HARRIET JACOBS AND ELIZABETH KECKLY: THE MATERIAL AND EMOTIONAL REALITIES OF CHILDHOOD SLAVERY

TEACHER TOOL 3: AN OVERVIEW OF CHILDHOOD SLAVERY

Childhood slavery in the American South encompassed a variety of different experiences and circumstances, but there were common elements shared by almost everyone born into bondage. Typically, enslaved parents were not married to each other in the eyes of the law, but might still live within family units, and, within their own community, did what they could to formalize their relationships with each other. They often lived in small one or two-room slave cabins located on their owner's property. Slaveholders provided rations consisting of corn meal, salted meat, and potatoes, but it was up to the slaves to find time around their workdays to cultivate any extra food they required (Schwartz 2001, 3). Although, slave parents sought to provide supportive, close-knit families for their children, the demands made upon their lives and the conditions in which they lived often undermined their efforts. Mothers of infants were given minimal time off after giving birth, and were forced to find ways to accommodate infant care around their labor duties. Thus, the harsh terms that defined most slave lives were particularly brutal for babies. As a result, slave children under the age of four regularly suffered from malnutrition and illness, which resulted in mortality rates more than double that of white children of the same age on major slaveholding estates (King, 2).

Children were pressed into service at an early age. As toddlers, they sometimes assisted adults gathering kindling, churning butter, chasing birds from crops, or minding babies younger than themselves (King, 2). Children would be considered ready for fieldwork by age ten or twelve, and might be allowed more rations once they were compelled to work full days (Schwartz 2001, 6). By this age, some children's tasks became more specialized. Some of the boys were fortunate enough to train as artisans, gaining skills in coopering, blacksmithing, or carpentry, while many girls were relegated to food preparation, spinning, and mending. Some girls might be brought into the Big House (as were Jacobs and Keckly) to become house servants for their mistresses, in which case they might learn to sew and prepare food for their owners. Those young slaves who achieved artisanal or more refined household skills no doubt found a greater modicum of comfort in comparison to their peers in the fields. Some of the young men (like Harriet Jacobs's father) could aspire to earn money from their skills for their own use. Although slave children learned many skills as they were prepared for their life of labor, they were not allowed to go to school. Slaveholders typically did not teach slaves to read and write for fear that education would encourage their slaves to rebel against the conditions into which they were born.

One of the greatest hardships for slave children grew out of the turmoil that often defined family life. Separation from parents was not uncommon, either as a result of slave sales or the decisions of slaveholding families who might separate a slave community as owners moved or their own offspring got married and established their own estates, bringing family slaves with them. One of the other stresses on slave families involved the question of loyalty. Slave owners did much to undermine attachments between parents and children, underscoring that a slave child's loyalty and obedience was first and foremost to his/her master and that tension would be a refrain slave children felt throughout their young lives (Schwartz 2001, 9). Harriet Jacobs related that very conflict between her master and her father regarding her brother William's behavior. Ultimately, the experience of childhood slavery varied in terms of the harshness of conditions, but the tenuous and often ruptured family ties remained a consistent tragedy.

REFERENCES

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