The Children of Enslavement: historical legacy and lived experiences of children in trans-Atlantic slavery.

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There were children too, on the deck and in the hollow of the Atlantic slaving ship. Confused, frightened, and enduring manipulation and violence from their enslavers, children experienced the journey from Africa to the Americas, the Middle Passage, particularly and severely. Yet, little scholarship and even less theoretical understanding has developed surrounding children's place and impact upon the trans-Atlantic trade of enslaved Africans, which predominantly occurred around 1500 to 1807, and afterward in an illicit fashion largely until the 1840s. By focusing specifically on the data available regarding children and extant slave narratives, as well as other documentary evidence from those involved in the traffic of humans, the common threads of children's experiences reveal a larger undercurrent in the nature of the trade itself. The dearth of available information and collated knowledge on children's experiences of the Middle Passage has created major gaps in scholarship regarding the processes that underpin the trade. Historical explanations of the Middle Passage tend towards the economic and often centralize the commodification of Africans, or the ways in which humans were "made" into objects. However, by examining children's place within the slave trade, it becomes apparent that commodification alone is an incomplete framework for examining the exploitation of Africans. Rather, infantilization is the mechanism by which commercializing Africans was made possible. Infantilization, as I term it here, is the process in which access to adulthood, the fullest mode of human agency, is denied to a person/category of persons, through their representation as having childlike and infantile traits such as being unspeaking, obedient, coercible, malleable, loyal, and potentially (socially and physically) reproductive. Historical focus on children reveals such traits were valued, though the physicality of the child was often taken as a commercial hinderance. Thus, trends in the Atlantic traffic of humans can be understood through the trade-offs that occurred between the desire for a "childlike" mental capacity and an adult physicality,

and the ways in which the former increasingly impressed this infantile perspective upon all Africans regardless of age. This study will briefly review existing literature on children in the trade, explain the conception of commodification frequently used to describe Atlantic slavery, then begin to detail the place of infantilization, and its relationship with children, commodification, and the wider nature of the trans-Atlantic slave trade itself.

The amount of scholarship regarding children in the Middle Passage is scant in comparison to its larger study, though a few scholars have attempted to face the challenges that come with studying children and have worked to illustrate their experiences. Despite the lack of scholarship, children were not only present in the Middle Passage but viewed as economically important to those who enslaved them.

The first evidence of children's commercial value can be found in the persistent and at times immense number of children in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Children's notable presence within the trans-Atlantic trade appears paradoxical; is it not the strong, adult men and women that are desired for the back-breaking labor of sugar cane plantations in the Caribbean or the cotton fields of the United States? However, children represented roughly 21.5 percent of the Africans forcibly migrated in the entire trade from 1514 to 1866, based on available data (Slave Voyages, Summary Statistics). The number of children brought across the Atlantic, according to the data of 34,448 ships available in the Slave Voyages Database, also reveals that the proportion of children increased as time went on with a noticeable uptick in the run-up to British abolition of the trade in 1807 and once again after (Figure 1).

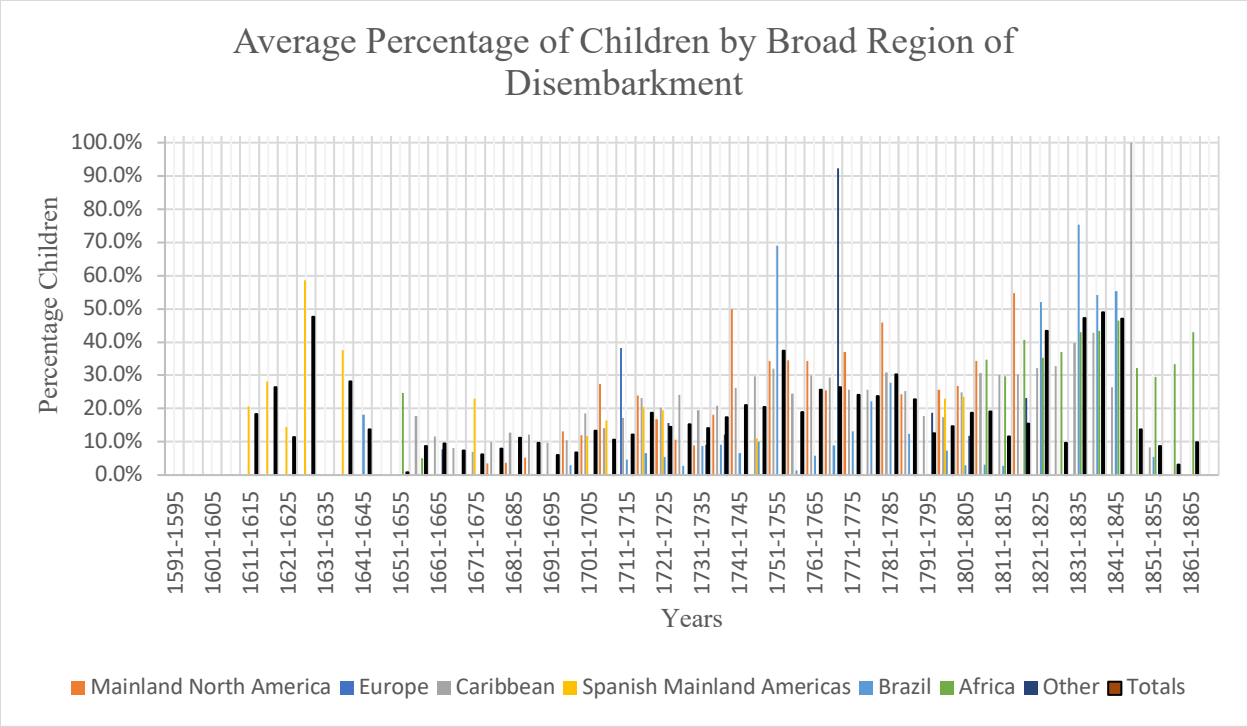

Figure 1 – Data From Slave Voyages

The number of children who made the forced Atlantic journey was diverse across regions of embarkment and disembarkment; for example, from 1514 to 1866, "children constituted 42.4 percent of shipments from Galinhas," nearly double the overall percentage of children in the time frame (Lawrance 2015, 163). Various theories have emerged regarding these trends. In large part, scholars have agreed these trends depended upon "supply" that was available in Africa, more so than a "demand" from planters (Lovejoy 2006; Diptee 2006). When more children were present in the African system of slavery due to factors such as famine and drought, they were also more present in the Atlantic system.[1] Sometimes, children simply provided a better commercial choice. In an account of the trade in which it was questioned why so many children were taken aboard

[1] Hard conditions led African parents to selling or pawning their children when food or otherwise could not be afforded; See: Miller 1998 and Lawrance 2015.

the slaving ship the *Delight*, the response from an agent of the Royal African Company was "they cost not much and the Shipp had as good bring them as nothing" (Donnan 1930, 307).

However, Colleen A. Vasconcellos has argued that documentary evidence reveals that Jamaican planters did increasingly desire children as British abolition of the trade threatened the continuation of their system. To Jamaican planters, children provided reproductive potential both in the sense of physically ensuring future generations and also by being a more "malleable" demographic to which planter's ideals, language, and socializing could be impressed upon (Vasconcellos 2004, 1-60). Utilizing a framework of infantilization, Vasconcellos's thesis holds validity even when arguments regarding supply are present. While a more specific demographic study would need to be done, the increased supply of children in the trade could have facilitated planters to value the infantile and consequentially lead to their demand for children. Essentially, the ways in which children in the trade were regarded began to mold the overall desire of planters when choosing those to purchase.

Children's experiences onboard slaving ships are also important to understanding the ways in which African children were perceived by their oppressors and the ways in which the humanity of Africans was made profitable. A common feature of their experience includes an overwhelming sense of confusion towards their situation, with notions of 'witchcraft,' cannibalism, and magic standing as explanations understood by children and communities for their horrible situations in slave narratives and lore (Green 2019, 26). Ottobah Cugoano, for example, wrote "I saw several white people, which made me afraid that they would eat me, according to our notion, as children, in the inland parts of the country" (1787, 123).

Manipulation of children through lies or false assurances to elicit compliant behavior also occurred, with various recollections in slave narratives describing situations in which adult

enslavers took advantage of their position of knowledge to control and inflict suffering on children. Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (James Albert), a formerly enslaved man, recollected in his narrative how a merchant from the Gold Coast offered to bring him to see “houses with wings” (sailing ships) and “that he would bring me safe back again soon” (1772, 5). Instead, this incident marked the beginning of his enslavement as a young child. The Middle Passage itself proved to be a voyage deeper into the dissociation African children had from any social ties or structures they could depend on, to an ever-changing environment in which violence and manipulation were intrinsic.

Another aspect of the Atlantic journey was children’s physical environment onboard. Children usually had less physical restriction upon boats, often being on the deck, as they were seen to be less threatening (Hofstee 2001, 87-88). This commonplace treatment indicates the infant perception of children, and to an extent the physicality of African women who were sometimes less restricted (Hofstee 2001, 35-37). Yet, some traders recognized the danger in this assumption, with an owner of a slaving ship advising his captain to “have the needfull Guard over your Slaves, and putt not too much confidence in the Women nor Children least they happen to be Instrumental to your being surprised which may be Fatall” (Donnan 1932, 45). This warning is indicative of the agency children held as well as the ways it was often overlooked by mere assumption of their aged capabilities.

Women, but also children, were the primary targets of sexual assault by crewmembers and captains. Equiano claimed he had “even known them to gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old” and other accounts imply similar situations (1789, 94). Angela Davis described that “[r]ape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal

was to extinguish slave women's will to resist" (2019, 19-20); similarly, this weapon was wielded against children, a harrowing act that exploited children's vulnerability.

These experiences lend credence to the notion of infantilization as it reveals the attention paid to the vulnerable traits of children. These traits were targeted and utilized for the monetary value they could be spun into. However, these experiences also prove the actionable agency of those children and other enslaved people onboard these ships. It was their persistence in the face of alienating violence and confusion, and their clear inability to become a 'thing' possessed by their oppressors, that prompted these attempts and attitudes from those profiting off the trade.

The presence of children, their experiences onboard, and their emphasized value once in the hands of their enslavers all make clear that children and enslaved people not only retained their humanity and agency, but it was specific features of that humanity, such as childhood, which were deliberately profited from. This conclusion challenges commodification as a framework for Atlantic unfreedom.

Scholars have repeatedly described the crossing of the Middle Passage as a route of commodification. Commodification, simply, is the process in which non-market goods become market goods that are saleable and priceable (Belk 2020, 31). Scholars who have used this framework argue that the Middle Passage "had to transform independent beings into human commodities whose most "socially relevant feature" was their "exchangeability"" (Smallwood 2007, 35; Appaduri 1988, 13). In order to make a product of Black bodies, every aspect and step of the Atlantic route including the holding prison "barracoons" on African shores, the experience on board, and the preparation for sale including the shaving of enslaved person's heads and increasing their food, were done for the purpose of making the African into a 'commodity' (Smallwood 2007, 33-64; Miller 1988). In this narrative of the trade, African peoples were no

longer seen as humans, but goods, like the barrels of rum, bolts of cloth, and other goods they were traded for and transported alongside. However, this theoretical and colloquial understanding does not account for, though often implicitly recognizes, human agency which troubles any simplified "African as object" conception. Even as scholar Stephanie Smallwood argued that Africans became "bodies animated only by others' calculated investment in their physical capabilities," she (as pointed out by Nicholas T. Rinehart) emphasizes that slave traders constantly recognized the humanity of slaves even if only for the purpose of exploitation (Smallwood 2007, 35; Rinehart 2016, 34-35).

Evidence of the persistent place of enslaved people's agency can be found even amongst the cold calculations of shipping logs. The accounts of the ship the *Hare* (1755) reveal the story of an enslaved girl onboard the ship. "Account Sales" listed that a doctor and medicine were obtained for £37 for two girls who were ill. The sale goes on to list nursing that occurred "from the Ist May 1755 to May 1756 […] at £16 pr month" for one of the girls, who then passed away from her illness. Shortly after is a listing of £8 "To Coffin etc the Girl that Dy'd" is written and a record of a zero-sum for the girl (Donnan 1931, 160). While this log may seem to prioritize the costs and numbers of this girl's life, making her death an object of lost profit, it is her *life* onboard, from sickness to death which exists underneath and reveals that her humanity could not be extinguished or left unrecognized by those who enslaved her. She, though left nameless, took up space as a human being in the records, her human fragilities and needs present. Other commodification arguments by historians have explicitly negotiated human agency, though I argue they have not found a comprehensive way to integrate it. Walter Johnson, in *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, has argued that the understanding of enslaved people within the slave market thoroughly recognized their humanity. Negotiations in the slave market

were not made from a simple reduction of their bodies to objects but rather on their attributes as individuals or otherwise, sometimes wielded by the enslaved themselves to leverage better situations (Johnson 1999, 58-59). In a more direct theoretical conception, Igor Kopytoff emphasizes processual commoditization (or *interchangeable* goods as commodities) as the crux of this issue, asserting when a person was enslaved in Africa, they were severed from the social ties and moved to the Americas in a sort of limbo, to which they are only fully a 'commodity' at the point(s) of their exchange (Kopytoff 1988; Belk 2020). Essentially, human beings in trans-Atlantic slavery retained their agency throughout, except for the moments of exchange. Rinehart, a more out-right critic of the commodification framework, posits that this existence of human agency poses a theoretical challenge, as commodification and notions of social death fail to integrate the reality of enslaved people actively taking space as humans and not objects in the minds of their enslavers (Rinehart 2016). Noting such critiques, lived experiences, particularly those of children, help to reveal a mechanism more prominent in the extraction of commercial value from Africans, which simultaneously centralizes agency: infantilization.

Thus, if human agency falters the commodification thesis, then conceptualizing 'infantilization' as the integral mechanism to the commodification of those enslaved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade allows human agency to find a space within this larger project. Foremost, it negotiates the fact that a human cannot fully ever *be* recognized as a 'good,' and secondly, accounts for the resistance and actionable agency of enslaved persons.

Addressing the former, previous conceptualizations fail to explain the presence of human agency alongside commodification in a way that acknowledges both lived experience and the commercial exploitation of Africans. To argue that Africans were made into objects would require Black bodies to be seen as non-human; yet, as previously demonstrated that this was not

true, and the human characteristics were valued in enslaved peoples. Infantilization provides a theoretical connection between this and commercial exploitation. As pointed out by Sean Sturm, the term infancy itself emerges from the latin *infans* which means unspeaking, and by extension those without reason; thus, Sturm conceptualizes infanticide to be not only the killing of children, "but also the casting out or striking out (exposure or erasure) of that which is without speech, without reason in our social body" (2020, 7-8). Sturm's analysis of infanticide is useful as it demonstrates the space between fully recognized human and that which is left in a degraded, irrational infancy. If the African human could not be made into an object, they could be represented as a child. By 'making' the African into a child, their right to demonstrate agency and claim any regress to their subjugation is actively repressed. Children's experiences of the slave trade are key in demonstrating the commercial value placed on their childhood and the infantilization of Africans largely. This process also provides a simpler logic to justifying the institution, as making commercial use out of someone with equivalent political rights and social standings to oneself would infringe upon the white adult man's place in the hierarchical structure—it would provide the logic that anyone could be exchanged or bought. Yet by reserving adulthood, not humanity, for adult white men, the dependency structure remains in place; it would then be the white owner's right to make use of the enslaved person as a subordinate human being. Corienne Field demonstrates the continued institutionalization of this process in Antebellum America where, "[a]s white boys matured, why did they gain not only rights to themselves but also rights to other people" (2014, 3).[2]

These traits, of an irrational infant state, were quickly interwoven with the state of enslavement and race itself, extending infancy beyond children. In the biographical preface to a

[2] See Field 2014 on the various racial/gendered relationships to "equal adulthood."

collection of the formerly enslaved Ignatius Sancho's letters, Joseph Jekyll claimed that "He who could penetrate the interior of Africa, might not improbably discover negro arts and polity, which could bear little analogy to the ignorance and grossness of slaves in the sugar-islands, expatriated in infancy, and brutalized under the whip and the task-master" (Sancho xv, 1782). Even to abolitionists, enslavement became a state of infancy, rather than a state of non-humanness or non-being. By making the African into a child, all justifications for the system could be easily predicated, including religious ones which claimed that slavery could not deny the soul of the African or their personhood. Pro-slavery Reverend James H. Thornwell argued in his sermon *The Rights and the Duties of Masters* in 1850 that "the moral and responsible agency of one person […] can never be owned by another […] no man can sell his soul to another," repeatedly demonstrating the mental consciousness that enslaved people were human (Thornwell, 22; Stanley 2004, 250). If slavery did not deprive a man of his soul, then the infancy of slavery could be tied to racial constructions.

Commodification as a theory holds weight in understanding the enslavement of Africans and their trans-Atlantic passage; yet, in attempting to emphasize the brutality of the trade, it falters in centralizing the agency of those who endured inhumane and degrading conditions. The way in which children, the most vulnerable population, were treated and perceived reveals that it was child-like traits that were valued and served as a mechanism by which commercial exploitation of not only Black bodies—but Black souls—could occur. Infantilization underpinned the trade as it interwove the value of coercibility and malleability with the African and Blackness itself. The Atlantic trade in souls and lives initiated the racialization of Africans, a process of forced infantilization that would underwrite the power of empires.

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