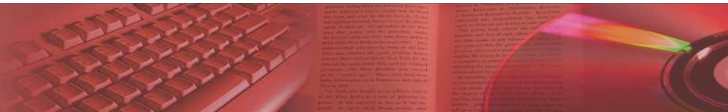

Marie Jenkins Schwartz. *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South.* Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2000. xii + 272 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00162-6.

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Breeding Loyalty

Breeding Loyalty

When young Emma Howard's master punished her, she threatened to tell her mother. Amused, her master remarked, "that little devil don't know I'm her Master" (p. 104). From this experience, Emma Howard learned that she had two sets of adults with a claim to her obedience.

In *Born and Bondage*, Marie Jenkins Schwartz uses WPA slave narratives as well as diaries, letters, and account books left by slave holders to compare and contrast parents' and slaveowners' expectations, hopes, and meanings attached to a child born in slavery. Masters and parents both hoped to impart to the children their own beliefs about slavery, self-esteem, and the southern social system. Tracing the stages of a slave child's life from conception and birth to courtship and marriage, this book details the way that decisions were made about raising enslaved children and the way slave children learned to perceive their own lives.

The very youthfulness of the slave population in the South was distinctive. While other slave societies in the Americas relied upon continuing imports of slaves, most slaves in the antebellum United States were native-born. As a result over two-fifths of the slave population in the South was younger than fifteen. While this phenomenon has been often noted by historians of slavery, *Born in Bondage* makes an important addition to only a handful of studies devoted to slave children and to the effect that "growing" slaves had on the peculiar institution in the antebellum South.[1]

Schwartz maintains that in this unique slave society, masters took a great interest in the health and raising of enslaved children. Births of slaves represented not only the most cost-efficient way to add to their inventories of chattel property, but also an opportunity to raise docile, obedient, faithful, and thus productive slave workers. Slave parents, on the other hand, wished to retain as much control over their children as possible, teaching them not only how to endure the system of slavery but also self-esteem, heritage, and their parents' values.

Schwartz's most important contribution to the history of slavery is her detail of the stages of enslaved children's lives. Beginning with birth and infancy, she moves to describing young children in the quarter, and the introduction and "education" of children to the working environment in which they would live their lives. When strong enough, children were moved to field work where if they proved themselves able they were at the greatest risk of being separated by sale. The last stage for enslaved children was young love and marriage and thus the beginning of slave families of their own. Slave parents exerted much more control over the raising of their own children at the youngest ages, although masters and mistresses intervened and influenced decisions even at this stage. For instance, Fanny Kemble Butler rewarded those parents who kept their infants' heads uncovered or ceased the practices of swaddling and swathing, all popular among the slave community. As the children grew, parents continued many forms of resistance to the masters' decisions, but slowly lost ever more control over the decisions affecting their children including at what age their children went to the fields, whether or not they would be sold away, and even who and when they married and began their own families.

Studying three different regions – central Virginia, central Alabama, and coastal South Carolina and Georgia – Schwartz proposes that "continuities in child-care practices would offer evidence that African Americans had forged a common culture, especially if they differed from those of the owners" (p. 17). Al-

though never explicitly stated, Schwartz's study does seem to show that in all three areas slave parents had different ideas than their masters of how their children should be raised. Despite the different work details and expectations in each area, slave parents hoped to spare their children as long as possible from masters' control, keep slave children contributing to the slave family's household, and to delay or lessen the risk of separation by sale.

If readers look to *Born in Bondage* to answer the great historiographical question of whether slaves controlled their own lives or were controlled by their masters, they will be disappointed. Schwartz often presents contradictory evidence. On the one hand, "A determined family might succeed in withholding a child from the field, at least for a short while" (p. 142). On the other hand, she cites many more instances of owners choosing to put even extremely young slave children into the fields due to financial necessity. While she argues that the parents and youths themselves made the decision when children were sent to the field, she also shows that masters controlled that decision in ways such as withholding food from children who did not work. While frustrating at times to read this contradictory evidence on successive pages, it actually aptly illustrates the contradictions inherent in the slave institution in the South: masters attempting to calculate and control as "property," human beings with human desires and wishes of their own.

Although Schwartz offers evidence that the entire slave community participated in the raising of children, she maintains in her introduction and throughout that "the majority of slave children while young lived in homes with two parents" (p. 50). This basic assumption seemingly relies upon Herbert G. Gutman's and other historians' 1970s works without taking into account more recent works that offer evidence that the institution of slavery produced households headed primarily by women.[2] Even Schwartz's own evidence seems to contradict her assumptions. Not including the chapter on the "Birth of a Slave" which is almost exclusively devoted to enslaved women giving birth, in 65 percent of her examples of slave "parents," the one parent discussed is actually a mother. Only in 19 percent of her examples is it clear that there are two parents living in the family. This oversight hardly negates the important conclusions of her work. However, it does fail to recognize that an important effect of slavery was that the common culture of childraising among African Americans in the South was shaped primarily by women.

Overall, Schwartz has contributed greatly to understanding how slave parents negotiated the difficulties of answering to a master while maintaining and passing to their children their own culture and ideas of self-worth.

Notes:

[1]. Other notable studies of slave children include Thomas L. Webber, *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865* (New York: Norton, 1978), Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), and Peter Bardaglio, "The Children of Jubilee: African American Childhood in Wartime," in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[2]. See for instance, Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985); Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America*, (New York: Broadway Books, 1988), and Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

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