

*Apuntes 80* (2017). doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21678/apuntes.80.910>

BERRY, Daina Ramey, 2017, *The price for their pound of flesh. The value of the enslaved, from womb to grave, in the building of a nation*, Boston, Beacon Press. 262 pp.

As someone who said she was 160 years old, the vitality of Joice Heth must have surprised more than a few among the audience who came to her shows. An actress and slave in the United States, Heth traveled to different places to tell her stories under the watchful gaze of her owner, the impresario P.T. Barnum. She was so popular that during a tour lasting seven months, Barnum made the equivalent of one million in today's dollars. But Heth died in 1836, depriving her owner of his goose that laid the golden eggs. Eager to cash in on Heth's fame, Barnum decided to use her cadaver to his advantage and rapidly put together a spectacle in which a group of doctors would perform a public autopsy. Tickets sold out quickly, in part because of the publicity campaign staged by Barnum, who promoted Heth as someone who had been George Washington's nurse and who had lived through the wars of Independence, even though the autopsy established that she could not have been more than 70 years old. However grotesque this case may seem, it was not an isolated one. According to the information that Daina Ramey Berry provides in her recent book, even after they were dead the bodies of slaves were used in ways that reached the limits of the inhumane, with the sole purpose of bringing income to their owners.

An Associate Professor in the Department of History of the University of Texas at Austin, Berry is the author of *The price for their pound of flesh*, in which she studies the complex network of actors, mechanisms, and contexts that played a role in establishing the price of slaves in the decades before the U.S. Civil War. This book describes the principal stages in the lives of slaves and how an economic value was assigned to each one. While the author could have limited herself to this task and still made an important contribution, she has gone further by extending the lifespan of slaves, viewing it as a period from before birth to after death – as in the case of Heth. The author reviewed a great many qualitative and quantitative sources such as insurance policies, plantation records, memoirs, press advertisements, and wills, in order to present us with a discomfiting text that exposes the inhuman treatment of slaves in the United States both in life and after their deaths. The literature on slavery often emphasizes the mercantile aspects that characterized this system, but Berry's transfer of the analysis to the bodies of slaves, the way in which they themselves tried to modify their value as

they grew up and grew older, as well as their desperate – and sometimes painstaking – efforts to avoid being sold and separated from their families.

Professor Berry's book articulates two lines of research which have reappeared in recent years. The period that begins in 2008 is particularly significant because, on the one hand, it marks the beginning of the Great Recession and a concern for re-examining and questioning capitalism. Since then, a new set of studies have analyzed the U.S. and international economic systems. Perhaps the best-known example is Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Simultaneously, and on the one hand, the swearing in of the first Afro-American president together with the beginning of the commemorations of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the U.S. Civil War, have revitalized research about the Afro-American community. Some researchers have returned to the link between slavery and capitalism, sparking one of the most intense academic debates of the last decades. To capture the tone of the debate, one need only recall the *Economist's* controversial review ("Blood cotton") of Edward Baptist's *The half has never been told* – in which the magazine relativizes the role of slaves – and its subsequent public apology.

Although Berry does not say so explicitly, it is impossible not to understand her book as a contribution to the connection between slavery and capitalism. One of its contributions is to introduce the personal and subjective aspects of the slaves themselves during the different stages of their lives, from their lack of awareness during childhood – up to ten years of age, approximately – and the slow discovery that they are the property of their owners and that their possibilities of action are limited. Thus, one of the major concerns at different points in their lives was the fear of being sold and the consequent separation of their families. Many, for example, remember slave auctions as traumatic experiences during their youth and their adult life. Even if they managed to avoid being sold and lived to old age (a stage that started at 40 years of age), they faced isolation and neglect. On some occasions, as the author suggests, slaves themselves were able to directly affect what was being done to them. This was the case of Ponto, a slave who, in the middle of a slave auction in Virginia, sabotaged his own sale by telling potential buyers that he was actually 40 years old and sick, when he had been advertised as 32 and in perfect physical condition for plantation work.

The most disquieting chapter is, without doubt, the one dedicated to *ghost value* and trafficking in the cadavers of slaves. Berry does an impressive job in dealing with the issue of the *post mortem* valuation of slaves and in reconstructing their journey from death to doctors' operating rooms. Rather than something gone about in a disorganized way, the book shows there

was a peculiar synchronicity between agricultural cycles and the availability of cadavers, as well as the conditions necessary for their conservation and transportation from the fields to medical schools. Trafficking in bodies led to a fetishization of the cadavers of slaves, leading important personages to seek to obtain some for display, even in their own residences. At the same time, an extensive illegal trade in body parts flourished as a consequence of this practice until the authorities intervened and regulated the availability of cadavers for medical study.

While this is an excellent book which has received high praise from academics and the media alike, there are parts that could be improved. For example, certain chapters, such as “Midlife and older adulthood,” do not seem to fit the tone of the rest of the book. In addition, the author emphasizes the issue of *ghost value* in several chapters. Finally, an epilogue with comparative suggestions, and which posited a framework broader than just that of the U.S., would have been useful for understanding the peculiarities of the U.S. case. But these criticisms do not take away from the many contributions of this text. One of the aspects that the author has executed most skillfully are the constant links between events that took place before the Civil War and the present, such as the persistence of abuses against Afro-American bodies (examples include the manipulation of Henrietta Lacks when cancer cells were extracted from her body without her consent, and the lethal cruelty and killing of Afro-Americans that led to the Black Lives Matter movement). This book is sometimes difficult to read because of the testimonies of the victims and the circumstances they had to face only 150 years ago. Still, it is highly recommended for its exploration of the roots of inhuman practices carried out in order to make money, compelling us to face the legacies left by these practices.

José Ragas  
*Cornell University, Ithaca*  
jr992@cornell.edu