

Swarthmore College

Works

History Faculty Works

History

Winter 1997

When Sons Remember Their Fathers

Bruce Dorsey

Swarthmore College, bdorsey1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Bruce Dorsey. (1997). "When Sons Remember Their Fathers". *Kenyon Review*. Volume 19, Issue 1. 162-166.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/120>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

BRUCE DORSEY

WHEN SONS REMEMBER THEIR FATHERS

Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom. By Russ Castronovo. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. 295 pp. \$32.00.

Over the past half decade, historians of American culture have been attracted to two quite disparate avenues of inquiry, one involving a heightened understanding of memory and the second expanding the parameters of gender to include the meanings of masculinity. Certainly the mythic and cultural significance of the “Founding Fathers” for a generation of Americans on the eve of the Civil War offers a rich field for exploring both of these. An understanding of the “Founding Fathers” demands an analysis of the relationships between fathers and sons (both real and metaphorical) as well as the manner in which different antebellum Americans constructed their memory of the legacy bequeathed to them by the revolutionary generation.

In his essay, “Memory and American History,” David Thelen observed that “the construction and narration of a memory comes from the oral and epic traditions of storytelling.”¹ In *Fathering the Nation*, Russ Castronovo invokes Abraham Lincoln’s call for “adding story to story, upon the monuments of fame, erected to the memory of others,” to champion an alternative reading of the ways various antebellum Americans constructed their personal and symbolic memories of national origins in the midst of a crisis over slavery and freedom. The stories articulated in the literature of the American Renaissance, in the hagiography of revolutionary heroes and the monuments erected in their memory, and in the writings of rebellious slaves all reveal conflicting strains inherent within that national memory—tensions that were principally rooted in the dilemma of slavery and freedom in America.

Castronovo’s thesis is that the “stories” of national memory in the antebellum years should not be viewed as a cohesive and unified narrative, but rather as a site for discordant voices and imaginings which belie the image of a single patriarchal lineage of freedom and citizenship. He juxtaposes the dominant national memory, depicted as either a “national narrative” or

a “monumental culture,” alongside voices in the 1850s who criticize and challenge the forgetfulness and exclusivity inbred in that collective memory, voices that Castronovo describes as parricidal. The idea of a linear descent of free *white* citizenship was stated most baldly by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney in the Supreme Court’s 1857 Dred Scott decision declaring that all blacks (slave or free) had been excluded from the republic’s foundational documents from the beginning and thus possessed “no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” Such historical amnesia could not remain uncontested, since there were dissenting voices to remind us that “the national-family tree is miscegenated at its roots” (9).

Castronovo offers three principal antebellum sons whose forms of remembrance made them parricidal critics of the mythic legacy of the Founding Fathers—Herman Melville, Abraham Lincoln, and fugitive slave men. Not surprisingly, Castronovo places Melville at the center of this critical stance. Michael Rogin, Ann Douglas, and others have previously noted Melville’s subversive approach to the national consciousness and his isolation from American democratic culture in the antebellum era. Nearly all of Melville’s protagonists were Ishmaels, illegitimate heirs of the patriarchs who fathered them, and living in desert-like alienation from a culture where principles and praxis, freedom and slavery, resided in an amnesiac co-existence.² *Moby Dick* celebrates a radical interracial democracy, while Melville himself once declared that “a thief in jail is as honorable a personage as George Washington” (84). One would be hard pressed to find a more subversive statement in the midst of a decade of intense veneration for Washington and the other founders.

While Melville’s presence as a subversive and disruptive voice in the national memory is undeniable, Castronovo’s claim that Lincoln was a parricidal critic of the “national narrative” is more problematic. Although Lincoln affirmed a national memory that applied the Declaration of Independence’s promise of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” to black slaves as well as to white heirs of the Founding Fathers, his own response to Taney’s Dred Scott decision acquiesced to the language of racial exclusion. Lincoln reminded a hometown audience in 1857 that his opposition to Taney did not imply his support for the “amalgamation” of the races or the social equality of blacks in America:

There is a natural disgust in the minds of nearly all white people, to the idea of an indiscriminate amalgamation of the white and black races. . . . Now I protest against that counterfeit logic which concludes that, because I do not want a black woman for a *slave* I must necessarily want her for a *wife*. I need not have her for either. . . . In some respects she certainly is not my equal; but in her natural right to eat the bread she earns with her own hands without asking leave of any one else, she is my equal, and the equal of all others.³

Lincoln also never opposed the provisions in the Illinois state constitution prohibiting free African-Americans from residing within his own state. And he remained an advocate of colonization as the solution for America's race problem until after he took residence in the White House and discovered the wartime strategy of emancipation. Lincoln most often invoked the idea of parricide when contemplating the severing of the Union, which for him was not exclusively an issue of slavery.⁴

It is the writings of fugitive slaves which provide Castronovo with the strongest evidence for his claim that certain antebellum critics stripped away the clouds that blinded national memory and brought to light the "miscegenated" history of a republic built jointly upon slavery and freedom. Those who penned narratives of their lives in bondage confirm Milan Kundera's observation that: "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."⁵ Castronovo employs the Foucault-influenced concept of "genealogy" to explain how the art of remembering allowed these slave men simultaneously to appropriate and criticize the inheritance of the "Founding Fathers." Denied a pure "genealogy" of their own (since nearly all slave narratives were written by men born to [white] fathers they never knew), former slaves disrupt and subvert the father-son metaphors used to express the lineages of freedom, and insert ambiguity into the narratives of historical imaginings in antebellum America. William Wells Brown's novel *Clotel* narrates the story of Jefferson's slave progeny; his lecture on Saint Dominque inverts the memory of heroic founders, declaring "Toussaint liberated his countrymen; Washington enslaved a portion of his" (9); and his autobiographical writings critique those monuments which "colonized off" the names of African-Americans "in keeping with American historical injustice to its colored heroes" (168). Frederick Douglass's lone fictional tale, "The Heroic Slave," tells the story of the slave who orchestrated the 1841 insurrection aboard the *Creole*, whose name (Madison Washington), heroic valor, and rhetoric of freedom confirms his place as an heir of the white "Founding Fathers." Hence, former slaves both reminded antebellum readers that popular myths of revolutionary liberty were the product of a genealogy of enslavement, and also wrote themselves a legitimate role in the narrative of national memory.

Fathering the Nation reveals for us the multi-contested nature of national memory regarding slavery, freedom, and the revolutionary generation. What emerges is a picture of three overlapping, almost fluid aspects of a struggle which Castronovo never quite differentiates. First, antebellum Americans in the 1850s engaged in a sectional and moral battle over their memories of the founders' relationship to slavery. White Southern ideologues claimed Washington and Jefferson as fellow slaveholders; Lincoln and Northern abolitionists turned to Jefferson's Declaration of Independence as an indication of the founders' true intentions; and compromisers within both sections saw harmony and "Union" as the unmistakable legacy of the founders. Second, Americans in this era also struggled with a historical debate over whether to remember

fully or not. A “monumental culture” expressed in sweeping panoramas of Niagara Falls, a quest for a national literature, and the inchoate constructions of the Bunker Hill and Washington Monuments pointed to the desire not only to herald national achievements, but also to engage in collective amnesia. “Once committed to remembering unhistorically,” Castronovo observes, “a people can forge heroes, icons, and myths” as part of a monumental history that confirms national greatness and unity, while also “. . . dismissing enduring concerns over the political and social status of women, slaves, and those who held no property” (111, 129). Finally (as we’ve already seen), memory also served as a subversive tool in the hands of certain antebellum voices, presenting a vision of national identity that affirmed the symbiotic relationship between slavery and freedom in American life.

Castronovo’s work shines its most illuminating gaze at the expressions of monumental veneration toward the “Founding Fathers,” leaving unforgettable visual images of legitimate and illegitimate sons striving to shore up a conflicted legacy of freedom and slavery. It is striking to see Henry Clay removing a monumental relic—a piece of Washington’s coffin—from his coat while delivering his impassioned appeal to the Senate for passage of the Compromise of 1850, or Lewis and Milton Clarke, the sons of a slave mother and a white father who fought at Bunker Hill, sitting at the foot of a half-finished Bunker Hill monument reminding themselves how bondage and “slave-mongers” followed them even to this sacred patriarchal site. However, some readers may find fanciful Castronovo’s effort to parallel Clay’s relic with Queequeg’s coffin rescuing Ishmael at the conclusion of *Moby Dick*, while others might wonder why half-constructed obelisks to memorialize fathers do not provoke an analysis of castrated phallic imagery as antebellum sons are about to sever the union that their fathers bequeathed to them.

Perhaps the most problematic feature of Castronovo’s thesis is his claim for a “national narrative” of collective memory. He seems to want it both ways—that a dominant discourse compelled a consensus of forgetfulness that could only be subverted by critical voices of remembrance *and* that this narrative was always a hybrid of contested stories and memories. If the latter is true, then the construct of a “national narrative” is as much an illusion of authorial rendering as it was of prevailing amnesia at the time. It is hard to believe that “members of the antebellum generation were shocked to learn of an illegitimate genealogy in which enslavement appeared as the undeniable twin of freedom” (40). Historian Edmund Morgan was not the first to discover in the 1970s that American freedom was constructed on the backs of black slaves. The sentiments of a Virginia newspaper were commonplace in that era: “In this country alone does perfect equality of civil and social privilege exist among the white population, and it exists solely because we have black slaves. Freedom is not possible without slavery.”⁶ Castronovo’s own evidence suggests that memory was always multi-contested, and lacking a powerful “national narrative” to guide it.

Many readers will also find the paucity of gender analysis to be among the shortcomings of this work. Although the book is structured around parricide and the legacies of fathers, Castronovo devotes little attention to constructions of masculinity within this spate of remembrance writing. The meaning of manhood for African-American writers most especially begs for analysis. Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* repeatedly invoked notions of manliness, describing his outward resistance as the process whereby "a slave was made a man," and his fighting back against an abusive master as having "revived within me a sense of my own manhood." Even when Castronovo notes how Douglass's aptly named rebel Madison Washington in "The Heroic Slave" appeals to "masculine virtue" and a "true man's heart" (221), we are left wondering about the meaning of African-American manhood. Were expropriated notions of white manliness and citizenship the only masculine constructs available to slave men, or is manliness (like gender as a whole) best understood in the social relationships of slave men and woman? Unfortunately, Castronovo sidesteps the voices of women (especially African-American women) and their responses to the historical imagining of a patriarchal lineage. Where would Sojourner Truth fit into this thesis? It was at the opening of this same decade of crisis that she voiced her critique of the racial construction of gender and citizenship, proclaiming herself as capable as any man, words later remembered by white listeners as the mythical question: "Ar'n't I a woman?"⁷

NOTES

¹David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989): 1118.

²Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983). Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

³Roy Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1953) II: 405.

⁴Lincoln wrote to Horace Greeley in 1862: "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union. . . . If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that." Basler, V: 388–89.

⁵Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: 1980) 3.

⁶Richmond *Enquirer*, April 15, 1856, quoted in James Oakes's *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Knopf, 1982) 141.

⁷Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845; reprint; New York: St. Martin's, 1993) 75, 79; Nell Irvin Painter, "Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known," *Journal of American History* 81 (1994): 461–92.