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“My Daddy...He Was a Good Man”: Gendered Genealogies and Memories of Enslaved Fatherhood in America’s Antebellum South

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Abstract: While the last few years have witnessed an upsurge of studies into enslaved motherhood in the antebellum American South, the role of the enslaved father remains largely trapped within a paradigm of enforced absenteeism from an unstable and insecure familial unit. The origins of this lie in the racist assumptions of the infamous “Moynihan Report” of 1965, read backwards into slavery itself. Consequently, the historiographical trajectory of work on enslaved men has drawn out the performative aspects of their masculinity in almost every area of their lives except that of fatherhood. This has produced an image of individualistic masculinity, separate from the familial role that many enslaved men managed to sustain and, as a result, productive of a disjointed and gendered genealogy of slavery and its legacy. This paper assesses the extent to which this fractured genealogy actually represents the former slaves’ worldview. By examining a selection of interviews conducted by the Federal Writers’ Project under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s (the WPA Narratives), this paper explores former slaves’ memories of their enslaved fathers and the significance of the voluntary paternal presence in their life stories. It concludes that the role of the black father was of greater significance than so far recognised by the genealogical narratives that emerged from the slave communities of the Antebellum South.

Keywords: slavery; fathers; american south; memory; WPA narratives

You growed up in slavery time. When Old Massa wuz ‘drivin you in de rain and in de col’—he wasn’t don’ it tuh he’p you ‘long. He wuz lookin’ out for hisself. Course I wuz twelve years old when Lee made de big surrender, and dey didn’t work me hard, but—dese heah chillum is diffunt from us.

(Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, 1934)

1. Introduction

British actress Fanny Kemble was, famously, horrified by what she encountered on her husband’s slave plantation in Georgia; so horrified, indeed, that the couple soon separated. Kemble waited, however, until the United States itself had, temporarily, separated to publish her memoirs of life in the slave south, memoirs that included a damning indictment of the constrictions that slavery imposed on the relationship between enslaved fathers and their children. This, she charged, “resembles...the short-lived connection between an animal and its young. The father, having neither authority, power, or charge in his children, is of course, as among brutes, the least attached to his offspring.” Kemble was not much more positive about enslaved motherhood, which she described as “mere breeding, bearing, suckling, and there an end,” but she did identify a stronger, albeit

compromised, bond between mother and child (Kemble 1863, pp. 59–60). Historian Andrew Delbanco has recently echoed Kemble's comments. Slavery, Delbanco argued, "robs mothers of their motherhood, and thereby stunts the souls of their sons. It turns motherless black boys into heartless black men." In its destruction of the mother-child bond, he concluded, slavery was "a factory for manufacturing monsters" (Delbanco 2019, p. 157).

This paper challenges the assumption that slave men were heartless monsters, and offers evidence to show that enslaved fathers bequeathed their children a more robust legacy than historians have so far acknowledged. Using a selection of 200 interviews (some 10% of the total available via the Library of Congress) conducted with former slaves by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s, it divides the analysis into two parts: the first concentrates on the evidence from the WPA interviews themselves, and the second assesses how bringing fatherhood more firmly into the frame might nuance the ways in which the WPA narratives have so far been used by historians.

Slavery's destruction of the African American family unit formed the focus of much contemporary abolitionist criticism of the institution, and has been of interest to historians for many decades now (Gutman 1976; Manfra and Dykstra 1985; Jones 1985; Malone 1992; Stevenson 1997; Hudson 1997; Dunaway 2003; West 2004; Fraser 2007; Fraser 2009; Patterson 2010; West 2012). This critique, however, has become increasingly gendered over the years, productive of a genealogy of divisive descent within which the role of the black father remains a contested, unsettled, and often marginalised one. There are, in some respects, sound reasons for this, the most obvious being the fact that from the mid-seventeenth century, enslaved status, first in Virginia and then in the rest of the then colonies, derived from that of the mother. The reasoning behind this, and the sexual exploitation of slaves that it highlighted, was made clear in the wording of the legislation (Act XII) passed in Virginia in December of 1662. This was in response to doubts that "have arisen whether any children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman should be slave or free." To abolish these doubts, the act ruled "that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother" (Hening 1809, vol. II, p. 170).

This matrilineal ruling has led to many erroneous assumptions over the years. For the modern African American family it had perhaps its most deleterious impact with the publication, in 1965, of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then Assistant Secretary for Labor. Commonly termed the "Moynihan Report", this argued that a combination of the economic and psychological effects of slavery, the segregated nature of society after the Civil War and into the twentieth century, and the ever-present threat of lynching "worked against the emergence of a strong father figure" within black communities. In support of his racially-informed assertions, Moynihan cited cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead's 1962 publication, *Male and Female*, and specifically her argument that slavery, along with warfare, famine, epidemics, and social unrest, undermined the family unit and destroyed the "delicate line of transmission" whereby men learned nurturing, paternal roles. The primary familial unit to emerge from slavery, Moynihan argued, was "mother and child...the biologically given" (United States Department of Labor 1965, chp. III).

As far as oral history is concerned, the absent-father trope gained traction via one of the most commonly-cited and influential writers on the genealogy of black America, Alex Haley, who penned both *Roots* (1976) and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965). Haley expressed the belief that, typically, "slave children would grow up without an awareness of who their parents were, and particularly male parents" (Haley in Perks and Thomson 2015, p. 23). This assumption can be heard even now in the most recent scholarly literature. As Michael Connor and Joseph White noted, "[h]istorically, black fathers have been either invisible in the study of child development and family life or characterized in negative terms." Above all, they are too often seen as "absent fathers who are financially irresponsible and rarely involved in their children's lives" (Connor and White 2007, p. 2; see also Hamer 2001).

Yet, Connor and White could almost be writing about the WPA narratives when they observed that that there "seem to be major discrepancies between the negative absent father images of black

men described by demographic studies and the picture of black men in fathering roles which emerges from structured interviews, narratives, biographical sketches, community-based observations and ethnographic investigations" (Connor and White 2007, p. 2), because what the WPA interviews represent above all is an assertion of a genealogical narrative for the African American community in the South. By far the largest percentage of the interviews examined for this paper begin by listing the names of mother and father, and often grandmother and grandfather, too. Those interviewed had a clear sense of their ancestral history, their location within a line of descent, even in cases of an absent father. In this respect, the oral history of the formerly enslaved has had a "transforming impact" upon our understanding of the black family (Paul Thompson in Perks and Thomson 2015, p. 37). The WPA narratives are clear about the positive role that many fathers, even what Jennifer Hamer termed "noncustodial" fathers, represented in the lives of their children (Hamer 2001, p. 33). Many enslaved fathers played what Connor and White termed a "generative" role in guiding the next generation, and this was recognised by their offspring (Connor and White 2007, p. 5).

It must be stressed that in seeking to extend our understanding of the father's role under slavery, this paper is not an analysis of enslaved masculinity, but rather the *memory* of enslaved masculinity in its paternal iteration. The WPA interviews are, as has long been recognised, difficult sources to use. To date, they have been approached largely as a debriefing exercise, the interrogation of a generation on the cusp of leaving the national stage with the intention of securing, before it was too late, direct evidence of life under slavery in the antebellum era. The interviews were conducted in the Depression-era South, a land of lynching, where racial tensions were high and the likelihood of many of those interviewed being completely candid about slavery was slim. The degree of directness could and did vary depending on whether the interviewer was white or black. "Dissimulation," as Paul Escott observed in his study of slave memory, "became a regular part of life for most slaves," and, bringing this forward, Catherine Stewart observed that the "compromising circumstances of the color line in 1930s America made it almost impossible for blacks and whites to speak to one another freely" (Escott 1979, p. 34; Stewart 2016, p. 3).

Historians have long been aware, in short, that as far as the conditions of slave life were concerned, black interviewers usually elicited both more direct and more detailed accounts than most white interviewers, although as Stewart noted in her discussion of Zora Neale Hurston's attempts to collect folklore in Florida, this is not necessarily an assumption the historian can always make (Stewart 2016, pp. 133, 155–65). However, recounting memories of fathers sidestepped the racial dynamic. The subject of slavery was politically charged in a way that the personal memory of a parent might not seem to be to a patronising interviewer, since it did not directly involve any kind of assessment of the interviewee's experience under or opinions of slavery, nor did it challenge white hegemony directly—but indirectly was another matter. A memory of brutality to a father could be recounted to an unsympathetic white interviewer in a way that an account of brutality to oneself, or anger at the black economic condition in the 1930s, might not safely be attempted. This enabled those interviewed to critique, indirectly—so indirectly that it is sometimes doubtful if the white interview picked up on the criticism—the brutality of the South's "peculiar institution". Theirs was, in its purest form, "a language of implication" (Stewart 2016, p. 201). Not all bothered to dissemble. "You are going around to get a story of slavery conditions ... before the civil war?" interviewee Thomas Hall asked. "You should have known before this late day all about that. Are you going to help us? No! you are only helping yourself," he charged. "No matter where you are from I don't want you to write my story cause the white folks have been and are now and always will be against the negro" (Library of Congress n.d.); see also Crosby 2012, p. 271).

In Hall's case the interviewer had clearly stirred up unwelcome memories, and this raises a second issue with these interviews. Many of those who first used them, as much as many of those who conducted them, did so absent any oral history training (Blassingame 1977, pp. xliii–lvi; Stewart 2016, pp. 2–7, 64, 201–3). This can be problematic when the interviewee is not being as direct as Hall. Laura Cornish, for example, welcomed her interviewer by observing "Lawd have mercy 'pon me, when you calls me Aunt Laura it seems jes' like you must be one of my white folks, 'cause dat what dey calls me" (Library of Congress n.d.). At face value, this could be read as welcoming. More subtly,

it can be read as a somewhat passive-aggressive reaction to the interviewer's calling her "Aunty". It was more likely a blunt criticism of the interviewer's patronising approach, but whether the interviewer heard it that way is open to doubt.

Nevertheless, and bearing all these problems in mind, as the first example in America of state-sponsored space within which former slaves could "talk about black identity", these interviews are indispensable (Stewart 2016, p. 2). In order to assess the role of the enslaved father in the life stories of those who were children when slavery ended, the memories of fatherhood that they retained, however indistinctly, the significance of the paternal presence, or absence, in their lives, and the role that fatherhood played in the genealogical narrative constructed out of the slave past, they are revealing. What they reveal is that fatherhood was of greater significance in the autobiographical memories and consequently the life narratives of many former slaves than it has been, so far, to the historiography of slavery. This paper agrees that, in purely evidential terms in respect of slavery, the WPA narratives are open to challenge; but as a means of assessing the ways in which former slaves wrote themselves into a national genealogical narrative of family and freedom, it proposes, they are both revealing.

1.1. Enslaved Fatherhood in the American South

Fathers are not wholly absent from the extensive and, for obvious reasons, frequently fractious debate over slavery in the United States. From Eugene Genovese's magisterial study of slave life, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (Genovese 1976, pp. 482–95), onwards, the significance of the father has not been entirely ignored. In part reacting against the "Moynihan Report", many historians, mainly writing in the 1970s and 1980s, challenged the idea that slave families had been compromised, if not entirely destroyed, under slavery. They emphasised the importance of the slave family in sustaining individuals trapped in an inhuman labour system, and identified an active slave culture distinct from the white world in which the enslaved had been forced to live (Blassingame 1972; Gutman 1976; Genovese 1978, p. 29; see also Parish 1989, pp. 76–89). Subsequent scholars, however, have evinced a tendency to read the problems that Moynihan described back into the slave past, and have qualified the image of the relatively stable slave society that emerged from earlier studies. Such stability as existed, historian Brenda Stevenson insisted, inhered in the matrifocal nature of the slave community around which "flexible extended families were formed to provide nurture, education, and socialization for its members to cope with the ever-present threat of displacement by their owners." Within this structure, "'husbands' had no legal claim to their families" and therefore "could not legitimately command their economic resources or offer them protection from abuse or exploitation" (Stevenson 1997, pp. 160–61).

As a result, the role of the slave father has, of late, become somewhat neglected; lost in wider studies that seek to assess enslaved masculinity in the Antebellum South. It is not entirely absent. Emily West, in particular, has closely examined the lengths to which enslaved men would go in order to hold their family units together. She has found that over 30 percent of marriages were "cross-plantation" relationships, where husband and wife succeeded in sustaining the family unit, but only across distance (West 2004, pp. 46–47; and see also West 2012; West 1999). However, it forms no obvious part of what Sergio Lussana has termed the "homosocial world of enslaved men". This world, Lussana argued, provided a very necessary "emotional landscape" for enslaved men, "serving as a buffer against the dehumanizing features of enslaved life, and a source of resistance" (Lussana 2013, pp. 872, 874; see also Lussana 2010a). For him, relational masculinity functioned within a framework of violence, particularly in respect to semi-organised wrestling and boxing contests, where the fighters could validate their own masculinity by defeating their opponent in front of their fellow slaves (Lussana 2010b, pp. 901–22; see also Doddington 2018). With its focus on the relationships male slaves formed with each other rather than with their children, the issue of fatherhood did not really factor into the emotional equation.

Walter Johnson, examining the slave markets of the Antebellum South, detailed several cases where an individual resisted sale away from family, but most of these met with little long-term success. The father, one former slave recalled, "was not considered in any way as a family part" (*Slave*

Narratives 1941, North Carolina, XI, Part 1, 361). Slavery, as Johnson emphasised, was a “story of separated lovers and broken families, of widows, widowers, and orphans left in the wake of the trade” (Johnson 1999, p. 41). Increasingly, as historians tell it, it has become a story largely about mothers (White 1985; Frankel 1999; Lindquist 2011, p. 220; Cowling et al. 2018; West and Shearer 2018; West 2018; Glymph 2020), and yet, this was not necessarily the narrative that former slaves recounted to their WPA interviewers.

Hannah Plummer’s family was typical of many in America’s Antebellum South in that her parents, Allen and Bertcha Lane, had different enslavers, albeit in this case living proximate to each other in Raleigh, North Carolina. As a result, Hannah’s father lived with his family. He also lived a more independent life than some. As a stone cutter, he hired himself out for wages, the bulk of which, however, went to his enslavers. This prompted the somewhat critical comment from his wife and children’s enslaver, Governor Charles Manly, that although Hannah’s father lived with his family, Manly derived no financial benefit from this arrangement. Hannah’s father, Hannah recalled the Governor complaining, “ought to keep up his [the enslaved] family” (*Slave Narratives*, North Carolina, XI, Part 2, p. 178).

Hannah was born in 1856. She was eleven years of age when America’s civil war ended and slavery was abolished via the 13th Amendment, and in her early eighties when asked to recall her memories of life as a slave. Did she remember Governor Manly saying this to her father? Is it likely that he said it in front of her? Can we, in fact, be certain that he said it at all? The answer to these questions is probably not, not very likely, and no, we cannot be certain. What we can be more certain of is that this is what Hannah Plummer told her interviewer. This was one of the “memories” she pulled out from her years of enslavement, one of the “memories” she retained of her father, and it is worth our while to ask what it tells us; not just about Hannah’s years as a slave, but about the assumptions often made in relation to the WPA narratives as a whole.

The problems of racial and class bias and intimidation that historian John Blassingame highlighted over half a century ago now with respect to the compromised nature of the WPA interviews have not diminished (Blassingame 1977, pp. xlii–li). What has changed is that oral historians now feel more confident dealing with the fact that oral history represents “a shared project in which both the interviewer and the interviewee are involved together, if not necessarily in harmony.” Both the “specific distortions” that the interviewer brings to the table, along with the likelihood that interviewees frequently tell the interviewer only “what they believe they want to be told” are now accepted qualifiers in the process of conducting, and consulting oral testimonies (Alessandro Portelli in Perks and Thomson 2015, p. 55). Furthermore, as oral historian Michael Frisch has stressed, in the context of memories of the Great Depression, what historians are often presented with is *received memory*. This is most evident, he argued, in interviews with the young, whose sense of the past “owes much to what their parents have not remembered and have not told them” (Michael Frisch in Perks and Thomson 2015, p. 46).

With these findings in mind, the charge that the WPA interviews lack immediacy due to “the long time between the actual slave experience and interview,” combined with the fact that “an overwhelming majority” of those interviewed “could describe only how slavery appeared to a black child,” appears less of a barrier to comprehension and analysis than it once did (Blassingame 1977, p. 1). Indeed, the WPA interviews have never described slavery as it “appeared to a black child”. What they actually described was how slavery appeared to, or at least was described by, an adult, and an adult at the other end of life course from the child he or she was during slavery. Assessing the extent to which memory in older age is necessarily neurologically compromised, combined with the impact of the hostile racial environment of slavery itself, as well as that in which many of these interviews took place, is beyond the scope of this article. However, as Kelly McWilliams et al. noted, “[r]esearch on the influence of prior maltreatment on children’s eyewitness memory is still in its infancy”, which should at least give us pause when it comes to generalising about the reliability, or unreliability of what the WPA interviews reveal (McWilliams et al. 2014, p. 702).

What we can say with certainty is that what these interviews offer us is not the detail of the memory of slavery, but an insight into the genealogical *narrative* that emerged from slavery. More

than many other sources, they “compensate for chronological distance with a much closer personal involvement” (Alessandro Portelli in Perks and Thomson 2015, p. 53). They are examples of what psychologists term “autobiographical memory...the chronicle of our lives, a long record we consult whenever someone asks us what our earliest memory is, what the house we live in as a child looked like, or what was the last book we read.” Autobiographical memory, as psychologist Douwe Draaisma has stressed, “both recalls and forgets at the same time”. It contains “next to nothing about what happened before we were three or four,” it focuses on and never fails to remember “hurtful events” and “humiliations”, it is “our most intimate companion”. The earliest memories, in particular, “cannot always be separated from stories circulating in the family” (Draaisma 2004, pp. 1, 12, 24).

Bearing all this in mind, Hannah Plummer’s apparently perfect recall of quite a specific conversation that took place over seventy years previously tells us one, or both, of two things: first, this conversation was of significance to Hannah, such that she was able to recall it with some clarity well over half a century later; or, second, that it was the product of received memory, an echo of her mother’s memory of it. In either case, it was a memory that positioned Hannah’s father firmly within the fledgling cash nexus that functioned as part of slave society, as a man with some status, such status deriving both from the skills that enabled him to work quasi-independently and the recognition of this fact by Hannah’s enslaver (on this point see Hudson 1994, p. 77).

Whilst it may have been an unrealistic assumption given the family’s particular circumstances, Hannah’s enslaver clearly considered Hannah’s father as having the same responsibilities as a father and husband that a free man would have shouldered. This was not unusual. As historian David Doddington stressed, the evidence indicates that “enslaved men who lived in family units were typically expected to act as providers of sorts”, as well as “be the mobile partners in abroad marriages”, an observation borne out in the interviews examined here (Doddington 2018, p. 100; West 1999, p. 238; Macdonald 1993; Pargas 2006a, 2006b; see, e.g., *Slave Narratives*, Charles W. Dickens, North Carolina, XI, Part I, p. 255; J. H. Beckwith, Arkansas, II, Part 1, p. 132; Henry Bland, Georgia, IV, Part 1, p. 83; Amanda McDaniel, Georgia IV, Part 3, p. 71). A slave was always both property and person in the Antebellum South, but Hannah’s father appears to have been considered, by Hannah’s enslaver at least, to have been both slave and free. It is difficult to assess what this meant for Hannah’s father, but his contradictory status may have been the source of some pride for Hannah’s mother and, by extrapolation, Hannah herself. What appears to be a negative memory of an enslaver’s complaint can, in fact, be read as a positive assertion of a father’s status.

Hannah Plummer was not alone in deriving some pride from her father’s position as a skilled slave. Charles W. Dickens recalled how his father “split slats and made baskets to sell”, but this was clearly received memory, because Dickens went on to add that “[h]e said his master let him have all the money he made sellin’ de things he made” (*Slave Narratives*, North Carolina, XI, Part 1, p. 256; see also Della Briscoe, Georgia, IV, Part 1, p. 125; Minnie Davis, Georgia IV, Part 1, p. 255). John Day, a former slave from Tennessee, recalled his father, Alfred’s, success as a blacksmith. “Blaksmithin’ was a real trade them days,” he told his interviewer, and by the end of the Civil War his father had accumulated some “fifteen hundred dollars in Confederate money”. So valuable was Alfred, indeed, that when his enslaver decided to sell him, not on any other grounds than “he could git a lot of money for him”, he quickly changed his mind and bought Alfred back. “Day de only time,” John reported, “master sold one of us” (*Slave Narratives*, Texas, XVI, Part 1, p. 302). Similarly, Carey Davenport, a retired minister at the time of his interview, understood that a specific skill translated into cash value for a slave. Proud of his father’s carpentry and ironwork expertise, and keen to emphasise that his father had made “the best Carey plows in that part of the country”, the economic worth that this translated into for his father’s enslaver nevertheless became inseparable from, was possibly part of, the pride that Davenport derived from his father’s abilities. “He was a very valuable man,” Davenport reported, “and he make wheels and the hub and put the spokes in” (*Slave Narratives*, Texas, XVI, Part 1, p. 283).

Independent work of this nature, as Doddington has emphasised, “could be an arena of ‘self-making’ for enslaved men” (Doddington 2018, p. 90). Given the second-hand nature of much of the

evidence with respect to the WPA interviews, this is plausible but perhaps harder to prove. The emphasis placed upon paternal skill and effort in these interviews, however, certainly suggests that this particular narrative was of significant value to the “self-making” of their descendants. It is important to stress that maternal support, skill, and effort is not entirely absent in these narratives, and apparently equally valued by the interviewee in many respects. However, what dominated many of the accounts was the father’s, not the mother’s work. This was the case even when the interviewee detailed the mutual effort that both parents sustained in order to support their families.

Louisa Adams, for example, told her interviewer that her “[d]ad and mammie had their own gardens and hogs,” which was essential, as Louisa recalled. “We were compelled to walk about at night to live,” she reported, we “were so hungry we were bound to steal or p[e]rish.” Later in the interview, however, she highlighted the hunting skills that her father deployed in order to keep the family from starvation. “My old daddy partly raised his chilluns on game,” she recalled, apparently privileging this over the combined effort of both parents to raise food (*Slave Narratives*, North Carolina, XI, Part I, pp. 2–3). An even more obvious example is that of Hannah Crasson from North Carolina. At first Hannah did not differentiate between her parents when recounting their efforts to provide for their family. “They worked their patches by moonlight,” she recalled, “and worked for the white folks in the day time. They sold what they made. Marster bought it and paid for it.” However, then joint effort suddenly translated into paternal success alone: “He made a barrel o’ rice every year, my daddy did” (*Slave Narratives*, North Carolina, XI, Part I, p. 188).

In some cases, the durability and security of an enslaved family was clearly understood by those interviewed so many decades later to have been directly linked to the father’s independent economic leverage within the slave system. This may have pointed to its unusual nature, or it may have been a reflection of survival recounted at a time, during the Great Depression, when survival was becoming more of a challenge. The memory was not always a pleasant one. Robert Glenn from North Carolina recounted the considerable efforts that his father had exerted to try and hold his family together. “My father’s time was hired out,” Glenn explained, “and as he knew a trade he had by working overtime saved up a considerable amount of money.” When Glenn was sold, his father attempted to buy his son back, but was unable to do so, not because he did not have the money, but because the slave speculator refused to sell to a black slave. Economic power, when wielded by African Americans, had its limitations in the Antebellum South. It was not until long after slavery had ended that Glenn, unlike so many in the aftermath of slavery, succeeded in finding his parents again, an emotional encounter that Glenn detailed to the interviewer. “I broke down and began to cry. Mother nor father did not know me, but mother suspicioned I was her child,” Glenn recounted. “Father had a few days previously remarked that he did not want to die without seeing his son once more. I could not find language to express my feelings” (*Slave Narratives*, North Carolina, XI, Part I, pp. 329–330, 339).

Given the extended trauma attendant upon separation, combined with the emotion Glenn experienced when the family was reunited, the reader can be reasonably confident that this was part of Glenn’s autobiographical memory. Trauma, indeed, is most likely to produce, and retain, “the very first autobiographical memories,” so it is unsurprising that it forms a significant component of the WPA interviews (Draaisma 2004, p. 22). The high cost of resistance was just one aspect of this. Rebellion, violence, and resistance have been the main themes analysed by historians seeking to understand how male slaves manifested their gender identity; a trend evidenced in, most prominently, Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins’ edited collection of essays on masculinity and slavery, *A Question of Manhood*, almost all of which are centred on slave violence and resistance, defined as “slave flight and revolt, sabotage and the destruction of property, the feigning of illness, manipulation and refusal to work, self-mutilation, suicide and even the killing of one’s children, poisoning, physical, and violent confrontation” (Hine et al. 1999, p. 2). Violent confrontation, or confrontation of any kind, however, could carry a high cost, as Anne Clark’s father found out. “My poppa was strong. He never had a lick in his life,” Anne recalled with some pride. When the day came that the enslaver tried to whip him, Anne’s father stood up to him. “I never had a whoppin’ and you can’t whop me,” he declared. “But I can kill you,” was the response, and the enslaver “shot

my poppa down. My mam tuk him in the cabin and put him on a pallet. He died" (*Slave Narratives*, Texas XVI, Part 1, p. 224).

In some cases, it was not direct confrontation that produced violence, and not necessarily white on black violence. Mary Bell from Missouri looked back at the effort her father had expended in order to visit her mother on the two days a week that he was allowed to do so. However, "so often he came home all bloody from beatings his old nigger overseer would give him," she remembered. "My mother would take those bloody clothes off of him, bathe de sore places and grease them good and wash and iron his clothes so he could go back clean" (*Slave Narratives*, Missouri X, p. 27). Louisa Adam from North Carolina recalled performing this service herself, a memory that must have stuck in the mind of the child she was at the time. "I have greased my daddy's back after he had been whupped until his back was cut to pieces," she reported. "He had to work jis the same" (*Slave Narratives*, North Carolina XI, Part 1, p. 5). Similarly, Mary Gladdy from Georgia recounted the time that her father, able to hold off several of his fellow slaves who had been charged with helping the plantation foreman whip him, was then shot by the foreman, "inflicting wounds from which he never fully recovered" (*Slave Narratives*, Georgia IV, part 2, p. 17). A J Mitchell's father was whipped for asserting his freeborn status. "I've seen stripes on his back look like the veins on the back of my hand," the interviewer was told, "where they whipped him tryin' to make him disown his freedom" (*Slave Narratives*, Arkansas III, Part 5, p. 103).

Retrieving and repeating these memories of violence similarly spoke to an assertion of status that enslavers were unwilling to acknowledge; an assertion of racial equality, of humanity, of belonging to a family, a family that slavery as an institution was designed to destroy. Fathers within these familial units were sometimes remembered as functioning in ways identical to more stable families, to free families, although sometimes also in having to behave in ways more extreme than most free families ever had to experience. Although bell hooks proposed that "most black male slaves stood quietly by as white masters sexually assaulted and brutalised black women and were not compelled to act as protectors," those interviewed by the WPA sometimes told a different story (hooks 2004, p. 34).

Sallie Carder's father was "shot and killed", for example, whilst attempting to prevent the overseer from whipping his wife (*Slave Narratives*, Oklahoma XIII, p. 28). Fathers also often experienced extremes of violence simply for visiting their families, as Mary Bell's father might have done, despite having passes permitting them to travel. In part this may have been indicative of gender-related assumptions in the Antebellum South, but here, too, fathers sometimes take second place to mothers in the literature. Deborah Gray White, for example, argued that this arrangement reinforced female independence (White 1985, p. 154). Yet, this came at a cost for their husbands. Enslaved fathers visiting wives and children on nearby plantations risked being beaten by the patrollers, who clearly needed little excuse to mete out violence to slaves. Manda Walker, for example, remembered how, due to the problems caused by a swollen creek, her father had "stayed over his leave dat was written on his pass." As a result, the slave patrollers "[t]ied him up, pulled down his breeches, and whupped him righ befo mammy and us chillum. I shudder to dis day," Manda recalled, "to think of it." "I often think," Manda mused, having narrated this harrowing episode, "dat de system of patarollers and bloodhounds did more to bring on de war and de wrath of de Lord than anything else" (*Slave Narratives*, South Carolina XIV, p. 171).

The role of father was not always so fraught with danger. Memories of a father's love and concern also come through the WPA narratives. "I 'members when I's jus' walkin' round good pa come in from the field at night and taken me out of bed and dress me and feed me and then play with me for hours," Will Adams recalled. John Day looked back in admiration at a father who would, after "de day's work" work for himself to support his family. "He'd work until midnight, sometimes," Day remembered, commenting "I never seen such a worker." John Smith from Raleigh had mixed memories of his father who, according to Smith, "believed in whuppin like the white folks did." Yet, before his father died he told Smith that he "had done more for him dan de other chilluns. He whupped me too much," Smith commented, "but atter all he was my father an' I loved him" (*Slave Narratives*, Texas XVI, Part 1, p. 2; Texas XVI, Part 1, p. 302; North Carolina XI, Part 2, pp. 279–80).

Slave fathers also sought to protect their families by offering simple advice and encouragement. Susan Davis Rhodes, an ex-slave from Missouri remembers that “people in my day didn’t know book learning but dey studied how to protect each other, and save ‘em from much misery as dey could” (*Slave Narratives*, Missouri X, p. 284). Similarly, Tennessee Johnson, a slave from Louisiana, recalled how “[d]ey do all dey can to keep de young people out o trouble, but if dey get into trouble, dere’s a place in de quarter de meet an’ dey talk it over. One say ‘yo’ boy do dis, or yo’ girl do dat’, and dey help to get dem out of trouble.” Slave fathers, in particular, one interviewee recalled, were particularly concerned with protecting their daughters from both black and white men, and supervised the courting practices of their daughters: “He (the father) sit... de boy in one corner an’ de girl (the daughter) she sit in dis corner, fo’ de paw don’ want her thrown back on de fambly” (Malone 1992, p. 234).

By focusing on their fathers in these various ways, former slaves were asserting both the stability and gender norms, for the era, of the slave family under a system designed to destroy both it and the individuals it encompassed. They were also able to critique slavery as an institution obliquely. Rather than challenging the interviewer directly, as Thomas Hall had done, and asserting bluntly the obvious truth that slavery was a system predicated on violence, that “punishments were severe and barbarous”, and that some “marsters acted like savages”, those interviewed achieved the same end by approaching the subject indirectly, speaking for or about their fathers rather than for or about themselves (*Slave Narratives*, North Carolina XI, Part 1, p. 360). In so doing, they were also openly and consciously retrieving a relationship that enslavers had so often attempted to subvert, and not necessarily through sale. Enslavers sometimes deliberately inserted themselves into a quasi-paternal role, either because, as was the case with Laura Cornish’s enslaver, they wished to deny the reality of enslavement; “he won’t ‘low none he culled folks to call him master,” she recalled, or in an attempt to undermine the familial bond. “We called our fathers ‘daddy’ in slavery time,” Jerry Hinton reported. “Dey would not let slaves call deir fathers ‘father’” (*Slave Narratives*, Texas, XVI, Part 1, p. 254; North Carolina XI, part 1, p. 429; see also Minnie Davis, Georgia IV, Part 1, p. 254). It was an assertion of fatherhood, and freedom.

1.2. Bearing Witness to the Slave Past, and Its End

Perhaps the most famous escaped slave and leading abolitionist advocate and editor, Frederick Douglass, concurred with Fanny Kemble’s reading of the parent-child relationship under slavery. Although apparently able to recall the considerable risks his enslaved mother had incurred in order to see him, travelling some twelve miles on foot in the dark after a day in the fields, he had little real memory of her. In adulthood, he understood that the separation of mother from child was most likely intended “to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child.” When she died, he remembered, he “received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger.” The issue of fatherhood for many, but not all slaves is encapsulated in Douglass’ emphasis on a barely-remembered mother rather than a father. It is most likely that, for him as for many others, Douglass’ father was his mother’s enslaver (Douglass 1845, pp. 2–3; see also Douglass [1892] 1962, pp. 28–29; Blight 2018, p. 9; Settle Egypt 1945, p. 105; Cade 1935, p.13; and Alex Haley in Perks and Thomson 2015, p. 23).

In part, the extraction of the male slave from a fatherhood role is because for too long he was understood to function as a man only within a familial setting. As former slave Elias Thomas commented, “[i]t took a smart nigger to know who his father was in slavery time” (*Slave Narratives*, North Carolina, XI, Part 2, p. 343). The acceptance of this assertion as typical of the slave experience has largely dominated ever since sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, followed several decades later by historians such as Kenneth Stampp and Stanley Elkins, concluded that male slaves were denied both their masculinity and a fatherhood role. Kenneth Stampp cited the intensive labour regime imposed on slaves as a major source of disruption to a slave’s family life and relationships (Kenneth 1956, p. 292). E. Franklin Frazier also pointed to sale and forced migration as a significant cause of rupture in the bond between a slave father and his children (Frazier 1939 in Rawick 1972, pp. 79–94).

Elkins, echoing Fanny Kemble, proposed that for enslaved children, “the plantation offered no real satisfactory father-image other than the master”, since the ‘real’ father “was virtually without authority over his child”. Indeed, as Elkins emphasised, “a father, among slaves, was legally ‘unknown’.” Furthermore, “the very etiquette of plantation life removed even the honorific attributes of fatherhood from the Negro male, who was addressed as ‘boy’—until, when the vigorous years of his prime were past, he was allowed to assume the title of ‘uncle’.” Only in naming practices, Elkins found, were fathers acknowledged in the naming of their sons (Lindquist 2011, pp. 224–25; Elkins [1959] 1976, pp. 55, 130, 284).

Perhaps the main issue with the concept of fatherhood, as this wends its way, in essence providing a faint historiographical genealogical pathway, through the extensive literature on slavery in the United States, is that of the long-term impact that enslavement had on slave fathers, slave families, and, by extrapolation, the American nation. Here, one must draw a distinction between micro-studies, often localised, of the slave experience, and macro-studies of masculinity, only some of which engage with race, such as those by Rotundo (1993), Harper (1996), and, of course, hooks (2004). Several of these examine what one might regard as the fall-out from slavery across a wider geographical distance and a longer time-span than the Antebellum South (Harper 1996; hooks 2004; Bederman 1995). Some are comparative (Patterson 1982). Almost all, arguably, have been in some way influenced by the conclusions offered in Moynihan’s contentious 1965 report and its proposition that “[a]t the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family” (United States Department of Labor 1965, chp. II).

Echoes of this concern for the stability of the African American family, specifically, can be heard throughout the nineteenth century. They were reinforced by a variety of individuals and organisations, among them the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission and the short-lived Freedmen’s Bureau, both of whom sought to influence the future of the black family, in the years immediately after the Civil War (see, e.g., Frankel 1999, pp. 136–37). Scholars, too, have disagreed about the stability of the black family in the South in the aftermath of slavery. Researching black step-families, Jo Ann Manfra and Robert Dykstra, for example, challenged Herbert Gutman’s suggestion that “[f]rom bondage the black family passed resolutely into freedom, its demographic health less damaged by slavery than it would be by Gilded Age racial discrimination and economic deprivation.” What they uncovered in Virginia was “that serial marriage and the stepfamily, initially observable in slavery, became characteristic features of the postemancipation black family” (Manfra and Dykstra 1985, pp. 18–20). One only has to look at the post-slavery marriage records of the Freedmen’s Bureau to get some sense of the extent of this, containing as these do the echoes of the uncertainty of relationships under slavery, of “previous connections”, and children from unions whose stability could be so readily undermined by an enslaver (The Freedmen’s Bureau Online n.d.).

Manfra and Dykstra’s findings, however, have themselves been qualified by, among others, Andrew Billingsley, who strove for a more nuanced assessment of the black family in the 20th century and the legacies this carries from slavery. “Too many discussions of African-American families,” he charged, “focus exclusively on single-parent families or on the underclass or on children in trouble as if these phenomena were characteristic of African-American families.” The result, he argued, “is an absurd and counterproductive tendency to see African-American families in isolation,” but also, one might add, to see them as somehow fixed in our assumptions about slavery and its fall-out across American society (Billingsley 1991, p. 27; see also Billingsley 1968). In fact, as has been shown by Raley, Sweeny, and Wondra, the “long-run historical influences such as the legacy of slavery” have less impact than one might suppose, and “the racial divergence we see now in marriage formation is relatively recent” (Raley et al. 2015, pp. 91–93). Moynihan’s report, avoiding as it did any discussion of middle-class, middle-income black families, and working instead within the kind of stereotypical parameters critiqued by Billingsley, tells us more about the racial assumptions prevalent in 1960s America. It tells us very little either about the extent or the importance to children of their father, but it has arguably had the effect of preventing us asking the question.

The ending of slavery allowed the formerly enslaved to acknowledge a paternal relationship the very name of which had previously been compromised, and many did so even if the father in

question had been mainly or wholly absent from the family unit. Not all did—Thomas Cole from Texas commented that he “was sposed to take my father’s name, but he was sech a bad, ornery, no-count sech a human, I jes’ take my old massa’s name” (*Slave Narratives*, Texas XVI, part 1, p. 225)—but many did. Contra Frazier’s argument in respect of the lack of memory of black fathers, they did so in order to assert their own genealogical narrative, to write an often invisible or absent black father into their life stories (Lindquist 2011, p. 213).

“Pap’s name was Tom Townes, ‘cause he ‘longed on de Townes place. He was my step-pap and when I’s growed I token my own pap’s name, what was Crawford,” John Crawford explained. There was no hostility toward his step-father in this decision. His narrative made it clear that he had enjoyed a good relationship with Townes. but for Crawford, the absent biological father was an important part of his own identity. “I never seed him, though,” Crawford admitted, “and didn’t know nothin’ much ‘bout him. He’s sold away ‘fore I’s borned” (*Slave Narratives*, Texas XVI, Part 1, p. 257). It was important to Willie Buck Charleston, Jr. that he could identify a line of genealogical decent. “I’m for the world like my daddy,” he proudly told his interviewer (*Slave Narratives*, Arkansas II, Part 2, p. 8; see also James Monroe Abbot, Missouri X, p. 1). Perhaps the most poignant example of the significance of fathers to those formerly enslaved came from Mary Colbert from Georgia, whose father had died when she was a child. “Now about my father,” she mused, “that is the dream” (*Slave Narratives*, Georgia IV, Part 1, p. 213).

Some former slaves acknowledged the direct influence that their fathers had had on their lives. “Father could neither read nor write,” announced the Rev. W.B. Allen from Georgia, “but had a good head for figures and was very pious. His life had a wonderful influence on me,” he admitted. Although “I was originally worldly—that is, I drank and cussed, but haven’t touched a drop of spirits in forty years and quit cussing before I entered the ministry” (*Slave Narratives*, Georgia IV, Part 1, p. 12). For others, it was a particular skill or trade that they had inherited from their father, enabling them to make a living after slavery. “I am a shoemaker,” James Bertrand told his interviewer, “I learned my trade from my father.” Ed Craddock took over from his father, a school janitor, after slavery (*Slave Narratives*, Arkansas II, Part 1, p. 158; Missouri X, p. 96). Perhaps the most important skill that slave fathers passed on to their children was that of survival in a post-war, racially hostile world where violence against former slaves was endemic.

Memories of violence, indeed, run through the WPA narratives, violence and the long-term evidence, the scars of being “skinned up”, that it left on the body if a slave had been whipped, and on the mind if a child had witnessed it (e.g., *Slave Narratives*, North Carolina XI, Part 2, p. 103; see also King 1994, p. 147). Survival after slavery, however, meant that these memories, if not the physical evidence of their accuracy, had to be suppressed. Robert Manson recalled the struggle his family had to make a living as sharecroppers after slavery. They “stayed on wid marster caue they didn’t have nuthin. Dey couldn’t leave,” he reported. On one occasion, a former overseer who had beaten Manson’s father very badly came to ask his father to work for him. Robert was shocked. “I axed pa ain’t dat de man who beat you so when you wus a slave?” His father, having a clearer sense of what survival required in the New South, hushed him: “you shet your mouth,” he told Robert, thereby conveying a lesson about suffering, survival, and suppression that Robert never forgot. Similarly, Della Fountain from Oklahoma remembered how her “brother Joe felt mighty big after freedom and strutted about.” On one occasion, a white man had thrown a ball of mud that landed on Joe’s foot. “It didn’t hurt him a bit,” Della recounted, and had not been meant seriously, “but Joe bridled up and he started to git smart, and father told him he’d break his neck if he didn’t go home and keep his mouth shut.” Father “finally to whup Joe,” Della recalled, “to make him know he was black” (*Slave Narratives*, Oklahoma, XIII, p. 104).

The importance of the father in helping offspring to safely navigate the new and dangerous landscape of freedom is perhaps the most significant, and most meaningful evidence that one can draw from the WPA interviews. It is evidence of what, in the context of post-Franco Spain, has been termed “genocidal genealogy”, the delineation of a world in which former victim and former perpetrator of extreme violence are not only required to construct a future proximate to each other but in which the former victim must somehow relinquish, or at least not express openly, the memory

of that violence (Macho 2016). The difference is that former slaves could not safely relinquish that memory; their future safety depended on their keeping it alive and passing it on to their children in ways not obviously likely to prompt racial retribution. The racial realities of the American South prompted them to play an active “generative father” role, both under slavery and after it ended. This was, for many, a conscious decision. Historian Edward Baptist emphasised the importance of being a husband or a father to enslaved men “who wanted to live in a way defined by moral choice rather than fear.” Such men, he proposed, “had to turn to the long view, to thinking of the people who would one day be left behind them” (Baptist 2014, pp. 281–82). We can see the results of that approach clearly in the WPA interviews, both with respect to the memories of fatherhood recalled and the ways in which these were framed (Connor and White 2007, p. 5).

Here, too it must be stressed that interviews with the aged, designed to elicit memories of when they were young, are likely to suffer from the same constraints and the issues of memory as in the very young. However, because what we are dealing with here is often “received memory”, and also because some of the WPA interviewees made it clear that they were not talking about themselves, but about their parents, we can hear the echoes of slavery in the life narratives of those too young to remember it in any coherent way. These individuals are not presenting their own memories of slavery, but representing those of their parents. “I was mighty young an’ I members very little ‘bout some things in slavery but from what my mother and father tole me since the war,” Martha Hinton admitted to her interviewer. Still, some memories stuck. “De first pair of shoes I wore,” she recalled, “my daddy made ‘em” (*Slave Narratives*, North Carolina, XI, part I, p. 434; see also Irella Battle Walker, Texas, XVI, Part 4, p. 123). “I was never a slave,” Millie Markham told her interviewer. “I was not born in slavery, but my father was. I’m afraid this story will be more about my father and mother than it will be about myself” (*Slave Narratives*, North Carolina, XI, part 2, p. 106; see also J. H. Beckwith, Arkansas, II, Part I, p. 132).

The significance of memories not their own to the life narratives of African Americans living in the post-slavery south can be clearly seen in the case of J.F. Boone from Arkansas. Boone had been born seven years after slavery, and was clear about his lineage. He set it out for his interviewer. “My father’s name was Arthur Boone and my mother’s name was Eliza Boone,” he established at the outset, “and I am goin’ to tell you about my father, Arthur Boone.” Boone went on to detail what his father had told him about slavery, the violence, the hardship, the cruelty. His father died relatively young, Boone reported, at just fifty-six. The implications of why this should be, at least in Boone’s opinion, were clear. He concluded his narrative by stressing that this was his father’s story. “Now whose story are you saying this is?” he asked. “You say this is the story of Arthur Boone, father of J.F. Boone? Well, that’s all right, but you better mention that J.F. Boone is Arthur Boone’s son.” So adamant was Boone about this that even the interviewer felt moved to comment: “the insistence on the word ‘son’ seemed to me,” he observed, “to set this story off as a little out of the ordinary” (*Slave Narratives*, Arkansas II, Part 1, pp. 210–13).

For Boone’s interviewer there was one other aspect of this particular narrative that was unusual; the fact that Boone’s father was a Union veteran. “Yes, my father fit in the Civil war,” Boone confirmed. “I have seen his war clothes as many times as you have hairs on your head I reckon. He had his old sword and all. They had a hard battle down in Mississippi once he told me” (*Slave Narratives*, Arkansas II, Part 1, pp. 211–12). What Boone’s interviewer found unusual was not mention of the war—many interviewers specifically asked about that subject—but he was most likely expecting to hear that Boone’s father had accompanied his Confederate enslaver to war; it was the Union part of the answer that surprised him. His surprise said more about white expectations about black behavior during the Civil War than anything else. However, the Civil War component to the memory of fathers is significant to our reading of these interviews and to the memories of fathers that they contain. Recounting Civil War activity, and specifically on behalf of the Union, was a clear assertion of agency on the part of the slave father and, as such, a source of pride for his children. It was evidence that the father concerned had fought actively for his freedom and that of his family. It emphasised that his story, and consequently his children’s life narratives, could be located in the national emancipation narrative to emerge from the war, however compromised in racial, social, and

economic terms emancipation had proved to be. Some memory of the Civil War that ended slavery in the United States formed a significant component of the narratives of over 75 percent of the group assessed here. “I ‘membr more ‘bout that war back yonder than I member ‘bout the war we had a few years ago,” Margaret Green from Georgia commented (*Slave Narratives*, Georgia IV, Part 2, p. 63). In this respect, however, how it came into the discussion, what narrative was remembered, or at least offered, and whether any memory of a father came into it was almost wholly location-dependent.

Those interviewed in states such as North or South Carolina had a lot to say about the war, about the arrival of Union troops in their area and the impact these had. Many described hiding the enslaver’s valuables and food from the troops; many recalled that union troops had looted the slaves’ cabins; some recollected shooting a “Yankee”. How plausible aspects of these narratives are is open to some doubt, since it is more than likely that this “memory” of a faithful slave, or at least a narrative of shared suffering when Union troops arrived, was one that the interviewer encouraged (see e.g., *Slave Narratives*, North Carolina XI, Part 1, pp. 255–56, 434; Part 2, pp. 135–36, 214, 217; Missouri X, p. 40). Narratives from former slaves located further west were more mixed, and the memory of Union troops was, similarly, mixed; a child’s fear remembered, combined with an adult’s realisation of what the war had meant for the enslaved (see, e.g., *Slave Narratives*, Arkansas II, part 5, pp. 2, 7). For some, the memory was a sad one; of a father disappearing into the Civil War, and never coming home again. Some fathers, such as Irene Robertson’s or Warren McKinney’s, both from South Carolina, took the opportunity to abandon their families and begin new lives; others, as was the case for Joe Casey’s father, came home just to die (*Slave Narratives*, Arkansas II, Part 5, pp. 30, 40; Missouri X, p. 76).

Boone’s narrative was, therefore, unusual in its recollection of a father who fought for the Union. Unusual but not unique. Tanner Thomas remembered his mother telling him that his father had “taken sick and died in the war on the North side” (*Slave Narratives*, Arkansas II, part 6, p. 304). Some, of course, were not certain. “My daddy got his leg shot in the Civil War,” one interviewee recalled, but “I don’t know which side he was on” (*Slave Narratives*, Arkansas II, Part 4, p. 62; see also Nannie Jones, p. 164). However, most knew which side their father had been on, or at least wished to have a father who fought for the Union as part of their life narrative. “My father ran off and joined the Yankee army,” William Latimore reported, adding that he had a clear recollection of when Abraham Lincoln had died because the Union troops “all wore that black band around their arms” (*Slave Narratives*, Arkansas II, Part 4, p. 242). J.T. Tims recounted how he and his father had escaped slavery and travelled to Natchez, where both had joined up; he in a white regiment and his father in an African American one (*Slave Narratives*, Arkansas II, Part 6, p. 338).

Several of these narratives emphasised the significance of the military contribution their fathers had made to the cause of freedom. J. Roberts related the story of his father, “a federal soldier in the Civil War,” and his father’s reminiscences about a conflict that he never expected to survive, while Omelia Thomas recounted the wounds her father had sustained fighting for the Union. On this subject she was adamant. “He was on the Union side,” she stressed, “He was fighting for our freedom. He wasn’t no Reb” (*Slave Narratives*, Arkansas II, Part 6, pp. 53, 297). Sarah Woods Burke from Virginia, similarly, engaged in a bit of racial role-reversal when her interviewer unwisely enquired about which side her father had fought for in the war. “On which side? Well, sho nuff on the side of the North, boy!” was her sharp retort (*Slave Narratives*, Ohio XII, p. 17). Although, for obvious reasons, they were hardly in the majority, these particular life narratives staked a claim for the speaker’s descent from a Union veteran, invoking the memory of fathers who were active not just in helping their families survive slavery, but in fighting to end it. In this respect, Omelia Thomas was not simply passively reminiscing but actively passing on, to future generations, her father’s message when she recalled that “he’d tell us many a day, ‘I am part of the cause that you are free’” (*Slave Narratives*, Arkansas II, Part 6, p. 297).

2. Conclusions

The importance of fathers in the narratives of former slaves recorded by the WPA serves as a corrective to the widespread assumption that enslaved families comprised mothers and children, with fathers a shadowy or altogether absent element in the family structure and, consequently, in the genealogical narratives that emerged from the slave community. In this respect, the direction of late-twentieth and twenty-first century scholarly enquiry has largely, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, pursued a nineteenth-century pattern. Academic debate over the paternal role is usually located in two main areas: the political, public one, concerned with social stability, fiscal planning, the ordering of the family with the state; and the private, personal one, with its roots in what historian John Demos termed the “hothouse family,” a nineteenth-century familial ideal and one from which the father was largely excluded (Demos 1978, p. 27). Too often, however, the 1965 Moynihan Report continues to cast a long shadow over the questions that scholars ask about the slave family, influencing to an unhelpful degree the resultant debates over whether, in fact, the familial unit to emerge from slavery was “mother and child...the biologically given” (United States Department of Labor 1965, chp. III). The questions we ask of the slave experience, and its legacy, can be reframed, however, if we understand and approach the WPA interviews as examples of the genealogical narratives composed by and working for the African American community in the South. As such, they emphasise the significance of the role of the father in the individual life narratives of those born on the very edge of slavery, in the years immediately prior to America’s civil war.

In this respect, locating the slave experience in the wider history of the American family can be helpful, and further research in this direction may prove to be instructive. In the antebellum years, as Demos (among many others) noted, the American family became identified as distinct from rather than part of wider society, and the domestic environment one that protected its inhabitants from the evils and agitations of what was becoming, for many Americans, an increasingly urban life. Along with this shift came “the equation of home-life with the development of individual character,” and a concomitant division, along both gendered and generational lines, of responsibility for said character. “In the brave new world of nineteenth-century America,” Demos noted, “there was no alternative to home life for the proper rearing of children” (Demos 1978, pp. 29–31). Within the home, it was maternal influence that mattered most, especially as far as male children were concerned. For nineteenth-century Americans, in short, any flaw in or weakening of maternal power risked the creation of Delbanco’s “monsters”, men growing “into potency with no sense of empathy or love” (Delbanco 2019, p. 157). Slaves hardly had the opportunity to construct anything approximating the ideal, middle-class home, but, as Demos noted, that does not mean that there was no structure to their child-rearing practices. The African American experience under slavery, he argued, more closely resembled an earlier epoch, when “responsibility for character-training was shared among a variety of people and institutions (parents, other kin, neighbors, churches, courts, and local government)” (Demos 1978, pp. 28–29).

Historians of slavery generally concur in this, highlighting a range of familial options: “Matrifocality, polygamy, single parents, abroad spouses, one-, two-, and three-generation households, all-male domestic residences of blood, marriage, and fictive kin, single- and mixed-gender sibling dwellings—these, along with monogamous marriages and co-residential nuclear families,” existed in Virginia at least (Stevenson 1997, pp. 160–61; see also Manfra and Dykstra 1985). The evidence for this is stronger in some slave states than in others, but the WPA narratives offer us the opportunity not simply to search for how the slave family was in practice, but assess how it was in *memory*. Further quantitative or qualitative research in this area may shed further light on the importance of the paternal role for slaves, and the value of the WPA narratives in this regard. Such research, however, might also be usefully informed by the growing field of oral history, since it is childhood memory, conjoined with an adult’s perspective on race relations that forms the evidential base here. As oral historians have stressed over the years, the reality rarely matches the recollection of childhood. “Oral sources are credible but with a *different* credibility,” Alessandro Portelli stressed. “The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge” (Portelli in Perks and Thomson 2015, p. 53).

From a state perspective, the WPA, as Stewart has argued, spoke to “a new role for the federal government as author of a narrative of national identity that was inclusive in its approach to the various ethnic groups, communities, and diverse cultures that comprised the United States.” In this context, the former slaves “became the case study—a metonym—for discussing the possibilities or problems of full integration into the national body” (Stewart 2016 pp. 38, 65). Many of the problems, in the 1930s and ever since, were associated with the absent father trope, itself predicated on enslavers’ denial or acknowledgment of the father’s role—biological, emotional, social, or material (Stevenson 1997, p. 221).

The WPA narratives support the conclusions of those historians who argue that slave fathers did play an active role within the family unit, in the form of “emotional support and affection, moral instruction, discipline, and physical protection,” as well as practical and vocational skills such as “metal and wood working, carpentry, and blacksmithing along with a host of other traditional skills such as folk medicine” (Stevenson 1997, p. 251). Crucially, the interviews reveal how significant this support was to the formerly enslaved, how significant it was to their autobiographical memories, how central to the life narratives they constructed and passed on, because the most significant aspect of the WPA interviews was not what they provided the state, but what they represented for the African American community in the South in the 1930s. These were claims for recognition reaching across both generational and genealogical space. Generational, because it is hardly likely that the WPA interviews were the first time that these former slaves had narrated their memories of slavery. Anyone who has interviewed individuals in the later stages of the life course or has family members at that stage knows that these stories are repeated and refined over and over again. The scholarly approach to these interviews can sometimes give the impression that this was the first and only time that these narratives were uttered, but this is unlikely. Yes, they were provided in what Stewart noted was state-sponsored space, but that does not mean it was the first time they had been heard (Stewart 2016, p. 2).

As both reminiscences for blacks and reckonings for whites, the WPA narratives were in part intended to instruct African American youth, who had not experienced slavery but for whom life in the South in the 1930s remained traumatic. They were genealogical because they served as reminders that there was a lineage, even for those born in slavery; a biological lineage, a familial one, and, for some, a military one. They bore witness to the fact that slavery, for those trapped in it, was not simply “a factory for manufacturing monsters” (Delbanco 2019, p. 157). Undoubtedly, slavery produced some monsters. More certainly it was created by those who fitted that description to a greater or lesser degree. However, for those who endured it, for those who lived in its final years and inherited their parents’ memories of it, survival meant not becoming a monster, but remaining a man, such that, in future years, a former slave like Perry Madden could tell his interviewer with confidence, “my daddy...he was a good man” (*Slave Narratives*, Arkansas II, Part 5, p. 42).

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