.

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224 For instance, I reference five such collections (in addition to secondary literature). Two were produced by publishers in the last fifteen years of the nineteenth century; the others scholars, including historians, compiled in the last twenty-five years. These represent only a sampling. Charles Joyner describes this oral culture as born primarily out of southern plantation life (although it has deep roots in related African stories.) See, Joyner, “The Trickster and the Fool: Folktales and Identity among Southern Plantation Slaves.”

225 Daryl Dance says of brother rabbit, whom he describes as an intensely sympathetic figure for slaves: “Brer Rabbit…tales were among the most popular in the slave community.” See: Dance, 2. And even a cursory glimpse at anthologies confirms this assertion. For instance, A.H.M Christiansen’s compilation, Afro-American Folk Lore..., features Brer Rabbit (or simply rabbit) in thirteen tales out of a total nineteen—an astounding proportion given the diversity of subjects and characters within the genre. Brer rabbit is strongly represented in other collections as well.


227 Christiansen, “De Rabbit an’ de Alligator,” 42-53.

228 Christiansen, “De Reason Why Dog Hates Cat an’ Cat Hates Dog,” 14-18.
While the vast majority of tales recorded in the decades after slavery revolve around animals, some do not. And those that harken to slavery confirm the role of brother rabbit, the trickster animal: Brother rabbit is the slave. In a tale called “De New Nigger and eh Mossa [his master],” a new slave arrives on a plantation. Walking alongside his owner, the slave notices that his owner often sits down, comes to rest, and lowers his head. “How come,” he demands. His master replies: he is “making plans, studying upon things.” The next day is broiling, and the master comes upon his new slave in the field, seated. He flies into a rage, asks the slave what he’s doing, to which the slave coyly replies, “master, I’m working with my head—[thinking.]” The slave then points to three pigeons perched on a nearby branch, to explain exactly what he’s thinking about. If you shoot one of those pigeons, the slave explains to his master, the other two will fly away; then you’ll have none. The master trudges on, and lets the slave be.

The master’s new slave accomplishes a stunning reversal. He outwits his master, who has just joked about his own wit. He even slyly suggests that the master has little to gain by punishing his slave in response, with analogy to the pigeons. The maneuver almost smells of a threat. In this tale, the slave possesses all of the intellect, and correspondingly much of the power. But the slave also compares himself to pigeons and occupies a role usually mediated by a rabbit—how does the reader of black folk tales from the plantation era square the circle?

The answer, like the tale, cuts both ways. Folktales among slaves and former slaves allowed the slaves to seize control: They outwitted their opponents and masters, occupied the

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232 Jones, “De New Nigger an eh Mossa,” 131. Original text: “Mossa, me duh wuk long me head,” matching another part of the master’s explanation of his own activity when he sits to think.”
role of protagonist and transmitted an oral culture. But, these slaves described punishing realities, all full of violence and danger. What’s more, they suggest a possibility put into words by Sojourner Truth. To a town hall meeting Truth explained: “I heard many people say that we were a species of monkeys or baboons; and as I had never seen any of those animals, I didn’t know but they were right.”

The folktales in which slaves told of plantation life internalized the idea that slaves were like animals, even as they struggled to assert the primacy of slaves’ experiences. More often than the new slave prevailing over his master, brother rabbit did. This makes sense. For slaves bombarded, as Truth suggests, with the argument that they were something other than human, encoding their experiences as those of animals seems natural—fluid. Partially setting aside their humanity in accounts of plantation life allowed slaves a powerful tool to cope with, understand and transmit their suffering.

Some of those accounts, smuggled north in the brains of people like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass, nevertheless exploded into the national dialogue as assertions of humanity. And white abolitionists deployed them widely to push back against the animalizing approaches put forward by slavers and scientists sympathetic to the slaveholding cause.

But something essential separates the accounts of slaves from those of scientists, who dissected blacks’ place in the natural world; slavers, who drew dire policy conclusions from the era’s pseudo-science; and abolitionists, who pushed back. Scientists, slavers and abolitionists described, argued and built the animal world of slavery. As slavers called into being a world in which some people blended with animals, slaves lived it.

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233 Truth speaking to an audience in New York, quoted by Alexandra Diallo, in: Diallo, 192.
III

PRACTICE

“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

“That the most brutal of instincts should be the source of all civilization will not seem a paradox to anyone who understands what life is.”

—George Santayana

“[We] were treated the same as stock on the plantation.”

—Baily Cunningham

PADDYROLLERS AND A HOG

Slaves and slavers, scientists and abolitionists battled over the question of slave humanity in print. Racial scientists and slavers contended that slaves resembled animals, physically and by extension (to their minds) morally. Slavery required justification. Abolitionists and slaves, meanwhile, simultaneously adopted and assailed the arguments of slavers and sympathetic scientists. But they did more than talk about their slaves as animals. Slavers made their slaves animals in practice, too. On the plantation, at the auction block, on the slave ship, or in a muddy ditch along a Selma, Alabama roadside, practice argued dramatically and physically, rather than

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234 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). Proposition 5.6. Wittgenstein meant to identify a relationship between language and reality. I mean to emphasize the ways in which debates about slave humanity were played out in not just language (“Talk,”) but also in the world (“Practice.”)


textually, to all who saw and experienced that slaves were animals rather than people—and that black slaves suited enslavement.

For slaves in the American South during slavery’s final decades, leaving the plantation was dangerous—extremely dangerous. The fear of slave revolts, sliced into slavers by putrefying images of revolts in Haiti and Southampton Virginia, had led slavers to clamp down on slaves’ privileges in the 1830s, subjecting slaves to ever tighter physical controls. Among these were controls on the movement on slaves. Slavers feared that, allowed to leave the plantations, slaves might not only flee, but coordinate armed uprisings, uprisings of the sort that might leave them, throats cut, at the center of a violent storm. So slavers often required physical passes for slaves to leave plantations.

Roving enforcers, patrollers or, in many slave narratives, “paddyrollers” trawled the roads separating the islands of the cotton kingdom’s violent archipelago, intent on fingering miscreant slaves. Slaves who left plantations without passes risked suffering extreme physical punishments at the hands of the paddyrollers—being whipped, rolled under barrels, whatever

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237 Southampton County, Virginia was home to the 1831 Nat Turner rebellion—the most famous and deadly slave revolt to take place in the United States. It brought home a fear underscored by the success of the Haitian’s slave rebellion—that numerically superior slaves would cut down their masters. For more on the Haitian revolution generally, see: Laurent Dubois, Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). For more on the impact of the Nat Turner rebellion on slavery in the United States, see: Eric Foner, ed., Nat Turner (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971.)

238 In the Caribbean and in the case of several American slave revolts (for instance the “rising”—a supposed foiled conspiracy at the heart of which lay Denmark Vesey, a free black and demonstration to slavers of the danger of the unrestricted black), slaves were able to coordinate revolts across multiple plantations in part due to permitted physical movements between plantations. Literally, slaves (or free black people) could go talk to one another. Slavers came to understand this to be hazardous. See, regarding Caribbean slave revolts: Richard S. Dunn, Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the British West Indies, 1624-1713 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972). Regarding Denmark Vesey and the “Rising,” see: John Lofton, Denmark Vesey’s Revolt: The Slave Revolt that Lit a Fuse to Fort Sumter (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1983.)

239 The practice of restricting the movements of slaves and issuing them passes to travel reflects in oral history. Recall the tale “De Reason Why Dog Hates Cat an’ Cat Hates Dog,” where dog loses his free pass and can no longer leave a fenced yard on his own. Here, the dog is a stand-in for the slave, who draws the comparison between the penning of slaves and of animals. See: Christiansen, “De Reason Why Dog Hates Cat an’ Cat Hates Dog,” 14-18
birthed from the brains behind slavers’ imaginations. The paddyrollers moved by the dozen and whipped to the bone, carrying themselves “just like police.” \(^{240}\)

Many slaves feared the paddyrollers, who left their mark on oral culture. In the south, slaves and former slaves even sang about the danger of the roving enforcers. One song made the transition to print in 1895, in a popular black magazine *The Southern Workman*. Despite its lively tune and electric rhyme, it offers a grim warning:

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Run, nigger, run de patteroler’ll ketch you,
Hit you thirty-nine and swear he didn’t tech you,
Run, nigger, run de patteroler’ll ketch you…
Poor white out in de night
Huntin’ for niggers wid all deir might.
Dey don’ always ketch deir game
D’way we fool ‘em is a shame.
Run, nigger, run de patteroler’ll ketch you…
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\(^{241}\)

Pursued by the paddyrollers, blacks became hunted game—even if they could use trickery to escape. But paddyrollers and parallels between southern blacks and animals in the antebellum era weren’t merely subject of songs. They appear elsewhere in the record, leaping off of the page and landing on the plantation.

In a narrative dictated to the Work Progress Administration in 1937, one former slave, Lizzie Williams, recalled her father’s brush with the paddyrollers. Williams lived in Asheville, North Carolina at the time of her interview, about four-hundred miles northeast of the Selma, Alabama plantation where she was born and Billy Johnson held her father as a slave. Life on the Johnson plantation was difficult; slaves knew they could be “whupped jes like a mule,” and


\(^{241}\) “Run, Nigger, Run de Patteroler’l Ketch You,” in Dance, 478.
didn’t have much to eat. They were also subject to the pass requirement and paddyrollers common across the south. Williams’ father departed the Johnson plantation one day without a pass. He spotted the paddyrollers approaching him from down the road. Knowing the consequences of discovery, he jolted into action. As Lizzie Williams describes it, her father: “[got] down in de ditch an’ [threw] sand an’ [grunted] jes like a hawg.” Most of the paddyrollers bought into the porcine deception. But one, the last in the line passing Williams’ father, found this hog odd: it grunted too much, he reasoned. He declared he should go see the hog, but the other paddyrollers convinced him to leave the poor creature alone. After all, it was merely a hog. The paddyrollers marched on. Spared, Williams’ father crawled up the side of the road and stumbled off. By playing animal, he had spared his own life. He made himself into a hog. Here are the tricks, the ways “we fool ‘em,” offered by the songs Williams and other former slaves sang.

The paddyrollers could accept a pig on the loose. But a loosed slave would have posed greater danger. Slave humanity was a perilous force in the antebellum south—one to be viciously combatted. Slave humanity posed an intellectual peril because it undercut the justifications that propped up black slavery, principally the belief that blacks occupied a different natural niche than whites, one more similar to that of primates or draught animals. And slave humanity posed a practical peril: humans could revolt; by contrast, slavers publicly claimed to think no more “of a negro insurrection than [sic] of a rebellion of [sic] cows or horses.”

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242 Williams, 2.
243 Williams, 3.
244 Quoting from: “Run, Nigger, Run de Patteroler’ll Ketch You,” in Dance, 478.
245 Quoted from: John H. Van Evrie, M.D, Negroes and “Negro Slavery”: The First an Inferior Race, the Latter its Normal Condition (Baltimore: John Toy, 1863): 23. Slavers, of course, were excessively occupied with the possibility of the revolt. The basic system of patrols and surveillance embodied by the paddyrollers confirms this.
THE LIFE OF GEORGE WOMBLE

In the winter of 1937, in Georgia, a young, white interviewer hired by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) sat down with a man named George Womble—an ex slave. This interviewer was a part of the largest effort in history to compile the narratives of American slaves, and one of the last viable efforts before the final survivors of slavery perished. The interviewer described Womble as a man of almost six feet, weighing 175 pounds, in possession of a “clear” mind and a “good sense of humor.” Given the chance to speak, George Womble gave a long account of his life. When that interviewer asked George Womble to sum up his years in slavery and on the Womble plantation—a significant portion of his life—Womble replied: “The slaves on the Womble plantation were treated more like animals rather than like humans.”

George Womble was born in 1843, on the Ridley plantation in Clinton, Georgia, to Patsy and Raleigh Ridley. Patsy and Raleigh took the name of the Ridley plantation; George would later take the name of the Womble plantation. George Womble could not recollect his father to the interviewer; Raleigh Ridley had been “sold before [Womble] was old enough to recognize him as [his] father.” Nor could Womble, like many slaves, recollect his birthday. Frederick Douglass opened his narrative in similar terms. Unaware of his own birthday, he wrote: “By far

But contradictions were common in slavery. The institution built itself on almost facetious but powerfully supported claims, for instance that a class of humans did not possess humanity.

247 Womble, 1.
248 Womble, 12.
249 Womble, 1.
the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant.”

Womble knew his mother long enough to remember her, but soon the Ridleys sold her too, to New Orleans.

According to Womble, Robert Ridley, the master of the plantation, treated his slaves badly. He was, in Womble’s words, “one of the meanest men that ever lived.” Ridley whipped Womble for pleasure, and dumped him in gigantic tanks of foul water, watching for entertainment as the boy struggled to stay afloat. Then Ridley would demand of Womble: “Who do you belong to?”

For Robert Ridley, the punishing practices of plantation life offered an opportunity to reinforce the status of his slaves—this was a physical argument.

Robert Ridley did not live long. He died and while George Womble still remained a young man. Mrs. Ridley continued to hold Womble as a slave for a number of years, but then sold him. Buyers considered Womble an attractive purchase: “On the day that I was sold,” Womble recalled, “three doctors examined me and I heard one of them say: ‘this is a thoroughbred boy. His teeth are good...he’ll live a long time.’”

A contemporary reader can imagine how the doctors arrived at their assessment of Womble’s teeth, plunging fingers into his gums and lips like a farmer might at a market for stock. (Often, these were the same markets.)

Enoch Womble, of Tolbert County, Georgia and Mrs. Ridley’s brother, trusting the doctors’

250 Douglass, 1.
251 Womble, 2.
252 Womble, 2.
253 Womble, 2.
254 Slaves draw this comparison explicitly in many narratives. The most famous example, previously quoted, is that of Frederick Douglass, who described the day of his sale: “We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being.” Douglass, 45.
appraisal paid five-hundred dollars and carted George Womble with him to a plantation in Talbottom.

On the Womble plantation in Talbottom, George Womble’s ordeal continued. “His new master was even meaner than the deceased Mr. Ridley,” as Womble’s interviewer relates the tale. Mr. Womble had his new slaves care for the cows, often herding them in the coldest throes of winter. George Womble recalled to his interlocutor a night where Womble demanded he drive the cows from pasture to stable: it was sleet, and the master feared the cold might injure his stock. George Womble, the slave, sloughed through the freezing rain, pushing the cows from the uncovered enclosure, and the sleet and rain began to freeze in his hair and on his body. To conserve warmth, he “stopped at the pig pens where he pushed one or two of them out of the spots where they had lain so that he could squat there and warm his feet in the places left warm by their bodies.” Another slave, interviewed by oral historians as part of the Fisk University collection of slave narratives, described an almost identical experience in even more effusively animal imagery: “I worked at herding the cows…bare-footed as a duck. Sometimes I would drive the hogs out of their warm place to warm my feet.”

As Womble recalled, slaves on the plantation shared more with animals than warmth; they also shared food. “The younger children,” according to Womble:

were fed from a trough that was twenty feet in length….At meal time…the cook [would] fill the trough with food…[which] was all mixed together in the trough by the master who used his walking cane….All stood back until the master has finished stirring the food and then at a given signal they dashed to the trough where they began eating with their hands. Some even put their mouths in the trough and ate. There were times when

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255 Womble, 2.
256 Womble, 3.
257 Unnamed Fisk Narrative, quoted in: Bay, 127.
the master’s dogs and some of the pigs that ran around the yard all came to the trough to share these meals.  

George Womble and the others who fed from the trough were not allowed to hit or push the animals who joined them, so the slaves stuck their hands against either side of their faces to protect themselves from the animals’ tongues. And the Womble plantation was not unique. Lizzie Williams, the former slave whose father imitated a hog in a ditch, recalled an astonishingly similar method for feeding slaves on an Alabama plantation—a slop-filled trough out in the yard. Williams explained: “‘we sho’ had to be in a hurry ‘bout it cause de dogs would get it all if we didn’t.’” On occasion, the animals out-ate the slaves. When this happened, George Womble told his interviewer, he ate the cows’ food as he fed them at night.

As George Womble entered adolescence, his master, Enoch Womble, died. Yet again Womble faced the risk of sale. He had seen sales before on the Womble plantation. According to Womble, “those to be sold were put in a large pen and then they were examined by the doctors and prospective buyers and later sold to the highest bidder like a horse or a mule.” Once again, George Womble remained in the family. His final master, Jim Womble, was his penultimate master’s son—“mean or meaner than his father,” according to the account Womble gave his interviewer.

Then the account disintegrates into the chaos of the civil war. Jim Womble claims he’ll fill the fields with blood to keep his slaves. The slaves on the Womble plantation, meanwhile, run off into the woods to pray secretly for Abraham Lincoln. Then, Sherman’s troops arrive,

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258 Womble, 8-9.
259 Williams, quoted in Bay: 127.
260 Womble’s account, despite its thoroughness, rarely makes reference to exact dates or ages; many slaves never possessed this information if they could not carefully construct it from memory.
261 Womble, 12.
262 Womble, 14.
burning and looting, and the whites flee into the woods. The war ends and ostensibly freedom has arrived, but George Womble passes the next several years trapped on the Womble plantation—carried back, rope around his neck, by local whites when he attempts to flee. Eventually, George Womble becomes a blacksmith (Womble was skilled and trained as a house slave, unlike many of the field hands alongside whom he worked.) And many years later an interviewer with the Works Progress Administration arrives on his doorstep.

George Womble’s life and his remarkably rich account of it offer examples of practices that made slaves understand their place in society to be that of animals. This shouldn’t surprise the reader; masters deliberately organized slave life around rituals meant to affirm the role of the slave as inferior and the role of the master as superior. Take one more example from the life of George Womble. Womble described the difference between the baptisms of black newborns and of white newborns. Black newborns received little. “The only baptisms that any of us got,” Womble told the interviewer, “was with a stick over the head and then we baptized our cheeks with tears.” Their sins, Womble suggests, washed in suffering waters.

White births and baptisms looked rather different—at least on the Womble plantation. The master required all the slaves to form a snaking line, which would slowly pass by the newborn child. Each slave entered one side of the room, approached the newborn and said either “little master,” or “little mistress,” bowed their head, and solemnly exited the opposite side of the room. The purpose of the staid ritual is not difficult to discern: The slaves are pledging fealty, which is not returned to newborn slaves. The rituals began at birth.

263 Womble, 12.
George Womble’s life throws another element of these rituals into stark relief, however; many of them revolve around not just making slaves inferior, but making them animal. Some masters forced their slaves to feed alongside the animals and to eat what the animals ate. You are, the adage goes, what you eat. Many sold their slaves alongside animals—slaves like Frederick Douglass.264 And many slavers housed their slaves adjacent to their animals, on the outskirts of the plantation.265 Many slaves found themselves forced to rely on animals to survive. And, as Mia Bay points out, “nowhere, perhaps, did the slaves see themselves more closely akin to domestic animals than in the world of work. The vast majority of slaves were field workers who labored right alongside the mules and horses to which they so often compared themselves.”266 As slaves saw themselves and animals performing similar rituals, they naturally understood their fates and positions as parallels. Their masters did too, presenting their argument about the status of black slaves in its most realized form.

NAMING

The practices that underscored slaves’ animal status on the plantation extended beyond those made explicit in George Womble’s narrative. Womble notices that, on the Womble plantation, masters named the children of black slaves. Naming slaves was one weapon among the complement of animalizing practices slavers possessed in their arsenal, but a striking one. Not only does naming slaves sever the connection between parents and children, it gives the

264 Walter Johnson offers a deep examination of the practices of the slave market, including the tendency of slaves to be sold alongside domestic animals. See: Walter Johnson, Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).
265 Monticello, where slave cabins extended over thousands of acres out of site of the main house—and even occupied satellite plantations—offers a particularly dramatic example of this phenomenon. Contemporaries recognized this exaggerated quality, writing that Monticello managed to keep the slave cabins and other outbuildings out of sight of the mansion, as opposed to their being arrayed around it in sight. See the account of Edmund Bacon in: Pierson, Jefferson at Monticello, 38.
266 Bay, 129.
master, now the namer, the ability to say what the child is—who they are. Many masters used the opportunity to say their newest slaves were animals.

In an analysis of the names of Virginia slaves compiled from advertisements for fugitive slaves, Iman Laversuch, a scholar of names, finds the presence of many slaves named for animals—so many, in fact, that when she attempted to group the 960 distinct names into categories the first to emerge was plants and animals, situating the slaves clearly within the natural world.267 Slaves, often but not always named by their masters, bore names including Peach, Lemon and Dolphin.268 Across the south they bore pet names: Kitten, Lamb, Honey and Sugar.269 Pet names needn’t convey insult, Dr. Laversuch, points out; but in fact the vast majority of names given to slaves match names given to mules, pets or domestic animals—as many as seventy percent by one count.270

Naming could go even further. One of the fugitive advertisements on which Dr. Laversuch relies took the practice of naming and carved it into the flesh; the runaway sought bore the initials of their master, by knife, on their cheek.271 For the many slaves who worked around cattle, the similarity to branding must have been inescapable. A name certainly would be. Names announce what a named person or thing is. Amongst American slaves, names often broadcast an unmistakable signal: Animal.

HUNTING

268 Laversuch, 341-342.
269 Laversuch, 341-342.
270 Laversuch, 341; For the documentation of the claim that seventy percent of names given to slaves match names commonly given to domestic animals, see: Newbell Niles Puckett, “Names of American Negro Slaves” in Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1973): 156-175.
271 Laversuch, 333-334.
George Womble knew of the paddyrollers, although he speaks to no encounters with them of his own. But one of the folk tales that describes them contains a verse eerily harmonized to Womble’s own experience: “Poor white out in de night/ Huntin’ for niggers wid all deir might.”\textsuperscript{272} The verse describes hunting blacks as a white past-time—sport, almost, for the poor. After the end of slavery, George Womble attempted to slink off the Womble plantation time and time again. Each time men on horseback pursued him, tied him and marched him back to the plantation.

Lizzie Williams, of Alabama and later North Carolina, describes a much more violent version of this sport. In the aftermath of the defeat of the Confederacy, Williams explains, “all some of the white folks think of war killin’ de pore niggahs what worked for dem for yeahs. Dey jes scour de country and shoot dem, ‘specially de young men.”\textsuperscript{273} Williams goes on to describe an encounter between her father and the hunters. They encountered him on the road and asked what he was going to do, having gained his freedom. Williams’ father replied that he planned to stay on the plantation and work—what else could he do? One of the men in the party trained his rifle on the man’s head and growled: “I like take yo’ head for a target.”\textsuperscript{274} But he demurred and lowered the barrel. Lizzie Williams’ father escaped.

Williams is describing a new world: The slaves, ostensibly, are no longer. Union soldiers had ransacked many of the plantations. Young, white, racist men were sucked into a vacuum in place of the carefully managed hierarchy already in the process of reforming. To some of them,

\textsuperscript{272} “Run, Nigger, Run de Patteroler’ll Ketch You,” in Dance, 478.
\textsuperscript{273} Williams, 6.
\textsuperscript{274} Williams, 6.
blacks appear to have made a startling animal transition: from draught animals to game. The question they ask Williams’ father reflects this unease. “What he gwine to do now he free?”

But hunts targeted blacks in the south well before the end of slavery. In fact, hunting fugitive slaves became something of an industry—catchers trained dogs, scoured trails and collected rewards for the capture of fugitive slaves. The Ridley and Womble plantations both suffered a rash of runaway slaves—a result of “inhumane treatment,” George Womble surmised. He recalled one family, a husband and wife, who escaped, lived in a cave and did their best to avoid emerging until freedom. But George Womble had little to say about how runaways were recaptured. Other slaves did.

Dogs found their way to the center of their stories. In Little Rock, Arkansas, a man named Bill Glass, the child of ex-slaves, told the story of his uncle Anderson to a WPA interviewer. Uncle Anderson—held as a slave in Alabama—suffered constant whippings, and made correspondingly constant escape attempts. These acquired routine, which Glass described:

“They’d whip him and do around, and he [Uncle Anderson] would run away. Then they would get the dogs and they would run him until he would climb a tree to get away from them. They would come and surround the tree and make him come down and they would whip him until the blood ran, and sometimes they would make the dogs bite him.”

The catchers prohibited Anderson Fields, Glass’ uncle, from fighting back as the dogs gnarled his body. But at least once he resisted. Fields bit a dog back, severing its foot and suffering a severe beating in exchange. After that, his masters affixed a ball and chain to his ankle.

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275 Williams, 6.
276 Womble, 13.
278 For the purpose of selecting a limited range of animalizing practices and expressing them with some depth, rather than listing many with even more limited depth, this thesis does not speak at length about the practices of chaining slaves as animalizing, but these deserve at least some notice. There is nothing particularly animal about the ball and chain, but other devices used to restrict the motion of slaves strike a more ghastly and animal tone. For instance,
Other slaves described similar experiences. Hilliard Johnson—a sharecropper in Livingston, Alabama, who still lived on the same plantation where he was brought as an infant—told an interviewer his story reluctantly. The interviewer, Ruby Pickens Tattt, had known Johnson casually for many years without asking about his past and Johnson wondered “Miss Ruby, iffen you is knowed me all dese years and still don’ know who I’m is, and my family is, and who us belonged to, dey ain’t no use of me stoppin’ now to tell you.” Besides, Johnson continued, “dem mules is tired and I is too.” But Johnson relented. The Johnson plantation, he confirmed, also had runaways and violent punishments. As punishment, the master once fastened Hilliard to a mule: “dey looped de bridle rein over my feet an’ let de mule drag me all over de orchard.” Nep Johnson, the slaver who owned the plantation, once executed a slave with a shotgun in view of Hilliard.

The Johnson plantation had dogs—“nigger dogs,” Hilliard Johnson called them. He described escapes, rabidly pursued by the dogs set by master or sheriff. Some slaves on the plantation, however, knew how to trick the dogs, according to Johnson. They called the skill “hoodooin’” the dogs. A slave would flee and the dogs would set chase, goaded on by

accounts refer to iron bits or muzzles, affixed to slaves as devices of punishment and resembling the bits put into the mouths of horses to allow a carriage driver control of the horse. See, for one example, the narrative of Equiano, a slave who gained his freedom and moved to London, where he describes a slave being punished in Virginia: “The poor creature was cruelly loaded with various kinds of iron machines; she had one particularly on her head, which locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak; and could not eat nor drink. I was much astonished and shocked at this contrivance, which I afterwards learned was called the iron muzzle.” Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself. (London: Published for the Author, 1789), 91-92.

279 Hilliard Johnson, Interview, c. 1937, “Hoodooin’ de Dogs,” WPA Slave Narrative Project, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1. Available online: https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mesnbib:@FIELD(DOCID+@BAND(@lit(mesn/010/233227)))

catchers. Like the dogs that pursued Anderson Fields, they would circle around the base of a tree, but, as Johnson explained, “’Twa’n’t nobody there….had dem dogs treein’ a nekked tree.” Johnson never explained how the slaves tricked the dogs into barking up the wrong tree.

Accounts from abolitionists joined the deluge of testimony describing the use of dogs to pursue fugitive slaves. In her 1869 biography of Harriet Tubman, Sarah Bradford offered lyrics to a hymn she claimed Harriet and her “hunted” party sang before a desperate crossing of the Wilmington Bridge: “The hounds are baying on my track,” it sang. Harriet Beecher Stowe imagined a set of four viciously trained dogs in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which the famously cruel Simon Legree warned Tom that if he ran the dogs would “jest as soon chew one on ye up as their supper.”

Frederick Law Olmsted made constant references to viciously trained dogs in his southern travelogues. Olmsted reproduced 1850s advertisements for slave-catching dogs. One man in Moore County, North Carolina had sold ten hounds for 1,540 dollars. Olmsted reasoned “a man who would pay these prices must anticipate frequent occasion to use his purchase.”

Olmsted did more than reason about dogs; he witnessed them in action, joining a group of slavers who dispatched a dog through the bayous to chase a slave bound for freedom in Mexico. The men swore they would have succeeded, if only their dog had managed to “grip” the runaway—that is, bite and maim him. Olmsted called the catchers “hunters,” who he claimed often shot to kill when slaves ran, sometimes several in a single day. Olmsted offered a long

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286 Stowe, Ch. 32 “Dark Places,” 451.
287 Olmsted, Vol. 1, 158.
288 Although they failed to catch their mark, the catchers expressed some degree of satisfaction with the fact that they’d given good chase. “We run him close though, I’ll tell you. Run him out of his coat and his boots and a pistol he got.” See: Olmsted, Vol. 2, 20.
289 Olmsted, Vol. 1, 156.
account of the training of dogs to hunt fugitive slaves, which he said a farmer shared with him. He claimed slavers shut up puppies from birth, allowing them to see blacks only when training. Masters would force a slave to run from the dogs and into a tree. When the dogs found the right tree, the trainers would give them hunks of meat; the dogs acquired a carnal taste for the black chase.290

Training dogs to hunt blacks was more than a local affair. It was national, even international, and undergirded by a long history. Dogs were long animals of choice for the hunt in Europe.291 During the conquest of the New World, Spanish conquistadors brought dogs trained to savage the natives to America; they “dogged” Amerindians in the Islands of the Carribean, in Mexico, in Chile, in Péru, in Venezuela, and in Argentina.292 The Spaniards put these dogs to extremely violent and degrading uses, siccing them on natives whom they decapitated or whose genitals they ripped and consumed.293 Europeans loosed dogs on the most shameful members or non-members of society. The Spaniards allowed dogs to tear and kill accused sodomites amongst the natives.294

European colonizers employed dogs to attack blacks, too. When Napoléon attempted to suppress the Haitian revolt, he deployed the vice-count Rochambeau (son of the French hero of the American Revolution.) Rochambeau adopted a strategy of annihilating the island’s blacks;

290 Olmsted, Vol. 1, 156.
291 Dogs have hunted alongside humans for an inordinately long period of time—since before the emergence of most writing systems. In medieval European manuscripts and paintings depicting hunts, which became increasingly elaborate spectacles of power, dogs continue to appear in large numbers, aiding horse-bound humans in hounding small game and large. By the nineteenth century, the many breeds of dogs were synonymous with the hunt. See, for more information: Harriet Ritvo, The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.)
293 See: Varner, 14-15 for a depiction of a cacique being “dogged” in Hispaniola.
294 Varner, 40-41.
he wanted to start over. Rochambeau famously encouraged the dogs to eat Haiti’s blacks. In a letter to one of his lieutenants, Rochambeau signaled that he had sent to the lieutenant twenty-eight dogs, but would be providing no additional rations. The dogs would not require them. “You should give them blacks to eat,” Rochambeau explained. Rochambeau and his colleagues, chasseurs or handlers, trained their dogs even more viciously than most of their counterparts in the American South: They tied captured blacks and enticed dogs to attack them over and over again. Southerners attempted to hitch a ride on this Caribbean expertise, importing Cuban bloodhounds—Rochambeau’s breed of choice—to clear the Florida swamps of blacks and Seminoles. Marylanders copied Rochambeau and his chasseurs techniques to train dogs.

The long legs of canine hunters in Atlantic history insist that the practice that developed in the south was hardly parochial. It developed from a long tradition, already imbued with meaning. In the act of hunting, hunters assert status. By hunting humans with dogs, they assert not only their own status but the inferior status of the hunted. Canine anthropophagy—training dogs to bite and consume human flesh—marks the most extreme version of this argument, and one abundantly present in slave life in the American South. Predation forms the basis for numerous natural hierarchies; predators are higher than their prey. When slavers made their

295 For more on Rochambeau and his strategy see: Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*.
298 For both of these insights, the author must express gratitude to Ben Maher, who in the course of writing his own thesis one year ago shared with me a draft discussing the role of the Cuban bloodhound in Florida’s Seminole War.
299 Eating bears a close relationship to human status. In ancient China, people who did not conform to dietary norms were often imagined as monsters rather than humans. In societies with human predators, predators are often seen as more powerful than their prey—superhuman rather than subhuman. In having dogs hunt slaves, the opposite principle applies. See: Carla Nappi, “On Yeti and Being Just: Carving the Borders of Humanity in Early Modern China,” in Aaron Gross and Anne Vallely, eds., *Animals and the Human Imagination: A Companion to Animal Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); and David Quammen, *Monster of God: The Man-Eating*
black slaves into prey or game, they extended their argument that blacks occupied a lower rung in the natural hierarchy into the flesh. Put simply, you are what you eat (slavers fed blacks like animals); but you are also what eats you. Slaves were liable to be hunted and eaten like animals.

**Breeding**

Paddyrollers and hunters confined slaves to space. But practices on the plantation confined almost every element of slave life—even love. George Womble described a marriage ceremony on the Womble plantation: “A broom was placed in the center of the floor and the couple was told to hold hands. After joining hands, they were commanded to jump over the broom, then turn around and jump back. After this they were pronounced man and wife.”

Even this ramshackle ceremony required permission from the Master; without permission, slaves could not be married. And permission was not always freely granted: “A man who was small in stature,” according to Womble, “was never allowed to marry a large, robust woman.” Masters encouraged the opposite. When strong slaves on one plantation took interest in healthy counterparts on another, Womble claimed, “passes were given freely.” The masters suspected they might be “good breeders.”

Slavery in the antebellum United States produced one of its most dizzying combinations in reproduction—where one of the most intimate elements of human life coincided with the most profitable. Slavers who could encourage healthy slaves to reproduce with regularity obtained enormous wealth as the number of slaves they owned grew over time. Childbirth and asset


Womble, 11-12.

Womble, 12.

Womble, 12.

Womble, 12.

Womble, 12.
appreciation were one in the same. Maryland and Virginia, which relied on exporting growing slave populations to the rest of the United States after the abolition of the international slave trade eliminated their most immediate competition, were even known as “breeder states.” In either “breeder” state, cotton was not a viable crop and tobacco had ravaged the soil to the point that selling slaves offered more lucrative prospects than working slaves. The language of “breeding” is both striking and indicative. In the course of asserting their control of slave reproduction, slavers produced some of the most demoralizing, dehumanizing and animalizing elements of American slavery.

Historians have not and likely will not identify stand-alone breeding plantations as a recurring element in American slavery, although they have searched. The prospect doesn’t make terribly much economic sense: the price of slaves fluctuated wildly in the nineteenth century; meanwhile, humans reproduce slowly and consume large amounts of expensive provisions in the course of their growth. Nor, recent authors on the topic explain, does it make archival sense that such a plantation would not be widely advertised and written of: wouldn’t the letters or slavers, or advertisements in slavers’ journals, gazettes and reviews, broadcast the existence of such plantations if they were anything more than anomalies? But breeding operations probably existed in isolation and certainly as pieces of larger enterprises—slave plantations. The evidence: A cluster of farms with exceptionally skewed demographics,

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305 Sublette and Sublette write: “The best argument, pretty much a clincher, against the existence of such businesses on any significant scale is that there seems to be no mention of them in existing slave traders’ letters. If such farms existed, they would have existed to supply traders, and mentions of them would presumably have turned up in traders’ records....” See Sublette, 30.
suggesting a focus on reproduction. The most extreme example cited comes from Drew County, Arkansas—a farm comprising two men, twenty-two women and twenty-seven children.\textsuperscript{306}

The broad economic imperative to produce more slaves encouraged brutal sexual regimes on the plantation. Women possessed almost no bodily autonomy, not merely in legal principle but in point of fact. They were subject to constant rape by masters—a fact to which several testified upon their freedom. Most famous among these women was Harriet Jacobs, who forthrightly accused her former master, under the pseudonym “Mr. Flint” of repeated sexual abuse.\textsuperscript{307}

Jacobs described her master refusing her proposed marriage to the man she loved—a free, black blacksmith. In fact many former slaves described forced marriages, forced breeding or both on the plantations. One former slave, in a 1937 WPA interview described her grandfather as a “stock Negro”—the human equivalent of a literal stud: “Luke was the father of fifty-six children and known as the GIANT BREEDER. He was bought and given to his young mistress in the same way you would give a mule or colt to a child. Although he was a stock Negro, he was whipped and drove just like the others.”\textsuperscript{308} James K. Polk’s brother-in-law, who managed Polk’s plantation while Polk served as president, wrote Polk to say he would buy women to whom he would marry the men—recently out of balance on the plantation.\textsuperscript{309}

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\textsuperscript{306} Sublette and Sublette make note of the Drew farm. They also identify forty-seven farms with “suspect” demographics. Several of these were quite large. For instance, a North Carolina farm profiled has twenty-eight men, thirty-eight women, and one-hundred twenty children. It would not make sense to maintain such astonishing numbers of children on a farm for the purposes of farming or labor. The primary value of children to slavers was future value. See: Sublette, 28.
\textsuperscript{307} See: Harriet Jacobs, \textit{Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl} (Boston: 1861)
\textsuperscript{308} Ida Hutchinson, quoted in: Sublette, 28.
\textsuperscript{309} Robert W. Campbell, to Polk, quoted in Sublette, 25.
\end{flushright}
There are astonishingly more narratives. They describe slaves whose masters either bought slaves from other farms or simply brought their slaves across farms “for breeding purposes.” Other slaves recall masters spotting a slave they thought might make a good match—that is, be able to bear many children with—with a slave of their own, and buying the slave on the spot. Other slaves describe being forced not just to marry, but to consummate. Mary Gaffney, a slave in Texas, was married by her master to another slave, whom she detested. When she refused him, her master whipped her until she allowed herself to be raped. Overwhelmingly, the slaves describe these women as “breeders” in their recollections. For slave women on a plantation, expected to increase in number alongside the cows, the pigs, the sheep, and the mules or be sold, their closeness to stock was not an elusive idea. And the gruff physicality of rape and childbirth punctuated private lives with reminders of powerlessness.

The idea of breeding slaves belongs to a larger web. On some plantations, though by no means all, rape, breeding and control of slave reproduction took place; but almost always they took place as part of an even larger suite of practices. After a mother gave birth, for instance, her child might be taken from her. That child might, motherless, be named by a master—possibly after an animal or plant, and if not likely along the same lines that a stock animal might be named. Along with other children, that child might eat from a trough along with pigs and dogs, and spend days in the fields alongside horses and mules. They might live on the outskirts of the plantation, close to those same animals. And if they ran, they might be hunted like them. Having lived a life subject to only some of those practices, George Womble offered the

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310 Lueatha Mansfield, quoted in Sublette, 25.
311 Sublette, 25.
312 Sublette, 26.
conclusion that: “The slaves on the Womble plantation were treated more like animals rather than like humans.”

Together, these practices made an argument that faced two ways. To the slave, it affirmed their enslavement. The processes of slavery began from birth to strip slaves of the identifiable cues of humanity—names, birth dates, parents—and then to confuse them with animals, via food, lodging, work, illiteracy, and more. To the slaver, it did the same: affirmed the enslavement of black slaves. Stripped of their human cues, and forced to live like the animals on the farm, slaves became easy to see that way. For that reason, a break in the natural order—an assertion of humanity from a slave—met fierce and violent reprisal. Describing a fellow slave who attempted to escape to New York, Harriet Jacobs put it well. She called him: “The Slave who Dared to Feel like a Man.”

313 Womble, 12.
314 See: Jacobs, Ch. 4 “The Slave who Dared to Feel like a Man.”
CONCLUSION: MAKING ANIMALS

“Do not slave holders wish to make the black man other kind? — animals.”

—Charles Darwin\textsuperscript{315}

America was founded on a contradiction—a glaring one. “All men are created equal,” wrote Jefferson, calling the nation into being and dedicating it to a set of self-evident principles. And yet, at the country’s founding, one-fifth of the population were slaves.

To slaves, the contradiction of slavery in a land dedicated to freedom and gross inequity in a nation dedicated to equality was obvious. William Wells Brown, a black playwright, novelist and abolitionist, dedicated “A Song for Freedom” to the problem:

My old massa tells me O
This is a land of freedom O;
Let’s look about and see if ‘tis so,
Just as massa tells me O.

He tells us of that glorious one,
I think his name was Washington,
How he did fight for liberty,
To save a threepence tax on tea.

And then he tells us that there was
A Constitution with this clause,
That all men equal were created,
How often have we heard it stated.

But now we look about and see,
That we poor blacks are not so free
We’re whipped and thrashed about like fools.\textsuperscript{316}

\textsuperscript{315} Charles Darwin, \textit{Notebook B}, 231.
Slavery, the song insists, betrayed a founding principle—made it an empty promise. Other slaves offered similar rebukes. Sojourner Truth demanded: “Ain’t I a woman?” And Frederick Douglass asked, in a society built on slavery, “What to a slave is the Fourth of July?” Even after the end of slavery, African Americans continued to express their frustration with estrangement from the nation’s principles. Langston Hughes declared: “I too am America.” And Martin Luther King, Jr. insisted that the nation had made a promise at its founding, but that, “It is obvious…that America has defaulted on this promissory note.”

These are difficult accusations to escape. And they confront American historians with a glaring problem: How could it happen? How could a people simultaneously dedicate themselves to a principle, equality, and subvert that principle to the point of building an institution antithetical to its core commitment: Black slavery?

This thesis does not attempt to present a full answer to that question—that would be overbold and doomed to failure. Instead, it tackles a well-worn piece of the existing answer: Dehumanization. It imagines that the slavers who declared all “men” to be created equal did not understand that category—men—to include black people. But it takes that analysis a step further, arguing that it would be insufficient to strip black slaves of human cues without substituting something else. In the Antebellum United States, animal cues made ready replacements. American slavers pushed the idea that slaves were more like animals than humans.

Animalizing slaves fit the era. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, natural science was in the process of its development, and still inextricably linked to political philosophy. Jefferson had set the tone for this in his Notes on the State of Virginia—a celebrated transatlantic dispute that demonstrated the believed importance of natural philosophy. Not only
did scientists lack the precise observational, methodological and theoretical tools to effectively
defeat the conclusion that black people were of another species or “lower race,” they were at the
height of their popularity. Pseudo-scientists, ethnologists, Egyptologists and their colleagues
misread in-vogue evidence, such as skulls, travelogues and hieroglyphs, to support the belief that
black people possessed a fixed and inferior nature, drawing comparisons to apes, orangutans and
domestic animals on which slavers would seize.

These animalizing arguments also presented a natural response to the language of human
rights. In many (but not all) accounts, only humans possess these rights. By attacking the
humanity of slaves, slavers and their allies put together an argument that their slaves did not
possess the rights and qualities America’s founding seemed to promise. They also proposed an
alternative natural order, in which slaves, like animals, might benefit from the care of masters.
This pastoral promise allowed them to bill slavery as a progressive institution, not a blot on the
national conscience.

Abolitionists and slaves alike took these slavers to task for their claims. Abolitionists
used the language of animalization to suggest argue that slaves were not animals, but rather
people whom slavers treated like animals—that is, without human dignity or compassion. Many
abolitionists, however, undercut the objective of racial equality in the progress. In children’s
literature in particular, abolitionists infantilized slaves, and even subverted black-humanity in
animal metaphors designed to win compassion for enslaved black people. Slaves and former
slaves pursued remarkably similar approaches, comparing their treatment to the treatment of
animals, but were often more vocal about asserting their own humanity. In some contexts,
however—especially folk-tales—slaves seemed to border on internalizing the arguments of
slavers and scientists: that they were animals. They mediated their experiences through animals.
For people suffering inhumane treatment, the disavowal of one’s own humanity may have offered a powerful rationalizing tool.

As with Jefferson, whose beliefs about slavery, race and nature came to life at Monticello, slavers put their beliefs into the practice on plantations across the nation. They designed practices and rituals—tied to birth, feeding, naming, hunting and many other spheres—that presented the argument that slaves were animals both to the slaves who worked the plantations and the slavers who observed them. This practical argument emerges in scores of slave narratives, and suggests a close link between theory and practice. Slavers and slaves couldn’t merely talk about slavery; they shaped their realities to match their beliefs, and vice-versa. The belief of some slavers that slaves occupied a position approximate to the animal in the natural order shaped astonishingly animalized lives on the plantation. The consequences run further: the very ideology of slavery, a key crutch of support for colonization. Ideas about black people’s place in the natural world mattered at a time when natural philosophy mattered a good deal.

At this moment of conclusion, a return to Mobile and to the theme of dissection seems in order. Louis Agassiz and Josiah Nott believed they could scalp into the black brain and categorize it—find its secrets, its structures and its appropriate place in the natural order. If they had been taking special care, at the end of the dissection they would have neatly lain everything back into place, delicately removed the scalpel, closed the skull and carefully wound the broken pieces back together. But, like their contemporaries, their predecessors and some of their successors, Agassiz and Nott were not taking special care. And even if they had they could not have but the pieces back together again. They confused humans with animals. Their
“dissection” of what it meant to be black in America left a strewn trail of hundreds of thousands of casualties. The pieces remain broken—the damage an idea can do.
“Man is the cruelest animal.”
—Friedrich Nietszche

On the evening of March 20th, 1981, Michael Donald left his home in Mobile Alabama, to buy a pack of cigarettes for his sister. The twenty-year old made the purchase and began to walk home.

Miles away, in Birmingham, Michael Donald’s fate had already been determined. A courthouse in Mobile was hearing a murder trial against a black man in Birmingham accused of killing a white police officer. The jury hung and the local Klan revved into action. One Klansman later explained: “If a black man can get away with killing a white man, we ought to be able to get away with killing a black man.”

A group of klansmen grabbed a knife, loaded a gun, tied a noose and slung into a car, which they prowled up and down residential Mobile streets, hunting a victim. They spotted Michael Donald, returning home with sister’s cigarettes. The Klansmen called him over for directions, then pointed a gun, demanding he get into the car. They drove Donald into the woods, beat him to death with a tree lamb, strangled him with a noose and cut his throat. Then they drove Michael Donald’s body back to Mobile and hung it from a tree on Herndon Ave, where a crowd gathered. Donald’s murder has come to be known as the last lynching in America (although later killings make strong contenders.).

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317 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883.)
319 Kornbluth, “The Woman Who Beat the Klan.”
Soon after the murder, an edition of *The Fiery Cross* landed on doorsteps. The *Cross* was the KKK’s nearest equivalent to a newsletter—a simple publication that extolled white supremacy and violence against black people. Michael Donald graced the cover, transformed. Some of his features had suffered from the gaze of old stereotypes; the cover widened Donald’s lips, frayed his hair and pushed flat his nose. But the *Cross*’ most striking feature, even on a cover that featured a cartoon of a lynched young man, was Michael Donald’s eyes. They bug out of the page, almost cuneiform, crisscrossed by sharp wedges: They are compound eyes. Insect eyes, literally.320 The drawing of Michael Donald sent a clear message: Michael Donald had not been a human.

The practice of thinking of people as animals—less than human—long predates American Slavery. It postdates it, too. In 1900, a man named Charles Carroll attempted to revive the arguments of Josiah Nott, George Gliddon and Louis Agassiz. He published a work that he and his publishers considered monumental: *The Negro a Beast.*321 The thesis is not hard to divine. Carroll argued that black people belonged to a different species, that they were “beasts,” relying on many of the tired arguments nineteenth-century racists has used to suppose that there must be multiple lines of human ancestry to produce multiple races, which share no common point.

Carroll’s book and Donald’s murder draw direct lines to the ideologies that animalized black slaves in the Antebellum United States. Other paths work more circuitously. Stereotypes about black athletes and prize fighters bear a troubling relationship to earlier forms of entertainment—cock-fights and rat-fights. Other stereotypes owe their existence to the literature

321 Charles Carroll, *The Negro a Beast* (St. Louis: American Book and Bible House, 1900)
of abolition, which infantilized those it sought to free from slavery. Victorian women held Africans as pets. Zoos housed pygmies until the beginning of the twentieth century.

The animalization of American slaves has echoes amongst the darkest moments of the twentieth century, too. During the holocaust, whose intellectual and scientific architects borrowed heavily from southern eugenicists, Nazis fitted Jews near the bottom of a natural hierarchy. Aryans assumed a place on top, as did German shepherds, Teutonic pigs and eagles. Jews, whom the Nazis constantly referred to as rats or lice, occupied roughly the same level as rats. The Nazis relied on pesticide in the gas chambers. Meanwhile, in Rwanda, Hutu radio jocks described the Tutsis—marked for elimination—over and over again as cockroaches. Their listeners understood what to do to cockroaches. There are more examples.

A fable exists which may be instructive. In the tale, an African king offers his daughter’s hand in marriage to any man who can give him “a story without an end.” For the potential suitor, the task is daunting: how is he to tell the entirety of a story without end—to show it does not end? A similar problem confronts anyone who would attempt to tell the story of how people have been thought of as animals: There is so much to tell.

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323 “Words Without End,” in Abrahams, 3.
NOTE ON SOURCES

A few words on my choice of sources are in order. A vast array of sources, almost all available digitally and at no cost, confronts any writer on the topic of American slavery. In fact this source base is so large that no writer can reasonably rely on even a substantial portion of it. History earns its status as the art of omission.

Because my goal has been to demonstrate that animalization was a common feature of debates about slavery in the antebellum United States, as well as of the practice of slavery, I have focused on major sources. When discussing abolitionists, for example, I do my best to refer to the most widely-read and well-connected abolitionists—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Theodore Weld, and William Garrison. I make use of the best known slave narratives as well—Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, to name two. Even when choosing scientific volumes, I give greater attention to those that went through many editions in the United States and engaged with significant scholarship (Darwin cited *Types of Mankind* multiple times.) Collectively, these sources represent millions of readers.

When citing folk-tales, I do my best to rely on anthologies collected when their subject would likely have experienced slavery first hand. The primary volumes on which I rely were published in the 1890s, meaning former slaves would include many of those black people above the age of 30. Ideally, this means that the stories I refer to more closely reflect the experiences I rely upon them to analyze. There are exceptions to this rule.

Lastly, a word is in order regarding my choices of primary sources for the final chapter of this thesis—Practice. I rely upon a combination of secondary sources, folk-lore, slave narratives and accounts from abolitionists. The bias of various secondary sources cannot be generalized,
but as a rule abolitionist accounts have strong motives to exaggerate the negative conditions of slavery. By contrast, WPA narratives—the source from which I derive the narratives upon which I rely most heavily—are often thought likely to downplay slavery, as black interview subjects may have felt pressure not to be forthright with southern, white interviewers in the 1930s. Despite these divergent biases, however, the various sources upon which I rely converge more than they diverge insofar as the practices of plantation life are concerned. These convergences lead me to the hope that the claims I put forward in that section and others are relatively modest.
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