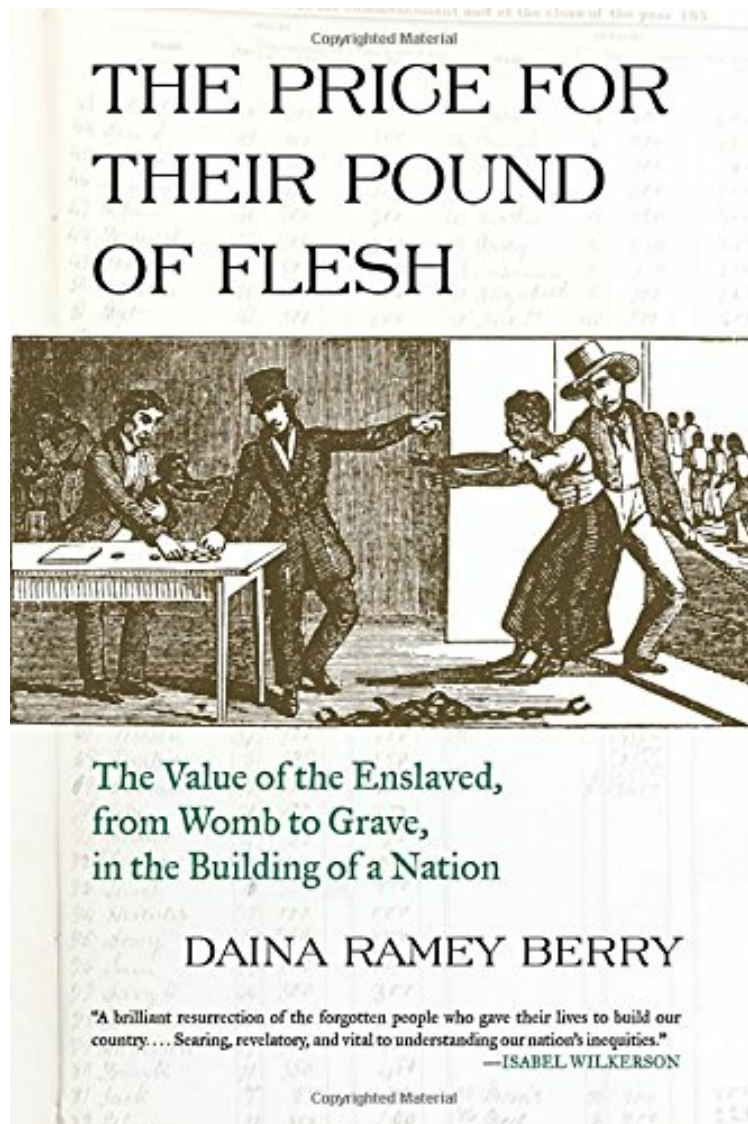


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# The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation

*Daina Ramey Berry*

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#96868 in Books imusti 2017-01-24 2017-01-24Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 9.28 x 1.02 x 6.22l, 1.25  
#File Name: 0807047627256 pagesBeacon Press | File size: 61.Mb

**Daina Ramey Berry : The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation:

15 of 15 people found the following review helpful. is a fantastic book that everyone should read beyond the historian

By esther

In a nutshell, this book delves into the economic value, and commodification of enslaved people (unborn, alive, and dead) in the building of our nation, the United States. Daina Berry delves deep into the archive to give birth to this ground breaking project based on primary records to show that enslaved people were valued way before they were born and long after they had died. She spent over 10 years researching through a miscellany of archives (insurance records, court documents, slave sales' rosters, and estate records, deeds, and wills, among a wide variety of other sources --(in a large number of archives) to show the value placed on enslaved people. Her work also emphasizes the value that enslaved people, themselves understood, felt, and used to view and own their individual self, their worth, and their empowerment. TThe author coins the term soul value, an unprecedented term that she utilizes to highlight --and to a certain extent measure and perhaps evaluate-- the force through which enslaved people felt their own worth, acknowledged and exercised their agency, a value that went beyond their economic worth. She introduces enslaved women, men and children, who lived their lives on their own accord, even when, in order to do that, they chose to take their own lives. This is a fascinating historical account on enslaved life and slave resistance that re-defines slave value, price, and enslaved empowerment. This simply, is a fantastic book that everyone should read beyond the historian, and/or history buff.

14 of 15 people found the following review helpful. Well-Written, Thought-Provocative, and Strikingly Innovative Addition to the Existing Body of Scholarship on American Slavery

By Stan Prager

Review of: *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation*, by Daina Ramey Berry by Stan Prager (2-11-17)

The vision of a frightened African-American woman on the auction block clutching her child to her chest as the bidding commenced renders an iconic image that has often served as a powerful ingredient in fiction to conjure up the helplessness and hopelessness that beset chattel slaves in the antebellum south. Such as: Adeline reluctantly stepped up on the block amid a crowd of unfamiliar onlookers. Arms crossed, head covered, she gripped her young to her chest to shield him from the spectacle of shame they were about to experience. The audience admired her dark olive skin and her evidence of fecundity. Her ten-week-old son was living proof that she was a child-bearing woman. Adeline had "a very fine forehead, pleasing countenance and mild, lustrous eyes," while her son was a "light-colored, blue eyed curly-silked-haried [sic] child" Positioned on the Columbia, South Carolina, courthouse steps, the two awaited their fate. Gentlemen, did you ever see such a face, and head, and form, as that? the auctioneer inquired, taking off her hood." She is only 18 years old, and already has a child [who] will consequently make a valuable piece of property for someone. The bidder and Adeline struggled with her hood as he praised her skill. "She is a splendid housekeeper and seamstress, he continued. By this time, tears filled her eyes, and at every licentious allusion she cast a look of pity and woe at the auctioneer, and at the crowd. As the sale continued, the auctioneer took Adelines hood off three more times to show her countenance and every time, she quickly replaced it. When he was exposed, her son cast a terrified look on the auctioneer and bidders, each time his face was revealed. Perhaps at his young age, he sensed his mothers terror. Within minutes, the sale was complete, and Adeline "descended the courthouse steps, looked at her new master, looked at the audience, looked fondly to her sweet childs face, and pressed it warmly to her bosom," while the auctioneer jeered, that child wouldnt trouble her purchaser long." The threat of separation followed enslaved people to the auction block. [p10-11]

Yet, the foregoing is not an overwrought scene from *Uncle Toms Cabin* or a sensationalist TV movie, but rather the report of an actual slave auction from the opening chapter of *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation*. In a remarkably original contribution to the historiography of African-American slavery in the United States, Daina Ramey Berry, professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin, reminds us that Adeline and her infant were subjected to this humiliating dehumanization on those long-ago courthouse steps for a specific reason: they each held a tangible value associated with real dollar signs for the buyer and the seller. Adeline especially was worth something because, as we learn from this account, she was an attractive young woman, she had household skills, and she was fecund. Adeline in this sense was not a human being, but property, plain and simple, and property has a value. In a well-written, thought-provocative, and strikingly innovative addition to the existing body of scholarship on American slavery, Berry sets out to locate what that specific value was and how it was rationally determined, not only for Adeline but for all of the many millions of those once held in bondage: men, women, children, infants even the dead. In this slim volume, based on extensive research, she largely succeeds, but even more significantly her work profoundly alters the way historians will conceptualize the slave-person ever after. In *Maps of Time*, Big History scholar David Christian aptly dubs slaves as human batteries. That is a useful construct. Berrys construct is equally useful, as she hangs a dollar sign around every neck and demonstrates how, in the peculiar version of African slavery that developed in the United States, some human beings, bought and sold just like batteries adapted for specific utilizations, came to be worth more than others, and how that value changed over a lifetime. In *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, it is clear that there were a whole host of values for human chattel slaves that are commonly overlooked. For instance, there was an appraised value, which was often noted in account books and wills. There was also a market value, which just like in an automobile or a home could pointedly differ from appraisal. Rarely acknowledged, there was also the value placed upon a slave when insured against loss by their owner, and the premium that was paid, again just like a car or a house. Some of this value was based upon what role the slave

property could perform. A strong man who could work in the fields was worth X. A competent woman who could sew or keep house was worth Y. A young woman who was fertile and could be bred like livestock was worth Z. If she was attractive, like Adeline, and could serve as an object of the flesh for her owner, all the better, and her value increased. Age was also a strong determinant in assigned values. In an era of high infant and child mortality, babies and small children were worth very little, but each year that they survived their assessed value increased until at fourteen they achieved something like adult status. Slaves had the greatest value during their prime years, driven by capability and productivity. Berry articulates this in a chilling passage: Sellers prepared the enslaved for display determined the condition of their health and sometimes rated them on a five-point scale of 0 to 1 in increments of 0.25. Prime or full hands had a rating of 1 or A1 Prime, which represented a projection of the amount of work a person could perform in a given day. Prime hands, typically between the ages of fifteen and thirty, were the strongest laborers on farms and plantations . . . Other enslaved people had their rates set at three-fourth hand, one-half hand, or for those unable to work or contribute to the plantation economy, zero. This rating system resembles US Department of Agriculture (USDA) meat grades, in which beef undergoes a "composite evaluation to determine quality. [p68] Naturally, supply and demand and transportation costs all factored into the price. Slaves could also be rented out to others, and their labor valued in fractions, much as they were famously assessed as fractional persons for the purposes of representation in the Constitution of the United States. [p84] Value diminished as the slave aged past forty. The author dubs the elderly and past-their-prime superannuated, and this class saw their value drop with great significance. Surprisingly, slaves also had a certain value after death, what Berry terms their ghost value. A slave executed for a crime by the state, for instance, had an assessed value that was paid to the owner for his loss in being deprived of their labor. [p98; 112] And the skull and skin of the infamous, such as insurrectionist Nat Turner, commanded a premium on a clandestine market for such goods. [p102-105] Much more astonishing, however, was that the corpses of dead slaves (as well as grave-robbled free blacks!) served as currency for the cadaver trade to medical schools, north and south. With an inspired sense of optimism layered over the revulsion that each of these valuations implies, Berry adds one more value that restores a certain dignity to the dehumanized humanity that she chronicles: soul value. The soul value, she underscores, is the value the human slave person placed upon their own life, a value that could not be bought or sold, a value that led one ringleader of a slave revolt to jump from the gallows with a rope around his neck and die on his own terms rather than wait for the trap to drop. [p146] This is an outstanding book that nevertheless suffers from a handful of flaws. First of all, as Berry assigns average values for her subjects throughout the volume, it soon becomes clear that the exceptions to the rules far outnumber the rules. In other words, values clearly are far less quantifiable than she would be suggest. That hardly diminishes the quality of the theme, but nevertheless frustrates the reader as she repeatedly notes what the values should be at the head of the chapter only to detail scores of values that fail to fall into these ranges. In another arena, Berry risks damaging her historical scholarship by repeated attempts to draw bold lines between the slave experience and the contemporary African-American experience and the Black Lives Matter movement. While there is merit to these insights and my own politics happens to coincide with hers, there is no place in a work of history (beyond the preface or epilogue, etc.) to intrude such editorials. Finally, in a personal quibble, I must admit that I always chafe at the reducing of the greatest pejorative directed at African-Americans by plantation owners and latter day racists to the euphemistic N--- or N-word. I realize the word is offensive. It should be! Just as a famous curse loses all power when rendered as the F-word, so too does a word used to denigrate human beings lose the power to shock and repulse when abbreviated and euphemized this way. As the late George Carlin noted with striking political incorrectness, it is all about context. Rap singers and urban youth, black and brown, use the word as kinship, even as a term of endearment. Slave auctioneers used it to dehumanize. Spell it out. Make us wince. We should wince. We should feel the passion and the pain. Just as we are repulsed by the ordinary, mundane, striking normalcy in the colorless bureaucrats who were the cogs in the wheels of the Nazi death camps, so too are we as readers struck with revulsion for the complicity of all those who participated in the institution of human chattel slavery as well as those who did not object, or objected too little, north and south. The genius in Berrys work is that by assigning values as she has in this fine narrative we are far more moved by the plight of those otherwise anonymous millions who were valued and used as meat, rather than dignified as unique humans. We can see and feel their soul values, even if they were largely denied these in life. We can honor them further by reading this excellent book and sharing its message. [Note: I received this edition as part of an Early Reviewers program.] 5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. The Horrors of Slavery By T. C. Brayshaw Daina Berry has written a book that brings the tragedy of slavery to life. While emphasizing the monetary values of slaves at different stages in life, she explains the person story of a variety of people subjected to this evil. It is well researched and well written.

Groundbreaking look at slaves as commodities through every phase of life, from birth to death and beyond, in early America In life and in death, slaves were commodities, their monetary value assigned based on their age, gender, health, and the demands of the market. The Price for Their Pound of Flesh is the first book to explore the economic value of enslaved people through every phase of their lives including preconception, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, the senior years, and death in the early American domestic slave trade. Covering the full life cycle, historian

Daina Ramey Berry shows the lengths to which enslavers would go to maximize profits and protect their investments. Illuminating ghost values or the prices placed on dead enslaved people, Berry explores the little-known domestic cadaver trade and traces the illicit sales of dead bodies to medical schools. This book is the culmination of more than ten years of Berrys exhaustive research on enslaved values, drawing on data unearthed from sources such as slave-trading records, insurance policies, cemetery records, and life insurance policies. Writing with sensitivity and depth, she resurrects the voices of the enslaved and provides a rare window into enslaved peoples experiences and thoughts, revealing how enslaved people recalled and responded to being appraised, bartered, and sold throughout the course of their lives. Reaching out from these pages, they compel the reader to bear witness to their stories, to see them as human beings, not merely commodities. A profoundly humane look at an inhumane institution, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh* will have a major impact how we think about slavery, reparations, capitalism, nineteenth-century medical education, and the value of life and death.

Berrys groundbreaking work in the historiography of American slavery deserves a wide readership beyond academia. Publishers Weekly, Starred In this sharp, affecting study, Berry reminds us of the cold calculus at the intersection of slavery and capitalism...A well-researched, effectively presented piece of scholarship that forthrightly confronts slaverys brute essence. Kirkus s...highly readable and addressing the most heartbreaking and starkly gruesome aspects of slavery. Library Journal With *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh*, Berry is now seen as a breakthrough writer who completed the herculean task of filling in the blanks of one of the darkest episodes in American history. Essence Magazine A brilliant resurrection of the forgotten people who gave their lives to build our country. Rigorously researched and powerfully told, this book tallies the human price paid for the nation we now live in and restores these unrecognized Americans their hopes, loves, and disregarded dreams to their rightful place in history. Searing, revelatory, and vital to understanding our nations inequities. Isabel Wilkerson, author of *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of Americas Great Migration* Daina Ramey Berrys harrowing account of how slaveholders turned every aspect of a slaves life into a commodity to be sold on markets from the reproductive possibilities of enslaved women to the corpses of deceased slaves is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding American history, or our contemporary dilemmas. Reading *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh* will leave you with an overwhelming sense of sadness, but also with great anger that we are still failing to fully overcome this historys legacy. Sven Beckert, author of *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* Daina Berry has written the richest account of the many ways in which an enslaved African Americans body was bought and sold throughout her or his lifetime. From the cradle to the grave and beyond, enslavers priced black bodies based on their imagined fitness for labor, sexual exploitation, use as collateral, and even their value after death as dissection cadavers. In horrific detail, Berry shows that there was a price tag placed on every pound of flesh. She also shows the efforts of enslaved people to assert that their lives had values beyond the money that could be rendered from their muscles and extracted from their bones. Out of the certainty that their souls were pearls beyond price, black people fought to make room for their own system of human values. Edward E. Baptist, author of *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* About the Author Daina Ramey Berry is an associate professor of history and African and African diaspora studies, and the Oliver H. Radkey Regents Fellow in History, at the University of Texas at Austin. An award-winning historian, she is also a Distinguished Lecturer for the Organization of American Historians. She lives in Austin, Texas.