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Title: Perspectives of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Investigative Question:

Who, besides slave traders and slave owners, benefitted from the transatlantic slave trade?

Contextual Essay:

The transatlantic slave trade was an institution that often reaped direct economic benefits for those involved in the purchasing, transporting, and capturing of slaves. However, the benefits were not confined to these groups alone; countless everyday workers increased their livelihood in indirect ways from this trade. This economic impact reached many people including those in the American colonies, Europe, and even some in Africa.

When examining the effect of the trade on the New England colonies between the years of 1750 and 1776, it becomes clear that while slaves may have been rarely used to produce goods in this part of the world, "New England's maritime commerce and shipping were a function of the commodity production of African slaves" (Inikori & Engerman, 1992 pg. 11). By investigating merely one facet of this industry, shipbuilding, it is found that roughly between twenty and thirty percent of the New England work force was involved in ship construction. Close to forty percent of all ships trading slaves from Africa to the British American Colonies were built in the American Colonies (Bailey, 1992, pg. 217). "Between 1763 and 1775, shipbuilding in the Thirteen Colonies totaled about 40,000 measured tons annually and was worth 300,000 pounds sterling" (Price 1976: 722). The slave trade increased the value of producing ships. With such a vast number of people involved in this production, the New England colonies were able to gain significant economical advantages from such a trade.

Landing at slave depots on the African coast, Newport, Rhode Islanders trading for slaves became known as "rum-runners." "When the Newport trade reached its peak just before the Revolution, its vessels were carrying 200,000 gallons (of rum) a year to Africa" (Farrow, Lang, & Frank, 2005, pg.98). The distilleries of New England not only produced rum that was sometimes directly traded for slaves, they created much of it based on the importation of molasses from the West Indies. In 1770, some 6.5 million gallons of molasses were imported. Some 140 distilleries (in New England) turned out 5 million gallons of rum (Bailey, 1992, pg. 217). While many New Englanders may have

been employed directly in distilling the molasses, many others would have been involved as complimentary businesses such as bottle making and the shipping the final product, rum.

In considering the commodity exports of New England between 1768-1762, the West Indies received 63 percent of these exports (Bailey, 1992, pg. 213). When considering that “about 90 percent of the population of the West Indies was African”, (Bailey, pg. 205) the aforementioned numbers of New England exports there gains more relevance in the analysis of the effect the transatlantic slave trade had on the industries of New England. According to data compiled by McCusker and Menard, the West Indies were the primary destination for fish, pork, beef, wood products, and grain products. Therefore, people involved in the production of these commodities benefitted from the slave trade because most of their goods were purchased by a colony that existed because of that very trade.

Unlike the New England colonies, the role of the slave trade on the economy of the West Indies and the Southern colonies is directly evident. The southern plantation owners used slaves to produce goods which were then exported for economic gain. Rice, Indigo, tobacco, and sugar cane plantations were common place throughout these colonies. These raw materials “required the plantation and hordes of labor” (Williams, 2002, pg. 6). To maximize profits, planters soon found that employing Negro slaves was the most cost effective way to produce raw materials. This opinion was expressed by the Barbados governor when he stated “three blacks were better and cheaper than one white man” (Williams, pg. 6). “Without (slavery) the great development of the... plantation, between 1650 – 1850, would have been impossible”(Williams, pg. 7), and the plantation itself was the economic backbone of these colonies.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, another group of people benefitted from the transatlantic slave trade, the African traders themselves. “Those who raided and took captives, and the African traders who bought and sold the captives, all realized private gains (Inikori and Engerman, 1992, pg. 2). Not only were these people advancing themselves economically, “the export centers on the African coast benefitted” (Inkori and Engerman, pg. 2) as well. The stability of these areas created a more productive environment for economic success. Local farmers were able to rely on slave ships to purchase their goods for the long journey on the Middle Passage. Therefore, even in the area where the trade was devastating millions of people, benefits for some of the population can still be found.

In addition to supporting obvious industries involved in the shipping and cargo of the slave trade, there were countless service and production industries that also flourished. These included gunsmiths, banks, insurance companies, and citizens of major slave port cities such as Liverpool and Bristol. It is estimated that more than

160,000 guns were exported to Africa from England which would almost entirely be traded for the purchase of slaves. The fact that 1L sterling of guns had more purchase power than 1L sterling of other goods (Inikori, 2002, pg. 53) provides substantial proof that they were a heavily sought after commodity in West Africa. Therefore, gun manufacturers were among the many beneficiaries of the slave trade in Great Britain. Others industries include banks, insurance companies, and the people of major European slave port cities such as Liverpool and Bristol. Barclay's and Lloyd's Bank as well as Heywood Bank were both started with capital that was made directly from trading in slaves. The development of the steam engine was also aided by capital from the transatlantic slave trade (Darity, 1992, pg. 257). Even insurance companies capitalized on the trade by insuring the cargo of slave ships as well as the ships themselves. Many businesses and people in England were benefitting from the trade. So much gain was accorded by the transatlantic slave trade that an examination of the public buildings built in the 18th century in slave port cities, the town hall of Liverpool being a foremost one, reveals the wealth and power gained by many through the trade.

From the common laborer to the wealthy landowner, millions of people, employed in thousands of different jobs, living in all parts of the Atlantic world, were directly or indirectly gaining from the existence of the transatlantic slave trade. The positive economic impact of this institution on such a vast number of people leads to insights into how such an inhumane situation can be tolerated for hundreds of years. Thus, looking at history from a number of perspectives can lead to a better understanding of why certain events may have taken place.

Annotated Bibliography

Bailey, R. (1992). The Slave(ry) Trade and the Development of Capitalism in the United States:

The Textile Industry in New England. In S. Engerman and J. Inikori (Ed), *The Atlantic Slave Trade Effects of Economies, Societies, and Peoples, in Africa, the Americas, and Europe*, (205-235). Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Summary: The essay by Bailey specifically sets out ways that New Englanders benefited from the slave trade. By using the shipbuilding, spermaceti candle making, and distilling of rum industries, he sets out an argument that shows the economic benefits slave trade could have on industries that weren't directly involved in the trade. The value of this essay is in its strong evidence that the everyday man benefited from the trade

Darity, W. (1992) British Industry and the West Indies Plantation In S. Engerman and J. Inikori

(Ed), *The Atlantic Slave Trade Effects of Economies, Societies, and Peoples, in Africa, the Americas, and Europe*, (247- 273). Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Summary: This essay by Darity argues that the ratio of profits made by the slave trade was much greater than many scholars have claimed. He argues against marginalizing the profits because when compared to the national income and investment in the Western world it is a significant value. The value of this essay is in its ability to show some actual hard profits from the trade itself and industries surrounding the trade.

Engerman, L.S. and Inikori, E.J. (1992). Introduction: Gainers and Losers in the Atlantic Slave

Trade. In S. Engerman and J Inikori (Ed), *The Atlantic Slave Trade Effects of Economies, Societies, and Peoples, in Africa, the Americas, and Europe*, (1-17). Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Summary: In this introduction to the book, a synopsis of key arguments about the benefits of the slave trade to industries in the Atlantic world is presented. The value of the introduction is allowing the teacher to gain an overview of the different perspectives on benefits reaped by the Western World through the transatlantic slave trade.

Farrow, A., Frank, J., and Lang, J. (2005) *Complicity*. New York: Random House Inc.

Summary: A book that shows how the Northern colonies promoted, prolonged, and profited from slavery. In researching, specific interest was paid to the chapter "Newport Rum, African Slaves". This chapter reveals how Rhode Island profited from the distillation of molasses and used it in trading with slaves. This book solidifies the idea that the mainland colonies as a whole benefited from the transatlantic slave trade.

Inikori, Joseph, (2002). Guns for Slaves. In Northup, D. (Ed.) *The Atlantic Slave Trade (Second Edition)*, (52-55). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Summary: This essay by Inikori focuses on the amount and value of guns shipped from Britain to Africa during the time of the transatlantic slave trade. The value of this essay is in its revelation that guns held more trading value than other goods when trading in Africa for slaves.

Metzler, Milton (1984). *A History in their Own Words The Black Americans*. New York, N.Y. HarperCollins Publishers.

Summary: This compilation of first-hand accounts allows the reader to analyze slavery from a personal viewpoint of actual slaves. The value of this book for the lesson is in the firsthand account of Equiano relating his personal experience of being captured, transported, and sold. Also within this book is a firsthand account of a slave auction the United States. These two eyewitness reports are used to impress upon the students that slaves were humans with emotions, desires, etc.

Northup, David (2002). *The Atlantic Slave Trade (Second Edition)*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Summary: This compilation of essays explores everything from the reasons why Africans became the dominant labor force in the Americas, all the way to examining forces that brought the trade to an end. The value of these essays is giving a solid background and knowledge of the transatlantic slave trade.

Williams, Eric (2002). Economics not Racism, as the Root of Slavery. In Northup, D. (Ed.) *The Atlantic Slave Trade (Second Edition)*, (2-7). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Summary: This essay argues that African slavery in the “New World” was purely a function of economics. He makes the case that the plantations found throughout the American colonies were economic successes because of the institution of slavery. The value of this essay is in examining slavery as a way to maximize profits and benefit the industries revolving around plantation farming.