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The Contrast Between Moral Interaction and Amoral
Conduct in the Transatlantic Slave Trade

William Jenkins, a Captain aboard a slave-trading vessel the *Fanny*, departed Liverpool, England, in May of 1755 for the Gold Coast of Africa. After purchasing 171 enslaved Africans, Jenkins set out for the West Indies to sell the slaves for John Knight, a merchant in Liverpool and principal shareholder in this voyage¹. Knight had instructed Jenkins to sell for less than £30 sterling per slave. A merchant named Henry Laurens in Charleston, South Carolina, wrote to Jenkins in August of 1755 addressing a letter he had received as Laurens said, "from our worthy good Friend Mr. Knight which did not reach us 'till the 24th Ulto. In this he directs us to meet you with Letters at Barbadoes and St. Kitts to inform you how the price of Slaves holds with us telling us you have orders to proceed down here if you cant obtain £30." Laurens went on to explain to Jenkins that the price for slaves in Charleston could go up or down in the time between his letter being sent, and the arrival of Jenkins in the Caribbean, depending mainly upon whether or not war broke out between Britain and France. In concluding, Laurens offered that, "we wish you may be able so to govern yourself as to sit down at the most advantageous Market for our Friend which will be much more agreeable to us than the Commission arising from the Sales."² Jenkins, an agent in a vast network of exchange between traders in England and the New World, was being presented by Laurens with a back up plan should the Caribbean market be unfavorable: to sell the

¹ Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/> (accessed November 25th, 2016).

² Henry Laurens to William Jenkins, 17 March 1745, in *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, ed. Elizabeth Donnan (Washington, D.C., 1935), 4: 330-331 (document no. 185).

slaves in Charleston, as long as the tentative peace between Britain and France held. As it turned out, Laurens' letter served no purpose for the conduct of the trade. Jenkins was met with high prices for slaves in St. Kitts, formally known as St. Christopher Island, where he sold the 151 enslaved Africans that survived the middle passage. While insignificant in determining the outcome of the slave trade voyage, Laurens' letter is invaluable for shedding light upon relations between traders. Laurens regards the other trader, John Knight, as "a worthy good Friend". Furthermore, Laurens suggests that the profit motive at the heart of all economic activity was supplanted for him by a deeper desire to see the successful sale of a group of enslaved Africans on behalf of his "Friend".

It's difficult to reconcile the cordial and seemingly selfless content of Laurens' letter with the cold, and avaricious context within which it was situated. Even more so when one considers that the letter sent by Laurens was not a singular correspondence, and that it is representative of a wider theme within the documentary record of trade across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century. Along with Laurens, many other traders of the transatlantic exchange placed a similar emphasis upon civil relations with their peers, and moral conduct. For historian Kenneth Morgan the insistence of traders upon this conduct tied in to the establishment of trustworthiness and repute amongst their peers. In introducing a compilation of correspondences between transatlantic traders, Morgan states that "Piety and moral probity were often emphasized by successful traders as the concomitants of reputation and trust in the search for wealth."³ In other words, for transatlantic traders in the eighteenth century being reputable or trustworthy was strongly connected to how one was perceived morally. Returning to Laurens' letter to Captain Jenkins in August of 1755,

³ *The Bright-Meyler Papers: A Bristol West-India Connection, 1732-1787*, ed. Kenneth Morgan (New York, 2007): 87

the cordiality and goodwill expressed towards John Knight is exactly what Morgan is talking about: Laurens was trying to express his faithfulness to his trade partner in England, and establish his morality in the eyes of other traders in order to solidify his trustworthiness as a trader in the Atlantic slave trade.

Within the conditions of trade across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century trustworthiness was a prerequisite for entry into the exchange, and was signaled amongst the network of transatlantic traders through adherence to a moral code associated with the culture of gentility. In understanding the history of the slave trade across the Atlantic, this exploration serves to juxtapose the focus of traders upon an image of morality with the monumental moral transgressions being committed in the trade of enslaved Africans. Clearly slave traders were not simply amoral in that moral considerations were prominent in their own conduct, and in their evaluation of the conduct of their peers. With this in mind, how could these individuals have engaged in such an inhumane activity as the buying and selling of human lives within a brutal system of oppression? Was their morality selectively not applied to this aspect of their sphere of exchange? Or were rationalizations used to excuse this immoral conduct? To explore these questions of how morality functioned in the minds of slave traders, it is important first to establish the role of trust in the interaction between traders across the Atlantic Ocean.

Traders engaged in trade across the Atlantic in the eighteenth century, such as Laurens and Knight, were separated by thousands of miles of ocean, and in conducting trade this proved to be a significant obstacle for conveying information. Travel between the various hubs of Atlantic trade was uncommon for the individuals directing the exchange. Traders

in Bristol often stayed in Bristol and delegated tasks to connections in the West Indies or North America. Similarly, Merchants such as Henry Laurens remained in Charleston, only venturing to England at the outset of his merchant business partnership to establish trade relations. Information was conveyed amongst these individuals by letters entrusted to the captains of ships trading across the Atlantic. A letter written by Laurens to three trade correspondents in Bristol begins, "Gentlemen, Your kind favor of the 28th Decem now before us did not reach us till 14th March..."⁴ Laurens' remark reveals a three and a half month delay in receiving a letter from England in North America. If it is assumed that a letter sent by Laurens would have delayed a similar amount of time in reaching Bristol, this would suggest a 7 month delay between sending a message and receiving a reply.

These conditions clarify the context within which trade was being conducted. Trade correspondents in eighteenth century transatlantic exchange rarely, if ever, had face to face interaction, and a communication sent onboard a trade ship would have delayed months in arriving. As a result of this communicative disconnect, information that was vital to one's trade interest was difficult to obtain. Basic knowledge, such as the location of a trade vessel, was hard to extract from distant ports and constantly moving ship captains. Furthermore, assurance that the individuals on the other side of the Atlantic charged with receiving and selling the shipments from England and Africa in the New World were honestly fulfilling their role in the exchange was almost unattainable.

Laurens' role in selling the slaves that arrived on board slave ships sent from England depended heavily upon market conditions. As the quote that introduced this paper suggested, the market price for slaves could vary greatly within a matter of months.

⁴Laurens to Wells, Wharton and Doran, 1755, In Donnan 4: 319

Because of market volatility, Laurens was greatly concerned with predicting and controlling the quantity of slaves that would be arriving at a certain time in order to coordinate their arrival with favorable market conditions. Doing so required accurate and timely information on the movements of slave trading ships. The attempt by Laurens to track a ship called the *Emperor* is revealing of the difficulties in obtaining this information. In 1755 Laurens sent a letter on behalf of his trade company, Austin and Laurens, to two traders on St. Christopher Island regarding "...a Ship we are largely concerned in. She sailed from Cork for Malimba the 31st of July and we can get no tidings of her... was she to appear soon the prices with us might be some help as Slaves just now would sell very well."⁵ In this instance Laurens is trying to discern whether or not a slave ship will be arriving in Charleston, and this mattered to him because at that moment the market price for slaves was high in Charleston. Laurens' difficulty in tracking this shipment of slaves is indicative of the trade conditions of the time. Conveying information required an intricate transmission of words between multiple individuals, across seas, and through ports. If a letter arrived without information that Laurens needed, he had no way of knowing when the next letter would arrive.

As it was difficult for Laurens to learn of the movements of shipments that he was concerned in, traders in England faced similar difficulties in assessing the conduct of agents across the Atlantic in receiving and selling shipments. Traders like Knight were investing large sums of money in trade endeavors to the New World. A slave trading voyage, such as that of the Captain Jenkins on the *Fanny*, required 5 shareholders in order to raise the capital to fund the voyage. This large sum of money was then entrusted to the traders

⁵ Henry Laurens to Smith and Clifton 1755, in Donnan 4: p. 317

receiving the shipment on the other side of the Atlantic. It was important to the shareholders in England that merchants in the New World, like Laurens, would sell the cargo as best they could, and honestly balance the accounts. Exemplary of this communicative disconnect is an instance in which Richard Meyler II, a Bristol merchant engaged in trade to the West Indies, had trouble observing that the agents receiving his shipments of alcohol were honestly conducting their role in the exchange. Meyler wrote to his junior trade partner, Henry Bright, who at the time was in Jamaica, urging that “you sell in the best manner you can & as soon as possible after arrivall, for I am sensible that if it [cider and perry] lye long on hand there will be tiplage which will be called breakage.”⁶ Meyler was unable to obtain detailed information on the activities of those handling his goods in Jamaica. Within this informational disconnect, it is clear that Meyler suspects that agents in Jamaica, perhaps those engaged in offloading shipments and storing goods in warehouses until the sale could be completed, were engaged in “tiplage”, by which Meyler meant cracking open the bottles of cider and perry for the enjoyment of themselves and their coworkers, all the while recording the bottles that they drank as “breakage”, or having broken during shipment. This rather comedic instance, in which one can imagine a serious and prudent businessman, such as Meyler, expressing outrage that the dockworkers and porters engaged in lugging around his cargos, were having some fun by drinking the shipments of alcohol at his expense, also clarifies how distance shaped the conduct of the trade. The limited ability to obtain and convey information across great distances severely restricted the efforts of traders to keep track of their shipments, and ensure honest conduct of the trade.

⁶ Richard Meyler II to Henry Bright 1739, in Morgan: 158

The quotes of Meyler and Laurens serve to solidify an argument that eighteenth century trade across the Atlantic was conducted without much information on the activities of overseas agents selling arrived cargoes, or even the location of trading ships of great importance to the merchants. Morgan interprets the result of this difficulty by stating that, “Mutual warranted trust... reduced the moral hazard inherent in situations where merchants could not observe the immediate outcome of overseas agents’ actions.”⁷ Morgan means that the “moral hazard”, or opportunity for dishonest and greedy conduct, that existed within the informational chasm of the Atlantic heightened the importance of trust between individuals engaged in transatlantic trade. The role of trust comes across in the way that Laurens establishes himself, and his trading company, within the trade, and in the considerations of Bright and Meyler in deciding who to engage with in trade.

The lack of information, and resultant dependency upon trust that one will fulfill their role in the absence of supervision, meant that inclusion in the trade hinged upon trustworthiness. Laurens sought to bridge the communicative disconnect between England and South Carolina by visiting England in 1758 to establish his trustworthiness within the network of traders. While in England, many of the letters sent by Laurens are recalling of modern day sales pitches, with Laurens expounding the benefits of engaging in trade with his firm. These letters repeatedly place an emphasis upon trustworthiness and cooperation in attaining the best result for the interested parties. In writing to Isaac Hobhouse in Bristol, Laurens detailed the services that his company in South Carolina would offer before concluding that “any concerns you may be pleas’d to put under our

⁷ Morgan, *The Bright-Meyler Papers*: 86

direction we shall be careful to conduct with integrity and in the best manner for your advantage.”⁸ Similarly, in writing to Foster Cunliffe of Liverpool, Laurens finished, “we shall be very Glad of opportunity to open a Correspondance with your good self or your friends and shall endeavor to act so as may increase the same to mutual Interest.”⁹ Both ending remarks indicate the desire of Laurens to convey that he is accountable, cooperative, and will advance the interests of those trading with him without the need for supervision. In concluding with these remarks, it can be assumed that these traits made up a fundamental part of Laurens’ sales pitch for his new trading firm. . Furthermore, the wider context of Laurens visiting England to establish trade connections suggests that Laurens felt the need to form face-to-face relationships before embarking on a long-distance trade partnership. In face-to-face interactions, it is far easier to convey information and signal one’s trustworthiness, and Laurens must have considered this in deciding to go to England. This reinforces the argument that due to the informational disconnect in conducting trade across the Atlantic, trustworthiness and personal accountability came to be of the utmost importance. For this reason, Laurens acted strategically in personally visiting England to meet face-to-face with the partners he would be trading with. More concretely, the placement of assurances of his integrity and accountability in the conclusions of Laurens’ business proposals to the traders of England proves that establishing trust was fundamentally important to Laurens in forming his trade relationships across the Atlantic.

Early credit systems were prevalent on both sides of the Atlantic in the conduct of the trade. It was rare for a single trader in England to possess enough capital, or to be willing to invest all of it, in a trade voyage. For this reason, in funding trade voyages merchants in

⁸ Henry Laurens to Foster Cunliffe, 1749, in *Donnan* 4: 304

⁹ Henry Laurens to Isaac Hobhouse, 1749, in *Donnan* 4: 305

England would purchase a share in a jointly funded voyage, and this sometimes involved borrowing money to purchase a share. On the other side, plantation owners had liquid currency on hand during the harvest season when crops were selling, but invested all of it in cultivation during the planting season. This meant that in purchasing slaves, many transactions had to take place based on credit that the planters would pay when the crops were produced and sold. Within credit systems of the time, there was no measure of credibility such as today's credit score, and the assessment of one's ability to pay off debts was based purely on trust. The role of trust in early credit systems comes across in Meyler's advice to his trading partner Bright. Meyler entrusted Bright with conducting the sale of butter and beef arriving in Cork, England. In reference to this task assigned to Bright, Meyler requested that, "your best and utmost endeavours may be used to bring it to a profitable sale taking a special care who you trust, for if you trust those that cannot pay you twill occasion you to tarry long to gather in debts." ¹⁰ Meyler was urging that Bright should be selective in selling the trade goods, and that his decision of who to sell the butter and beef to should be based upon trust.

Both the care taken by Laurens to establish his trustworthiness at the outset of his business venture, and the emphasis placed by Meyler on trading only with individuals that could be trusted to pay debts, suggest an essential role for trust in trade efforts across the Atlantic at this time. Within the context of the informational disconnect between the areas engaged in trade across the Atlantic, it is now clear that trust was crucial to the execution of trade endeavors. This trustworthiness was signaled amongst the network of

¹⁰ Richard Meyler II to Henry Bright, 1739, in Morgan: 158

transatlantic traders through adherence to a moral code associated with the culture of gentility. To understand the role of morality in establishing trust it is important first to establish what is meant by morality: it's a "principle of right or wrong", or adherence to "high principles for proper conduct."¹¹ In one sense, for the landed gentry of this time period, and those aspiring to that elite status, materialism was a vice, and there were immoral connotations to the conduct of trade and the business engagements of a merchant. Thus in any projections of selflessness, generosity, or detachment from a materialistic motives, traders were adhering to an ethic, or part of the moral code of the gentile culture of the landed elite that they aspired to be. In another sense, immorality was more directly connected to financial instability and rejected for the enhanced risk of trading with unaccountable individuals. Both of these moral considerations were apparent in the correspondences between traders across the Atlantic, and demonstrate a concern with evaluating the morality of others, and projecting an image of morality for themselves.

By 1756, Henry Laurens was well established as a merchant within the transatlantic trade, with a wide network of correspondents, and a reliable flow of business and shipments to his company in South Carolina. His investments in travelling to England, and establishing trade relations came to fruition, and his many correspondences after 1748 depict a well connected merchant who in many instances had difficulty in decreasing the volume of trade coming his way in times of economic downturns, and went so far as to redirect surplus trade placed under his command to help establish merchants in South Carolina to succeed him. "When I recommended the House of Messrs. T. L. And Roger

¹¹Google search for "moral", <https://www.google.com/search?q=moral&oq=moral&aqs=chrome..69i57j69i59j0l4.1561j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8> accessed 11/4/16

Smith for the Sale of your African Cargoes be assured Gentlemen I had your Interest solely in view. I thought that from their connections and particularly from the great assistance, which they might have from their respective Fathers both in person and purse no House in Town was better qualified to make advantageous sales.”¹² This quote indicates the importance of

With the expansive experience and deep involvement that Laurens had in the Atlantic trade, and especially in the slave trade to South Carolina, his correspondences are representative of the exchange, and his actions surely set the tone for the conduct of other similarly engaged individuals in that he was a seasoned and successful merchant. In a correspondence to Samuel and William Vernon in 1756, Laurens gives his personal evaluation of Peter Manigault by stating, “As to Mr Manigault refusing to allow Capt Godfrey a Share in his Commission, you must highly commend him for it, he is a Gentleman that does many acts of Benevolence.”¹³ The contextual evidence as to why Manigault was right in refusing this commission to Godfrey is less important than the way in which Laurens praises this act that he looks upon positively. Here we see a well established trader describing one of his peers in the exchange as deeply benevolent, and of high enough status and repute to be considered a gentleman. Laurens’ quote here serves to introduce the idea that reciprocal moral conduct, and a culture of gentility were prevalent in the establishment and maintenance of trusting relationships between traders across the Atlantic. The positioning of Laurens within this trade gives further weight to the claim that his behavior within the trade is more widely representative of transatlantic trade relations.

¹² Henry Laurens to Rossand Mill, 1770, in *Donnan* Vol. IV pg. 434

¹³ Henry Laurens to Samuel and William Vernon, *in* *Donnan* Vol. III pg. 170

The theme of gentility, moral conduct, and generosity that arose in the previous paragraph served to determine both whether an individual should be deemed trustworthy and inducted in to trade relations, or vehemently denied personal accountability and excluded from the exchange. Firstly, in a 1768 correspondence to Richard Oswald of London, Henry Laurens advised that, "If a man is honest you may depend upon him remitting according to the times of Payment set forth in the Sales if he is tricky and avaricious you can't depend on him at all."¹⁴ In Laurens' advice to Oswald we see that being accepted as a trade partner was not just a matter of honesty or dishonesty. In the negative extreme here, Laurens implies that if one is not honest, that they are avaricious. This statement goes beyond the implication that this potential trade partner is perhaps not reliable enough to be traded with, to denouncing the very being of the individual as fundamentally materialistic and greedy. This depiction of the black sheep of the transatlantic trade network is revealing of how those engaged in the exchange portrayed materialism and self interest as traits rendering one unaccountable and thus excludable from trade relations. On the other hand, Laurens presents a characterization of a company of merchants to correspondents of his in Bristol named Clay and Habersham, suggesting that they "... embrace the first opportunity of writing to these Gentlemen and if you have an inclination for doing business in their way their friendship is worth cultivating, being a principle house in St. Kitts, and men of integrity and generosity."¹⁵ Here again, we have the other extreme where an individual deemed worthy of business relations is portrayed as meriting more than just trust, but also friendship in that the individuals are morally respectable due to their selfless and benevolent conduct. Both of these examples serve to

¹⁴ Laurens to Richard Oswald, 1768, *in* Donnan vol. IV pg. 463

¹⁵ Laurens to Clay and Habersham, 1767, *in* Donnan vol. IV pg. 419 - 420

clarify that trust was a basic necessity in transatlantic trade relations, and that fundamental characteristics meriting trust, such as honesty, and reliability, were founded in moral conduct.

Through the words of Laurens, a picture is starting to emerge here of the transatlantic traders as individuals that sought to project an outward appearance of moral conduct and reciprocity to establish basic relationships of trust. Exemplary of this theme is a tendency of transatlantic traders to send their male family members overseas to reside amongst the merchants and agents that they interacted with through their trade activities. Parallels can be drawn between this activity and a similar assurance of trust employed by European slave traders on the West Coast of Africa, in which a West African Prince was sent to reside upon the slave trading ship whilst the exchange of goods for slaves was completed. In both this case in West Africa, and the example here, exchange of kin served as both an assurance for the honest conduct of the trade, and as an opportunity for cultural sharing.

For transatlantic traders sending their kin to the distant places with which they were engaged in trade, it is understandable that the relations between both parties weren't as strained as the tense interactions between European slave ship captains and the rulers of coastal African kingdoms. However, the custom likely served a similar purpose in establishing trust through the cultivation of a shared culture of gentility between traders. Henry Bright contacted a group of individuals in North America in 1763, including Henry Laurens, Lawrence Read, William Fisher, James Griffin, Tarply and Thompson, in order to advise them of the imminent arrival of his nephew, "Lowbridge Bright who goes in a ship.. for North America and as he will be a stranger in your country must begg leave to introduce him to your acquaintance. Should he want any money to defer his expences whilst with you

please to supply him and his bills on me for the sums shall be open.” Bright is requesting hospitality for his relative from distant contacts that Bright was connected with through trade. Subsequent correspondences between Lowbridge Bright and Henry Bright reveal that many of these acquaintances were made, and Lowbridge reported back to Henry Bright in 1764, that, “many of your old acquaintance enquire after you, and by their civilities to me, shew their regard for you.” Here we see that Lowbridge Bright’s being sent overseas served as an opportunity for each of the traders and merchants in North America to pay their respects to the Bright family, and distinguish themselves as civil individuals. This activity then, served a purpose beyond the coercive assurance of trust that the same activity represented for the Europeans engaged in the slave trade with coastal West African Kingdoms. The practice of exchanging kin solidified a cultural connection in gentile and civil conduct, and founded the trusting relationships so crucial in this fragmented exchange.

While moral conduct provided a basis for the establishment of trust, in trade relations between Bristol and the West Indies, it was also directly connected to financial responsibility. For English merchants such as Meyles and Bright, the West Indies represented a region of promiscuity, with a climate associated with bad health and a propensity towards immoral conduct. In writing to Francis Bright in Jamaica, Meyler reveals his perception of the Caribbean islands by declaring to Francis, “you live at present in a wicked island yet there may be a Righteous lot in Sodom.”¹⁶ Meyler was suggesting that the environment surrounding Francis is full of sin, Meyler provided the caveat that a positive outcome could be extracted from that corrupt region only to further enforce his

¹⁶ Richard Meyler II to Francis Bright, 1748, in Morgan: 216

assertion that Francis was surrounded by temptation and that his commitment to moral rectitude was essential to any gain being made through engagements in the West Indies. This related to business relations in that the immoral activities perceived as commonplace in the West Indies, such as gambling, drinking, and prostitution, were directly related to financial instability. "If you lose your credit by sin all is lost forever but if you refrain 'twill be the making of you & make you shine in the world which will be all that is desired by your loving friend and kinsman."¹⁷ Here Meyler connects sin, or engagement in morally suspect activities with the loss of credibility. In the context of perceptions of Jamaica, this connection made sense in that immoral activities were associated with financial loss, and thus the inability to pay off debts which was so essential to maintaining trust and inclusion in the trade. "I hear you are well respected. Endeavour to maintain it by an honest sober diligent way. If you give yourself up to any vice you may depend upon being rejected and disdained by man altho never so much prais'd before, for sin is odious in the sight of wicked men altho they make jest of it in the present, yet they despise the man that's overcome therewith."¹⁸

The above establishes that trust was crucial in conducting trade across the Atlantic, and that the means of establishing this trust had a strong moral component: Established traders conducted themselves as generous, well intentioned, and overall morally probate human beings within the network of agents, traders, merchants, and captains of the transatlantic trade network. The emphasis recurrently placed upon morality in communications amongst the network may be seen as more deeply indicative of self perceptions held by

¹⁷ Richard Meyler II to Jeremiah Meyler, 1754, in Morgan: 296

¹⁸ Richard Meyler II to Jeremiah Meyler, 1754, in Morgan pg.387

these individuals. These apparent self perceptions contrast strongly with the true nature of the exchange, in which human beings were being bought and sold as commodities in an inhumane system of oppression. It's confounding that these traders who would go out of their way to look out for the kin of another trader living across an ocean, would simultaneously look away whilst an arrived cargo of enslaved Africans died in the middle passage, suffered in Charleston quarantine, or were sold to an oppressive plantation regime. This juxtaposition brings up questions as to how the slave trade functioned in the minds of it's perpetrators: Was morality not applied to the inhumane activities that transpired within the slave trade? In other words, was the slave trade exceptional from moral considerations applied to other aspects of life? Or, were ideas of morality applicable to all parts of life for these individuals, but certain rationalizations rendered the exchange of human lives morally acceptable to transatlantic traders? Instances of compassion, or at least the recognition of compassion as within the realm of relevant emotions, expressed by slave traders will be used explore these questions, and to problematize the assumption that the slave trade was simply exceptional from the moral considerations that were so prevalent in other parts of slave trader's existence.

At first glance, it seems as though the hypocrisy of slave traders in being so concerned with projecting and evaluating morality as a basis for trustworthiness in transatlantic trade endeavors, while being actively engaged in the violent oppression of enslaved Africans, went unnoticed by traders like Bright, Meyler, Laurens, and their wide networks of correspondents. References to morality were shown to be frequent when traders were referring to their own conduct, or the conduct of their agents and partners in trade, yet there is scant evidence that the inhumane practice of buying and selling human lives even

registered on the moral radars of traders. This is apparent in the language used to discuss enslaved people within the exchange, showing a perception of enslaved peoples as commodities.

A correspondence from Laurens to Knight in 1755 is representative of this theme. In updating Knight on the state of the market for slaves in South Carolina, Laurens notes that “the Emperor Capt. Gwynn has made a sad piece of work of it this Voyage, purchasd only 390 Slaves, buried of them 120, met with a violent Gale of Wind off this Baron the 8th of April which obligd him after lying too for seven days to bear away for Jamaica.”¹⁹ Further context is provided, along with Laurens’ interpretation of the fate of the emperor a week later in a message Laurens sent to Devonshire, Reeve, and Lloyd. In addressing the loss of the *Emperor’s* cargo to the Charleston market, Laurens speculates that the “mishap alone will be £2000 sterling out of the way of the Owners. We mean that her Slaves would have yielded so much more here than there but ‘tis fruitless to think what can’t be remedied.” For Laurens a ship in which 120 enslaved individuals perished is notable for the loss of a shipment that would have sold well in Charleston. It is clear that Laurens treated enslaved Africans as economic units, and the tone is economic and apathetic to suffering amongst other human beings. Since Laurens is conversing with various correspondents of his in these cold economic terms with reference to the death of enslaved Africans, this would imply that the culture of gentility and morality surrounding traders was selectively applied, and that the slave trade did not register as a sphere in which morality could be applied.

In light of exploring the acute awareness of transatlantic traders of their own morality and that of their peers, however, this does not seem conclusive. Trade correspondences

¹⁹ Henry Laurens to John Knight, 1755, in Donnan 4: 322

should have been purely economic as well, in that traders were communicating across the ocean to solidify trade interests. Yet moral considerations prevailed in establishing and maintaining trust in trade relations. It's hard to believe that the same moral orientation espoused by traders in addressing their trade relations could not have impinged upon the conduct of the trade itself.

A useful circumstance for developing this contrast arose when an enslaved girl brought to Rebellion Rhoad harbor in Charleston in June of 1756, arrived gravely ill. The notes included by Henry Laurens in the account of the sale reveal that she was "Sold for £180 but she being very ill with the foul disease we have agreed to pay for her care which may be £30,"²⁰ This quote by Laurens suggests perhaps a mild concern for the wellbeing of the suffering girl, but is difficult to distinguish Laurens' caring action from his financial commitment to completing an honest sale. The girl had been sold to Benjamin Yarnold, and in the following days, she passed away. Upon hearing this, the Vernons wrote to Laurens, "You observe to us that the girl sold Benja. Yarnold is since Dead, that you had prevaild on him to submit the matter to Arbitration, that is whether he should pay for her or not. We dont imagine whether he bought the Girl at Public or private Sale that you warranted her to be perfectly sound and well – wch is not customary for new Slaves, and whether we are not intitled to as much compassion as he is – or whether he cant afford to bear such a Loss as well as we are cant say."²¹ Here, the economic calculus that typically encompasses the sale of slaves in the minds of these traders is complicated by moral considerations. Primarily, the Vernons were expressing concern over who rightfully should pay for what they saw as

²⁰ Henry Laurens, Account of Sale for the Sloop *Hare* Capt. Caleb Godfrey, 1756. In Morgan, pg. 161

²¹ Samuel and William Vernon to Henry Laurens, 1756, in Donnan 3: pg. 171

a lost commodity. Yet more subtly, the correspondence brings in an element of compassion. In doing so, Vernon presents compassion as a possible emotional reaction to this tragedy, which would imply recognition of the cruelty inherent within the situation. While limited in scope in that this consideration by the Vernons applied to the death of an enslaved individual, and not to the wider immorality of the slave trade, it serves to blur the line between the moral considerations that predominated other aspects of slave trader's lives, and the slave trade its self.

Going further in complicating the idea that conduct of the slave trade was exceptional from moral considerations for traders, it is worth considering that Laurens gave up the Slave trade at the age of 54 after generating wealth and repute through his participation. In writing to a Quaker merchant in Philadelphia, William Fisher, in 1764, Laurens explained, "I have been largely concern'd in the African Trade. I quitted the Profits arising from that gainful Branch principally because of many Acts from the Masters and others concern'd toward the wretched Negroes from the Time of purchasing to that of selling them again some of which, altho with my knowledge were uncontrollable."²² Since Laurens is writing in this quote to a prominent religious figure, it should be expected that Laurens would seek to portray his intentions in quitting the slave trade as humanitarian. Even so, this quote grants at the very least a conscientiousness of Laurens in understanding the immorality of the slave trade on a certain level. Within this claim to morality, Laurens deems some of the acts committed against slaves as uncontrollable. For Laurens to have thought atrocities committed against enslaved individuals were beyond control, it is possible that the exploitation and oppression of slavery were so deeply ingrained in his world view that

²² Henry Laurens to William Fisher 1768, in Donnan 4: page 426

actions towards enslaved individuals were only unacceptable once they went beyond a certain threshold.

The slave trade emerged during an era of trade in which wealth was attainable in new ways as colonies were established across the Atlantic Ocean, and tenuous lines of communication developed across larger distances and through more complex conditions. Within this context, individuals in Europe were connected to individuals in the Caribbean and North America through networks of exchange, and the pursuit of wealth. These new connections were forced to discover other means of cooperation without the spatial proximity, or the ability to rapidly communicate that had traditionally allowed for the establishment of trust. In response to these conditions, conformity to a shared morality allowed traders to signal trust to one another and confidently conduct trade ventures across the Atlantic. Resultantly, within correspondences between traders discussing the slave trade there is an emphasis placed upon moral conduct that contrasts sharply with the activities being discussed, and the nature of the trade. Within this contradiction, questions arise over the functioning of morality in the eyes of those conducting the slave trade across the Atlantic. In exploring these questions, it can be suggested that traders did not simply overlook the application of moral principles in the slave trade, but in certain moments recognized the immorality of the trading human lives, or the possibility of feeling compassion for the suffering of enslaved humans. With this complication, other interpretations are possible. Perhaps slave traders were willing to undergo a compromise in their morality for the potential financial gain available in the slave trade. This would suggest that as wider social movements proclaimed the immorality of slavery, the loss in moral standing associated with participation in the slave trade was no longer offset by the

potential for financial gain, and that this contributed to the gradual decline of the slave trade in the early nineteenth century.

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