

# THE PRICE OF COTTON: THE DEMOGRAPHY OF INEQUALITY IN MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY MISSISSIPPI\*

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The slave was, by the very nature of slavery, engaged in  
continual warfare.

Charles S. Sydnor<sup>1</sup>

Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with  
some dead Negro's grief.

Toni Morrison<sup>2</sup>

One of the most important long-term aspects of the American Revolution was that it helped bring the rightfulness of slavery into question.<sup>3</sup> By the Revolution's end, white Americans felt qualms - or more than qualms - about the institution, black Americans were forcing open a window to their own freedom from it, and the Northern states and territories had become a zone where to be black was no longer presumptively to be a slave. The knowledge that this had happened once meant it could happen again, as African Americans both North and South knew well.

But the same Revolution also expanded slavery's realm. White nineteenth-century Americans liked to flatter themselves that the territorial growth of their Republic was creating an "empire of freedom," unique in the history of the world's large political structures. At best, they were only half-right. Until the Civil War the Republic was also an empire of slavery.

African-Americans knew that, too, of course, which is why a man like Frederick Douglass scorned as well as honored the rituals and sacred truths of American patriotism. The intention here is to explore what slavery's geographical expansion

\*Editor's note: The text which appears here is a revised version of the paper delivered in Milan and was presented at the Conference "Equality in Early America" (Huntington Library, Jan.17-18, 1997). The text is accompanied by a "visual [presentation] of the evidence on which [its] argument... rests", composed of many dozens of graphs derived from data contained in the 1850 and 1860 censuses. The nature and dimensions of this *Quaderno* oblige us to omit this material; we feel, however, that the argument is of itself convincing. Those who wish to consult the graphic appendices should contact Edward Countryman directly, or await Huntington publication.

1. Charles S. Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, D. Appleton-Century Company, New York, 1933, p. 72.

2. Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Signet Books, New York, 1991, [orig. pub. 1987], p. 72.

3. See: Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1983; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1975; David Brion Davis, *Revolutions: Reflections on American Equality and Foreign Liberations*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1990; Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991; Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Black Urban Experience in Philadelphia, 1720-1820*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988; Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution*, Madison House, Madison, Wisconsin, 1990; and Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770-1810*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1991.

after the Revolution meant for the people who endured it. The exploration will not be of the slaves' actual historical memory. Instead it will ask about the context of experience within which they either tried to remember or preferred to forget.

We know astonishingly little about what actually happened as nineteenth-century slave society burst Westward. That post-revolutionary Virginians, Carolinians, and Georgians of both races did go West is obvious. That Simon Legree, Harriet Beecher Stowe's fictional emblem for the worst kind of mastery, was a frontier farmer (and a Northern-born migrant) is a commonplace. But the social history of slavery in the expanding cotton kingdom possesses little of the intellectual and conceptual sophistication that we now have about tobacco-growing slavery in the Chesapeake, rice-growing slavery in the Carolina lowlands, and sugar-growing slavery in the West Indies. Before asking what actually happened on the cotton frontier we need to look at some of the questions that people have been asking about American slavery in other locales and times.<sup>4</sup>

The biggest gains have come from taking locale and time themselves seriously as historical categories. For far too long students of slave society tended to look at the whole system as part of an a-temporal "Old South." That old south's trappings may have changed, but its essence did not. But the assumption that slave society simply persisted and spread without seriously altering itself is no longer tenable. Plantation slavery was not part of an "olden times" in which "lustly manhood withered with age and found place under new slabs in the family burying-grounds" as "generations went and generations came".<sup>5</sup> Like free society in the North or the centuries-long "middle ground" between Indians and Europeans, it was a historical arena.<sup>6</sup> Within that arena people made both their world and themselves into what each previously had not been. We can only learn what they did and how they did it if we look precisely at different people in their own times and places, each with its own possibilities and constraints. But getting beyond generalizations also carries implications for understanding very large problems.

4. On tobacco slavery see particularly Allan Kukikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake Colonies, 1680-1850*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1986. See also Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1973; T.H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of the Revolution*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985; and Darrett B. Rutman and Anita H. Rutman, *A Place in Time: Middlesex County, Virginia, 1650-1750*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1984, 2 vols. On rice slavery see: Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1991 [orig. pub. 1981]; Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina From 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1975 [orig. pub. 1974]; and Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1985. All of these studies benefit from a close attention to time, culture, and space and most of them gain from the sophisticated use of demographic techniques. They should be contrasted with Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1989, and John Hebron Moore, *The Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom in the Old South West: Mississippi, 1770-1860*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1988. Both of these volumes are very informative, but in conceptual and methodological terms neither represents any significant advance beyond Sydnor's *Slavery in Mississippi*, published almost six decades ago.

5. Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, Little, Brown, Boston, 1930, p. 366.

6. See Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1991, and Edward Countryman, "Indians, the Colonial Order, and the Social Significance of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser, LIII (1996), 341-362.

Consider the significance of substituting AfricanAmerican for Black as the preferred descriptive term. The phrase itself is historical and contextual. It invites us to ponder how Africans who came unwillingly to America begat a people for whom the United States is home, a people whose history is necessarily American. The phrase is comparative as well. What makes these specific people of the African diaspora different from Africans themselves, from the other black people whom slavery and colonization scattered, or from the non-black people with whom these share their country? Seen in this way the phrase becomes central to the most enduring problem on the American historical and cultural agenda: what it is that makes the multi-racial, multi-cultural United States itself. None of this happened to African-Americans all at once or all in one place, any more than it did for any other people.

One of the most striking large contrasts in the comparative history of Western hemisphere slavery turns on broad demography. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries West Indies slavery literally devoured its victims and it required a large continuing slave trade to keep the system going. The reasons included a disease environment that may have been tropical but that was not African, the fierce exploitation that went with growing sugar, and continuing sexual imbalance as the slave trade imported far more men than women. But "slave populations located in temperate climates, such as those of the United States and the British Bahamas, managed to achieve high rates of natural increase." So much was that the case, assert two well-known scholars, that "after 1840 natural increase among U.S. blacks was somewhat greater than among the whites." Though the mainland British colonies/United States received only about six percent of the whole transatlantic slave trade, by 1825 North America contained roughly thirty-six percent of the hemisphere's people of African descent.<sup>7</sup> The logical implications seem clear: slavery in the United States was "easier" than elsewhere. In strictly demographic terms we might even call it benign.

In broad terms, perhaps. But quantitative patterns do not necessarily justify qualitative generalizations. We can readily admit the difference in climate and epidemiology between Jamaica or Trinidad and almost anywhere in the mainland South. We can admit as well that the growing and processing of sugar imposed physical demands far beyond what rice, tobacco, or cotton ever required. We can even concede that West Indies, Spanish, and Brazilian slavery remained dependent on the African trade long after North American slave society became able to reproduce itself.

But the real implication of the hemispheric contrast is that we need to know the specific conditions slaves had to endure, wherever and whenever the system existed. Broad regional differences counted. But so did local situations. So did time, as a given slave society transformed itself from early crudity to intense productivity and then, perhaps, to decadence. Both early Virginia and early South Carolina provide powerful evidence that North American plantation agriculture had the potential to be as demanding on its laborers as anything elsewhere.

7. Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1989, pp. 124-126; Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, Little, Brown, Boston, 1974, Figure 1, p. 14, Figures 8 and 9, p. 28.

The first unfree laborers in Virginia's tobacco fields were not slaves, but rather English servants. Their skins were white, their native language was English, and their condition of bondage was temporary. Nonetheless, their experience was catastrophic. The land on which they worked was cheap. So was the labor they themselves provided. But during the first decade and a half of tobacco production, from 1616 to about 1630, returns on tobacco were very high. There was every reason for masters to work their servants without mercy: with a ready supply of young men for whom England itself had no place, a dead servant could always be replaced. In only three years during this initial tobacco boom some three thousand servants simply disappeared. Disease took some. Warfare with Native Americans took others. But overwork and ill-treatment - being treated "like a damned slave" - claimed the rest.<sup>8</sup>

When actual African slaves did begin coming to Virginia in large numbers during the early eighteenth century, their experience was hard. Perhaps one in four of the migrants was dead within a year of arrival. The immediate cause was usually respiratory disease, particularly as these natives of the tropics encountered their first North American winter. Nonetheless, by this time Virginia's worst was over. The price of tobacco had long since fallen. White Virginians were trying to create a stable society, in contrast to the seventeenth century's shambles. They were a long way from any sense that all men and women are created equal. But some of them were starting to deal with their slaves as fellow human beings.<sup>9</sup> Though a quarter of the Africans died during their first year, three quarters survived. Though, as usual in the African trade, men far outnumbered women, women did come and people did begin to form families. Once established, Virginia's particular form of slavery did not have to rely on the trade to sustain itself. It would not have been any comfort to Virginia's Africans had they known that demographically, at least, white servants had experienced the worst of the Old Dominion's ordeal. But in comparative and developmental terms this was the case.<sup>10</sup>

In South Carolina it was black people, not white ones, who suffered through the worst time, and far more of them suffered. In large diachronic terms the same pattern appears: when land and labor were cheap and returns were high the human cost was worst. During the province's first two decades of heavy rice production, from 1720 to 1740, South Carolina could not get enough slaves. Its absolute black population rose during those years, from just short of 12,000 people to just over 39,000. But unlike Virginia's rising slave population at the same time, this growth was due entirely to the trade. Black Carolinians themselves could not sustain their own numbers and "a population which had been increasing at a rate of 5.6 per cent per annum before 1720 appears to have been decreasing at a rate of 1.1 per cent per annum over the next twenty years." To achieve an actual increase of 27,327 people required the importation of 28,180. The conditions of Carolina slavery were more than cancelling whatever

8. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, pp. 101, 130.

9. See: Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1982, esp. pp. 328-346; Kenneth A. Lockridge, *The Diary, and Life, of William Byrd II of Virginia, 1674-1744*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1987; and Jack P. Greene, ed., *The Diary of Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1965, 2 vols.

10. Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, Part III, esp. pp. 326-327.

11. Wood, *Black Majority*, pp. 131-166. Quote at p. 154, n. 68. The evidence provided by Morgan on

natural increase slaves already there may have had, and then some.<sup>11</sup>

Like Virginia, South Carolina changed with the passage of time. The supply of swamp land to turn into rice fields ran out. The rate of exploitation slowed down too. The slaves themselves developed ways to control the pace of their work. By the eve of the Civil War, they had generated stable, self-perpetuating African-American communities, particularly in the low-land rice country, though the most recent research suggests that rice-swamp slavery remained a demographic nightmare until the very end.<sup>12</sup> The contrast between early and late slavery in South Carolina does not reflect upon the masters. Instead it "casts fresh light on slave, not owner, belief and behavior" as "the slaves themselves . . . sustained lasting marriages and the slave social beliefs and practices associated with them."<sup>13</sup> It also demonstrates the importance of recognizing that slavery and the people who had to live within it could change.

## II

Did slave migrants to Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Northern Louisiana, and East Texas endure similar demographic agonies? The presumptive answer would seem to be no, for very good reasons. These people were already African-Americans. In medical terms that fact meant that they grew up with as much protection against the American disease environment as inherited antibodies and childhood experience of disease could provide. In cultural terms it meant that their parents had prepared them for the inevitable shock of forced separation. They had learned their people's wisdom about how to survive. Being African-American also meant that unlike Africans who often could not even speak the same language, these forced migrants were members of a single people. By the nineteenth century they shared patterns of speech, dance, music, and religion, whatever any given slave's immediate origins. Moreover, again unlike the Africans, the balance among them of men and women was roughly even. They could form families quickly in the new environment and they ran far less risk of living their whole lives without a close personal tie.

Their material conditions were different too. Though cotton fields were grim places, they were not the mosquito-ridden swamps that rice-growing required. Laboring in them was of a different order from the demands of sugar production. And whatever other factors operated, nineteenth-century slaves did not come cheap. When the Atlantic trade was open, working bound laborers to death may have made economic sense. Like those early Virginia servants, they could always be replaced. But by the nineteenth century that could not have been the case, even for the most callous of planters. Whatever other factors were involved, dollars and cents calculations ought to have convinced masters that feeding, housing, and clothing their slaves and giving them medical care made sense.

Virginia and by Wood on South Carolina demonstrates the appearance in North America of a pattern that held for much longer in the West Indies. See Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1972.

12. See William Dusing, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the Rice Swamps*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1996.

13. Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1976, 45-100, quote at p. 52; Joyner, *Down by The Riverside*; see also Joyce E. Chaplin, "Tidal Rice Cultivation and the Problem of Slavery in South Carolina and Georgia, 1760-1815", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., XLIX (1992), 29-61.

But in important respects the nineteenth-century cotton frontier and the early stages of tobacco, rice, and sugar slavery were analogous. None of these situations appeared in a stable society. A slave may have been far more expensive in Alabama or Mississippi than that slave's first American ancestor had been in Virginia or South Carolina. But the land on which the slave worked was not. Whether in the Chesapeake Tidewater or the Mississippi/Yazoo Delta, the land was more or less there for the taking by individuals once white America succeeded in taking it all from Indians, particularly if the taker was aggressive and enjoyed good political connections.

Once acquired, the land would be opened fast. North or South, a mixed-crop free farmer might have cleared new land at whatever pace personal strength and that of family members allowed. The immediate goal might well not have been profit at all, but rather family security and the building of an estate to pass on to heirs. But cotton slavery expanded because England and the industrial North wanted all the cotton the slaves could grow, as fast as they could grow it. If the price of cotton was rising, there was no time to allow for the different strengths of individuals or for a family's other needs. To its new owners, the land had to be cleared and put into cultivation, at the quickest possible pace.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, unlike any whites who went west - whether Northern pioneers, Southern planters, or the Old South's "plain folk" - these peoples' migration was just as forced as their African ancestors' journey across the sea had been. Even a migration freely undertaken involves stress and disruption: upon communities, upon families, and upon the human body. Comparative studies suggest that this can exact a high price in morbidity and mortality. Stress-induced diabetes and hypertension are well-recognized as special medical problems that affect migrants to modern industrial societies in disproportionate numbers. Systemic lupus, which was not known clinically in the nineteenth century but which certainly existed, affects women more than men and black women far more than whites; it is likewise stress-related.<sup>15</sup>

If the stress of a free migration can be severe enough to induce serious health problems, that of a forced journey is far worse. There was more to the one-in-four first-year death rate of the earliest black Virginians than just exposure to the rigors of the American winter. For them, as for their white-servant Virginia predecessors, or their black fellows in South Carolina or Jamaica, actual exploitation and disease worked together with the social effects of their forced journeys and with the absence of protective institutions around them to render their lives short as well as nasty and brutal. It seems a fair supposition that migrants to the cotton frontier experienced

14. See Douglass C. North, *Growth and Welfare in the American Past: A New Economic History*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966), pp. 78-80, 92-94.

15. I owe this point to on-going research on twentieth-century West Indian and Italian migrants to the English city of Coventry being carried out by my wife, Evonne von Heussen-Countryman. See also: A.M. Adelstein and M.G. Marmot, "The Health of Migrants in England and Wales: Causes of Death," J.K. Cruickshank and D.G. Beevers, eds., *Ethnic Factors in Health and Disease*, Wright-Butterworth, London, 1989, pp. 35-47; Maggie Pearson, "The Sociology of Race and Health," *Ibid.*, 71-83; A.W. Burke, "Psychiatric Practice and Ethnic Minorities," *Ibid.*, 178-189; A.W. Burke, "SocioCultural determinants of Attempted Suicide among West Indians in Birmingham: Ethnic Origin and Immigrant Status", *British Journal of Psychiatry*, CXXIX, 1976, pp. 216-266; G. GenCham, "Migration and Morbidity: Implications for Geographical Studies of Disease", *Social Science Medicine*, XXVI, 1988, pp. 49-54; J. Black, "The Difficulties of Living in Britain", *British Medical Journal*, CCXC, 1985, pp. 615-617. My thanks to Evonne for these references.

similar pressures. It also seems a fair guess that whatever strengths they gained from being African-American, as opposed to African, they may still have suffered in a similar way. Stress-related diseases like hypertension, diabetes, and lupus might not have been recognized by observers of migrant slaves. But that does not mean the syndromes were not appearing.<sup>16</sup> The issue of the special conditions of slave health ranges well beyond the incidence of Sickle-Cell Disease.

Those suppositions are borne out by reality. Frontier cotton planters were not trying to build a way of life; they were in the business of extracting profitable labor from unwilling people under conditions that only the most desperate free workers would have tolerated for more than the shortest time. Mississippi imported more than 217,000 slaves between 1830 and 1860, sometimes as members of whole plantations that were on the move but much more often in conditions of extreme disruption. Some of that disruption was at the hands of traders, some at the hands of very large-scale masters who were establishing far-flung operations.<sup>17</sup> In 1850 the absentee Benjamin Roach had four hundred eighty eight slaves on properties in Adams, Warren, Washington, and Yazoo counties. The Mississippi resident Stephen Duncan had six hundred sixty eight on five properties in Issaquena County and one in Adams. These figures are grossly atypical of planters as a whole, of course. But they suggest the direction and thrust of slave life in the places where cotton boomed. In 1850 the eight Mississippians whose slave forces were larger than three hundred held a total of 3,801 slaves. In 1860 there were nineteen such owners and their slaves totalled 8,756.

It seems a safe bet that those slaves, and slaves belonging to much smaller owners, were not living where they had been born. In principle it was the same situation as early Virginia tobacco or early South Carolina rice: "Slavery proved lucrative for many Mississippi planters because land was cheap and cotton yielded high returns."<sup>18</sup> And

16. The argument here and the evidence that follows are intended to challenge the assertion that "the differences between races living in the same regions are small in comparison to the differences between black and white groups combined living in different regions." For that assertion see David Eltis, "Free and Coerced Transatlantic Migrations: Some Comparisons", *American Historical Review*, LXXXVIII, 1983, pp. 251-280, quote at 268. I would not deny that anyone exposed to the disease environment of Jamaica had a harder time than anyone exposed to that of Massachusetts. But social conditions were intertwined with purely epidemiological ones. Colonial Massachusetts generated vital statistics that are truly astonishing, with life expectancies for its seventeenth-century men and women approaching those of modern advanced societies. Climate counted in the New Englanders' longevity, low infant and material mortality, and high childhood survival rate. But so did the intense concern of the Puritan migrants for creating strong social structures around their individual lives. Among many studies see especially Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1970, and Stephen J. Foster and Timothy H. Breen, "The Puritans' Greatest Achievement: A Study of Social Cohesion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts", *Journal of American History*, LX, 1973-1974, pp. 3-22. The Mississippi evidence suggests the same point. For a suggestive argument from another part of the world see Randall M. Packard, *White Plague, Black Labor: Tuberculosis and the Political Economy of Health and Disease in South Africa*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989. Packard demonstrates that South Africa's enormous tuberculosis problem is almost entirely confined to its African, colored, and Asian peoples, despite the fact that these people share their country's environment with its highly privileged whites.

17. By far the best study of the internal slave trade is Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1989.

18. William K. Scarborough, "Heartland of the Cotton Kingdom", in Richard Aubrey McLemore, ed., *A History of Mississippi*, University and College Press of Mississippi, Hattiesburg, 1973, pp. 310-351, figures drawn from table 6, pp. 344-345, and table 7, pp. 346-347. Quote at p. 329.

like the earlier crops, the conditions of life and work on the cotton frontier exacted a high human price.

### III

The evidence lies in numbers. Unlike figures for the other situations, which historians have managed to recover only with imagination and great difficulty, demographic data on mid-century cotton slavery is easy to find. One need only open the appropriate volume of the United States census. But like the scrappy figures for the early situations, a careful reading of the endless rows and columns in the census reveals enormous human pain. The mass of numbers only seems tedious. It offers extremely rich evidence about the experience of being a slave on the cotton frontier.

Not all the data is useful. Before 1850 census-takers provided fundamentally different kinds of information about free people, whatever their race, and enslaved ones. For free Americans the census gave detailed breakdowns by age, sex, and locality, using five year intervals for persons under twenty and ten year intervals for adults. But for slaves the breakdown was much more crude. Only two categories were employed for the young: less than ten years of age, and between ten and twenty-four. The effect was to make age-specific comparison between the free and the unfree virtually impossible.

But in 1850 the Census Bureau changed its rules. Now recording officers began supplying the same detailed breakdowns for white people, for free black people, and for slaves. They also began reporting children less than one year old as a separate category. It may well be that a white census-taker was more likely to pay attention to white subjects than to black ones, especially in a county like Issaquena in the Yazoo Delta, where slaves outnumbered whites by more than ten to one in 1850. Nonetheless, the census data is remarkably complete. It makes it possible to make very precise statements demographically as cotton boomed.

The 1850 census-takers were also required to provide evidence about every single person who had died in their districts during the preceding twelve months. Not all of these manuscript "mortality schedules" were well made-out, and it seems probable that census-takers regarded the dying of black people as less important than that of whites. Some of the schedules do show the names of particular slaves who died; others dismiss them as simply slaves, nameless even in the only historical trace their passing generated. But the 1850 mortality schedules do allow an investigation of places where the main census suggests that something abnormal was going on. At least they distinguish black people from white ones, unlike the mortality figures recorded in the next census, ten years later.<sup>19</sup>

The most common historical use of census data is to seek large structure and patterns in order to demonstrate what was "typical" of a given group or time. But if the frame of reference is large enough, another approach becomes possible: showing the relationship of large, self-repeating patterns to different atypical instances. If one

19. For the problems of using the mortality schedules see Todd L. Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1978, pp. 135-146.

seeks only typicality, the individual a typical case can be discarded: it simply does not fit. But once established, the patterns that represent typicality provide a background for asking serious questions about why an instance that does not fit is in fact "different".<sup>20</sup>

To establish these patterns, both the ones that reveal typicality and the ones that do not fit, I have used two different methods. First, I constructed a series of database tables from the gross census material. Data from the census of 1850 was entered in its entirety for all whites by state, for all free African-Americans by state, for all slaves by state, and for all Mississippi whites and slaves by county. All groups were entered by sex and by age, using the age-intervals of the census itself: under 1, 1-4, 5-9, 10-14, 15-19, 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70-79, 80-89, 90-99, more than 100, and unknown. It seems important, of course, to reach beyond data for that one single year. Since the criteria for recording data for free people and for slaves differed for the 1840 census, no data was taken from it. But full tables were created for the separate white and black Mississippi populations in 1860, using the same categories of age, county, and sex that were used for 1850. From these tables it was possible to generate very revealing graphs about particular situations.

The particular database program used has its limits, the most important being that it can display no more than six series elements on a given graph.<sup>21</sup> But it has the capacity to produce graphs in many formats. The three-dimensional bar graphs I here employed here provide sharp visual demonstrations of contrasts among series elements. This particular format is also useful because it allows comparison among instances that differ widely from one another in actual size. The elements in particular graphs always appear in relation only to one another, within a standard frame. If the concern is with pattern, as it is here, rather than with absolute numbers, pattern-differences become readily apparent from one graph to another, assuming that each graph is built up from units within a given order of magnitude and that the group it measures is large enough to expect statistical regularity to operate. The overall pattern for a unit as small as a county can readily be related to that of another county, or to a whole state, or a region, or the entire nation.

This method is somewhat unorthodox, and reporting it ultimately proved to be difficult. So after the original analysis, I turned to the demographers' standard measure

20. I draw this point about numerical patterns and variations from a long-standing amateur reading interest in the most "historical" of the physical sciences, deep-sky cosmology. Like historians, cosmologists deal with fragments of evidence generated by events that happened long ago, events that by their nature cannot be repeated. Again like historians, their investigatory task is not to demonstrate what can be replicated, but rather to make the strongest possible sense of data that is often extremely fragmentary. Any cursory reading of cosmological articles in a journal like *Scientific American* shows how cosmologists seek to understand the non-repeating event, such as Supernova 1987A, or the unique instance, such as the distorted galaxy M83, by placing it against the background of events and instances that do repeat themselves again and again. Such a procedure provides a means for establishing precisely what is different about the spectacular exception and to explain what accounts for it. In the context of the overall patterns of the 1850 American population the Mississippi slaves provide a series of such exceptions. But though this particular kind of evidence demonstrates that the work of the scientist and that of the historian can approach one another, it merely represents one example of the historian's larger interest in the telling anomaly rather than the recurrent pattern. See Bernard Bailyn, "History and the Creative Imagination," (public address, Washington University, 1985 and Yale University, 1989).

21. The software package used is Borland Paradox, version 3.5.

of fertility, the ratio of children of both sexes (census categories under 1, 1-4, 5-9 and 10-14) to women of childbearing age (15-19, 20-29, 30-39, 40-49). I did this analysis only for the places that I had singled out for discussion in the first round of study. The results completely confirm and in some ways amplify what the first analysis suggested.

The large groups in question are free whites, free African Americans, and slaves. Within each group separate tables and graphs were generated for men and for women and for children and for adults. The category "children" was defined in the bar-graphing stage as people in the age intervals under 1, 1-4, 5-9, 10-14, and 15-19. Because a slave in the late teens could well be carrying a full workload, the 15-19 interval was included in the "adult" category as well. The other intervals on the adult graphs were 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, and 50-59. No attempt was made to study people older than sixty.

If all the tables that were generated are taken together, the most striking point is indeed that they display great regularity. For men, for women, for white people, for free black people, for slaves in many situations, for northerners, and for southerners, the same patterns come back, again and again. For "children" the peaks come almost invariably in the interval 5-10. For "adults" they come just as invariably in the interval 20-30. Again almost invariably, the other intervals graphed display roughly the same proportions in relation to the peak interval.

The eight graphs in Appendix I demonstrate the point. They represent, respectively, the national total of white male children, the national total of white female children, slave male children in Kentucky, slave female children in Kentucky, white male Virginia children, white female South Carolina children, white male Mississippi children, and white female children in Carroll County, Mississippi, all for the year 1850. The one slave group represented is particularly significant. Kentucky was not a plantation state. It was not newly settled. It was not contributing heavily to the interstate slave trade. If it is appropriate to speak of the burdens of slavery resting lightly, that situation could be found among black Kentuckians. The actual numbers involved in these different groups varied enormously, from the millions at the level of the whole United States to the mere hundreds at the the level of the county. But the shapes of the graphs vary hardly at all. And that is the point.

A similar rough congruity appears within the figures for adults. Appendix II presents the "adult" graphs for the same categories: white male national total, white female national total, slave male Kentuckians, slave female Kentuckians, white male Virginians, white female South Carolinians, white male Mississippians, and white females in Carroll County. There are variations among the graphs. But whether the peak within each graph is represented by the nation's total of almost 1,900,000 white males aged twenty to thirty, or by Carroll County's six hundred and fifty white women in that age band, the overall pattern holds.

Perhaps the most striking evidence of regularity is provided by the case of free African-Americans. There were so few in Mississippi itself - 474 men and 456 women in the entire state in 1850 - that they have been left out of the analysis entirely. But the national total of 208,724 men and 225,771 women formed a very sizable group. So did the 26,002 free black males and the 28,331 free black females in Virginia. The four graphs in Appendix III show the age profiles for male free black children nationally,

for female free black children in Virginia, for male free black adults nationally and for female free black adults in Virginia. As much as any African-Americans could be in their time, these people were in a position to shape the patterns of their own lives. No individual, no couple, sets out to "produce" a demographic pattern. But both in the case of children and in that of adults, these people did create almost the same demographic curves among themselves as did whites virtually anywhere, or slaves in the small-farm, non-plantation state of Kentucky.

There is no attempt or intent (or ability) here to probe the statistical or demographic reasons why these same shapes appear again and again, in all these different contexts. But it does seem evident that these demographic profiles are what both white and black Americans "naturally" produced in the mid-nineteenth century, given the absence of external constraint. When a variation from these patterns appears for any but the smallest actual population, it seems bound to be significant. The actual scrap of evidence may only be the relative size of a bar or two on a standard-format graph. But if enough variations turn up often enough, they can offer a clear signpost toward seeing a fundamental difference in human experience.

Slavery was the ultimate external constraint. However hard slaves struggled to build personal ties and to control their personal lives, however much they created their own institutions to cope with the disaster of forced separation, disaster was always waiting for them. This was the core of the white abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe's indictment of the institution at the time when the subjects of this essay were alive. From a different perspective and in different language, it is the core of the African-American writer Toni Morrison's indictment now.

The powerful fictions of both Stowe and Morrison deal with slavery in the state of Kentucky. But there were far more slaves in Mississippi than in Kentucky in the mid-nineteenth century. Their condition was much closer to the image that the word slavery usually conveys. In the case of mid-century Mississippi, the indictment that Stowe and Morrison present is a true bill, not only morally but statistically and demographically. Slavery did drastically distort the patterns of the slaves' lives and of their communities.

For these Mississippi slaves there was no "typical" demographic pattern. This is so whether the frame of reference is provided by whites, either elsewhere or in Mississippi itself, or by free African-Americans, or by other slaves in places where the institution was settled and perhaps restrained by custom or law. It is even true if the frame of reference is other enslaved Mississippians: there is enormous variation from one county, or one region, or even one census, to another. But like the repeating pattern that other groups did produce, this is precisely the point. The booming, dynamic conditions of the cotton frontier did not exact the same price as those of early tobacco or rice or sugar. But they did exact a big price. And the worst of that price was paid in the lives of the young.

#### IV

Among adult Mississippians of either race there are few surprises. There were 156,287 white males but only 139,431 white females in 1850, and in not a single county did females form the white majority. But the 154,674 slave males and the 154,626

females were almost perfectly balanced statewide. Males formed the actual black majority in only twenty-seven of the state's sixty counties. The smallest gender plurality was the margin of three that separated 5,248 black men from 5,245 black women in Jefferson County.

In 1860 the large patterns were the same. The state had 183,777 white males and 165,526 white females. White males outnumbered white females everywhere in the fifty-seven counties that reported census figures.<sup>22</sup> The black male total was 209,377 and the black female total fell only sixty-four persons short of that figure, at 208,313. Now black males outnumbered females in only twenty-one counties. The two sexes were most narrowly separated in the counties of De Soto, where there were 6,996 African-American males men and 6,991 females, and Noxubee, where were twenty-two more males than females in a total slave population of 15,496.<sup>23</sup>

The difference between the imbalance of the sexes among the whites and the almost perfect balance among slaves gives pause for thought. One of the clearest signs of the demands that early tobacco, rice, and sugar servitude had imposed upon the people who did the work of producing them was a lopsided ratio of men to women. The planters did not care about their work force reproducing itself, let alone about their laborers' personal, sexual, and social needs. They wanted strong, young, mostly male bodies to work in their fields immediately, and that is what they bought. Did that happen in Mississippi?

Some correlations do appear among a county's productivity, its sex ratio, its total black population, and its overall percentage of African-Americans. Of the twelve counties that had more than ten thousand slaves in 1850, eight had male majorities.<sup>24</sup> For 1860 the equivalent figure was eight counties out of fifteen.<sup>25</sup> Of the fifteen counties where African-Americans comprised more than sixty-five per cent of the people in 1850, eleven had male majorities.<sup>26</sup> Of the five highest cotton-producing counties in

22. The counties that did not report were Hancock, Sunflower, and Washington. I am using the words "males" and "females" to avoid the problem at this point of distinguishing adults from children.

23. Hancock faces the Gulf of Mexico and was not important for either cotton production or the size of its black population. It contained only 1,216 African-Americans in 1850, to 2,444 whites. The loss of the figures for Washington and Sunflower is more serious. The former was a major producer in 1850 and had a black population of 7,836, to only 546 whites. In 1857 the total valuation of its land was the highest of any county in the state. In 1850 Sunflower had only 754 slaves and 348 whites. But it fronts on the Yazoo river, in the rich Delta land that was being opened to cotton production during the decade that followed. Evidence from its neighbors Bolivar and Coahoma suggests, however, what Sunflower's pattern would have been.

24. The counties with male majorities in a black population greater than 10,000 were Adams (6,970M/6,889F), Claiborne (5,781M/5,627F), Hinds (8,534M/8,091F), Jefferson (5,248M/5,245F), Lowndes (6,531M/6,423F), Marshall (7,754M/7,763F), Monroe (5,887M/5,830F), and Noxubee (5,846M/5,477F). The counties with female majorities were Madison (6,869M/6,974F), Warren (5,959M/6,177F), Wilkinson (6,500M/6,760F) and Yazoo (5,161M/5,188f).

25. The counties with male majorities in a total black population of more than 10,000 in 1860 were: DeSoto (6,996M/6,991F), Hinds (11,254M/11,109F), Lowndes (8,404M/8,326F), Marshall (8,785M/8,654F), Monroe (6,414M/6,314F), Noxubee (7,759M/7,737F), Warren (7,791M/5,972F), and Yazoo (8,416M/8,300F). The counties with female majorities were Adams (7,023M/7,269F), Carroll (6,852M/6,956F), Claiborne (6,111M/6,185F), Holmes (5,902M/6,073F), Jefferson (6,187M/6,209F), Madison (9,018M/9,100F), and Wilkinson (6,541M/6,591F).

26. The male-majority counties in this category were Adams, Bolivar, Claiborne, Hinds, Issaquena, Jefferson, Lowndes, Noxubee, Sunflower, Tunica, and Washington. The female-majority counties were Madison, Warren, Wilkinson, and Yazoo. Population ratios drawn from Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi*, frontispiece map.

1849, three had male majorities when the census was taken the following year.<sup>27</sup> Of the five highest producers in 1859 four had male majorities in 1860.<sup>28</sup> Ten Mississippi counties had rates of production higher than 4.0 bales of cotton per slave in 1860. In seven of these, male slaves outnumbered females.<sup>29</sup>

But none of these correlations seems particularly strong. In the whole group of counties that were highest either in actual cotton production or in productivity per slave in 1850 and in 1860 the largest gender plurality was only two hundred eighty four. This was the figure by which men outnumbered women in Washington County in 1850, out of a total black population of 7,836 people. The lowest plurality in those counties was a mere twenty seven, separating Yazoo County's 5,188 women from its 5,161 men the same year. In the whole set of data that the 1850 and 1860 censuses provide for the counties of high productivity, only one instance approaches the degree of male overbalance that was normal in the eighteenth-century coastal and Caribbean provinces while the slave trade was fueling their growth. This was the Mississippi River county of Warren, and then only for the year 1860, when its African-American men were in a majority of 7,791 to 5,972. But these still represented no more than fifty-six percent of the county's African-American population. Warren contained the major town of Vicksburg, and it seems at least possible that the county's male overbalance represents slaves whom the census-takers counted while they were in the hands of traders. In the same year Adams county had a female majority, with 7,269 to its 7,023 men. It contained the trading town of Natchez. In gender terms, cotton was an equal-exploitation crop.

But though the two sexes were more evenly balanced among black Mississippians than among white ones, the actual patterns that the two races created differed sharply. Mississippi was not easy for anyone, and its young whites differed from national norms themselves, as the "white" graphs in appendices IV and V show. But the state's young black people differed more.

Let us look at some hard data. The evidence is drawn from the counties that displayed one sign or another of being part of the mid-century cotton boom. One of these signs was a large actual black population, defined as more than ten thousand people. Mississippi slavery was not old enough for so large a group to be the result of natural increase. A second sign was large actual cotton production, indicated by a ranking in the top five producers. A third was a high rate of productivity, defined as more than four bales of cotton per slave. Where one or more of these signs appears, graphs have been generated that show the demographic patterns of both young whites

27. The five were Marshall (32,775 bales), Wilkinson (26,381 bales), Washington (26,178 bales), Yazoo (22,052 bales), and Claiborne (20,795 bales). The three were Marshall, Washington, and Claiborne. Source for production figures: Scarborough, "Heartland of the Cotton Kingdom," Table 2, p. 322.

28. The five were Yazoo (64,075 bales), Hinds (54,685 bales), Madison (51,327 bales), Lowndes (51,234 bales), and Noxubee (50,096 bales). All but Madison had a male majority. Source for production figures: Scarborough, "Heartland of the Cotton Kingdom," Table 2, p. 322.

29. Taken by region the ten consisted of four counties in the Yazoo/Mississippi Delta (Bolivar/5.23 bales, Issaquena/8.93 bales, Tunica/5.12 bales, and Yazoo 4.88 bales), two in the Old Natchez District (Claiborne/4.22 bales and Wilkinson/4.46 bales), two from the Brown Loam and Loess Hills (Holmes/4.56 bales and Madison/4.01 bales) and three from the Tombigbee Basin (Lowndes/4.67 bales, Monroe/4.09 bales, and Noxubee/4.60 bales). Of these Claiborne, Wilkinson, Holmes, and Madison had black female majorities. Source: Moore, *Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom*, Table 5, pp. 124-126.

and young slaves, by sex. A total of sixty separate graphs were created for the 1850 counties and a total of sixty-four for those a decade later. Each of these graphs displays the profile of one age, race, and county-specific group.

The data is difficult to use. For three of the counties selected the number of resident whites was very small, rendering any patterns statistically suspect.<sup>30</sup> There are sixteen instances when the white data is large enough to be reliable and when the white pattern replicates the national norm.<sup>31</sup> There were only ten when the slaves replicated it.<sup>32</sup> In nineteen instances the black pattern differed markedly from the norm.<sup>33</sup> But there were only eight instances in the 1850 booming-counties in which a sizable group of whites did so.<sup>34</sup> In fully twenty one 1850 instances the age profile of the young black group was visibly different from that of same-sex young whites.<sup>35</sup> In two instances there was a pronounced spike among young blacks for the fifteen-to-twenty age group.<sup>36</sup>

The 1860 data shows even greater disparity between the two races. The white populations of two counties were too small to be counted as significant.<sup>37</sup> In fully twenty three white instances something akin to the normal age pattern appeared.<sup>38</sup> There were only six instances among the slaves.<sup>39</sup> In twenty-six instances the black pattern differed from the national norm.<sup>40</sup> There were five such instances among the whites.<sup>41</sup> In twenty two instances the black pattern differed markedly from the white

30. These were Bolivar, Issaquena, and Washington.

31. These were: Adams male, Hinds male, Hinds female, Lowndes male, Madison male, Madison female, Monroe male, Monroe female, Marshall male, Marshall female, Noxubee male, Noxubee female, Warren female, Wilkinson male, Yazoo male, and Yazoo female.

32. These were: Bolivar male, Bolivar female, Claiborne male, Hinds male, Jefferson male, Jefferson female, Lowndes female, Madison male, Warren male, and Wilkinson male.

33. These were: Adams male, Adams female, Hinds female, Issaquena male, Issaquena female, Lowndes male, Madison female, Monroe male, Monroe female, Marshall male, Marshall female, Noxubee male, Noxubee female, Warren female, Washington male, Washington female, Wilkinson female, Yazoo male, and Yazoo female.

34. These were: Adams female, Claiborne male, Claiborne female, Jefferson male, Jefferson female, Lowndes female, Warren male, and Wilkinson female.

35. These were: Adams male, Adams female, Claiborne male, Claiborne female, Hinds female, Jefferson male, Jefferson female, Lowndes male, Lowndes female, Madison female, Monroe male, Monroe female, Marshall male, Marshall female, Noxubee male, Noxubee female, Warren male, Warren female, Wilkinson male, Yazoo male, and Yazoo female.

36. These were Adams male and Adams female.

37. These were Bolivar and Tunica.

38. These were: Adams male, Adams female, Carroll male, Carroll female, De Soto male, De Soto female, Hinds male, Hinds female, Holmes male, Jefferson male, Lowndes male, Madison male, Madison female, Monroe male, Monroe female, Marshall male, Marshall female, Noxubee male, Noxubee female, Warren female, Wilkinson female, Yazoo male, and Yazoo female.

39. These were: Hinds male, Madison male, Madison female, Marshall male, Marshall female, and Wilkinson male.

40. These were: Adams male, Adams female, Bolivar male, Bolivar female, Carroll male, Carroll female, De Soto male, De Soto female, Hinds female, Holmes male, Holmes female, Jefferson male, Jefferson female, Lowndes male, Lowndes female, Monroe male, Monroe female, Noxubee male, Noxubee female, Tunica male, Tunica female, Warren male, Warren female, Wilkinson female, Yazoo male, and Yazoo female.

41. These were: Holmes female, Jefferson female, Lowndes female, Warren male, and Wilkinson female. In all of these cases the differences appear marginal rather than large.

pattern for the same county and the same sex.<sup>42</sup> In fourteen separate instances there was a spike in the proportion of black people in the fifteen-to-twenty age group.<sup>43</sup>

Instances, repeating patterns, norms, graphs, congruent shapes, spikes in the curve: this seems like the language of a laboratory report, or at best of a social scientist for whom the scientific method has obliterated the social subject. But only by confronting this kind of evidence can we begin to explore the specific problem of what slavery meant to Mississippi's African-Americans as it carried them westwards from the Chesapeake, or the Carolinas, or Georgia, or Tennessee, or even Alabama. Cotton may not have been a killer in the manner of its predecessor crops in the history of forced American agricultural labor. But there are too many cases in these two censuses when the basic life experiences of young slaves were different: from those of the young whites near them, from what their experience would have been had they been free, or even from what it would have been they been enslaved somewhere else in the United States in their own time. These instances cannot be dismissed. They offer evidence of the profound distortions that slavery imposed, not in a timeless sense but rather in the booming, expanding, dynamic conditions of Mississippi's most prosperous mid-century cotton counties. We cannot explore all the reasons for all of these distortions. Nor can we explore any reason to its full extent. But let us probe at least briefly into what seems to be the fundamental problem, the issue of forced labor in a highly exploitative situation.

## V

There has been no attempt here to argue that the issue is just slavery. These figures reflect the life chances of white people who were living on the Mississippi frontier as well as those of black ones. There are ample instances in the graphs in Appendix IV and Appendix V of patterns among young whites that do not fit the national norm, evidence that they too were creating demographic patterns which we can properly call "distorted". It does not detract from the enormity of what was going on among the blacks to note the case of the free young women of Adams County in 1850, or those of both young white women and young white men in Claiborne County the same year, particularly since Claiborne's young black men did generate a pattern that year close to the norm. Again, the cotton frontier could be tough for everyone.

But it was tougher for slaves. The counties that have been closely studied so far are precisely the ones where high actual numbers of slaves, high absolute productivity, and high rates of productivity present a *prima facie* case for suspecting that actual suffering may have been intense before even looking at demography. No slaves were where they were or in the condition they occupied out of choice. These people were concentrated in the Delta, the old Natchez counties, and the Tombigbee Basin because

42. These were: Adams male, Adams female, Carroll male, Carroll female, De Soto male, De Soto female, Hinds female, Holmes male, Jefferson male, Jefferson female, Lowndes male, Lowndes female, Monroe male, Monroe female, Noxubee male, Noxubee female, Warren male, Warren female, Wilkinson male, Wilkinson female, Yazoo male, and Yazoo female.

43. These were: Adams male, Adams female, Bolivar male, Bolivar female, Carroll female, Hinds female, Holmes female, Tunica male, Tunica female, Warren male, Warren female, Wilkinson female, Yazoo male, and Yazoo female.

someone else wanted them to be there. Some of these were places where whites did not want to be themselves, if they could help it; time after time in these counties the black population simply dwarfed that of whites.

These particular places had no monopoly on demographic distortion and on the human suffering that it seems to have signified. There were other Mississippi counties where a graph of the young slaves' age distribution reveals a pattern that was not "normal." There were also counties where the black population, rather than the white, was too small for a breakdown to have any statistical significance. These latter included virtually every county in the the Gulf Coast Meadows region and in the Pine Hills, just to the coastal region's north. In these places cotton production ranged from insignificant to nil.

But there were also places that did produce cotton and where, demographically at least, free and slave seemed to fare alike. Among the counties already discussed two did have black populations that displayed "normal" patterns in the 1860 census. These were Madison and Marshall, each of which had a sizable white population as well. They were not contiguous. Though they share the fertile soil type called brown loam and loess, Marshall lies in Mississippi's far north, abutting Tennessee. Madison is in the state's heart.

The demographic patterns that the black people of these counties produced do not imply that their whites were kinder or gentler. They simply suggest that in 1860 conditions in them were less demanding on everyone, and that whites, who had the choice, found that these were places where they were willing to live. There were other Mississippi counties where the two races were numerous enough to be compared to each other and where the "normal" pattern also appeared for both sexes and both races. Four of these counties, Attala, Choctaw, Yalobusha, and Lafayette, defined a jagged north-south line that stretched from the center of the state to just below the Tennessee line. Both their black people and white people numbered in the thousands. Appendix VI shows the population graphs for the white and black "child" groups in each of these counties for 1860. The overall shapes are virtually identical to one another. They are also virtually identical to the larger patterns seen outside Mississippi, whether for white people, for free black people, or even for Kentucky slaves.

In 1860 these four counties were all producing cotton. But they were growing it at roughly the rate of only two bales per slave. This was half the rate in most of the counties of the Yazoo/Mississippi Delta, or in the old Natchez region, or in the Tombigbee Basin. It was only a quarter the rate of the state's most intense producer, the Delta county of Issaquena. Meanwhile Choctaw was growing almost ten times as many bushels of sweet potatoes per slave as Issaquena and Attala was producing twice as many bushels of corn per slave as cotton-growing Adams.<sup>44</sup> These are not the only signs of difference.

By 1860 the total land valuation in a major cotton-producing county might be approaching \$5,000,000. In Bolivar and Hinds it was well over \$6, 000, 000 and in Washington it stood at \$7,416,162. These high valuations were not absolute measures of primeval worth; they reflected what masters in these counties were forcing slaves to do. But in Attala, Choctaw, Lafayette, and Yalobusba, only Lafayette had a total land valuation of more than \$2,000,000. There, too, masters were forcing slaves to

44. Source: Moore, *Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom*, Table 5, pp. 124-226 and *Appendix A*, pp. 294-296.

work, but not to the same effect. The evidence seems conclusive. Cotton itself may not have been a killer crop. But the intensity with which it was being produced along the Mississippi, the Yazoo, and the Tombigbee created a situation that placed immense stress upon the lives of the slaves who were actually growing it. The price of Mississippi cotton was high indeed.

## VI

Lastly, let us turn to the standard measure of fertility that demographers employ. Using the 1850 census, I made hand calculations of the fertility ratios for whites, free black people, and enslaved black people in the United States as a whole, and the states of Virginia, South Carolina, and Kentucky. I also calculated the ratios for white people and slaves in the state of Mississippi and in twenty-three Mississippi counties, chosen not at random but rather because bar graphs had already been generated for them. As noted above, these confirm what my own more idiosyncratic method has suggested: that there were very significant differentials between white and black demographic experience on the cotton frontier. Indeed, they suggest major differentials between black demography and white demography as a whole in the nineteenth century, even though the African-American population was increasing naturally. Finally, they indicate that the places where cotton was booming were demographically disastrous for the people who were growing it in ways that go beyond what the bar-graphs show.

In overall terms, the difference between the white and black fertility ratios is striking. Among all the instances that I calculated, only the state of Kentucky and the Mississippi county of Issaquena showed higher fertility among black people than among white ones, and Issaquena's actual white population (seventy-eight women and one hundred twenty children) is too small to be significant. Within the black community, the difference between the fertility of free black women and enslaved ones is striking too, and in a way that surprises. In every instance, it was the slaves who were more fertile. The overall white/black differential testifies to the far greater difficulty of black life, whether enslaved or free. But the greater fertility among slaves than among free black people, south and north alike, testifies to the difficulties those people faced as they forged their own freedom.

The real concern, however, is Mississippi. In the Delta counties of Bolivar, Tunica, and Washington the white population was so small that the fertility ratios cannot be trusted. Tunica's 1850 black population of 548 may also be too small to be significant. Elsewhere, however, the populations were large enough for figures for both races to be meaningful.

What is most striking within the state is that even by national standards its black demography was appalling. Only in the counties of Attala, Choctaw, DeSoto, and Lafayette did the black fertility ratio exceed the rate for the U.S. as a whole. Three of those counties lay in the mixed-farming North Central Hills and they were the only Mississippi counties studied where the black fertility ratio was higher than 2.00. For whites, that figure was exceeded in thirteen counties of the twenty-three. Only in Issaquena, where the white population was minute, did black Mississippians have a higher fertility ratio than whites.

If we were seeking a spurious “typicality,” we might take the counties of the Tombigbee basin and the midstate Brown Loam and Loess Hills to represent Mississippi as a whole. In all the sample counties from these regions, the black fertility rate hovered around the state norm, as it did in two counties of the Old Natchez district, Jefferson and Wilkinson. Both of those counties are set back from the Mississippi River, which rendered them fairly remote from commerce. In the riverfront counties of Adams, Claiborne, and Warren the black fertility rate was noticeably lower.

That difference speaks to the “mountain of pain” that one historian has described in the area immediately around Natchez. It also links those counties to what was happening in the Delta, despite the difference between their rolling topography and the utterly flat Delta soil, and between the gullied, overworked quality that was appearing in them and the Delta’s inexhaustible richness. The Delta was only beginning to be settled as of 1850. The appallingly low fertility ratios for Bolivar, Issaquena, Washington, and Yazoo counties, all of which did have significant black populations, testify to what their “settlement” required, as their wooded swamps became plantations and as those plantations started producing cotton in the truly staggering quantities that created the fortunes of a Benjamin Roach or a Stephen Duncan.

## VII

These graphs and figures do not resolve the problem of Mississippi slavery. But they do reveal something of the social structure that cotton slavery produced when it was at its most intense. They suggest a basis from which a full understanding of cotton slavery, as opposed to rice slavery, or sugar slavery, or tobacco slavery, might be developed. The remaining few pages will trace some possible lines of inquiry.

The first implication is for the study of slaves’ health, perhaps with an understanding of the medical implications of living in a situation of high stress. What accounts for the minute population of infant slaves in Washington County in 1850? The mortality schedule for that year reveals that the county was hit badly by cholera during the great epidemic of 1849.<sup>45</sup> But cholera struck indiscriminately of age or race and it hit other counties as well. By itself it does not explain why the county had only fourteen children less than one year of age among its more than seven thousand black people.

By comparison the “spikes” among slaves in the fifteen-to-twenty bracket that the graphs for the high-production counties show, particularly for 1860, seem straightforward. The young men and women whose lives are hidden in those graphs were victims: either of the domestic slave trade or of forced separation from their roots and families by an absentee master. Young whites and young free blacks left home too. But it was not in the same way or in numbers that distorted the proportion of their age group to their larger community. To see how sharply this particular form of migration altered the lives of slaves who were on the verge of adulthood raises problems for understanding what followed. It has been clearly established how much

45. The mortality schedule is available on microfilm from the American Genealogical Lending Library, Bountiful, Utah. My thanks to Winthrop D. Jordan for pointing this out to me.

African-Americans under slavery valued their families and their personal ties. It has been shown just as clearly how they adapted their family patterns in order to cope with what had to be.<sup>46</sup> But it is still the case that these young Mississippi slaves were facing problems with which only the least lucky of whites would have had to deal. And it seems likely that having to face such problems at such an age imposed very large demands on their own congealing personalities.

Whatever happened inside these slaves' minds and souls, the dramatic demographic differences between whites and cotton-frontier blacks raise the question of what went on in the cotton fields themselves. How demanding was the work that masters and overseers exacted? What struggles went on for control of time and of pace? However unequal the relationship, slaves in some other situations were in a position to negotiate with masters about how much work would be delivered.<sup>47</sup> Was there any sense in which, like those slaves and like free working people in other parts of the United States, black Mississippians were writing their own rules? Or was cotton-frontier Mississippi a place where their subjection was virtually complete?<sup>48</sup> None of these questions as yet have answers.

Finally, we need to examine rather than simply assert the proposition that an African-American culture of resistance formed under slavery and spread westward with it. That such a culture did develop is undeniable. But Mississippi masters knew what they were doing when they virtually banned free African-Americans from the state. In a place like Virginia the free black population offered living evidence to slaves that their condition did not have to be as it was. Free black people also provided a vital link with the outside world. Unwilling migrants to Mississippi would remember these things, just as a survivor of the middle passage might have remembered Africa. But however many stories a real African might have told to a first-generation African-American, the listener could never fully appreciate what the teller had known first-hand. However many stories a Virginia migrant might have told to a native Mississippian, or to slaves who had come too young to remember on their own, it could not have been the same either. But how the mental world of people whose only world of experience was the cotton frontier differed from that of people who once had known another way - that issue remains to be explored.

For the most part slavery was only one generation thick in Mississippi. A single person's life could easily have spanned the time from the final surrender of the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations of Native Americans to the final defeat of slavery itself. But though plantation Mississippi's time was short, the shadow that it has cast is long. Within that place and during that time one of the central dramas in American history, the expansion of slavery in the land of the free, worked itself out. As it was doing so another drama was preparing to break on a scale that engulfed the whole nation. That drama would resolve the grossest terms of the huge contradiction between freedom and slavery and between equality and subordination that the Revolution itself had left behind.

46. See, especially, Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*.

47. See Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*.

48. For free industrial workers who jostled with their employers in defining what amounted to new rules for a new game, see Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Purral Massachusetts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1983.

One way or another, all Americans remain children of both their country's founding revolution and its second revolution, the Civil War and Reconstruction. But if the bright words of a Thomas Jefferson represent the first Revolution's best promises, the actual world of a Jefferson Davis represents what it delivered to far too many of its heirs. The two cannot be separated. The Mississippian who became the first and only president of the Confederate States of America and who bore Thomas Jefferson's own name had every reason in his own mind to regard himself as a legitimate heir to what the slave-owning Virginian who became the third president of the United States had begun. Jefferson Davis's people lived not only in counties bearing such names as Yalobusha, Issaquena, and Tallahatchie but also in counties whose names honored the memory of George Washington, John Adams, James Madison, and John Hancock. Memory and inheritance aside, a man like Davis knew as well that in the social and economic order of his own time cotton grown by slaves like his brought prosperity not only to the white south but also to the free-labor north.

To that extent, all Americans then were Mississippians. And to the extent that we live with the effects of their unresolved contradictions, we are all Mississippians still.\*

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In both the Milan and Huntington Library versions, the essay is dedicated to the memory of Herbert Gutman.