

THE PRICE FOR  
THEIR POUND  
OF FLESH

The Value of the Enslaved,  
from Womb to Grave,  
in the Building of a Nation

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## EPILOGUE

## The Afterlives of Slavery

*The valuation and division of slaves among contending heirs was a most important incident in slave life.*

—Frederick Douglass<sup>1</sup>

*Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery.*

—Saidiya Hartman<sup>2</sup>

What do we make of this legacy of souls and ghosts in circulation? How do we understand the ways enslaved people responded to this history of bodies and souls in circulation? As always, I turn to them for the final word, first to Elizabeth Keckley and then to a descendant of Nat Turner. Keckley shares, “At the grave, at least, we should be permitted to lay our burdens down, that a new world, a world of brightness, may open to us. The light that is denied us here should grow into a flood of effulgence beyond the dark, mysterious shadows of death.”<sup>3</sup> For her, death would be a resting place, one free of the burdens of the here and now, a place to let in God’s spiritual light. The descendants of Nat Turner shared this belief, as Lucy Turner noted, “sometimes, there is a Victory in the Grave, which leads to a bright, eternal Heaven, where Faith, Hope, Charity, Love, and Justice, shall last forever and forever, without ceasing.”<sup>4</sup> Understanding the soul values of the enslaved and their descendants provides a window into their concepts of life and death. For some, their bodies would remain in circulation years after their last breath.

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The internal and external values of human chattel examined in this book resonate today in recent discoveries of bones dating back to slavery. A

construction project at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in 1994 led to the discovery of several unidentified remains of African American cadavers. Like the remains found at the Medical College of Georgia, the VCU remains were sent for study to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Forensic anthropologists have been examining the remains of about twenty-six unnamed African Americans that Baker likely collected. Now, with the help of Professor Shawn Utsey, there is a movement to return the remains to Virginia and lay them to rest. On January 10, 2014, the Virginia General Assembly issued Senate Joint Resolution 84, “Recognizing the training of nineteenth-century physicians in Richmond,” and acknowledging the work of Chris Baker. The university is currently preparing for a “fitting memorial to commemorate the contributions of Richmond’s African Americans whose bodies were stolen for anatomical dissection and the furtherance of science and medical research.”<sup>5</sup>

The VCU case speaks volumes about ghost values and documents some of the history offered in this book. We now know more than ever that a trade in cadavers occurred and that historians like Ruth Richardson were correct in describing the process. She found human beings “compressed into boxes, packed in sawdust, packed in hay, trussed up in sacks, roped up like hams, sewn in canvas, packed in cases, casks, barrels, crates, and hampers; salted, pickled or injected with preservative.” This was the work of folks like Grandison Harris, Chris Baker, and many other resurrectionists who came before them or followed after. People put price tags on corpses and “carried them in carts and wagons, in barrows and in steam-boats.” They were “dismembered and sold” sometimes into pieces and placed in an underground “red market” that exists today.<sup>6</sup>

Ghost values of the formerly enslaved cultivated to populate this market remind us that death did not end their commodification. Their bodies were sold and remained in circulation decades and, in some cases, centuries after their deaths. For some, like Shields Green, Joice Heth, and Nat Turner, their remains (or parts of them) ended up being crucial to medical instruction, suggesting that postmortem histories tell us different stories about their lives than when they were living.

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This book ends where it began, with an enslaved man in prison. And yet not quite. As you will see in the story of Mingo, it ends with the recognition of soul values that led to freedom. Mingo was a poet and possibly was influenced by Shakespeare. While in prison for liberating himself, he inscribed the following poem on one of the beams in his cell:

Good God! and must I leave them now—  
 My wife, my children, in their woe?  
 'Tis mockery to say I'm sold—  
 But I forget these chains so cold,  
 [...]
   
 Dear wife, they cannot sell the rose  
 Of love, that in my bosom glows.  
 Remember, as your tears may start,  
 They cannot sell th' immortal part!  
 [...]
   
 Thou sun, which lightest bond and free,  
 Tell me, I pray, is liberty  
 The lot of those who noblest feel,  
 And ofttest to Jehovah kneel?  
 [...]
   
 I feel high manhood on me now,  
 A spirit-glory on my brow;  
 I feel a thrill of music roll,  
 Like angel harpings, through my soul [...]

In the opening lines, Mingo expressed grief about being separated from his family. He challenged the institution of slavery as a mockery to him and many other enslaved people, because their souls were invaluable. While he acknowledged the realities of his enslavement, Mingo offered a sensory description of his cold shackles. But he also did what most enslaved people did: he drew strength from his inner spirit, focused on God, and viewed his condition “above the sky.” He kept his spirit intact, preserving his love for his family and his God. Turning to his wife, he instructed her to find peace in the fact that neither their love nor their souls could

be sold. He reminded her that even in the face of anguish, their union eclipsed captivity. More important, for him, there was an inner spirit that could not be commodified, a place deep in his heart that enslavers could not control. This “immortal part” was sacred and owned by self and spirit. Mingo shifted to comparisons between the enslaved and free, emphasizing the spirit expressed through feeling and kneeling. He used the metaphor of kneeling, which signals supplication, a position of humility and deference to a higher power.

From his perspective, humankind operated under the same sun and all were equal in the sight of Jehovah, Allah, or the name one called their maker. Mingo rose above to assert his humanity and his value as an incandescent spirit. He mentioned “touching Isaiah’s lips with fire,” drawing on prophetic imagery from biblical scripture. He likened himself to the anointing granted in Isaiah’s commission.<sup>7</sup> Although favored by God, Mingo struggled with the notion of justice, given his enslaved status. Thus he prayed and fled that night and was killed by bloodhounds. He left us with words to describe how he felt on the eve of his death. Mingo valued his life, his wife, and his children. And he went to glory assuring them that enslavers could never sell their “immortal part.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite being traded as commodities from the womb to the grave, enslaved people’s understanding of their soul values transcended the external values placed upon their bodies. And with this realization, their souls were at peace.

#### POSTSCRIPT

On October 6, 2016, while this book was in production, Richard Hatcher, former mayor of Gary, Indiana, confirmed what I suspected, that he was in possession of the alleged skull of Nat Turner. DNA testing ensued and the descendants await confirmation. If the outcome is affirmative, then the family will have some closure, and Nat Turner’s body and soul will be reunited with his people just as he said it would, “Somehow, Somewhere, Someday!”