

Slavery, Fatherhood, and Paternal Duty in African American Communities over the Long Nineteenth Century.

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Review

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Hilde, Libra R. *Slavery, Fatherhood, and Paternal Duty in African American Communities over the Long Nineteenth Century*. University of North Carolina Press, 2020. PAPERBACK. \$37.50 ISBN 9781469660677 pp. 400.

Libra R. Hilde's study joins a growing literature on enslaved men's masculinity that has problematized and added complexity to our understanding of how enslaved men negotiated a system designed to unman them. What distinguishes Hilde's study is her focus on fatherhood. Fatherhood remains an understudied aspect of enslaved people's experiences, and with the exception of the work of historian Edward Baptist, has primarily focused on enslaved father's economic responsibilities.¹ Like Baptist, Hilde argues for multiple meanings of enslaved men's paternal duties and explores the emotional component of fatherhood. And like Baptist, Hilde concludes that this emotional component to fatherhood, what she calls, ideological provisioning and caretaking, while often overlooked by historians because it took place in private, is key to understanding the choices enslaved fathers made within the slave system.

Hilde begins her book by locating it within a public discourse, encapsulated in the infamous Moynihan report, that degrades Black men's fathering specifically and masculinity in general. A main goal of her book is to counter these images. She locates the origins of these understandings of Black fatherhood in slavery. "When black fatherhood and provisioning threatened the power structure," Hilde writes, enslaved men were denied access to masculinity in definition and in practice, a trend that continues to describe the experiences of black men today" (13). Hilde concludes her book with an analysis of how this pattern shapes police violence and racist responses to the Black Lives Matters Movement.

¹ Edward Baptist, "The Absent Subject: African American Masculinity and Forced Migration to the Antebellum Frontier," in *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South*, eds. Craig Thompson Friend and Lorrie Glover (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004); Edward Baptist, *The Half that Has Never Been Told: American Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

Hilde addresses these issues through copious research into familiar sources—the WPA interviews and, to a lesser degree, slave narratives. Her nuanced readings of these sources allow her to make effective and convincing arguments for the importance of caretaking and ideological provisioning in enslaved peoples’ practice and expectations of fatherhood. She divides her book into eight chapters which trace both different aspects of fatherhood and how Black men’s fathering changed from slavery to freedom. She identifies several underexamined aspects of enslaved men’s fathering to emphasize the importance of enslaved men’s “emotional investment in their kin” (17). This emotional investment was expected within the slave community, and central to its members understanding of manhood.

Where Hilde’s study departs from previous book length studies of enslaved masculinity is in her expansion of provisioning to include not just the providing of food and clothing, but also meeting the emotional needs of kin and community. Enslaved people valued fathers for their ability to teach their children, provide love and advice. And while enslaved people respected men who resisted enslavement, they understood the importance of those men who taught their children to survive enslavement. Here, Hilde notes the paradox of emotional provisioning: “to be a caretaker, to create and deepen human connections, enriched a person’s life and yet further entangled them in a system that eroded their humanity” (39). Nonetheless, Hilde notes, as did Baptist, the importance of this aspect of enslaved men’s role in their families and communities to the socialization and emotional well-being of their children. At the same time, she also notes the pain this caused enslaved men, who understood that they could lose their children at the whim of the slaveholder. Fatherhood, Hilde articulates, for enslaved men was both an act of love and laden with potential loss.

Hilde notes that the reason recent studies on enslaved masculinity have ignored ideological provisioning is because enslaved fathers had to practice it in private. She contends that the WPA informants and authors of slave narratives emphasize that fathers taught their children to treasure freedom as well as how to survive enslavement. The consequences for fathers and their children for not following the rules of their enslavement were so high that fathers had to balance strict discipline with an emphasis on teaching their children self-worth. Even after the end of slavery, Hilde notes that white supremacist violence forced enslaved fathers to continue this pattern. Religion offered to fathers an important avenue for these teachings as preachers could serve as surrogate fathers to the community as well as providing to

fathers tools “to teach their children self-respect and survival and to navigate the dilemmas of authority within the institution of slavery” (111).

Even when enslaved fathers and freedmen were forced to discipline their children, enslaved people contrasted their responses with those of current and former slaveholders. As Hilde and previous historians have argued, slaveholders often violently usurped from enslaved men the prerogatives of fatherhood casting themselves as benevolent fathers capable of caring for the well-being of enslaved people. And many enslaved people had white biological fathers. Informants in the WPA narrative, contrasted the fathering of slaveholders with that of enslaved men to demonstrate the importance and value they placed on enslaved men’s fathering. Unlike the slaveholder who held power, enslaved fathers had honor as demonstrated by the love and care they showed for their kin and communities. Informants were especially critical of slaveholders for selling their biological children, which they considered a fundamental violation of the duties of fatherhood they judged slaveholders on their ability to act with honor, which obligated slaveholders to both be caretakers as well as providers of food and clothing.

The final chapters of Hilde’s book explore how freedpeople negotiated fatherhood. As they had during slavery, freedpeople judged fathers for their ability to serve as caretakers and provide adequate food and clothing to their families. While underscoring the importance of these expectations and the efforts and desire by freedmen to fulfil these obligations, several things worked against their efforts. Because enslaved men were more likely to be sold away from their families and had little hope of seeing them again, many formed new families in their new location. Freedmen had different strategies for negotiating this dilemma that ranged from staying with their present family to trying to reunite their previous family. Both of these strategies could disappoint and sow discord. Probably the largest obstacles freedmen faced was poverty and continued expectations that Black labor be available to whites, an economic arrangement that white supremacists enforced through violence. Still, Hilde notes, that children and freedmen hoped that their fathers could gain a modicum of independence within this economy that might secure a better future.

Overall, Hilde has written a convincing book that adds depth and complexity to the existing literature on enslaved masculinity. To my knowledge it is the first book-length study on enslaved fatherhood, and I appreciate her emphasis on the emotional lives of fathers and their children. While I did not find her conclusions to be significantly different than other historians

such as Baptist, her book deepens and adds specificity to more general arguments about fatherhood and caretaking among enslaved men. It thus encourages us to think about the complexities of enslaved men's experiences and inner life as historians of women have done for enslaved women. Furthermore, the work is accessible as Hilde keeps the stories of enslaved people at the center of her work while deftly framing those stories within a narrative that emphasizes the interrelationships between gender and race in shaping social categories such as fatherhood. For this reason, her book will appeal to general readers and undergraduates as well as graduate students. It is an important contribution to the historiographies of American enslavement and constructions of race and freedom after the Civil War. It also adds to our understanding of how these constructions of race and gender continue to shape our most important public debates of today.

Kathleen Kennedy is the department head and professor of history at Missouri State University. She has published articles on grief, enslaved masculinity and ethical questions about writing about the pain of others.