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Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America

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Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America

Wilma King, 1995. *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, xxi + 253 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, and notes. \$27.95 (cloth).

Here King discusses enslaved children and youth (males under the age of twentyone and females under the age of eighteen) as they lived in the family and community. These children engaged in work and play, received temporal and spiritual education, experienced the traumas of slavery, and sought and gained freedom.

Documentation is drawn from a wide range of primary sources and the WPA slave narratives. It is worth noting that many of the former slaves interviewed in the 1930s had experienced slavery as children in the 1840s and 50s, providing direct access to childhood under slavery.

King's essential argument is that slavery robbed African-American children of a childhood. Yet, free children on farms labored under the direction of patriarchal fathers, orphans and delinquents served under indenture, and children in factories and small shops were a source of cheap, unskilled labor, as the notion of a sheltered and protected childhood was only just emerging among the middle class in the early 19th century. 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. Much of King's discussion resonates with the small finds of domestic sites that are the material reflections of children in the archaeological record.