

Commodification: An Understatement to Slavery

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Abstract

Starting from the 15th century in the Atlantic slave trade, black people have been treated by lighter-skinned counterparts as commodities to be sold and bought. The effects of the trade and the resulting dehumanization can still be seen in subsequent historical events and in today's society. Analyzing the Haitian Revolution in the late 18th century through literature such as *The Grateful Negro* by Maria Edgeworth, "Spectres of the Atlantic Zong Massacre" by Ian Baucom, and *Obi, or, The History of the Three-Fingered Jack* by William A. Earle, this paper rejects the familiar idea that black people were commodities and rather studies how the commodification of black people was a process that victimized black people to worst treatment only, in fact, because they were humans. Nicholas Rinehart, a comparative literature professor at Harvard University rejects the Marxist definition of commodity and adopts Igor Kopytoff's theory of *commodity-as-process*. Rinehart's argument is further explored through the lens of George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a German philosopher, to consider the relation of black people's treatment as commodities to the master-slave dialectic and the corresponding power dynamics. Such power dynamics are often shown to be fluid and therefore reinforcing black people as humans undergoing treatment as a commodity-as-process but not an object.

In the infamous Zong Massacre of 1781, the ship owner threw slaves overboard to collect on his slave insurance claims, trying to profit from their deaths. The capitalistic structure of the trans-Atlantic slave trade had allowed slaves to be treated as assets to be insured during the 18th century, resulting in such a massacre to inevitably occur. Recurring themes of slaves being commodified and black people being objectified, such as in the Zong Massacre, can be seen throughout history, but such stock words of *commodification* and *dehumanization* have been systematically used and simultaneously forgotten. While it is commonly accepted in academia that slaves were commodities, this generalization only serves to further obscure the treatment towards slaves and the slaves' dynamic suffering and growth experiences. Nicholas Rinehart, an English professor at Harvard University, rejects the familiar idea that black people were commodities and rejects the Marxist definition of commodity "as social use-value [determined] by the quantity of human labor embodied within it, representing the labor-time socially necessary for its production" (Rinehart 37). Marx's definition inherently ignores that slaves were in fact humans and underwent changes in emotion and physique based on treatment. Therefore, using Igor Kopytoff's definition of *commodity-as-process* and exploring the biography of slaves in context of George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy in *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, this paper further supports the theory of *commodity-as-process* as the lens to understand slavery since the master-slave dialectic creates a relationship based on an ever-changing power dynamic that subjected slaves to varying degrees of treatment precisely because they were viewed as humans.

The relationship between slave and master is not one of object and owner; it is far more complex. Kopytoff's theory of *commodity-as-process* "reflects the lived experience of

enslavement itself... [in which] the life of a single slave often comprised an accumulated series of various forms of enslavement” (Rinehart 38). The cyclical and dynamic nature of a slave’s life are nuances not to be ignored, and thus, “references to the ‘commodification’ or ‘dehumanization’, [as opposed to *commodity-as-process*] of enslaved humanity are often normative claims masquerading as historical ones” (Rinehart 30). Therefore, one can observe that only at the time of transaction is the slave really treated as a commodity equating to a numerical value. However, to understand the treatment of slaves during this transaction as one of commodification would be understating the reality of what the slave experienced; treating an object as an object should not be held to the same recognition as treating a human as an object. More importantly, after the slave is bought, the slave deviates away from being a commodity and becomes “a social figure that moves through various phases of expulsion, marginality, and reincorporation” (Rinehart 38). This is possible because of Hegel’s philosophy in the master-slave dialectic. The interaction between master and slave shows that the master, despite being free, becomes dependent towards the slave for the master’s desires. Ultimately, the master-slave dialectic described by Hegel further supports that the slaves were not objects and that the inhumane treatment towards slaves, often inaccurately generalized as “commodification”, was a result of this dialectic and the continuous struggle for power between both sides—master and slave.

The first stage of a slave’s life starts from capture and represents commodification in a sense similar to how animals are captured and raised and commodified, but the *process* from a slave’s *capture* to *transport* cannot be accurately described with a simplistic motif of “commodification” which “does little to articulate the lived experience of enslavement. Rather,

it recapitulates an all-encompassing, static, and ahistorical view wherein the ‘commodified’ slave is dominated absolutely by the ‘commodifying’ slaveholder” (Rinehart 31). In fact, the initial commodification of slaves through capture justifies the *commodity-as-process* theory better than the Marxist definition of commodification because slaves are first victimized as commodities being taken as potential labor; however, once the slaves enter the Middle Passage, the situation changes. Rinehart explains that “the Middle Passage and its techniques of brutalization were profoundly invested in human frailty. The slave trade did not operate by treating slaves simply as things—objects, commodities, goods—it operated by treating them as persons who could suffer, and it worked to maximize that suffering without hitting the tipping point at which the slave ceases to suffer because it has died” (Rinehart 35). In order for the brutalities of the Middle Passage to have occurred, the slave owners and ship captains had to acknowledge the slaves’ humanity; objects cannot feel suffering but humans can. Torture and violence are tests of humanity to see how far a person can be pushed before dying or becoming insane, both of which are uniquely biological, and thus human, characteristics. Moreover, “to violently subject captives to “unmitigated poverty” and deprive them of their social and familial ties is to make the fundamental concession that enslaved Africans could be violently subjected to poverty” (Rinehart 36), another uniquely human experience. Even at capture when a slave is commodified, Hegel’s master-slave dialectic still applies since the slave trader depends on the slave’s livelihood and health to garner a profit, and thus, the slave trader balanced a thin line between torturing the slave to assert dominance and power and keeping the slave alive.

Another example of the humanity of slaves in the Middle Passage can be taken from literature in Obi; or, The History of Three Finger’d Jack by William Earle. Jack, the protagonist

slave urging for a revolution against the Europeans, experiences the death of his father, Makro, who had been put on a ship that sank. Makro's death in the Middle Passage was not forgotten as an object would have been forgotten. Due to the familial ties attached with the humanity of Makro, his death instigated a need for vengeance by Jack's mother, Amri. Therefore, even up to his death, Makro in the Middle Passage was still human and the additional grief and anger felt by Amri and Jack shows that the trans-Atlantic slave trade even helped slaves better identify with their own humanity.

Since slave treatment differs across time and space, one must note that during the time period of the trans-Atlantic trade, the world of finance was simultaneously burgeoning, independent from the slave trade, although the additional labor provided by slaves did further perpetuate the growth of capitalism. In the Zong Massacre previously mentioned, the moment when the slaves' lives were equated to the value of the insurance claim was in fact a moment of commodification; however, a fleeting moment of commodification does not justify the slaves' collective experiences in the Middle Passage as commodification. In fact, in Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic*, Baucom explains that evaluating the violence of the Zong Massacre was a complicated task, given that "[t]he credit financing that both accompanied the slave trade and, in partnership with the trade, fueled an Atlantic cycle of accumulation entailed... an epistemological revolution [that] transformed the epistemological by fantasizing it, altered the knowable by indexing it to the imaginable" (Baucom 71). At the time, the obsession with economic growth and empirics encouraged commoditization, implying that the commodification of slaves was a normalized process that aligned with global trends in finance. In context of Baucom's article, Rinehart elaborates that "[t]he historical advent of this

epistemology of the imaginable and the typical... indicates how the allegedly “dehumanizing” notational practices of Anglo-American slave merchants might be better understood as part of a larger global shift in the representation of reality according to a speculative culture of finance capital. (Rinehart 34). When analyzing *commodity-as-process*, the implications of “exchange being a universal feature of human social life” (Kopytoff 68) are that even in moments when slaves were treated as commodities or as objects, such as being viewed as an asset to be insured, this is because slaves were incorporated into the world as it was becoming more financially advanced with financial engineering and the increased speculation that accompanied better financial tools to regulate risk. This correlation between global finance and the slave trade suggests that the Marxist static definition of commodity does not fit slavery since the initial commodification of slaves was not necessarily an attempt to commodify but rather a habit of commodifying all people, free or enslaved, and things that generated or could potentially generate revenue.

Viewing slavery as *commodity-as-process*, when slaves are bought and begin contributing to capitalism through labor, they are reincorporated back into a community, albeit a slave plantation, which reverses the initial commodification of being captured; Rinehart and Kopytoff explained this reversal as *singularization*. However, one should be aware that singularization only happens if the slave had been effectively dehumanized when he or she was being bought or sold, which is a claim that only the slave could make because only the slave can recognize when he or she loses his or her own emotional autonomy. For example, analyzing Jack from Obi; or, The History of Three Finger'd Jack, the novel specifies that “nay, there is not a *thing* called Jack, whether a smoke-jack, a boot-jack, or any other jack” (Earle 69). By clarifying

that Jack is not an item even though his name may often be mistaken for items such as a smoke-jack or boot-jack, Jack is shown to be an enslaved man who maintains his personal autonomy throughout the novel despite being physically constrained. More importantly, since Jack is a common name used to represent all slaves, this clarification generalizes that all slaves are not items and possess their own humanity. From the perspective of physical autonomy, reincorporation occurs because slaves provide the labor that creates a cash flow for their master. This ability to work in the fields and create cash crops gives the slaves power as they prove their worth as humans and workers to their master and gain their master's trust, creating a relationship between the master and slave in which "[t]he *truth* of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman. (Hegel 117). As the slave develops new relationships in his or her new residence, the slave gradually realizes and acquires power over the master in that the slave, or bondsman, exists for its master but also has the independence and connection to nature that the master does not have but needs. From this point, the direction of the slave's development in *commodity-as-process* depends on his or her relationship with his or her master.

In the case in which the master and slave become friends, the slave must juggle his or her existence and loyalty to his or her master with the slave's passion to protect the liberty of all slaves. When the "commodity-slave becomes in effect reindividualized by acquiring new statuses (by no means always lowly ones) and a unique configuration of personal relationships (Kopytoff 65), the slave may forget previous bad experiences in exchange for the continued friendship with the current friendly master. For example, in *The Grateful Negro* by Maria Edgeworth, Caesar is the grateful negro who becomes friends with his master, Mr. Edwards,

after Mr. Edwards showed Caesar kindness and prevented the separation between Caesar and his wife. In fact, Mr. Edwards is the one who first uses the word “friend” to describe Caesar while explaining to Caesar that at Mr. Edwards’ plantation, “[Caesar] may work for himself, without fear that what [he] earns may be taken from [him]; or that [he] should ever be sold, to pay [Mr. Edwards] debts” (Edgeworth 233). This elevation in status from worker to friend shows a natural progression in trust and adopts from the French Revolution the concept of brotherhood and friendship. The French Revolution motto of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” was important because it inspired the Haitian Revolution, but also because it demonstrates the importance of friendship and unity in times of revolution for not only the slaves but also for the masters who maintained good relations with their slaves, putting said slaves in the position of choosing the passion for revolution or choosing the loyalty for friendship. As shown in The Grateful Negro, Caesar “in a transport of gratitude [for his master’s trust in him and for the gift of a knife], swore that, with this knife, he would stab himself to the heart sooner than betray his master!” (Edgeworth 239) and when Caesar was put to the test as Hector, Caesar’s slave-friend who was participating in the revolution, urged Caesar to join the revolution, Caesar refused and chose loyalty to master, using the reasoning that Mr. Edwards “is now [his] benefactor—[his] friend!” (Edgeworth 235). Interestingly, even though Hector is a literary antithesis to Caesar and chose passion for revolution and the path of vengeance, both slaves experienced the theory of *commodity-as-process* in which Caesar realized the status of a trusted friend while Hector realized the status of a revolutionary.

Just as the French Revolution inspired the Haitian Revolution, fraternity and familiarity is linked with rebellion, like that which Hector supported. With the power between slave and

master being in flux, “the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own... [and] having a 'mind of one's own' is self-won, a freedom which is still enmeshed in servitude” (Hegel 119). Both Caesar and Hector found this freedom within servitude as described by Hegel, but Hector’s outlet was through revolution. In an alternate world, if Caesar had chosen revolution, that would only further demonstrate that a closeness between master and slave is what sparks the next stage towards revolution. In some cases, it often was the insider man that gained the trust of the master but tricked the master to lead rebellions and redistribute arms; the variety of scenarios supports the theory of *commodity-as-process* to exemplify all the unique experiences felt under slavery. Clearly, slaves could not be commodified in the Marxian sense because slaves could think and could act or react on thoughts and conspiracies.

Besides Hector’s revolution, another example of a complete shift in power due to a revolution can be seen in the case of Jack with the power of obi. Hegel explains that in a master-slave dialectic, “they must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being *for themselves* to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won” (Hegel 114). This can be demonstrated as Jack traps Captain Harrop in the cave, others exclaim that “Jack was a Man!! Jack was a Hero!!” (Earle 119). The diction in using the words “Man” and “Hero” and the structure of capitalizing the words and having “Hero” follow the usage of “Man” show the transformation of Jack from being an object to a common slave to a real man equating to a hero, which has the connotations of a status higher than man. This literary structure used by Earle illustrates Jack’s *commodity-as-process* and how revolution was his attempt to find freedom. Additionally, as

Captain Harrop was stuck in the cave, he finally acknowledged Jack as human in order to beg for his own life, in which Harrop implored Jack to “let humanity be the guide of your bosom; ...[and] temper your justice with mildness; humanity is a sovereign balm to the heart of man, and blest is he that possesses it. If you will unbind me and let me return to my family, I do most solemnly promise to obtain your pardon and your freedom” (Earle 122). Harrop uses persuasion techniques that concedes that Jack is human, explaining that Jack will be blessed if he shows Harrop generosity and pleading to go back to his family as a pathos appeal. Ironically, even though Jack had the power in the cave, Jack was still not free and he was still the slave which is why Harrop tried to guarantee Jack his freedom, emphasizing Hegel’s philosophy that slaves can hold power and possess humanity despite not being free.

Lastly, *commodity-as-process* is a better theory to use to understand 19th century slave literature because it shows the relation between how commoditization clashes with culture, an important aspect that gave slaves hope and kept them unified. Kopytoff introduces this concept in which “[t]he counterdrive to this potential onrush of commoditization is culture. In the sense that commoditization homogenizes value, while the essence of culture is discrimination, excessive commoditization is anti-cultural” (Kopytoff 73). In both The Grateful Negro and Obi; or, The History of Three Finger’d Jack, the culture of the slaves incites the revolution and helps the slaves stay in touch with themselves and their humanity, separate from their relationship with their white masters. In a particularly poignant example, when Amri was offered freedom in exchange for information on Jack and Captain Harrop’s whereabouts, Amri responded that she “well [knew] the severity of [the white man’s] justice; do with me as you please... But as for [Jack], learn that he is beyond your malice; learn from me that he possesses an Obi, shall sink

you all to very nothingness” (Earle 120). This passage demonstrates both the dynamic power of the master-slave dialectic for both Amri and Jack and also demonstrates culture as a source of power. Amri shows a faith in her son and his powers of obi that allows her to come to terms with her own fate. Her belief in her culture and her family transfers power to Amri since the slave owners are depending on her for information and since the one thing that they could threaten Amri with, her life, was not something Amri valued more than obi power which makes the white people powerless against her. Similarly, Jack’s obi power and that corresponding connection to nature gave Jack power over Captain Harrop and the other white slave owners; this power strips any remaining viewpoint from others that Jack was a commodity and transforms him to a formidable opponent, a threat.

If Hegel’s philosophy of the master-slave dialectic were held up against the Marxian definition of commodity in context of the Haitian Revolution, the structure of such arguments would collapse. Therefore, despite the slave trade’s being banned in the early 19th century, the continued process in which slaves escaped, were recaptured, or were born into slavery, necessitates the study of enslavement to adopt Kopytoff’s *commodity-as-process*, taking on a “perspective [of] slavery [that is] not as a fixed and unitary status, but as a process of social transformation that involves a succession of phases and changes in status” (Kopytoff 65).

The process of commodification is a preferable outlook on slavery, as opposed to static commodification, because it allows for the comprehensive understanding of the biography of the slave from both an emotional and physical standpoint. The emotional and physical standpoints of a slave’s lived experiences justify the revolution and the state of racism in today’s society. On the other hand, “the ‘commodification’ of the slave assumes an all-

encompassing master-slave dialectic that is arguably not an observable, historical phenomenon but rather 'a static abstraction, independent of time or place that we imagine by observing it as such.'... and it keeps us willfully ignorant of the lessons learned from comparative studies of slavery in the Americas" (Rinehart 31). When reading novels about the Haitian Revolution or slavery, one must prefer the more inclusive but less generalized definition of *commodity-as-process* which allows all lived experiences of slaves, whether the experiences were good or bad, to be acknowledged as a part of history, as well as the experiences of those with statuses that may not have been as clear, such as those of indentured servants. Slaves are treated in a process of a commodity because one recognizes their humanity, their ability to think, and their interactions. Often times, this humanity led to worst treatment than how the slave owner would have treated an object; moreover, such treatment towards a person instead of an object inherently makes the offense greater. Therefore, objectification and commodification are understatements. Furthermore, in today's world of micro aggressions and subconscious racism, black people and descendants of slaves are not commodified in the Marxian sense and traded for a numerical value; however, they do still face an unequal but shifting power dynamic that can best be categorized as a *commodity-as-process* as black people continue to preserve their culture through dance and hip-hop and fight for equal treatment and rights such as through the Black Lives Matter movement.

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