

CHILDREN, RACE, AND MEMORY
IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

by

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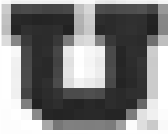
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ABSTRACT

In the antebellum South, race defined work, family, recreation, and interaction with others. Rules and expectations structuring racial identity were not innate; children were socialized to them. Early on black and white children were indoctrinated to understand race in certain ways; in school, church, and their homes, children learned to classify themselves and others in the antebellum social structure.

This thesis focuses on transmission of racial identity. How race was taught and learned; how peers, parents, teachers, and others instilled racial identity; how children were introduced to their racial identity in relation to the “other”; and how, when, and where children learned to perform their own racial identities are discussed. I explore how children of both races became aware of racial patterns and implemented racial behavior in their lives. I examine how interracial relationships shaped childrens’ attitudes about slavery.

Recollections by former slaves and free whites form the foundation of my research. Several of these sources were written long after childhood, but they are no less valuable. Memory is crucial in understanding race relations. How planters and slaves interpreted childhood encounters with racial difference, how individuals coped

with and justified master/slave relationships, and how adults romanticized childhood memories of slavery to validate a society structured on race are all examined in this work.

Scholars examining children in slavery often stress hardship and vulnerability; but none focus specifically on how young slaves understood race and slavery, or how childhood memories instilled racial identity later in life. Nor do these works address attitudes of white children toward black peers or the slave system. Most historians do not incorporate experiences of black and white children into a single interpretive frame. However, it is crucial to study children of both races relationally.

Other historians have used similar source material, but none focus on perceptions and memories of children toward doctrines of race. My work conceptualizes memories of children and roots their identities in experience. Children who witnessed slavery often followed examples taught and instructions instilled in them. I explore how children learned authority and subordination, superiority and inferiority, and white versus black.

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INTRODUCTION

On May 30, 1803, Lunsford Lane was born a slave on a North Carolina plantation. Lane was the only son of slave parents; in his boyhood, Lane recalled “playing with the other boys and girls, colored and white, in the yard...I knew no difference between myself and the white children; nor did they seem to know any in turn.” In his narrative, Lane remembered that as a child he was not aware of any racial differences between himself and the master’s children, and the white children he associated with did not recognize differences either. This realization came later for both the black and white children on the plantation where Lane grew up; Lane did not discover the “difference between myself and my master’s white children” until he began to work, and “they began ordering me about, and were told to do so by my master and mistress.”¹

Mary Norcott Bryan gave a very different picture of her childhood as a white planter’s daughter growing up on Woodlawn Plantation. Born in North Carolina in April 1841, Bryan’s memoir, *A Grandmother’s Recollection of Dixie*, was published in 1912 in the form of letters to her children and grandchildren. Of the black servants at Woodlawn, she remembered “our man Tony,” “our cook, Rachel,” and “our faithful servant, Hollen.” In none of her recollections did Bryan mention the black children of the plantation, let alone black playmates or friends in her childhood years. To her posterity Bryan only

¹ Lunsford Lane “The Narrative of Lunsford Lane” in *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, William L. Andrews, ed. (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 101-102.

remembered the faithful and happy servants of the household; the young slaves did not appear to have belonged to her world.²

While Lane recalled his childhood days playing with black and white children alike on the plantation until he went to work in the fields, most white memoirs told a different tale of plantation childhood. White memories of childhood rarely focused on the black children who also resided on the plantation; instead they recalled the black nurses and house servants they encountered as children in the big house. When whites like Mary Bryan did recall slave children, they remembered being in a position of authority over them, rocking young slave babies in their cradles and making clothes for them. Bryan mostly recalled the servants she associated with directly: the cook, the family's driver, and their servant Hollen. Bryan recorded no memory of black children as playmates.

These two recollections frame various questions about children and race in the Antebellum South. Why did white and black adults remember their childhoods differently? Why did blacks tend to remember their white playmates, while whites often left no recollection of having befriended the black slaves on the plantation? How was race a factor in their reminiscences? How did children learn about race differently, and how did that knowledge affect their memories of childhood? This paper will explore these and other questions in an investigation of the source material and questions that instruct inquiry. While there is a wide degree of variability for each case studied here, there are also apparent patterns in memories of childhood from both white and black authors. Plantation size, region, and inclinations of masters/parents all affected childhood

² "Mary Norcott Bryan: A Grandmother's Recollection of Dixie," New Bern, N.C.: Owen G. Dunn, Printer, *Documenting the American South*, [archive]; available from University of North Carolina University Library, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/bryan/bryan.html>; Internet; accessed 08 April 2009.

experiences and how they were remembered. Memories reflect how children were conditioned to view race and slavery, and how outside influences shaped their perceptions of slavery and race. Reminiscences also indicate how planters and slaves interpreted their childhood encounters with racial difference. In such a study as this one cannot differentiate systematically between region, plantation size, cash crop and other factors; therefore while sources for this research are drawn mainly from large plantations in the upper South, other sources are taken from various states and regions of the Southern United States in order to more fully understand the construct of racial identity.

The historiography on black and white children of the antebellum period has mostly been kept separate by historians, who generally do not incorporate the experiences of black and white children into a single interpretive frame. Yet black and white children knew and associated with one another on the plantation. While their life experiences were not the same, black and white children on Southern plantations often shared a childhood in common until they were old enough to learn and understand their racial identities. Paradoxically, many more memoirs of slave children are available than of white children, and this presents a problem when attempting to strike a balance in the narrative. In this thesis, I will attempt to create parallel categories of analysis, keeping in mind that the literature on the subject is imbalanced. Records of children's experiences during childhood, if they exist, are not easily available to historians. However, adults recorded their memories of childhood experiences and from these sources we can glimpse the ways they learned race and identity as children growing up on the plantations of the antebellum South.

The argument I put forth in this work is that slave and white children played together, grew up together, and developed a natural affinity for each other, but underneath all that was the system of racial hierarchy, which they had to learn and navigate as they grew older in order to survive in the natural order of things in the plantation South. Regardless of what friendships and affection might have developed between them, black children had to learn to discipline their words and their actions, so to not give any information coming from the slave quarters which might be considered insubordinate; white children were required to perpetuate their place of superiority in society, and they were taught to believe and treat the slaves, even those they may have come to love as friends, as inferior to themselves. As children they had to be taught societal rules, because racial identity was not inherent to them. For both black and white children, this education was taught in a variety of settings, by a variety of people, and in a variety of ways.

BLACK CHILDREN AND RACE

Mary Jenkins Schwartz, in her work *Born in Bondage*, argues that slaveholders often interfered with their slaves' families and constantly tried to reinforce the notion that slave children did not belong to their parents but to the master of the household. While slave parents tried to help their children understand the racial hierarchy of the Southern plantation system, masters often confused children by undermining the loyalty children felt for their parents and the slave community by affording them special attention and favors. "The owner's attention to details of child rearing curtailed the capacity of the slave family to create a cultural space where slaves could be critical of servitude and slaveholders and could teach their children standards of behavior that differed from those owners." Slave children were required to "negotiate a dangerous world" in trying to balance obedience and loyalty to parents, the slave community and their masters.¹

Oftentimes that negotiation failed, as when Harriet Jacobs' brother was called by both his father and mistress at once. When this happened, he "hesitated between the two; being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress. When my father reproved him for it, he said 'You both called me, and I didn't know which I ought to go to first.' 'You are *my* child,' replied our father, 'and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through

¹ Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Mass. & London, England: Harvard University Press, 2000), 77-78.

fire and water.”² Slave children, as this example shows, were required from an early age to understand the complex hierarchy that faced them, and often they were reproofed no matter which figure of authority they chose to obey.

Slave children had a difficult time not only negotiating between figures of authority, but also understanding the place they occupied in the world of the Southern plantation. Booker T. Washington was a slave on a Virginia plantation until his emancipation after the Civil War. He wrote in his autobiography *Up From Slavery*, published in 1901, that when asked later in life what “sports and pastimes” he was involved in during his youth, he recalls only work and chores as a child with rarely any time to play. He reflected that “until that question was asked it had never occurred to me that there was no period of my life that was devoted to play.”³ Washington’s story reflects the experience of many slaves; forced to work from a very early age, sometimes as young as three or four, young slave children had little time for leisure activities. Young children were assigned tasks such as retrieving firewood, keeping yards clean, toting water for thirsty field hands, and most often caring for infants and toddlers in the slave quarters. None of these chores was restricted to one sex or the other, and boys and girls shared these tasks. Along with these daily responsibilities, slave children were also subjected to threats of beating, heavy labor, and family separation. Because of these experiences for many slave children, Wilma King argues in her work *Stolen Childhood* that slave children did not have any childhood at all, since they were subjected to the

² Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Harriet Jacobs Writing as Linda Brent* (New York: Signet Classic, a division of Penguin Group, 2000), 5-6

³ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 42.

same authority, punishments and separations as slave adults, and forced to grow up much faster than their white peers.⁴

Depending on a master's treatment of his slaves and how he taught his children to consider them, blacks had varying reactions to their memories of the plantation during childhood. Slaves who did not experience much in the way of hardships – they were not beaten much, the slaves around them were not cruelly treated, nor did they have a lot of work to do – remembered more details surrounding their childhoods, such as family, friends, teachings they received, and details about the places they lived. Children who were beaten or saw other slaves treated poorly often only remembered the cruelty of their masters, how much work they had to do, and no happiness in their childhood. While some like Lunsford Lane were not aware of racial separations, others remembered from early in their lives that there was a difference between themselves and white children, and they were marked as inferior to their white peers. Childhood was filled with work and degradation, as Thomas Jones recalled: “I was born a slave...I was made to feel in my boyhood's first experience that I was inferior and degraded, and that I must pass through life in a dependent and suffering condition.” Born on a plantation near Wilmington, North Carolina in 1806, Jones belonged to a “very severe and cruel master” who gave his slaves little food and clothing. No doubt his master's mindset was transferred to the white children on the plantation, who also created the sense of inferiority in Jones. Because of his master's harsh treatment toward his slaves, Jones's first memories of

⁴ Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth Century America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

childhood in slavery were dismal; nor did his treatment improve during his time as a slave.⁵

Even if black children were not themselves the object of a master's anger and they were treated well as children, many became vicariously aware of their slave status through the punishments and treatment of other slaves on the plantation. Often children were first exposed to the cruelties of slavery as they witnessed a loved one take the brunt of a punishment. For William Wells Brown, a young house servant on a Missouri plantation, the harshness of slavery came to him at four o'clock every morning, when he heard the whip upon the slaves late to work in the fields. The full horror came to him one morning when he recognized the voice of the slave being punished:

At half past four, a horn was blown by the overseer, which was the signal to commence work; and every one that was not on the spot at the time, had to receive ten lashes from the negro-whip, with which the overseer always went armed. My mother was a field hand, and one morning was ten or fifteen minutes behind the others in getting into the field. As soon as she reached the spot where they were at work, the overseer commenced whipping her. She cried, "Oh! pray--Oh! pray--Oh! pray"--these are generally the words of slaves, when imploring mercy at the hands of their oppressors. I heard her voice, and knew it, and jumped out of my bunk, and went to the door. Though the field was some distance from the house, I could hear every crack of the whip, and every groan and cry of my poor mother. I remained at the door, not daring to venture any farther. The cold chills ran over me, and I wept aloud. After giving her ten lashes, the sound of the whip ceased, and I returned to my bed, and found no consolation but in my tears. It was not yet daylight.⁶

Brown, though a house servant, understood the sounds of the plantation; he knew the sound of the horn, what it meant, and what would happen if the field hands disobeyed it.

⁵ Thomas Jones "The Experience of Rev. Thomas H. Jones who was a Slave for Forty Three years" in *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews (Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 211.

⁶ William W. Brown, "Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself," Boston: Published at the Anti-Slavery Office, 1847, University of North Carolina Library, *Documenting the American South*, [archive]; available from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brown47/brown47.html>; Internet; accessed 25 April 2009.

Brown started out to presumably help his mother when he heard her voice, but stayed at the door of the plantation house, knowing that he would receive the same discipline for trying to prevent his mother's punishment. Slave children, such as Brown, understood early in their youth that unless they obeyed the master's will they would be subjected to the same punishments as the adult slaves. This realization overshadowed their childhood experiences, making them wary of the whites who surrounded them.

Slave narratives often recalled the gnawing hunger blacks faced as children and the poor quality of clothing and food they received, which also caused much misery and reinforced the dehumanization they faced. Amos Long recalled to his WPA interviewer in 1939 that his mistress "use to throw bread out to us jes' like we was dogs; we went hongry back den a heap o' times."⁷ Frederick Douglass, living on a large plantation in rural Maryland as a young boy, remembered suffering "much more from cold," being "kept almost naked – no shoes, no stockings, no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a coarse tow linen shirt, reaching only to my knees."⁸ Better clothing and a larger ration of food was a benefit to growing older for slave children when they began to work in the fields at twelve or thirteen. While the added supplies were welcome, work also brought on a new set of challenges. These experiences resonate with King's argument that slave children, inundated with work, hunger, cold, and cruel masters had little experience of childhood and grew up quickly in the face of tribulation.

Evidence indicates, however, that while many black children experienced dreadful conditions in their youth, other slave children not only had a childhood but a

⁷ Amos Long, interviewed by B.K. Harris, Seaboard, N.C. 22 February 1939 in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, North Carolina and South Carolina Narratives*, ed. George P. Rawick, Supplement, Series 1, Volume 11 (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1977), 30.

⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, George Stade, consulting editorial director, Barnes and Noble Classics (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2003), 36.

relatively happy one. Before ten to twelve years of age, many children had minimal tasks to complete if any at all, which left much of their time free to play and explore as they wished. In her 1890s autobiography, Lucy Delaney remembered “those happy days! Slavery had no horror then for me, as I played about the place with the same joyful freedom as the little white children.” George Fleming told his WPA interviewer in 1937: “Mercy on us, dem was de happy days; dey was heavenly days...us lil’ kids played lots of games den...befo’ we was big enough to work, ‘cept tote water and de like of dat, we played sech things as marbles.” Annie Burton stated in her 1909 reminiscences:

The memory of my happy, care-free childhood days on the plantation, with my little white and black companions, is often with me...On the plantation there were ten white children and fourteen colored children. Our days were spent roaming about from plantation to plantation, not knowing or caring what things were going on in the great world outside our little realm. Planting time and harvest time were happy days for us. How often at the harvest time the planters discovered cornstalks missing from the ends of the rows, and blamed the crows! We were called the “little fairy devils.” To the sweet potatoes and peanuts and sugar cane we also helped ourselves.⁹

Delaney, Fleming, and Burton were all born on large plantations, and all of them lived beyond the Civil War. They described in their remembrances that their masters treated their slaves with kindness. Burton maintained she was mostly ignored as a child; because of the Civil War, her master and mistress didn’t have the time to notice her or her playmates. Not only did these former slaves have relatively carefree childhoods, they also remember playing with the white children on the plantation, just as Lunsford Lane

⁹ Lucy Delany “From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or Struggles for Freedom” in *Six Women’s Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 13; George Fleming, interviewed by Elmer Turnage, Spartanburg, S.C., 28 October 1937 in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, North Carolina and South Carolina Narratives*, ed. George P. Rawick, Supplement, Series 1, Volume 11 (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1977), 127; Annie L. Burton, “Memories of Childhood’s Slavery Days by Annie L. Burton” (Boston: Ross Publishing Company, 1909), University of North Carolina University Library, *Documenting the American South*, [archive]; available from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/burton/burton.html>; Internet; accessed 08 April 2009.

did. While no historians argue that childhood in slavery was entirely happy, these narratives illustrate that in spite of the discomforts and harshness of slavery, black children – with the help of the slave community – did make the best of what they had available to them and found what happiness they could in their circumstances.

Regardless of these memories of happy childhoods, most black children were taught about race from an early age and had to learn quickly that they were considered inferior to the white planter and his family and must act the part. Part of this education was learning their value as property over their value as people. John Quincy Adams, born a slave in Virginia in 1845, recalled in his narrative: “I will now tell you of my old master's family....You would see them going around sometimes and put their hands on one of the little negroes, and say, ‘here is \$1,000, or \$1,500 or \$2,000.’ How much a negro was worth then, and now not worth 25 cents a piece.”¹⁰ Educating their slaves to see themselves as commodities was a way for masters to exercise control over their young merchandise and teach them subordination. Walter Johnson argues in his work *Soul by Soul* that “from an early age slaves’ bodies were shaped to their slavery. Their growth was tracked against their value.... [T]he process by which a child was made into a slave was often quite brutal.” Children learned early that as chattel with a price, their value as a profit making commodity outweighed their value as a person. Because of this, children along with members of the slave community lived in constant fear that they or

¹⁰ John Quincy Adams, “Narrative of the Life of John Quincy Adams, When in Slavery and Now as a Freedman,” Harrisburg, PA: Sieg, Printer and Stationer, 1872, University of North Carolina University Library, *Documenting the American South*, [archive]; available from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/adams/adams.html>; Internet; accessed 24 April 2009.

any member of their community could be sold at any time, and masters often used this threat to govern their slaves and teach slave children the ways of the plantation.¹¹

Slave children did not usually learn racial inferiority from parents and kin in the slave quarters, but from the whites on the plantation. Harriet Jacobs recalled, “I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away. They [Harriet’s parents] lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment.”¹² As Jacobs’ comment shows and as Marie Jenkins Schwartz argues, masters were convinced that young slave children did not belong to their parents. They were owned by the master of the plantation and tended by their parents only for safe keeping.

Schwartz argues that “slave parents as a result of their servitude forfeited the right to shape their sons’ and daughters’ lives. Slaveowners considered themselves the rightful heads of plantation households, responsible for directing the lives of all members whether black or white.”¹³ Throughout her work, Schwartz discusses the various ways white plantation owners interfered with their slaves’ lives: in pregnancy, childbirth, and the rearing of children in the quarters. Slave parents tried as best they could to keep slave children unaware of their status as property for as long as possible. In Jacobs’ case, she was six years old when she learned of her position in Southern society.

Harriet Jacobs was born on a plantation in North Carolina in 1813. Shortly before she turned fifteen she was sent to live with her mistress’s sister and husband, Dr. Flint.

¹¹ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 20-22.

¹² Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1-5.

¹³ Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 3.

As young as she was, she began to be pursued by her master, who was relentless until she sought a relationship with another man. Although her parents and later her grandmother tried to shield her from the harsh realities of slavery, Harriet eventually came to understand her status from her white masters. Dr. Flint continually reminded her that she was his property and must “subject to his will in all things.” When her mother died, and especially after she became the slave of the Flints, Harriet became acutely aware of her inferior place as a slave.¹⁴

Jacobs’ narrative supports John Blassingame’s claim that black children did not feel racially inferior within the slave community as they were surrounded by those of their own race and circumstance. Blassingame argues in *The Slave Community* that slave parents “could cushion the shock of bondage for [their children], help them to understand their situation, teach them values different from those their masters tried to instill in them, and give them a referent for self-esteem other than the master.”¹⁵ Parents helped slave children realize their worth within the context of the slave community, which they needed reinforced as they grew, started work, and became part of the bigger plantation world. As black children grew older, white masters – as well as their children, instilled with the racial ideology of their elders – made certain young slaves knew their place in the social order of the plantation. The slave community, then, was essential in rearing black children to both understand and accept their position in life as a slave; but the community also gave them the courage and resilience to recognize their worth despite the fact they were considered inferior by their white masters.

¹⁴ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 3, 15.

¹⁵ John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, 2nd ed. (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 151.

Although slave children were not necessarily taught they were inferior within the slave community, children were socialized to understand racial differences and the hierarchy of the plantation within the quarters and to abide by its laws. Families and extended kin networks were an important part of a slave child's education regarding the conventions of the slave society. Grandparents were often key figures in bringing a slave child up in the ways of the community. Thomas Webber claims that "It was often from the grandparents that quarter children acquired most of their religious beliefs, their knowledge of signs and conjur, and their practice of herbal medicine...Respected for their age and for their position as head of the family, grandparents often enjoyed a venerated authority in the family....Grandparents also played an important educational role in transmitting the songs and stories of Africa and of plantation history."¹⁶ The older generations, especially those not working in the fields, took time to educate children through stories, song, and other means. While some historians claim that slave children did not have solid or clear family arrangements in the quarters, most children in slave narratives remember having some family structure in their lives, whether it was an immediate family or relatives of their extended family.¹⁷ Family was an important part of children's socialization of racial differences, and through family they received the encouragement they needed to succeed in a racialized world.

Ira Berlin argues in *Generations of Captivity* that a "Second Middle Passage," that is, the movement of slaves and plantations westward as cotton and sugar began to dominate the Southern economy, had a great impact on slaves throughout the South, including those in the upper South. He states

¹⁶ Thomas Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), 175.

¹⁷ Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 256-257.

As the coffles of slaves trudged from the seaboard South by the thousands, slave spouses came to understand the fragility of the marriage bond, and slave parents came to realize that their teenaged children could disappear, never to be seen again. Sales to the interior shattered approximately one slave marriage in three and separated one fifth of all children under fourteen from one or both of their parents. The trauma of loss weighed as heavily on those left behind as on those traded away for few slave families escaped the catastrophic effects of the massive deportation. If a husband or wife, son or daughter, brother or sister did not disappear into the interior, then a niece or nephew or some neighbor's child did.¹⁸

Parents in the upper South states lived in constant fear of their children being sold South. Because no one knew when that might happen or to whom, black families and communities tried to teach children the ways of the community when they were young. Sale of strong young slaves from the upper to lower South shattered many families; despite this, slave parents and kin struggled to create strong family bonds in the quarters and give children a sense of strength and self-worth.

Religion also helped many young slaves develop a sense of worth and purpose beyond a world that offered little of either to them. Children were taught religious principles from an early age. Many slave owners were concerned for the Christianizing of their slaves, and often brought white preachers to their plantations to preach or took the slaves to church. Masters often believed that Christianity was a form of social control over their slaves. The slave community, while it embraced Christianity, also incorporated African practices and cultural customs into their worship. Albert Raboteau argues that “in the New World slave control was based on the eradication of all forms of African culture because of their power to unify the slaves and thus enable them to resist or rebel. Nevertheless, African beliefs and customs persisted and were transmitted by

¹⁸ Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass & London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 214.

slaves to their descendants.”¹⁹ African American religious customs came from a variety of backgrounds, from which slaves synthesized and created their own form of religion; many slaves had had contact with Christianity, Islam, or traditional African religious practices before they were brought to the Americas.²⁰ Charles Joyner states that

Despite a large number of ‘survivals’ of African cultural patterns, what is most obvious from a truly Afrocentric perspective is the creativity of slave culture...Most of the slaves’ culture was neither ‘retained’ from African nor ‘adopted’ from white slaveholders. Rather, it was created by the slaves from a convergence of various African cultural patterns, white cultural influence, and the necessities demanded by a new environment.²¹

This creative cultural blending gave religion in the slave quarters a unique perspective on life, God, and how to overcome the sorrows of bondage.

Children were included in religious practices and rituals and learned about God and heaven from parents and others in the slave community. One young slave remembered: “My father started me off praying. Every Wednesday night when he came to see us, as soon as it was time for us to go to bed he always called me to him and made me kneel down between his knees and say my prayers....The old slaves didn’t know nothing about books but they did know God and knowing Him they called on Him in their trouble and distress and I can testify that He heard them.”²² Slaves believed that religion helped them through the hard times in life, and as parents and guardians they wanted to give their children the ability to call on God when they were in distress; this

¹⁹ Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 4.

²⁰ Charles E. Orser Jr. “The Archeology of African American Slave Religion” in *Southern Crossroads: Perspectives on Religion and Culture*, Walter H. Conser Jr. and Rodger M. Payne, eds. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 44; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 5-7.

²¹ Charles Joyner, “‘Believer I Know’: The Emergence of African American Christianity” in *African American Christianity: Essays in History*, Paul E. Johnson, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 36.

²² Unknown author, “Preacher from a God-fearing Plantation” in *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Negro Ex-Slaves*, Social Science Source Documents, No. 2 (Nashville, TN: Social Science Institute, Fisk University, 1945),148.

slave learned to do so, and he gained confidence that if he turned to God in trouble and sorrow his prayers would be heard.

How religious a slave community was depended in part on the slaveowner. Once southern clergy began to find support for slavery in Bible passages, the fears that slaves would liken baptism with freedom dissipated and slaveholders relaxed their policies regarding Christian preaching and worship among their slaves. While some plantation masters gave “considerable latitude to preach and worship...because...they could moderate any unruly or seditious activity through church discipline,” others felt that “black men and women could exploit the privileges that they earned on the basis of their religious commitment for revolutionary purposes.”²³ Planters who felt that religion could be used for “revolutionary purposes” were not off the mark. As Charles Joyner argues, all of the “major slave insurrections of the Old South – those of Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner, and Denmark Vesey – were planned under the cover of...religious associations.”²⁴ In some instances, slaves used religion as a revolutionary tool to gather supporters under a common cause in order to break free of their slave bonds. This form of religion was different than that preached in the white churches, which taught subordination and acceptance of their slave status.

While one slave remembered the plantation he grew up on being considered “the most religious of any in that part of the country,” another remembered her Methodist master as a “mighty mean one....On Sundays they would go to church and leave me there to clean the house and cook dinner....When they got back from church I always had the

²³ Charles F. Irons, *The Origins of Proslavery Christianity: White and Black Evangelicals in Colonial and Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 109, 130.

²⁴ Joyner, “‘Believer I Know’: The Emergence of African American Christianity” in *African American Christianity*, 27.

meal ready.”²⁵ Although some slaveholders controlled even the children’s access to religion, on larger plantations they had less power over slave religious practices, and the slave community worshipped independently, sometimes in secret.

Religious teachings for children varied depending on who was teaching them. White preachers and teachers read the Bible as it supported the peculiar institution; they hoped slave children learned to be obedient to masters and content in their position in life. Slave parents, on the other hand, taught their children that passages in the Bible and some Christian doctrines could be quoted in favor of the slaves’ plight. The slaves “could identify with Moses leading the children of Israel out of enslavement in Egypt after the Lord had visited seven years of plagues upon the slaveholders. They could identify with the crucified Jesus, suffering through his time on the cross....”²⁶ Thomas Webber argues that

So strong was the conviction concerning the falsehoods contained in the white preaching and religious instruction that most slaves did not put much stock in the Bible as they knew it from their masters. ‘They generally believe there is somewhere a real Bible, that came from God; but they frequently say the Bible now used is master’s Bible, the most they hear from it being, “Servants obey your masters.”’²⁷

Slave children were therefore exposed to two different interpretations of Christian beliefs, and they had to navigate between them. As Marie Jenkins Schwartz argues, “neither slaveholders nor parents could force slave children to accept their interpretations of scripture, but both attempted to require children’s attention to religious matters.”²⁸ Thus

²⁵ Unknown author, “Preacher from a God-fearing Plantation,” 172; Unknown author, “Sixty-five Years a ‘Washer and Ironer’” in *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Negro Ex-Slaves*, Social Science Source Documents, No. 2 (Nashville, TN: Social Science Institute, Fisk University, 1945), 185.

²⁶ Joyner, “‘Believer I Know’: The Emergence of African American Christianity” in *African American Christianity*, 26.

²⁷ Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, 82.

²⁸ Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 122.

religion was another instance in the continued struggle between parents and slaveowners to construct a slave child's identity and place within the racial hierarchy of the plantation South.

While many slaves attended white meetings with their masters, some slave communities held their own services within the quarters regularly as well. Because there were laws forbidding religious meetings among slaves in many parts of the South, these meetings were often held in secret and have been termed by historians the "invisible institution." Slaves' meetings were often much more boisterous than white church services, and often including singing, shouting, clapping, and sometimes dancing. Because of this, slaves took extra measures in order to retain secrecy. They used methods such as meeting in secluded places, hanging quilts and rags, using an overturned iron kettle or pot, or speaking into or over a vessel of water to drown the sound.²⁹ One slave recalled:

Meetings back there (during slavery time) meant more than they do now. Then everybody's heart was in tune and when they called on God they made heaven ring. It was more than just Sunday meeting and then no more Godliness for a week. They would steal off to the fields and in the thickets there, with heads together around a kettle to deaden the sound, they called on God out of heavy hearts. I was small but I witnessed all these things. My mother always took us little ones along because she was afraid something might happen to us.³⁰

The slaves on this plantation used a kettle to deaden any of the sound they might make as they were praising God. Children, such as the young boy in the example above, were included in these meetings as well; "the need for secrecy even dictated that children keep quiet about what went on in the slave quarters. 'My master used to ask us children, recalled one former slave, "'Do your folks pray at night?' We said 'No' cause our folks

²⁹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 215.

³⁰ Unknown author, "Preacher from a God-fearing Plantation," 156.

had told us what to say. But the Lord have mercy, there was plenty of that going on. They'd pray, "Lord, deliver us from under bondage."³¹ In religious matters, children were told to keep quiet about the slaves meeting in secret and even praying to be delivered from bondage in order to protect the community. Children witnessed the effects of religion on adults in the quarters, and realized how important God was to their parents and others they were close to. These memories and religious experiences stayed with the children in later years. As they recorded their experiences in slavery, many ex-slaves included religious teachings in their accounts.

In white churches, blacks were taught to always be obedient to their masters, and by doing so they would receive their reward in heaven. Charles C. Jones, in *A Catechism for Colored Persons*, told servants:

Servants must *honor and obey* their Masters and Mistresses, and do their best to please them in all things, so that there shall be no occasion to find fault with or punish them. Let Servants serve their Masters just as faithfully behind their backs as before their faces. God is present to see them, if their Masters are not. They must not be Eye-Servants, and men-pleasers, but seek in all they do to please God their Master in Heaven. Especially all *Christian* Servants, must be an example of obedience and honesty, otherwise their Masters will not believe they are Christians, but hypocrites; and hypocrites they will be.³²

The Catechism for Colored Persons is similar in many ways to a catechism that might be given to any persons willing to join a church or search for God. However, toward the end of this catechism are two sections: the *Duties of Masters to Servants* and the *Duties of Servants to Masters*. That these two sections are in the catechism show how whites tried to condition their slaves to endure the physical, emotional, spiritual, and physiological torments of slavery; by first showing what a master must do for his servants, Charles

³¹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 216.

³² Charles C. Jones, *Catechism for Colored Persons* (Charleston: Observer Office Press, 1834), 95.

Jones gave the indication that this was as important if not more important than what a slave must do for his master, and that they should come to expect such treatment from their masters. The fact that these instructions are included in a catechism also indicates that slaves' obeying their masters was a religious duty, which pleased God.

Even though whites showed in the catechism what servants could expect from their masters, they contradicted that counsel by justifying the cruelties of a hard master. Whites taught servants that no matter how horrible a master was, a slave could not seek revenge at his own hand, but God would ensure the owner received his just reward in heaven. Slaves were told to endure whatever their master may inflict (while still expecting the master to provide for their needs) because they would then be pleasing in the sight of God and also receive their own reward. Slave children and adults learned these principles; religion could be a part of their lives as long as religious ideas did not interfere with their contentment in bondage.³³

Slaves often rejected their masters' form of Christianity, and they resisted in different ways with their religious worship. They believed that "for the members of the quarter community the immorality of the slave system suspended moral considerations with regard to actions towards whites."³⁴ Slaves could not follow a moral code in events and circumstances over which they had no control, and they believed that because of the irreligious system which held them bound they were under no obligation to act as Christians to those slaveholders who did not return the consideration. Therefore, such practices as stealing, lying, deceitfulness, and even murder, usually considered moral vices, were not considered sinful and some even regarded them as "virtues to slaves when

³³ Irons, *Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 168.

³⁴ Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, 87-88.

dealing with whites.”³⁵ Because of the unfair system of slavery they were subjected to, slaves felt God would punish the slaveowners for their participation in such immoral behavior, while slaves, unable to control or prevent their circumstances, would be shown mercy by God in the afterlife.

Black preachers were preferred by the slave community over white preachers. White preachers often focused on teaching slaves obedience to their masters and long-suffering in their afflictions, as Charles Jones did, black preachers often preached the same things in order to protect their fellow slaves from the lash; as a slave himself a black minister “understood their tribulations and was accepted as a counselor and arbiter in the quarters.”³⁶ Black preachers could conduct the meetings of the “invisible institution” away from white scrutiny, thus giving them an honored place in the quarters. In Virginia among evangelicals, according to Charles Irons, black preachers enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy away from white control over black congregations; whites rarely kept records of black preachers, who were often itinerant and operated outside the supervision of white evangelicals. Irons asserts after Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831, which Turner claimed was brought to pass because of religious conviction, white evangelicals monitored black ministers much more carefully and “remained interested in making evangelicalism attractive to African Americans. But the new objective was not fellowship; it was security.”³⁷ While some whites held the notion that religion could be used as a form of social control, they also knew the dangers of religious ideas of equality that could lead to events like Turner’s revolt. Because of this, slave preachers and their

³⁵ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 296; Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers*, 88.

³⁶ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 131.

³⁷ Irons, *Origins of Proslavery Christianity*, 153.

congregations had to carefully monitor their words and actions; the slave preacher “who verged too close on a gospel of equality within earshot of whites was in trouble.”³⁸

Spirituals were also an important part of slave religion, and showed some African retention of customs among slaves. Spirituals helped slaves, young and old alike, to express sufferings, joys, and news through song. While slave spirituals did not refer to slavery directly, they represented a slave’s feelings about various events. As John Blassingame writes, spirituals

were composed in the fields, in the kitchen, at the loom, in the cabin at night, and were inspired by some sad or awe-inspiring event. The death of a beloved one, even one of the master’s family, the hardness of a master or his cruelty, the selling of friends or relatives, and heart-rending separations, a camp-meeting, a great revival, the sadness or loneliness of old age, unusual phenomena such as the bursting of a comet, – any of these might be sources of inspiration.³⁹

Slaves sang spirituals about escape and freedom, sorrows and trials, anger and dissatisfaction, and sometimes the songs even served as secret means of communication and warning between slaves in the field. Spirituals almost always contained references to Bible stories and heaven. As a young child on Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, Frederick Douglass recalled, “To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery....If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, and on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul....I have sometimes thought that the mere

³⁸ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 232.

³⁹ A.E. Perkins, “Negro Spirituals from the Far South,” in *Journal of American Folklore* XXXV. (July-Sept. 1922): 223; quoted in Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 139.

hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.”⁴⁰

Albert Raboteau claims that

the flexible, improvisational structure of the spirituals gave them the capacity to fit an individual slave’s specific experience into the consciousness of the group. One person’s sorrow or joy became everyone’s through song. Singing the spirituals was therefore both an intensely personal and vivid communal experience in which an individual received consolation for sorrow and gained a heightening of joy because his experience was shared.⁴¹

Children also shared in this joy and sorrow; spirituals and religious practices had a powerful impact on slave children of the plantation. They kept those teachings and feelings with them and remembered them as they recorded their experiences years later.

⁴⁰ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. George Stade, consulting editorial director, Barnes and Noble Classics (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2003), 26.

⁴¹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 246.

WHITE CHILDREN AND MEMORY

Lorri Glover argues in her work *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* that because white boys – and by extension white girls as well – witnessed daily the power of race, they learned from the time they were young that whiteness gave them superiority over non-whites, and every time they associated with the slaves on the plantation, they experienced power over them. Racial identity was “an unspoken assumption, hardened by the routine, even reflexive, exercise of power over African Americans.”¹ White children were encouraged to apply this power over the slave children on the plantation on a regular basis, reinforcing their superiority and the slaves’ inferiority.

As slavery became an increasingly Southern institution after the American Revolution, slaveholders and their constituents became more concerned with justifying chattel slavery. Particularly when abolitionists appeared in force in the 1820s, proslavery racial theory solidified and expanded in the Southern mind. George Frederickson argues that “by the middle of the 1830s the full impact of the abolitionist argument had been felt in the South....The abolitionist charge that slavery was inherently sinful was now met increasingly by the unequivocal claim that slavery was ‘a positive good.’”² As slaveholders sought to validate their way of life, planters, along with educators, ministers,

¹ Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 27.

² George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny 1817-1914*, 2nd ed. (Middletown, Connecticut: The Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 46.

newspapers, and other sources, reinforced in their children the good attributes of slavery, and taught them how to defend it. As their generation of children grew, they had to defend their loyalty to Southern culture against outside pressures that their elders had not faced.

An example of the generational switch from compromise to defense can be seen in the Tucker family of Virginia. St. George Tucker supported the abolition of slavery but also “bore the mark of the racial values of his age.” While he wanted Virginia to abolish slavery, he also proposed that freed slaves be denied political and civil rights and then wait for them to voluntarily leave the state. Thus, “Tucker advocated gradual emancipation coupled with ethnic cleansing of sort.” His sons Beverly and Henry, on the other hand, “grew up to become unapologetic defenders of slavery.” As abolition became more radical and the line between anti- and proslavery advocates became more rigidly drawn, the generation growing up in the antebellum period learned from many sources to defend their way of life against outside attack.³

In 1833, Richard Colfax published a pamphlet entitled *Evidence against the views of the abolitionists, consisting of physical and moral proofs, of the natural inferiority of the negroes*. Colfax presented a comprehensive argument for the inferiority of African Americans, contending against the abolitionists’ arguments “that negroes and white men belong to one and the same species, and 2d, that their known want of intellect and mental capacity arises from their deficiency of education and from the peculiar habits that slavery has entailed upon them.” Colfax concluded that he could counter abolitionist arguments “by demonstrating to the public, that the physical and mental differences between negroes and white men, are sufficient to warrant us in affirming that they have

³ Glover, *Southern Sons*, 168.

descended from distinct origins, and that therefore no alteration of the social condition of the negro can be expected to create any change in his *nature*.”⁴ Literature circulating throughout the South in the antebellum period reinforced the notion of social, psychological, and biological African American inferiority, and that slavery was a “positive good” for Southern society.

Youth also learned to defend their society based on racial hierarchy in their schooling. In an address given to the Alpha Pi Delta Society on July 14, 1858, William H. Stiles addressed the growing divide between North and South:

Not only are the *circumstances* under which we are assembled peculiar, but the *times* in which we meet, so far at least as respects the political condition of our country, interesting in the extreme. There was a period in the earlier stages of our government, when no sectional animosities divided the people of this wide-spread union, when there were no institutions peculiar to one section which did not exist in another, when Southern youth could with impunity be committed for instruction to Northern mind, and when under the sacred and inviolate charter of our liberties, we dwelt together without distinction of locality, in harmony and peace. But mark now the contrast. Sectional divisions agitate our country to its centre. An institution once universal is now abolished by one section and retained by another. This circumstance alone has converted fraternal friendship into deadly hostility. The Constitution disregarded and annulled has been supplanted by “Higher Law” and the former union and harmony seems ready to give place at any moment to dissolution and war.⁵

Loyalty to and preservation of the Southern way of life inundated every aspect of a white child’s education and upbringing. Defending against those who attacked the South’s peculiar institution was an important part of that preservation.

⁴ Richard H. Colfax, “Evidence Against the Views of the Abolitionists, Consisting of Physical and Moral Proofs, of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes,” (New York: James T.M. Bleakley, Publisher, 1833); *The Library of Congress American Memory*, [archive]; available from [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/t?ammem/murray:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(lcrbmrpt2401div0\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/t?ammem/murray:@field(DOCID+@lit(lcrbmrpt2401div0))); Internet; accessed 24 April 2009.

⁵ William H. Stiles, *Southern Education For Southern Youth: An Address before the Alpha Pi Delta Society of the Cherokee Baptist College, Delivered at the Commencement on the 14th July, 1858* (Savannah: Power Press of George N. Nicols, 1858), 3-4.

Racial perceptions were taught to white children from an early age. Even if white children did not control their slave companions in a master-slave relationship, there was an overarching sense of paternalism toward them. Frederick Douglass remembered during his childhood that, while he was required to “drive up the cows at evening, keep the fowls out of the garden, keep the front yard clean, and run of errands for my old master’s daughter,” he also had a lot of leisure time, which he spent “helping Master Daniel Lloyd in finding his birds, after he had shot them. My connection with Master Daniel was of some advantage to me. He became quite attached to me, and was a sort of protector of me. He would not allow the older boys to impose upon me, and would divide his cakes with me.”⁶ Douglass and Lloyd were friends who spendt time together hunting. But, as they were both aware of the rules of slavery, Lloyd most likely never offered Douglass an opportunity to shoot the gun, and Douglass never asked. Douglass went along with Lloyd as a servant, and both boys knew this. Yet Douglass’s relationship with Lloyd proved advantageous to him as well, as Lloyd protected Douglass from the older boys, as a master protects a slave. While friends to some extent, these boys had been trained to understand the slave system, and observed the regulations of a paternalistic society accordingly.

Masters wanted to be seen as paternalistic toward their slave charges, and they taught their children to be so as well. Lorri Glover argues that “fathers schooled their sons, through examples as well as directives, on cultivating paternalistic attitudes.” She uses the example of a letter John Ball Sr. sent to his son John Jr., who wrote, ““always have in mind that our first charitable attentions are due to our slaves.”” Glover states that “young men absorbed this ethic of duty, condescension, and exploitation. They came to

⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative*, 36.

believe that their families, black and white, benefited from bondage.”⁷ Plantation owners wanted their children to take care of the slaves first and foremost to make a profit; but slaveowners believed that they were benevolent to their slaves as well, and taught their children to provide for the slaves because of their inferiority, thus reinforcing the idea of superiority in the white children’s minds.

This sense of paternalism supports Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s argument in his work *Southern Honor*. Brown maintains that in Southern society, honor was the key variable for white planters to maintain control and retain their power over slaves and society. Along with this culture of honor came a culture of shame; when a slave disobeyed or a small farmer showed disrespect, Southern planters often felt it a direct affront to their honor, and acted accordingly. The order of patriarchy in Southern society was dependent on this system of honor. Brown states that “policing one’s own ethical sphere was the natural complement of the patriarchal order. When Southerners spoke of liberty, they generally meant the birthright to self-determination of one’s own place in society, not the freedom to defy sacred conventions, challenge long-held assumptions, or propose another scheme of moral or political order.”⁸ In this sense, planters taught their children that they had an inherent ability and responsibility to keep slaves and those of the lower class in their place, and if any tried to rise above or challenge their authority, they were to defend their honor and exercise paternalism over them, reinforcing the hierarchy of society.

Children learned their racial identity as the natural order of the plantation South.

While honor was mixed into the equation, children learned that black people were

⁷ Glover, *Southern Sons*, 177.

⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 371.

naturally inferior to white people, and therefore black people should know and accept their place in the society. White children learned this from many different sources; because white Southerners believed that blacks were naturally inferior and they must be looked after, white children learned as they grew that this was the natural way of things and they must accept and practice this identity to truly conform to Southern society.

Children also learned these notions of racial ideology in school, and evidence from many black narratives indicates that upon white children's entrance into school a turning point came in the relationship between white and black peers. Eugene Genovese states "at that point the difference in condition became manifest, for the black children often wanted to go too, and the white children demanded that they be allowed to."⁹ Parents then had to intervene, and children black and white learned a lesson in racial identity. Steven Mintz quotes a young master who had been playmates with Charles, a Virginia slave: "It is customary in nearly all households in the South for the white and black children connected with each other to play together. The trial...comes when the young Negroes who have hitherto been on this democratic footing with the young whites are presently deserted by their...companions, who enter upon school-life...ceasing to associate with their swarthy comrades any longer, meet them in the future with the air of master."¹⁰ No longer playmates, black children became slaves and entered the slave world, while white children became masters, entering school and solidifying their learning of racial superiority. This young master recognized that transformation in white

⁹ Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, 1974), 517.

¹⁰ Quoted in Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 104.

and black children as they grew older; but according to him, the only soul who suffered from this transition was the black child, who now had a master rather than a friend.

In Virginia, according to Brenda Stevenson, parents “heavily invested in the traditional order of southern society, [and] tried to exclude the influence of ‘foreign’ textbooks, teachers, and administrators from their schools and academies....For scholars, professors, or students to assert [against slavery] at a time when pro-slavery and abolitionist rhetoric threatened to destroy national unity would have been inexcusable. Since there essentially was little or no tolerance of abolitionist thought among Loudon County whites..., parents were adamant that their children act accordingly.”¹¹ White education, whether in a classroom or brought to the plantation by a tutor, reinforced the racial identities of white children by perpetuating the rhetoric of racial superiority over black slaves. Parents made sure their children were taught the ideologies of race relations in the South and children often learned through their schooling the proper relationship between a white master and his black slave.

James Curry, born a slave in North Carolina, recalled that as a domestic servant he “played with the master’s children, and we loved one another like brothers.” When he turned about sixteen years old, however, and the master’s children were sent to school, they returned with “the love of power...cultivated in their hearts by their parents, the whip is put into their hands, and they soon regard the negro in no other light than as a slave.”¹² In white recollections, school years only got a passing recognition, and children did not recall the lessons they learned. But black children who remained on the

¹¹ Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 114-115.

¹² James Curry, “Narrative of James Curry,” in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies*, John W. Blassingame, ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977 [2002 printing]), 130.

plantation noticed and commented on the difference they saw in their childhood friends. As with the young boy in Mintz's quotation and James Curry, something happened when white children went away to school which caused them to forget the equality of their black playmates at home and foster a new relationship as master and slave.

While racial superiority was not necessarily a subject taught to white children in their lessons, the social construct of race was further instilled in them when they left the plantation and went away to school. Previously, they had spent much of their time among black and white children alike, and everyone was treated on more or less equal ground. This interaction got little or no attention from plantation owners, and black and white children matured as friends. But when white children went away to school black children were no longer their peers; the only interaction white children may have had at school with blacks was as a master to a slave. This relationship was reinforced by the way the white child watched his schoolmates, teachers, and other white people talk about and treat blacks. In George Emmett's work, *Young Tom's Schooldays*, Emmett gives an interesting example of this. Young Tom spends his days on the plantation of his father, creating mischief with his friend, Chowder Loll, the son of a black slave on the plantation. When young Tom is sent to school, he takes Chowder Loll, whom he affectionately calls Lollipop, with him. The exchange between Tom and the matron at the dormitory is telling:

"Here is the dormitory. There is your bed, Master Wildrake, and there is yours, Master Miggs."

"But where is Lollipop to sleep, not on the floor, surely?"

"Oh no, a bed is made for him in Simeon's room."

"And who is Simeon, ma'am?"

"A sort of odd man about the place," returned the matron. "He's gardener, and coachman, and porter, too, when he's wanted."

"Was it Simeon who drove us from the station?" asked Tom.

“Yes.”

“Poor Lollipop,” muttered our hero, “he’ll have a nice time of it with that surly beggar, I’d have him sent home again, only I know he’d rather put up with anything than leave me.”¹³

While Emmett’s book was written in 1870, the story was set in antebellum times and shows how Southerners like Emmett chose to remember the “old slave days.” Young Tom was concerned because Lollipop did not have a place to sleep and he got a glimpse for the first time of what his relationship was to be with his friend at the school. Lollipop did not get a bed in the dormitory but had to share a room with another black servant away from the white students. Later in the story Tom goes looking for Lollipop but he cannot find him, and he is told that it is forbidden that he should have such communication with the servants at the school anyway. While Tom appears to be a true friend to Lollipop, from this short passage one can also see that Tom has had instilled in him some of the paternal notions of planters in the antebellum period. Though Tom feels sorry for Lollipop, he believes that his faithful servant will “put up with anything rather than leave me,” echoing the pro-slavery rhetoric that slaves were most happy with their masters.

College students also learned at school how they should defend their way of life. In a lecture “Delivered Before the Institute of Education of Hampden Sydney College, at its Anniversary Meeting, September 24, 1835,” Mr. Lucian Minor gave the following advice to the students:

...The storm so lately (and perhaps even yet) impending from the north, and several other conspicuous ebullitions of fanaticism, are clearly traceable to the perversion of a text in our Declaration of Independence and Bills of Rights, detached from its natural connexion with kindred and qualifying truths, by minds uninstructed in the *general principles* of civil and political right... Young gentlemen, foster-sons of the venerable institution near us!

¹³ George Emmett, *Young Tom’s Schooldays* (London: Hogarth House, 1870), 22-23.

Some, if not all of you, are destined by your opportunities, and by bosoms glowing with honorable ambition, and beating high with the consciousness of talent, for a conspicuous part in the drama of life...but permit me to suggest, that if you will devote the powers which nature and education have gifted you, to the patriot task of purifying and expanding the minds of your countrymen – besides enjoying in your latter days that sweetest of earthly thoughts, the thought of a life spent in usefulness – you may have gathered laurels compared with which, all the chaplets ever won in the tilt-yard of vulgar ambition are paltry weeds.¹⁴

Not only did Minor reinforce the Southern way of life by belittling the opinions of the North, he also urged the young men receiving their education at Hampden Sydney College to teach others this way of life, to help all Southerners, whether educated or not, see that the plantation system and the institution of slavery were noble. Long before the first shots were fired in the American Civil War, Southerners already fought what they saw as a direct assault upon their way of life. Because of this defense, Southern perceptions of racial hierarchy became more ingrained and more defined as the antebellum period went on; George Fredrickson states that “the patriarchal plantation was the best model for society in general, because the cement of all enduring social relationships was the pattern of responsibility and dependence that existed in the family and on the idealized plantation.”¹⁵

Minor was not the only one who gave this advice to students. Throughout the antebellum period, students received the same advice to defend their institutions and honor as Southerners and shun the opinions and agenda of their Northern counterparts. In 1848, at the Cokesbury Institute in South Carolina, A. Means directed all Southerners

¹⁴ Lucian Minor, Esq., *An Address on Education, as Connected with the Permanence of our Republican Institutions: Delivered Before the Institute of Education of Hampden Sydney College, at its Anniversary Meeting, September 24, 1835, on the Invitation of that body* (Richmond, VA: Printed by T.W. White, 1835), 8-10.

¹⁵ Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 59.

to support Southern schools and institutions, for only those who truly understood the Southern way of life could teach and instill it in the rising generations.

Although, then, we cheerfully award the need of distinction to whom it is due, without reference to soil or latitude, we must be pardoned for demurring to the claim of *exclusive* superiority, either on the part of the North or East, and for advocating the importance of *home Institutions*, where the sameness of feeling and of interest shall exist between the student and his preceptor; where no latitudinarian heresies, as violative of liberty and the constitution, or subversive of the rights and security of the South, shall be insidiously instilled into the generous and unsuspecting minds of our warm-hearted youth, and where, too, no heartless jibes and significant allusions in regard to “Southern institutions” and “Southern Sensitiveness,” shall continue to grate upon their ears through the whole term of their literary pupilage.¹⁶

This Southern way of life also included teaching children their racial identity, both black and white. Part of white children’s education included the understanding that slaves were inferior and that it was acceptable to keep them in bondage because they were children and needed to be looked after. As white children learned this principle, black children inadvertently learned they were considered inferior; it did not take formal schooling to understand this concept.

Parents also had to teach their children the racial order as they left the plantation and entered the world. Parents had to teach their children they could no longer play or associate with the black children as equals. Nineteenth-century schools were expected to teach “patriotism and civic responsibility and to mold moral character.”¹⁷ Parents “who posses[ed] the ability to educate their children, ought certainly to feel the responsibility which rest[ed] upon them, as well from a due regard to society, as parental affection.”¹⁸

¹⁶ A. Means, A.M., M.D., *An Address Designed to enforce the Importance of Sanctified Learning and Home Institutions to the South, Delivered Friday, June 30th, 1848, Before the Amosopic and Phi-Gamma Societies, Cokesbury Institute, S.C.* (Charleston: Printed by Burges & James, 1848), 22-23.

¹⁷ Kristine Ashton, “Perpetuated Inferiority: Racism in Reconstruction Textbooks” in *The Thetean*, Volume 28, (1999): 31.

¹⁸ Georgia Home Gazette, “Education,” *Southern School Journal*, ed. E.H. Myers, vol. II, no. 7 (July, 1854): 104-105.

As a benefit to society as well as for their own well-being, parents should not let their children associate with those who would hinder their children's learning or stain their moral character. Children learned these notions of superiority from society, school, and their parents.

The most influential teachers in a white child's life were his parents.

Slaveholders taught their young sons and daughters to treat slaves as they had learned in their own youth, which methods varied depending on the disposition of the planter. In the case of J.H. Banks, he was constantly confronted with the violence of his young master, violence which was reinforced by the planter's instruction: "My master had a son of the name of Alexander, who was about one year older than myself, and he was able to whip me, which he did frequently, until I was about five years old, when I grew too strong for him, and began to pay him up for old scores. So whenever I whipped him he would go and complain to his father." After several attacks, Banks' master told Banks to ask Alexander not to hit him anymore, and tried to make Banks take the punishments from Alexander. Banks continued to defend himself, however, on the advice of his slave father. The old master "thus finding that I would not allow Alexander to whip me when he pleased, took and adopted the plan of sending him to school, and me he sent to watch the corn field, to keep the crows away. At this time, being about seven years of age, I began to feel very keenly the hardness of my treatment as a little slave."¹⁹ Not only was Alexander's father trying to teach his son how to keep his slaves in line, he was also teaching his slave how to be submissive to the violent nature of oppression. Banks

¹⁹ James W.C. Pennington, "A Narrative of Events of the Life of J.H. Banks, an Escaped Slave, from the Cotton State, Alabama, in America," University of North Carolina, *Documenting the American South*, [archive]; available from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/penning/penning.html>; Internet; accessed 24 April 2009.

rejected this notion of master dominance over him, and even received encouragement from his father to defend himself.

Brenda Stevenson argues that children were exposed to the cruelties of slavery by their parents, often not only witnessing the brutality but sometimes even called on to assist in unjust treatment. Southern slavery, she claims “exposed slaveholders’ children to much more than the ‘respectful,’ ‘kind’ black faces they were so fond of recalling during the postbellum era. Planter children, like their parents, could not escape the institution’s violent, oppressive, or dehumanizing nature. Instead they learned how to perpetuate it.”²⁰ In this way white children learned from watching their parents and other adults their racial identity as superior to blacks, and often these lessons came when the child was asked to assist in the violence. Stevenson uses the example of Henrietta, a young slave who was caught stealing a piece of candy. Her mistress, in a fit of rage, called upon her daughter to help her beat Henrietta for the infraction. Henrietta suffered a physical deformity for the rest of her life; Stevenson argues that it was not unusual for white children on the plantations to not only witness but participate in this kind of treatment of the slaves.²¹

Other planters, of course, taught their children to treat their slaves with kindness, reinforcing the paternalistic attitudes of plantation owners. Often this was through example. Charles Coles remembers his master, Silas Dorsey who “was never known to be harsh or cruel to any of his slaves, of which he had more than 75. There were no jails nor was any whipping done on the farm. No one was bought or sold. Mr. and Mrs. Dorsey conducted regular religious services of the Catholic church on the farm in a

²⁰ Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 112.

²¹ *Ibid.*

chapel erected for that purpose and in which the slaves were taught the catechism and some learned how to read and write....”²² Dorsey’s children would have seen this behavior from their father, and would have learned to treat the slaves in the same fashion.

Eugene Genovese argues that “even harsh masters often took great delight in their ‘pickaninnies’ and treated them with a kindness and affection that provided no warning of the privations and cruelty to come.” Because of this fondness for the young slave children, white masters often berated their children if they tormented the slave children. Genovese uses the example of Edmund, a slave who taught himself to read. The master’s “two young boys tormented him and one day beat him badly. The master ‘wore them out’ for doing so.”²³ Some white planters also let adult slaves discipline their children in order to keep them from believing they had all power over the slaves.

Even without their parents’ encouragement, white children befriended black slaves on the plantation. While some masters may have been afraid of the corrupting influence of black children on their own, Genovese argues that “white children eagerly sought the companionship of the black children their own age and loved nothing better than to romp in the quarters...often, white and black children conspired not only to commit mischief but to help each other...sometimes, life long friendships grew out of these early years.”²⁴ Yet even if these friendships were acquired, Brenda Stevenson argues, parents made certain “that their children learned that their black playmates were their inferiors and their servants.” Fannie Berry recalled her childhood playmate and master Tom. Even though they played together, Fannie still called Tom “marser” and his

²² Charles Cole, interview by Rogers, transcript, Baltimore, MD, 15 November 1937; WPA Interview, available from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11552/11552-h/11552-h.htm>; accessed 20 February 2010.

²³ Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 512, 517.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 515-516.

mother “made certain that Fannie never saw Tom’s authority as a white male challenged.”²⁵ Even as playmates, white and black children had to be cautious of the social order to which they were bound; even as young children blacks had to know and understand they were considered inferior, and white children had to act the part of a superior master.

Some slaveholders worried that slavery would corrupt their young boys, afraid it made them violent, lazy, and arrogant. Parents sometimes went so far as to send their sons away from the plantation and the South altogether to keep them from the harmful effects of slavery. Ralph Wormeley sent his son to London for school, claiming, “I sent you to London to try to make you a man of the mercantile business, that you may be enabled to live by your own exertions independent of land and Negroes...I wish to keep you out of Virginia; if you come here you are ruined forever.” Friends of William Heyward claimed that he was “lounging away his mornings...[and] drinking away his afternoons” because of the wealth and ease slavery afforded him.²⁶ Northerners often pointed out these shortcomings in their writings, comparing their industriousness to what they considered the laziness of their Southern counterparts. Parents were aware of these accusations, and sought to guard their children against those behaviors until they reached adulthood.

Even though some parents worried about corruption, Glover also contends that slaveholders were determined to “preserve slavery and teach their sons to do the same....Elite southerners encouraged young men to make defending slavery a centerpiece

²⁵ Stevenson, *Life and Black and White*, 112-113.

²⁶ Quoted in Glover, *Southern Sons*, 172.

of their preparation for leadership.”²⁷ Southerners expected their children to maintain the institution of slavery and their way of life. Because of this desire to defend slavery Southerners taught their children racial identity within the context of the slave institution, and to preserve that racial identity within the institution.

Beyond teaching the defense of slavery, some parents did not believe that slavery corrupted their children at all and encouraged dominance and violence toward the slaves of the plantation, as illustrated in the story of J.H. Banks and his young master Alexander. Many slaveholding parents, while worried about slavery damaging their sons, simultaneously taught their boys “the lessons of mastery required to perpetuate racial bondage and tried to structure coming-of-age experiences to militate against antislavery attitudes.”²⁸ During the antebellum period, childhood experiences with slavery became increasingly unguarded and children were exposed to racial attitudes and mastery of slaves more and more. Children’s ability to defend slavery as adults against the arguments of abolitionists and moral reformers became more important to slaveholding parents than did protecting their children from the corrupting influence of racial oppression.

Religion was an important part in the upbringing of young white children in the institution of slavery as well. Plantation owners were often very religious, and expected their children to participate in religious practices. Charles C. Jones instructed that parents

Having received [their children] from God, as a peculiar blessing, *are first of all to offer and dedicate them unto God, according to his command, and in his own appointed ordinance: and train them up for His Church and Service.* And as soon as their Children are capable of understanding, they should tell them that they have been dedicated to God...and that it is their duty to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, and yield themselves unto God

²⁷ Ibid., 175.

²⁸ Glover, *Southern Sons*, 33, 171.

and come forth and profess themselves his Children...and thus openly and sincerely assent to the gracious covenant of God.²⁹

Parents were obligated to teach their children to be in the service of God, to “instruct them out of the Scriptures before they are able to read; take them to the House of God and to the Sabbath School: give them great reverence for God’s holy day” and train them up in righteousness. Children were to follow the fifth commandment, to honor their father and mother and obey their instructions. In Southern religion, masters were taught that they should provide for their servants as their Master in Heaven provided for them:

Next to our children and brethren by blood, our servants, especially our slaves, are certainly in the nearest relation to us. They are an immediate and necessary part of our households, by whose labors and assistance we are enabled to enjoy the gifts of Providence in ease and plenty; and surely we owe them a return of *what is just and equal* for the drudgery and hardships they go through in our service. This, nature, and plain unassisted reason might teach us. But when we further consider it as a positive command of Almighty God, who is our as well as their *master in Heaven*, it must needs receive a vast additional force, and convince us that our want of love and gratitude to these poor serviceable creatures, must be attended with the highest danger; – the danger of bringing the wrath and indignation of our *heavenly master* upon our heads; – that great *master*, to whom we are as much accountable as they are, and indeed far more than they can be, because more is committed to our charge; – *For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required.*³⁰

Many children on the plantation were taught the same doctrine, that they should treat the slaves with kindness, because God would judge their actions once in heaven. Slaves were also God’s children, and should be treated accordingly. Yet planters often contradicted themselves with this doctrine in their claim that slaves were inferior, and

²⁹ Charles C. Jones, *A Catechism of Scripture Doctrine and Practice, for Families and Sabbath Schools, Designed also for the Oral Instruction of Colored Persons*, 3rd Edition (Savannah: T. Purse & Co.; New York: Leavitt, Trow & Co., 1844), 126-127.

³⁰ Rev. Thomas Bacon and Rev. William Meade, “Sermon 1: Colossians IV, 1.” in *Sermons Addressed to Masters and Servants, and Published in the Year 1743, by the Rev. Thomas Bacon, Minister of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Maryland now Republished with other Tracts and Dialogues On the same subject, and recommended to all Masters and Mistresses To be used in their families by the Rev. William Meade* (Winchester, PA, John Heiskell, Printer, [1813?]), 4-5.

sometimes went so far as to argue for “polygenesis”: the notion that Africans came from a different ancestry than white people.³¹

Bertram Wyatt-Brown discusses that while Northern children were reared to be “God-fearing, hard-working, and well-motivated... Southerners reared children to value honor as much as, if not more than, godly conscience.”³² Part of Southern honor was instructing children that they were superior to both lower class whites and slaves, and they should be treated as such by all. This culture of honor in their religious teaching was not necessarily in conflict with the teaching that slaves should be treated with kindness. White Southerners defended their honor by putting those beneath them in their place; those slaves who accepted their inferiority could be treated with kindness when they knew their place in society and obeyed societal rules.

Some Southerners believed that contact with slaves tainted the minds and spirits of white children. Susan Markey Fickling, author of the book Slave Conversion in South Carolina, cited South Carolinian statesman Charles Cotesworth Pinckney in her work: “He pointed out first the pernicious influence on the minds of white children of contact with negroes in general. As he was taught he might commit any vice he could conceal from his superiors, the little negro early imbibed falsehood, and kindred vices. Because of the various notions of religion in man, the negro would embrace those of error, if the truth were withheld; the prevalence of idolatry and Islamism in Asia sanctioned this position.”³³ Fickling’s work was published in 1924, long after Pinckney had been teaching religion to slaves in South Carolina. Pinckney believed that African retentions

³¹ Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, 73.

³² Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 128-129.

³³ Charles Cotesworth Pinckney quoted in Susan Markey Fickling, *Slave Conversion in South Carolina 1830-1860* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1924), 13.

in slave religion corrupted white children; no doubt many planters felt the same and kept their children sheltered from African American religious practices as much as possible.

Masters often referred to their slaves as members of their family, yet did not hesitate to beat them cruelly if they disobeyed or made a mistake. Slaveholders somehow held contradictory views of their slaves; while considering them family, they also considered them property, and somehow made themselves believe their slaves were content and happy and loved their masters and would never leave them. As Marie Jenkins Schwartz argues, masters often felt it was their right to make sure slave children were reared according to their specifications; owners hoped “to transfer the love and allegiance of the children from parents to themselves.... [They] were confident of their right to interject themselves between parent and child [and] they intended to teach boys and girls that they – not parents – headed the plantation household.”³⁴ Slaveowners believed they were in fact the head of their black and white family, and tried to make their slaves conform to that ideal. Plantation masters often truly believed their slaves were a part of their family and they were happy to be characterized that way.

In many white narratives, the author seems to be trying to convince himself of the happiness of his slaves in their bondage, such as Edward Thomas, Jr.

They were very well housed in two-room lumber cabins. Sundays no work was permitted, the slaves attending church. They could raise as many chickens as they pleased...They were given two suits of clothes a year, one of wool, the other cotton, two shirts, a pair of blankets, and a pair of heavy shoes. The clothing was given to them twice a year, in the early spring and winter; the shoes in the beginning of winter...The ration on cotton plantations was corn meal and grits, potatoes, peas, and a little bacon or Louisiana molasses; on rice plantations, rice instead of meal. These rations were distributed weekly, the slaves coming with proper utensils to receive them. Having their own boats, they could always have fish and oysters, and in their gardens raised chickens and vegetables....I

³⁴ Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, 77.

can remember to this day the sweet chants of "our people," as we used to call them, when the young men and girls, on moonlight nights, would meet to grind their corn around the hand mills. The constant whirr of the mill stones and the plaintive ditties and merry shouts of these happy people frequently lulled me, when a boy, to sleep, the negro quarters being not so far away. Never more will such merry shouts be heard!³⁵

Former slaveowners continued to believe long after emancipation that the blacks were never happier than when they were slaves, and continued to extend the notion that the slaves enjoyed being in bondage, despite the hardships and labor they faced. Leon Litwack maintains that after the Civil War, a new generation of blacks known as the "New Negro" came of age who were not educated under slavery, agitating the fears of Southern whites about keeping blacks in their place in the social order. These "New Negroes" were "sassy," "uppity," and did not accept their inferior place in Southern society. "The contrast," Litwack argues, "encouraged white Southerners to seek comfort in an idealized version of the past. To flatter their egos, as well as to assuage their doubts and apprehensions, whites during slavery had invented the figure of Sambo, the simple faithful cheerful, unresentful, deferential Negro menial who was always eager and willing to serve, even to give his life for his owners....If whites embraced this image during slavery, they became downright ardent in their reverence for it after emancipation."³⁶

White Southerners needed something to hold on to, and their image of happy, contented slaves, willing to accept their subordinate place was the way they could perpetuate their authority over the black population after emancipation.

³⁵ Edward J. Thomas, *Memoirs of a Southerner, 1840-1923*, (Savannah, 1923), University of North Carolina Library, *Documenting the American South* [archive]; available from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/thomas/thomas.html>; Internet; accessed on 02 December 2009.

³⁶ Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Inc., 1998), 184-185.

This collective memory had an impact on the personal memories of adults recalling their childhood in the antebellum South. W. Fitzhugh Brundage argues that “the narrative conventions of a group’s historical memory provide individuals with a framework within which to articulate their experience, to explain their place, in the remembered past.”³⁷ After the Civil War, whites began to remember the South in an idealized, romantic view: honorable white planters, beautiful southern belles, and contented slaves. Whites looking back on their antebellum childhood remembered how the community remembered itself. In the aftermath of the Civil War, white Southerners were looking for something to help them through the difficult times of Reconstruction, and to build a collective memory of carefree childhood days on a plantation was their way of managing bad circumstances. Because the community remembered happy and faithful slaves and benevolent masters, that was how white writers remembered their childhood.

Richard McIlwaine, born in 1834, gave an example of how collective memory in the Southern community influenced his reminiscences of slavery and race relations in his childhood. He recalled the black servants in his childhood home in his reminiscence this way:

It will, perhaps, seem strange to persons not acquainted with the benign influence of African slavery as it existed in Virginia during my early life...The trouble with these persons is that they know nothing of the institution as it really was, as I knew it, and of the relations between master and servant. To me and others similarly situated it appears perfectly natural and proper and right, and we look back on those days without misgiving or regret, but with thanksgiving for what we experienced and learned under those conditions, -- for the love and

³⁷ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 13.

kindness we cherished for our colored friends and received from them, and for the relations we sustained to them and they to us.³⁸

This passage of McIlwaine's memoir encompasses childhood, race, and memory. He remembered loving the black servants in his father's house as he loved his own family, but he also acknowledged the status of master and slave, indicating the knowledge he received from adults that the blacks of the household were inferior to himself. McIlwaine himself became a minister and did not own slaves, but he remembered fondly the time he spent among his father's slaves. McIlwaine's reminiscences of his childhood associations with black slaves indicate well the workings of collective memory; the Southern community expressed the loving relationship between masters and slaves long after slavery was abolished, and believed those who wanted slavery to end misunderstood these relationships, claiming they could not know the benevolent society under which Southerners and slaves resided.

Many factors affected how former slaves and former planters remembered their childhoods in the antebellum days. Collective memory, trying to keep the "Lost Cause" alive, often reflected how whites remembered the romantic version of their lives on large Southern plantations before the Civil War. Those who were not even old enough to remember the antebellum days continued the tradition of Southern memory, understanding the Old South in the way parents, teachers, and others recalled it to them rather than being able to remember those things themselves.

In many reminiscences, the authors wanted to leave their readers with an image of the old South that challenged what Reconstruction and the Northern population had left

³⁸ Richard McIlwaine, "Memories of Three Score and Ten," New York and Washington: The Neale Publishing Company, 1908, *The Library of Congress, American Memory*, [archive]; available from [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/lhbcb:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(lhbcb19140\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/lhbcb:@field(DOCID+@lit(lhbcb19140))); Internet; accessed 11 April 2009.

in memory. They wanted their descendants to understand that the old South was not a brutal and unfeeling place. John George Clinkscales, in the foreword of his work On the Old Plantation: Reminiscences of His Childhood writes:

These chapters are written primarily for the benefit of my own children and grandchildren and with the hope that they may not be wholly uninteresting to many others whose parents lived through the days of which I write. Too many of our young people know of the institution of slavery only what they've learned from "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Knowing only the negro who has grown up since the Civil War, and knowing nothing whatever of "de ole-time slav'ry nigger," they cannot have a correct idea of "a civilization that is gone." If what Mrs. Stowe wrote was true, and only that, then our children's children must conclude that their fathers were only half-civilized and worthy of all the horrors of the Reconstruction. Slavery was not all bad. It had its evils, God knows; but, on the dark picture, there were many bright spots: our children should be allowed to see them.³⁹

R.Q. Mallard in his work titled Plantation Life Before Emancipation gave a very similar description of how he wanted his readers to remember the old South and the institution of slavery and plantation life:

The purpose of the author has been to portray a civilization now obsolete, to picture the relations of mutual attachment and kindness which in the main bound together master and servant, and to give this and future generations some correct idea of the noble work done by Southern masters and mistresses of all denominations for the salvation of the slave. If the reader shall have half the pleasure in perusing that the author has had in writing these letters; if they shall in any degree contribute to the restoration of the mutual relations of kindness and confidence characterizing the old régime, and sorely strained, not so much by emancipation, as by the unhappy happy events immediately succeeding it...then will the author's purpose have been fully realized.⁴⁰

³⁹ John George Clinkscales, "On the Old Plantation: Reminiscences of his Childhood," (Spartenburg, South Carolina: Band and White, Publishers, 1916), University of North Carolina Library, *Documenting the American South*, [archive]; available from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/clinkscales/clinksc.html>; Internet; accessed 23 October 2009.

⁴⁰ R.Q. Mallard, "Plantation Life Before Emancipation" (Richmond, Virginia: Whittet and Shepperson, 1892), University of North Carolina Library, *Documenting the American South*, [archive]; available from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/mallard/mallard.html> ; accessed 6 November 2009.

Writers of these reminiscences believed that conditions in the old South, for both master and slave, were far better than in Reconstruction and the time following. Southerners who had lived in the antebellum era were afraid that their children and descendants would grow up only hearing the negative aspects of slavery, as the North portrayed them. Many writers overemphasized the romantic version of the South, which created the Lost Cause rhetoric.

David Blight argues that “In the Gilded Age of teeming cities, industrialization and political skulduggery, Americans needed another world to live in; they yearned for a more pleasing past in which to find slavery, the war, and Reconstruction... The soot of factories, the fear of new machines, the unsettling dynamism of the New South could dissipate in the rarified air of gracious, orderly, old plantations; an unheroic age could now escape to an alternative universe of gallant cavaliers and their trusted servants.”⁴¹ After the horrors of the Civil War and the pain of Reconstruction, those who wrote their memoirs were looking for something simple within their past to grasp; the New Negro stepping out of his place and constantly threatening the racial order also intensified Southern fears, and the need to remember the glory of the Old South caused many writers to elevate the conditions of the antebellum days. Memories of a slower-paced old South with faithful slaves, lush plantations, and uncomplicated life became the answer to these issues.

In all of these arguments, memory plays a crucial role in the understanding of how blacks and whites perceived their childhood experiences, even into their old age. Many black children remembered playing with and being equal to white children until a

⁴¹ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 222.

certain point in their lives. As they got older, they recognized they were treated differently from their white playmates of childhood. In many accounts this change took place when their white playmates were sent to school and they went to the fields. Sometimes there was a particular instance in a child's life that led him to understand this racial difference, such as when a white boy called Francis Black out to play, saying "Come on, nigger." When Black responded "I'm no nigger," the white boy replied "Yes, you is, my pa paid \$200 for you. He bought you for to play with me."⁴² In other narratives, however, children grew accustomed to being treated as a slave as they grew, such as Thomas Jones' experience mentioned earlier. Regardless of these differences, the general pattern of memory for black children on plantations was the recollection of being equal to their white peers as young children, but as they matured they remember growing out of that equality and into their slave status.

In most white memoirs included in this study, the authors did not reminisce about black childhood playmates; rather, the slaves they remembered as children were the house servants, the drivers, and their mammies. Some whites remembered their body servants, who were usually about their age, but never do they call them friends, and they are specific in classifying them as slaves right away. White diarists rarely had much to say about their childhoods at all, in fact, often only taking a few pages to give their parentage, place of birth, and a few anecdotes about their early lives. However, the absence of black children mentioned in white memory as friends is indicative of how Southern memory after the Civil War interpreted life on the plantation. Focused on the romantic views of faithful slaves, white diarists in the post-bellum period remembered the blacks they associated with as just that: only slaves who always served them in

⁴² Quoted in Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 516.

faithfulness and contentment, never resisting, always complacent, and willing to be obedient in all things.

White childhood memories were often filled with things such as news of political events which young children most likely did not understand or were not concerned about. Sally Pleasants, who grew up in Leesburg, Virginia recalled: “My earliest recollections are of endless political discussions. My father was an ardent Whig, and our house was for many years headquarters for the party.” Sally spent the first two chapters of her memoir discussing the politics of the 1840s and 50s in rather meticulous detail. As the only child of her parents, she claimed, she was “much indulged and was often allowed to sit up with my elders when I should have been in bed. Thus I became tolerably conversant with the great questions of the day.” Politics were always a part of Sally’s home, yet she wrote her narrative as if she could not only remember all the political conversations in her early childhood, but also “tolerably” converse about them.⁴³

The psychologist Karl Sabbagh argues that children do not have solid, clear memories until they reach three or four years old. He claims that early childhood memories are based more on visual elements than narrative. While some may claim they remember events from early childhood, these memories are often instilled in their minds by conversation with parents instead of actual recall, as memories “are easier to retain when they are organized into stories with narrative and structure, and this inevitably leads to some elements being left out or ‘forgotten.’”⁴⁴ Sabbagh claims that because parents

⁴³ Sally Pleasants, “Old Virginia days and ways; reminiscences of Mrs. Sally Pleasants,” Lucy Lee Pleasants, ed., (Menasha, Wisconsin: George Banta Publishing Company, 1916), *The Library of Congress American Memory*, [archive]; available from [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/lhbcb:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(lhbcb08377div6\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/lhbcb:@field(DOCID+@lit(lhbcb08377div6))); Internet; Accessed 01 April 2009.

⁴⁴ Karl Sabbagh, *Remembering our Childhood: How Memory Betrays Us* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 62.

express events in a more narrative form than children can remember them, early childhood memories are often encompassed by the re-telling of the event, augmented by visual portrayals of the child's real memory. According to Sabbagh's argument, antebellum childhood memories were likely to have been shaped in part by adults' interpretations, which were in turn passed on to their children. One apparent example of this phenomenon appears in the account of Belle Kearney, born in March 1863 on a plantation in Mississippi, when she recounts her father informing his slaves they were free in 1865:

As soon as father was physically strong enough to perform the trying duty, he went to the negro quarters on his plantation, assembled his slaves, and announced to them that they were free. There was no wild shout of joy or other demonstration of gladness. The deepest gloom prevailed in their ranks and an expression of mournful bewilderment settled upon their dusky faces. They did not understand that strange, sweet word - freedom. Poor things! the English language had never brought to them the faintest definition of liberty - that most glorious gift of God. They were stunned. What were they to do, where should they go? What would become of them? Who would feed and clothe them, and care for them in sickness, when they went out from "marster" free? Noticing their consternation and dumb sorrow, father told them that they might stay and work for him as hired hands. Some of them did, but the majority drifted away, and finally all. The record of the devotion of the slaves to their owners is deeply touching.⁴⁵

Kearney, only two years old at the time of this event, must have relied on others' accounts in order to tell the story. Kearney gives the account with such passion that the incident must have been embellished in her memory. She remembered the event as she had been told to remember it, complete with emphatic emotional responses. This memory helped her parents' generation as well as their offspring recall the benevolent

⁴⁵ Belle Kearney, "A Slaveholder's Daughter," (New York: The Abby Press Publishers, 1909), University of North Carolina University Library, *Documenting the American South*, [archive]; available from <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/kearney/kearney.html>; Internet; accessed 11 April 2009.

society which they lost through war, and that helped them keep that interpretation of the Old South alive.

If Sabbagh's view of childhood memory is correct, it appears that many black children were not made aware of racial differences between themselves and their white peers when they were young. Instead they seemed to learn their place in the racial hierarchy as they grew older. As indicated in many narratives, slaves played in equanimity among black and white children alike, frequently not realizing their slave status. Most likely, the memories of these experiences caused the writer to differentiate between the white and black children he played with, not that he was actually aware of these differences as a small child playing. I would argue that the reason blacks mentioned these instances of equality in their memoirs, as opposed to white people who did not, was because they were considered inferior to whites as adults; they wanted to demonstrate to those who read their narratives that they had once been considered equal with white children on the plantation, and so the notion of inequality among black and white people was not founded in biology. If they had been equal once in their lives among white playmates, they knew there was something wrong about being considered inferior as they grew, because it was not innate to white and black children to be masters and slaves.

Former slaves' memories of their childhood are controversial however. While white writers often wrote their memoirs for posterity's sake, black autobiographers wrote for various reasons. For instance, Thomas Jones's narrative was "written by a friend, as related to him by Brother Jones" and sponsored by abolitionists in Massachusetts in 1855. His writing, which expounds on the horrors and cruelties of slavery, was clearly meant to

serve a political and social agenda describing the awful circumstances in which slaves lived, and against which the abolitionists were fighting. Other sources used frequently in this paper are the interviews from the WPA Federal Writers Project. Most of these interviews were conducted between 1936 and 1938, over seventy years after slavery ended in the South. Many of the interviewees were young children when slavery ended, and old men and women when they sat down to recount their experiences of the antebellum period. They were probably told what had happened as a slave growing up in the antebellum period and, being as old as they were (some were over one hundred years old) they also probably forgot many of their childhood experiences they might have remembered earlier in life. They were also most often retelling their experiences to a white interviewer, which most likely made them cautious about what was said regarding whites in the South, as racial prejudice continued to be prevalent throughout the 1930s.

Ex-slaves writing after they were emancipated or had escaped while slavery was still in force had a much different memory of the institution than those who wrote many years after slavery was no more. Memoirs of former slaves such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs tell of the hardships of slavery; while as children they may have had some happy memories, many told stories of hunger, cold, and the cruelty of the system. These narratives tell a different story than those produced in the WPA interviews many years later. Many ex-slaves interviewed in the WPA project recalled that they had plenty of food to eat and clothes to wear as young children on their masters' plantations during the antebellum period. These memories depended on the current conditions of the slaves at the time of the WPA interview; many of them were destitute and old, could not work for themselves and did not have anyone who could or wanted to take care of them. And

so they often remembered that back in slavery days they always had clothes, shoes, and plenty of food to eat, as compared with their current circumstances. Lydia Floyd remarked in her WPA interview: “Don know nuthin’ ‘bout slavery time. Knows that if’n my white people wuz heah today I wouldn’t be punish like dis heah. I hungry an’ I cold. Got nuthin’. Jes have to swallow me spittle. Oh, my Lord! Got no beddin’. You kin go in de house an’ see fur yourself. Oh, my Lord!”⁴⁶ Floyd believed that if the white people whom she had worked for had been present, she would have been provided for in her old age. Researchers must also keep in mind that the WPA interviews were conducted during the Great Depression. Conditions for ex-slaves and black Southerners in general had always been precarious as they struggled to survive after the Civil War in a society that did not know what to do with them and often oppressed them, but particularly so during the Depression when unemployment and poverty reached historic highs.

⁴⁶ Lydia Floyd, interviewed by Phoebe Faucette, Hampton, S.C., 17 December 1937 in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, North Carolina and South Carolina Narratives*, ed. George P. Rawick, Supplement, Series I, Volume 11 (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1977), 141.

CONCLUSION

Slavery forced black children to see the realities of the institution early and to understand their place in the racial hierarchy. Brutal images of beatings and whippings and the sound of screams and weeping did not leave memory easily for young slave children, and many years afterward they remembered those images. For white children, memories are not always so clear: they speak of political events and plantation business from their early childhood, give an account of their understanding of the complexities of slavery and other questions of the day, and mostly recall briefly their happy days on the plantations. Stark images do not surface in their narratives, but sweeping generalizations and brief mention of small events make up their stories of childhood.

Despite the differences, some of the patterns of childhood on Southern plantations during the antebellum period surface in these memoirs and narratives of black and white children. Not all black children were happy, but some remembered carefree days playing on the plantation with white children. These happy days ended as white children went to school and black children began slave work. White children did not reflect much on their leisure time in their writings, but instead focused on the issues of the day, things they most often neither understood nor participated in; nor did white children reflect on their relationships with their black peers. A pattern of paternalism in whites' writings of relationships with blacks on the plantation, and the racial hierarchy that was established among them, reflects the culture of honor in the Southern society, and how whites

continued to learn how to defend their way of life. Even after the ways of the Old South were no more, white autobiographers and writers continued to immortalize the glory days of their society, through collective and learned memories.

In the upper South, where white families generally stayed on the plantation, children had more interaction with peers of a different race than children in the lower South, where white families often lived apart from their black slaves. Therefore relationships between white and black children could form more easily when they could interact on a daily basis with one another. Memories of these relationships vary widely. In the post-emancipation South, whites wanted to remember their slaves as loyal, kind, and content in their bondage, a memory they passed on to their children. For blacks, post-emancipation proved a difficult time; as shown in the WPA interviews, former slaves reminisced about the good conditions they had under slavery as opposed to later times. Yet others continued to reminisce about the difficulties of slavery, and their gratitude for emancipation from bondage.

Children in the antebellum South were forced to navigate a complex system of racial hierarchy as they matured. Friendships, family relationships, and master/slave relations all presented various contexts in which children, both black and white, learned their racial identity, were socialized to survive in a racialized world, and created for themselves a place in the world of the plantation South. Children were placed in precarious circumstances as they tried to learn how to maneuver through this system, often with harsh consequences. Slave children had to follow both their parents and their master's bidding; as adults vied for their obedience, children were often caught in the crossfire. White children had to learn the concepts of racial superiority and inferiority as

they grew; if they were not willing to follow the cultural practices of the South they could be ostracized for it.¹ These situations were not uncommon on plantations in the upper South, as children tried to understand and learn how to survive in such a problematical institution.

Children created and kept complicated relationships among their white and black peers. These relationships were volatile and uncertain, especially as the children grew and developed a better sense of their place in the racial hierarchy from their parents and masters. While some masters did not prevent relations between their own children and those of the slaves, others, “afraid of the ‘corrupting influence’ of the slave children on their own, forbade contact or tried to restrict it to the children of the house servants.” But as Genovese argues, those rules were usually unenforceable, as children both black and white sought each others’ company on the plantation.² Children also learned from the examples of their parents, how to treat peers of the other race. Masters could be cruel or kind, indulgent or severe, and their children often followed the ways of their parents. Parents and kin of slave children taught them to navigate through perilous circumstances; they taught their children to defend themselves against abuses while still following the code of conduct within the institution of slavery. Racial identity for both black and white children was a learned concept, and children were required to conform to the system or face the consequences. Yet as children navigated this complex system they continued to associate with each other and sometimes disregarded racial ideology, in the process demonstrating that racial identity was a social construct, not an inherent truth.

¹ Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 115.

² Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 515.

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