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Damian Alan Pargas

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## Slavery and Forced Migration in the Antebellum South

American slavery in the antebellum period was characterized by a massive wave of forced migration as millions of slaves were moved across state lines to the expanding southwest, scattered locally, and sold or hired out in towns and cities across the South. This book sheds new light on domestic forced migration by examining the experiences of American-born slave migrants from a comparative perspective. Juxtaposing and contrasting the experiences of long-distance, local, and urban slave migrants, it analyzes how different migrant groups anticipated, reacted to, and experienced forced removal, as well as how they adapted to their new homes.

Damian Alan Pargas is an associate professor of social and economic history at Leiden University. Specializing in North American slavery, he is the author of *The Quarters and the Fields: Slave Families in the Non-Cotton South* (2010) as well as numerous academic articles for journals such as *Slavery & Abolition*, the *Journal of Family History*, the *Journal of Early American History*, and *American Nineteenth Century History*. In 2011, he was granted a prestigious three-year Veni postdoctoral fellowship from the Dutch Council for Scientific Research (NWO) and a visiting research fellowship from the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies at the Freie Universität of Berlin. Pargas is also an editor for the journal *Itinerario: Journal of European Expansion and Globalisation* and the secretary of the Netherlands Association for American Studies.

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DAMIAN ALAN PARGAS

*Leiden University*



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## Introduction

*The being of slavery, its soul and body, lives and moves in the chattel principle, the property principle, the bill of sale principle... You are a slave, a being in whom another owns property.*

Former slave James W.C. Pennington, 1849<sup>1</sup>

Upon leaving a Louisiana sugar plantation during his travels through the southern states in 1854, Frederick Law Olmsted, landscape architect and newspaper reporter for the *New York Daily Times*, struck up a conversation with the “talkative and communicative” slave named William who was charged with driving his buggy to his next destination. In the course of their journey of some twenty miles together, the two men broadly discussed various issues of local and national interest, including sugar cultivation, slavery, and master–slave relations in the Deep South. Interestingly, however, the very first thing William said to Olmsted as he stepped into the carriage was the seemingly irrelevant reassurance “that he was not a ‘Creole nigger’; he was from Virginia,” having been sold and shipped to Louisiana via the domestic slave trade as an adolescent.<sup>2</sup>

Not being mistaken for a Louisiana-born slave was obviously of profound importance to the thirty-three-year-old forced migrant even though he had lived in Louisiana for twenty years, learned to speak French fluently, and admitted no desire to move back to Virginia anymore because he had already “got used to this country” and fully adapted to the “ways of the people.” Yet however

<sup>1</sup> James W.C. Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; Or, Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church, New York, Formerly a Slave in the State of Maryland, United States* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1849), iv, vii–viii.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States in the Years 1853–1854, with Remarks on their Economy* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), 676 (quotes). In the American context the term “Creole” refers to somebody born in Louisiana.

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assimilated William may have seemed in the Louisiana slave society that had become his new home, cracks in his identity were clearly evident, as he proudly continued to identify himself first and foremost as an outsider, a Virginian, even confiding to Olmsted his opinion that “the Virginia negroes were better looking than those who were raised here” and that there “were no black people anywhere in the world who were so ‘well made’ as those who were born in Virginia.”<sup>3</sup>

William was certainly not alone in his experiences as a slave migrant. Uprooted from his home, transported to another slave society, and cast as a stranger into a new community to which he was forced to assimilate, he was one of millions. Forced migration was a central experience in the lives of black slaves throughout the New World, as their labor and, by extension, their *bodies*, were continuously reallocated across space according to the demands of various slave economies. In the case of the American South, two major waves of forced migration occurred during the era of bondage. The first took place in the colonial and (post-)revolutionary periods, especially between 1680 and 1808, and was characterized by the importation of more than a half million slaves from Africa to North America. The second wave occurred in the antebellum period (roughly 1800–1860) and witnessed an even more massive reallocation of slave labor within the South itself. This latter wave of domestic forced migration was monumental – scholars such as Ira Berlin have even referred to slaves from this period as the “migration generations.” Yet not all nineteenth-century newcomers experienced removal quite like William did. Indeed, antebellum slave migration was three-pronged: first, almost a million American-born slaves from the “older” slave states in the Upper South and Atlantic seaboard were, similar to William, forcibly transported to other states, especially in the expanding southwest; second, roughly twice as many slaves were scattered locally (within the same state) through estate divisions and local sales; and finally, innumerable slaves from rural areas were sold or hired out in the burgeoning towns and cities of the region.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 676–77 (quotes).

<sup>4</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 21–96, 159–244; Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993), 18–24, 96–98. Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 41–46, 157–60, 283–89; Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1989), 63; Peter McClelland and Richard Zeckhauser, *Demographic Dimensions of the New Republic: American Interregional Migration, Vital Statistics, and Manumissions, 1800–1860* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 118–19, 135; David L. Lightner, *Slavery and the Commerce Power: How the Struggle Against the Interstate Slave Trade Led to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 5–8; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6–7; Jonathan D. Martin, *Divided Mastery: Slave Hiring in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 6; Walter Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle:*

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How did American-born slaves experience forced migration in its various forms during the nineteenth century? How was their knowledge of forced migration characterized, and to what extent did they attempt to resist or negotiate the terms of their removal? To what extent and by what means did they adapt to new slave communities, work regimes, and master–slave relations? How were their relations with other forced migrants and local slaves characterized, and to what extent did domestic migration contribute to the development of broader slave-based identities? This book examines the nineteenth-century migration experiences of American slaves from a comparative perspective. Juxtaposing and contrasting the experiences of long-distance, local, and urban slave migrants born in the American South, it addresses three broad themes. First, it underscores the *different* experiences of slave migrants, especially according to type of migration but also according to age, sex, and regional background. As this book argues, antebellum slave migrants experienced forced removal in a variety of ways, and the boundaries and opportunities with which they were confronted – to negotiate the terms of their migration, for example, or adapt to new slave societies – often differed widely. Second, this study examines the ways in which slave migrants attempted to rebuild their lives upon arrival – the extent to which they assimilated or were integrated into new American slave cultures or communities; their experiences in adjusting to new work regimes; and the extent to which they implicitly or explicitly protested their migration, new environments, or new masters or clung tenaciously to overly romantic memories of home. Third, this study addresses the consequences of forced migration for identity formation among American-born slaves during the antebellum period. It points to the importance of regional and fluid identities as well as memories of place – both during the migration experience itself and after arrival at new destinations – and argues that for slave migrants,

*Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). Calculating the extent to which interstate migrants were transferred to their new destinations by domestic slave traders has been the source of heated debate among historians. Fogel and Engerman estimated in their statistical study of slavery *Time on the Cross* (1974), for example, that of the hundreds of thousands of American slaves who were forcibly relocated across state lines between 1820 and 1860, only 16 percent were deported via the domestic slave trade. The rest supposedly accompanied their masters into the interior. Their sources and conclusions were fiercely criticized and discredited by a number of scholars, however, most aptly by Michael Tadman, who argued in his groundbreaking study *Speculators and Slaves* (1989) that between 60 and 70 percent of the total interstate slave migration could be attributed to the domestic slave trade. Since then, most scholars have tended to agree that approximately two-thirds of interstate slave migrants – well over half a million – were transported by traders, a significant percentage by any standard. See Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 283–89; Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 49; Herbert Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of Time on the Cross* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 102–11; Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 44–45.

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the process of adapting to new environments was an important factor in the development of personal and group identities.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to the numerous studies that deal with transatlantic forced migration and the cultural assimilation of Africans in America in the colonial period, the internal migration experiences of American-born slaves in the antebellum South have received relatively little attention from historians. A handful of scholars – including Michael Tadman, Walter Johnson, Stephen Deyle, Robert Gudmestad, and David Lightner, to name only the most prominent – have examined the economic, demographic, and political aspects of domestic forced migration, but the actual experiences of forced migrants both during the migration process itself and after arrival in new communities have rarely been the focus of in-depth academic research. Historians who have delved into these topics – such as Ira Berlin’s masterful examination of the assimilation experiences of domestic slave migrants in his seminal work *Generations of Captivity* (2003) – have moreover largely focused on the experiences of *interstate* migrants. Indeed, no studies have attempted to compare the experiences of interstate, local, and urban slave migrants, and virtually none have acknowledged that there were similarities and differences in the ways these groups experienced migration. These gaps in the historical literature are especially poignant when one considers that the ways in which enslaved people experienced and endured removal are of particular importance in understanding the centrality of forced migration to the slave experience.<sup>6</sup>

For the antebellum period, when few American slaves escaped the onslaught of forced migration, an analysis of the ways in which enslaved people anticipated, responded to, and experienced migration itself – from the first news of removal to arrival at new destinations – reveals volumes about how

<sup>5</sup> For more on fluid and group identities, see, for example, Hazel Rose Markus and Maryann G. Hamedani, “Sociocultural Psychology: The Dynamic Interdependence among Self Systems and Social Systems,” *Handbook of Cultural Psychology* (New York: 2007), 7; Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture* (London: Routledge, 2006), 22–23; Tom Postmes & Nyla Branscombe, eds., *Rediscovering Social Identity* (New York: Psychology Press, 2010), Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>6</sup> For the colonial period, see, for example, Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Richard Price and Sidney W. Mintz, *The Birth of African American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon, 1992); Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Herbert Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998). For the antebellum period, see, for example, Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*; Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract*; Martin, *Divided Mastery*; Deyle, *Carry Me Back*; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*; Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Lightner, *Slavery and the Commerce Power*; Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 159–244.



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they understood and negotiated the commodification of their valuable bodies. Enslaved people were indeed often fully aware of the circumstances by which they could be removed from their homes, had clear ideas and opinions about proposed destinations, and often anticipated and prepared themselves for forced removal long before it actually occurred. Indeed, when forced removal appeared imminent, attempts to avoid, resist, or negotiate the terms of their migration were commonplace, as bondspople strove to use various strategies to assert some agency over the reallocation of their bodies.<sup>7</sup>

During removal itself – whether hawked on a humiliating auction block, locked in a filthy slave pen, chained in a coffle headed south, or simply accompanying their masters to town to be disposed of – bondspople were again confronted with both the commodification of their bodies and separation from their home communities. Their understanding of the nature of their removal and the destinations to which they were being removed informed their actions along the way. Although many urban migrants looked forward to life in the city, for example, and local migrants hoped to be able to maintain at least limited contact with loved ones, most interstate migrants perceived their removal to distant locations as a traumatic experience that severed their bonds with friends, family, and everything they knew (from crop regimes to masters). Indeed, social contact among interstate migrants during the journey south was extremely important because it helped them to cope with forced separation from loved ones and the daunting exodus into the unknown with which they were confronted. Resistance to forced removal also often took its most dramatic forms during this stage, as many slaves undertook last-ditch attempts to escape their captors' grasp and either flee slavery altogether or return to their home communities.<sup>8</sup>

Upon arrival at their destinations, migrants were confronted with the monumental task of rebuilding their lives, a theme that is acutely lacking in the current historiography. Indeed, from browsing the historical literature, one would be excused for believing that for American-born slaves in the nineteenth century, little or no adjustment was involved in moving from one place to another. An examination of slave migrants' experiences, however, reveals that they consistently experienced tension in at least three areas. First, they had to find their

<sup>7</sup> Gudmestad, *Troublesome Commerce*, 43; Deyle, *Carry Me Back*, 246; Phillip Troutman, "Grapevine in the Slave Market: African-American Geopolitical Literacy and the 1841 Creole Revolt," in Walter Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 204–208. See Chapter 2 of the present volume.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 63–77; Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, 174; Robert Gudmestad, "Slave Resistance, Coffles, and Debates Over Slavery in the Nation's Capital," in Johnson, ed., *The Chattel Principle*, 80–82; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845; New York: Dover, 1995), 16–17; Paul D. Lack, "An Urban Slave Community: Little Rock, 1831–1862," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 41 (autumn 1982): 265; Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 35–36.

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place within new slave communities. This process has often eluded scholars because of a flawed approach to antebellum slave culture: in the past, many scholars erroneously assumed that domestic slave migrants were easily assimilated into their new communities because their cultural backgrounds (from religion to language to family life) were supposedly all more or less alike by the nineteenth century. Even Ira Berlin recently argued that in the Deep South, “slaves from the North, Chesapeake, and lowcountry mixed easily.” Enslaved newcomers, however, often experienced considerable difficulties finding their place within new slave communities, mixing with local-born slaves, and even getting along with other forced migrants. This was especially true for long-distance slave migrants, who were often sent to parts of the South that they deemed inferior in every respect to their places of origin. Divisions also arose in the cities, where slave migrants from the countryside clashed with urban slave communities. The American slave population was not always as united as is often believed, and integration processes were often slow and full of setbacks, although under specific circumstances (especially when confronted with incidents of oppression), slaves from all backgrounds and origins – newcomers and locals alike – frequently came to identify with each other as a group, transcending regional and local identities.<sup>9</sup>

The assimilation and integration of American-born forced migrants were further complicated by new work patterns, cultivation methods, and economic arrangements. Scholars have expended much energy analyzing and comparing the various agricultural regimes of the antebellum South, including the consequences of various work patterns and economic arrangements for slave culture in different regions. The seasonal calendars and various methods of cultivating tobacco, wheat, rice, cotton, or sugar had far-reaching consequences for slaves’ daily lives and, as I have argued elsewhere, even their family arrangements. For country slaves sold to or hired out in cities, work patterns were on another order altogether. Yet few scholars have examined the ways in which new work patterns were *learned* by forced migrants or the difficulties involved in adjusting to unfamiliar economic regimes. For example, slaves from the Upper South sold to work as field hands on cotton plantations often experienced extreme stress in learning to pick cotton and keep up with more experienced local hands. Slaves who were forced to learn to cultivate new crops or perform new tasks also appear to have been particularly vulnerable to work-related punishments. On the other hand, local migrants were often easily assimilated into new work

<sup>9</sup> Berlin, *Generation of Captivity*, 170–71 (quote). Many revisionist scholars have tended to portray slave culture as having been largely homogenous by the antebellum period. See (among others), for example, John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1976); Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract*; Starling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

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regimes, and many country slaves apprenticed to artisanal trades in the cities appear to have welcomed the opportunity to learn new skills.<sup>10</sup>

Third, slave migrants who changed owners (whether long distance, local, or urban) were confronted with new masters and therefore new master–slave relations. Rules, temperaments, and privileges often varied widely among southern slaveholders. Most slaves indeed believed that there were distinct regional differences in master–slave relations, with the Deep South in particular standing out for its cruel masters and overseers compared with the “mild” Upper South. City slaves, on the other hand, were usually granted a considerable degree of autonomy in their daily lives, and urban newcomers often enjoyed new arrangements, although they often unknowingly breached urban codes of segregation that resulted in severe reprimands. Furthermore, slaveholding size had important consequences for master–slave relations: whereas slaves sold to large plantations were often largely anonymous to their owners and governed through overseers and drivers, those who were sold to small farms usually had more personal relationships with their masters.<sup>11</sup>

The ways in which newcomers adjusted to new masters raise important questions about the treatment of slaves in general. Indeed, although the focus for this study is on the migrants themselves, an additional underlying aim of this book is to use the theme of forced migration as a springboard to engage in broader historical debates concerning the nature of master–slave relations in the antebellum South. To what extent was forced migration compatible with slaveholders’ claims to the ideology of paternalism (as conceptualized by Eugene Genovese), in which they maintained that their slaves were natural extensions of their own families (“our family, black and white”) and in which they loudly professed their commitment to the benign rule of the “childlike” bondsperson under their stewardship? How could the sellers of slaves reconcile the mutual obligations of paternalism (i.e., protection and care in exchange for absolute obedience and hard work) with forced migration and the forced separation of families? How could the buyers or hirers of slaves reconcile such beliefs with their purchase or hire of slaves who had been torn from their families or with their often brutal treatment of newcomers?

<sup>10</sup> For comparative studies of slave culture in various economic regions, see, for example, Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*; Daina Ramey Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Damian Alan Pargas, *The Quarters and the Fields: Slave Families in the Non-Cotton South* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> For paternalism, planter ideology, and the treatment of slaves, see, for example, Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 195–234; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 3–7, 5 (first quote); James Oakes, *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 137–94; Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1877*, 111–32; Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception: Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 193–200.

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These questions have sparked considerable debate among historians. Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argued in *Fatal Self-Deception* (2011), a publication that concluded nearly forty years of research on the subject, that despite its contradictions, antebellum slaveholders were essentially sincere in their commitment to paternalism, that they “said what they meant and meant what they said,” and that they “managed to square” forced migration and family separations with their paternalist self-image by insisting that these were merely untimely and unforeseeable ruptures in an otherwise benign master–slave relationship. By formulating slave sales and forced separations as constituting only minor and irregular exceptions to the rule (mere last resorts in times of financial distress or grave consequences for unruly slaves who failed to meet their obligations to the master), slaveholders were able to execute forced migration yet still believe that they were exercising hegemony in Gramscian terms – imposing their worldview upon the slaves they owned and procuring a form of accommodation that even minor “apolitical” acts of day-to-day resistance did not fundamentally threaten – and sincerely retain their claim that they governed in the interest of the enslaved. Framing their peculiar institution as a form of human interdependence whose abolition would lead to the extinction of the black race, they stubbornly believed that their society was humane and superior to every other even when they contradicted themselves in their own behavior. They ultimately deceived themselves, the Genoveses argue, a claim that provides the title to their book. Yet, they maintain, “because the ground beneath their feet was unstable does not mean that they were insincere,” claiming that slaveholders’ commitment to their deceptive and faulty ideology was so strong that it propelled them and the nation into the civil war that ultimately destroyed their institution altogether.<sup>12</sup>

Critics of this view, most notably Walter Johnson, have dismissed paternalist justifications for slave sales and family separations as planter alibis rather than evidence of commitment to a deceptive ideology, contending that forced migration was such a logical result of a system that treated human beings as commodities that it was essentially impossible to reconcile with paternalism. These scholars argue that from participation in the slave market to treatment of newcomers, slaveholders undermined claims to paternalism, making them dishonest. The slaveholders did so because of their unwavering commitment to self-enrichment, their fundamental view of enslaved people as valuable bodies rather than human beings, and the brutally expropriative – rather than altruistically benevolent – nature of their class relations. Virtually none were willing to place paternalist responsibilities above financial self-interest. Although they

<sup>12</sup> Genovese and Fox-Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception: Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1 (first quote), 5 (second and third quotes); Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 25–49, 147–49, 587–97; Kathleen M. Hilliard, *Masters, Slaves, and Exchange: Power’s Purchase in the Old South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2–5.

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tried to defend their actions through a paternalist framework, Johnson argues, “the proslavery construction of slave-market ‘paternalism’ was highly unstable,” constantly threatening “to collapse at any moment beneath the weight of its own absurdity.” Aware that their ideology was based largely on fiction, slaveholders attempted to reconcile obvious contradictions “the same way they solved other problems,” namely by constructing “ever more elaborate fantasies about the slave market,” “bewilder[ing]” forced migration and paternalism, and concocting ridiculous and contradictory justifications that few could have possibly taken seriously. According to Johnson, paternalism can be seen more as “a pose that slaveholders put on for one another than as a praxis through which they governed their slaves.” Indeed, the very existence of forced migration was crucial to creating that pose in the first place: the only way antebellum slaveholders were able to formulate a system of labor discipline that did not rely on torture – and thus outwardly appear even remotely benign – Johnson claims, was not by imposing cultural hegemony and procuring the accommodation of the enslaved but rather through the implicit (and often explicit) threat of forced migration and family separations. In other words, the slaveowners ruled through terror, a fact that stands in complete contradiction to their claims of benevolence and good intentions. The best way of “describing the relationship of slaveholders’ effusive paternalism to the threats of family separation through which they increasingly governed their slaves,” Johnson writes, “is this: the slaveholders were liars.”<sup>13</sup>

This book aligns broadly with the latter view. Although there were surely exceptions throughout the South, this study argues that most southern slaveholders’ commitment to paternalism was inconsistent at best and nonexistent at worst, and that their disregard for their own contradictory definitions of benevolent rule was most starkly revealed in the role they played in slave migration – when they rid themselves of bondspeople, casually orchestrated forced separations of slave families, skimmed on newcomers’ material conditions, and authorized (or inflicted) extreme physical abuse on new slaves. Slaveholders nobly claimed to outsiders that they encouraged and protected slave families but dangled forced separation in front of their slaves as a threat and executed forced separations without qualms; they loudly advocated a humane treatment of slaves but brutally “broke” newcomers who were believed to have been “spoiled” by their former owners or who unknowingly breached new rules; they wrote contracts in which they demanded that their hired slaves be treated well but often ignored (or even ridiculed) hirelings who ran home complaining

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 107–15, 109–10 (first quote); Richard Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana’s Cane World, 1820–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 151–94; Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, Chapters 9–10; Hilliard, *Masters, Slaves, and Exchange*, 2–5; Walter Johnson, “A Nettlesome Classic Turns Twenty-Five: Re-Reading Eugene D. Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll*,” *Common Place* 1 (July 2001): <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/cp/vol-01/no-04/reviews/johnson.shtml> (second and third quotes).

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of abuse at the hands of their employers. As this book reveals, the contradictory spider web of justifications that slaveholders developed to perpetuate and sustain the forced removal of slave bodies in the antebellum period illuminates how difficult – indeed, impossible – it was for them to reconcile their claims to benevolence with the inconvenient reality of forced migration. The amount of force and violence necessary to successfully execute forced migration, moreover, suggests that slaveholders were aware that their attempts to impose hegemony over the people they bought, sold, willed, hired, and moved were unsuccessful. As Johnson has argued, all of the whips, chains, slave pens, threats, and lies “were made necessary by the fact that slaveholders knew that they weren’t exercising hegemony but fighting something that sometimes looked a lot more like a war.”<sup>14</sup>

Besides consulting secondary literature, the source material consulted for this study runs the full gamut of available primary evidence, with a particular emphasis on that left by slave migrants themselves. These include slave narratives, government interviews with former slaves, and antebellum interviews with slave refugees in the North and Canada. Moreover, primary source material left by nonslaves has also been consulted, such as slaveholders’ records and memoirs, travelers’ accounts of conversations with slaves, runaway slave advertisements, and government records of the slave population (including the marriage records of the Freedmen’s Bureau).

Because much of this qualitative investigation into the fears and feelings of slave migrants relies on nineteenth-century narratives and interviews of former slaves – sources that historians in the past have shied away from – some remarks regarding source analysis are in order. During the first half of the twentieth century, historians generally rejected slave testimony for two reasons: first, because of their conviction that victims of oppression are its least credible witnesses, and second, because the transcription and publication of antebellum narratives (which predated emancipation) occurred in the North or Great Britain and served the cause of abolitionism, supposedly rendering the accounts of slaves who had fled the South to be so biased as to be unworkable. This changed in the 1970s, when revisionist historians gained a renewed interest in slave testimonies as offering alternative perspectives to a field of study that had hitherto been approached in a top-down manner and dominated by the sources left by biased white southerners. Since then, most slavery scholars have tended to consult slave narratives sparingly, although some continue to dismiss their validity. Nineteenth-century slave narratives and interviews do indeed pose some important challenges – they represent only a minority of bondspeople, especially those who fled slavery, and many were indeed transcribed and published by northern whites who strongly disapproved of slavery. Yet

<sup>14</sup> Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 598; Johnson, “Nettlesome Classic,” (quote). For a recent discussion of the debates surrounding Genovese’s use of Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony and the nature of slave resistance, see Hilliard, *Masters, Slaves, and Exchange*, 3–5.

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to dismiss them as complete fabrications is misleading. Several scholars have mined a variety of records to authenticate many of the most famous narratives. John Blassingame also found that in general, the white editors of antebellum narratives were well-educated professionals with no formal connection to abolitionism and whose procedures were virtually identical to those now used in contemporary oral history projects, including final crosschecks and approval by the interviewee before publication. Furthermore, many narratives were published *after* emancipation and thus did not serve the antislavery movement at all. Narratives published before emancipation are often supported by other evidence, including records left by white southerners and travelers, as well as post-emancipation slave testimonies. I agree with Walter Johnson's opinion that "though they require careful reading, the nineteenth-century narratives remain our best source for the history of enslaved people in the slave trade."<sup>15</sup>

For this study, I have followed Johnson's three-tiered strategy for using slave narratives to uncover the fears and reactions of enslaved people confronted with forced migration. First, the antebellum narratives are used alongside other sources, such as travelers' accounts, planters' records, newspapers, and post-emancipation testimonies of former slaves. Tales of slave migrants mutilating themselves to prevent deportation, for example, are revealed not only in narratives but also in antebellum newspaper articles, travelers' accounts, and even court records. Second, the narratives have been analyzed for facts that fall outside of the abolitionist cause. Although abolitionists had every reason to condemn the forced separation of families as painful and traumatic for enslaved people, for example, their interests were less clearly served by stories of slaves successfully negotiating to retain family bonds intact, yet such accounts are recorded in the narratives and interviews. There is also no reason to assume that forced separations were *not* painful and traumatic. Third, the narratives have been analyzed for what Johnson calls "symbolic truths" that transcend factual details. The metaphors and dialogues that antebellum slaves used to dictate their experiences to interviewers are more important for the feelings they convey – fear, sadness, confusion – than for exact quotes or numbers. By reading the narratives according to Johnson's strategy, this study seeks to illuminate the prospect and reality of internal migration from the perspective of the enslaved.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 9–10, 10 (quote); John Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History* 41 (Nov. 1975):473–492. The interviews of former slaves conducted by the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) in the 1930s pose far greater challenges to the historian than the nineteenth-century testimonies. The former slaves were elderly at the time of their FWP interviews and had moreover only experienced slavery as children. I have therefore limited my use of these interviews in general; the FWP interviews that are cited in this book only deal with elements of the slave migrant's experience that are overwhelmingly supported by other evidence.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 9–11. David Thomas Bailey found that antebellum slave narratives, which served the antislavery movement, match post-emancipation narratives published in the



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This book is divided into two parts. Part I, titled “Migration,” revolves around the central theme of forced removal. Chapter 1 examines the reasons for forced migration in its various forms in the antebellum South. It provides an overview of the economic factors that stimulated an intensification of slave labor mobility in the post-Revolutionary period and discusses the ways in which forced removal was formally and informally organized. Chapter 2 shifts the focus to the perspective of the enslaved, delving into the ways in which enslaved people anticipated and responded to the prospect of forced migration. It specifically underscores the importance of family and kinship ties in explaining slaves’ fears and reactions to the possibility of removal. Chapter 3 illuminates how slaves experienced removal itself, including how they experienced holding chambers and auction blocks, journeys to their destinations, and what their first impressions of their new homes were like.

Part II is titled “Assimilation” and pays particular attention to the ways in which slave migrants adapted to their new environments. Chapter 4 examines the ways in which various migrant groups learned and adjusted to new work patterns, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages to new work regimes in interstate, local, and urban settings. In Chapter 5, the experiences of slave migrants regarding new masters, overseers, and employers are analyzed. The final chapter delves into migrants’ social assimilation into new slave communities. It places particular emphasis on the development of migrants’ identities, the “dual orientation” that many continued to manifest even years after removal, their memories of place, and the institutions that aided them in their integration process. Most important, it discusses the divisions within slave communities and underscores the fluidity of slaves’ personal and group identities.

As a comparative study, this book largely (though not always) discusses interstate, local, and urban migrants in separate sections. Each chapter begins with an analysis of the migrant group that was subjected to the most extreme experiences vis-a-vis removal and assimilation: interstate migrants. Local and urban migrants are then discussed in relation to how their migration experiences compared with those experienced by interstate migrants. The intention is not to place undue weight on one migrant group over another; structuring the analysis in this way rather facilitates a comparative perspective. Interstate migrants did not necessarily always experience the most change of all antebellum migrants, but their experiences were often the most extreme, traumatic, and stressful. Only by comparing other migrants’ experiences with the worst-case

late nineteenth century, when there was no antislavery agenda to pursue. These postbellum narratives have also been consulted for this study. See David Thomas Bailey, “A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimony on Slavery,” *Journal of Southern History* 46 (Aug. 1980): 381–404, especially 402. Blassingame agreed. See Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves,” 478–79.



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scenario can students and scholars of slavery begin to appreciate the variations in the experiences of slave migrants. Although this study cannot provide a definitive analysis of slave migration in the antebellum South, its intention is to stimulate more comparative studies of domestic slave migration in the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Peter J. Parish, *Slavery: History and Historians* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 97.