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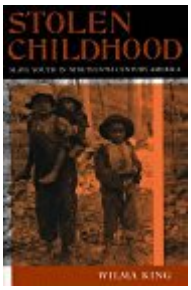

Wilma King. *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. xxi + 253 pp. $27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-32904-2.

Reviewed by Jacqueline S. Reinier

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Wilma King has made a significant contribution to the history of slavery in this carefully researched and engagingly written study of the experiences of enslaved children. Drawing on a rich collection of primary sources from archives across the South, she discusses children and youth as they lived in the family and community, engaged in work and play, received temporal and spiritual education, experienced the traumas of slavery, and sought and gained freedom. Defining children and youth as males under the age of twenty-one and females under the age of eighteen, she portrays the lives of individuals who comprised more than half of the enslaved population. Historians overlook the youthfulness of the new American nation in the early nineteenth century, when from 1790 to 1830, the median age of the entire population was approximately sixteen. Of the almost four million slaves counted by the census of 1860, as many as 56 percent were under twenty years of age. How poignant the experiences of family and community life, rhythms of work and leisure, or traumas of the slave trade appear when the reader realizes that more than half of the individuals affected by them were children.

This perspective lends credence to King's use of the WPA slave narratives, in addition to such sources as plantation records, family papers, and slave autobiographies. Although former slaves were interviewed in advanced age in the 1930's, their experience of slavery in the 1840's and 1850's occurred when they were children. The interviews thus provide not only a direct access to voices of the enslaved, but also a fresh, immediate perception of childhood. Historians have long been aware of embellishments by collective memory over a long period of time, of nuances in the story told to fit a particular interviewer, and of changes made by the WPA writers who did the recording. Nevertheless, the language and interpretations of the narratives are so rich that this reader can not help but wish that King had provided even more of this material, allowing these remarkable individuals to relate directly their experience of childhood under the institution of slavery.

However unjust and harsh, slavery was an institution to which individuals adapted or resisted

in a wide variety of enduring and courageous ways. For this reader, King's repeated analogy of slavery with war detracts from the impact of her material (for example, comparing the plight of enslaved children to that of the twentieth-century diarists, Anne Frank and Zlata Filipovic, pp. x-xii). Westward migration of a labor force comprised of ten- to fourteen-year-olds (whose capacity for labor and monetary value would augment as they grew) or separation of very young children from their parents and siblings through the domestic slave trade is compelling enough material without introducing the completely different contexts of children's experiences in war. It also seems unnecessary to introduce material, as King does, from contemporary authors--Alex Haley or Toni Morrison--when voices of the enslaved themselves are available in autobiographies and narratives, and as abundant a secondary literature exists as is the case in the history of slavery. Perhaps a more appropriate comparison would be that of enslaved children to other youngsters of the early republic. While King argues that slave children lacked a childhood, domestic ideology and concepts of sheltered and protected childhood were only just emerging in the middle-class. As wage labor became prevalent, children on farms still labored under the direction of patriarchal fathers, youthful orphans or delinquents served under indenture, and children in factories and small shops became a source of cheap, unskilled labor. These children also entered the work place early, endured often arbitrary authority, and grew old before their time. Only a small percentage of children in early nineteenth-century America enjoyed the experiences that for later generations would epitomize childhood.

In light of these issues, perhaps the most innovative chapters in King's book are those dealing with play, leisure, and education. Her analysis of play stresses its relationship to reality as children observe and imitate procedures, ideals, and values. Plumbing the WPA narratives, she finds boys testing their speed and strength, and girls playing dolls and imitating domestic duties. Realities of power relationships were learned when white and black children played together. As enslaved children played Euro-American games, they reworked verses and songs with their own cultural meanings. Leisure activities blended with education, as adults instructed children with animal trickster tales, and youngsters participated in religious services and celebrations. Yet such aspects of early nineteenth-century childhood were shadowed by traumas and tragedies--the physical punishments, sexual abuse, and family separations permeating the lives of the enslaved. Throughout this very readable book King vividly brings to light the individuality and humanity of remarkable children who persisted in coping, growing up, and hoping for the future under the heartrending circumstances of the institution of slavery.

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