

TEACHING THE COMPLEXITY OF SLAVERY

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The history of slavery in the antebellum South is a challenging topic to teach on a variety of levels. It is a complex subject with a rich historiography that informs issues of race in contemporary America. Students walking into the American history survey, however, tend to have simplistic understandings of American slavery, understandings that they do not shed easily. Instructors of the U.S. history survey, meanwhile, attentive to "coverage" issues, struggle to adequately address the complexity of slavery in a few class sessions.¹

Historians have discussed the views students have about slavery for some time. In the 1990s Ellen Swartz and Peter Kolchin complained about how slavery was presented in American history textbooks. Textbooks, they found, neither revealed that slavery is a complicated subject constantly being reinterpreted nor addressed important "underlying issues" of slavery. More recently, Russell Olwell stressed that students too often understand slavery in very basic terms, as a "unified, static, unchanging institution." Similarly, Tracey Weis found that students tend to have crude "Gone With the Wind" views of slavery. Ira Berlin maintains that "stereotypes ... fixed the history of slavery." These stereotypes prevent students from gaining a thorough understanding of slavery because they see slavery only in terms of narratives about the Civil War and lack a sense of "historical agency."² What all these scholars have shown is that students tend to conceptualize slavery in narrow one-dimensional terms instead of understanding that slavery has a history that cannot be reduced to simplistic characteristics.³

¹This article was originally presented at the International Conference on Teaching and Learning, Niagara University, Niagara, NY, January 11-12, 2007.

²Ellen Swartz, "Emancipatory Narratives: Rewriting the Master Script in the School Curriculum," *Journal of Negro Education*, 3 (1992), 343; Peter Kolchin, "Slavery in the United States Survey Textbooks," *Journal of American History*, 84 (1998), 1436-1437; Russell Olwell, "New Views of Slavery: Using Recent Historical Work to Promote Critical Thinking about the 'Peculiar Institution,'" *History Teacher*, 34 (August 2001), 459; Tracey Weis, "What's the Problem? Connecting Scholarship, Interpretation, and Evidence in Telling Stories about Race and Slavery," *The Journal of American History*, 92 (March 2006), 1386; Ira Berlin, "American Slavery and Memory and the Search for Social Justice," *The Journal of American History*, 90 (March 2004), 1262.

³A key lesson from the scholarship of teaching is that the views students have coming into class must be addressed. The unsophisticated understandings students have about slavery is not unique to this topic. Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke have pointed out that in U.S. history courses students often fail to see the "complexity" of history in general, and their knowledge of history seems to consist of "a cast of heroes and villains to cheer and boo." Ken Bain explains that one of the greatest difficulties college

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In my experience, American slavery is a subject in which students' preconceived assumptions severely limit their understanding of slavery. Students view slave-owners as evil, and they view slaves as passive victims. And they want to view them in these dualistic terms. For many students, the story of slavery is a moral story, not a historical one, in which there are "good guys" and "bad guys." The moral indictment students have about the institution of slavery, while valuable in the development of their ethical awareness, places them in a struggle with an instructor who wants them to view this subject in historical terms. That is not to say, however, that historians avoid making moral judgments. Of course, historians share the repulsion students have about slavery, but historians attempt to dig deeper to understand how slavery operated.

Many historians see history as a powerful tool in the development of moral values. Jörn Rüsen, for example, argues that a critical historical consciousness, by encouraging a critique of past moral values, can make a positive contribution to students' own moral values. To have the ability to offer an effective critique, though, students must have a firm understanding of the historical context in which those values existed. Roger I. Simon also believes history can shape students' values but in a different way. When teaching about past suffering, he recommends that teachers focus on creating a response in students that "impels" them to think reflectively about their own ethics and how they live in relation to others, to rethink their own identity and view of the world.⁴

The development of moral values through historical understanding, as discussed by Rüsen and Simon, looks very different from the basic dualistic moral view of slavery students have in hand as their image of slavery in the antebellum South. Students often believe they "know" slavery because they understand slavery was

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instructors in all fields face is that students are very resistant to having their "mental models" challenged, no matter how inaccurate those models may be. For example, Ibrahim Abou Halloun and David Hestenes, two physicists at Arizona State University, in their study of how students understood the basic laws of motion, found that students tend to follow a more "intuitive framework" that is Aristotelian and reject Newtonian principles—even after learning about Newton's laws and conducting experiments that prove his laws! Encouraging students to shed their own inaccurate models in order to fully understand a given subject is thus one of the greatest challenges instructors face. The "assumptions and beliefs" students bring into the classroom, Robert Bain's research has also shown, can "undermine" even the best efforts by teachers. See Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, "What Does It Mean to Think Historically?," *Perspectives*, 45 (January 2007), 35; Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 22-28; Robert B. Bain, "Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction," in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 334.

⁴Jörn Rüsen, "Historical Consciousness: Narrative Structure, Moral Function, and Ontogenetic Development," in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, Peter Seixas, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 75-76; Roger I. Simon, "The Pedagogical Insistence of Public Memory," in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, 186-187.

wrong. Masters were evil people. What else is there to learn? They see little value in understanding slavery in any elaborate historical terms. Such a position can lead them to resist some key notions contemporary historians of American slavery use as their premise: that slavery varied greatly over place and time, that slavery was a complex social system, and that the history of slavery in America is debated by historians.

Slavery is a story of victims and abusers. But other important stories also emerge: stories of slave-owners, who had positive self-images of themselves and their behavior, and stories of slaves, who refused to be dehumanized and created a life for themselves within the abject system of slavery. Historians today present different understandings of slavery. They debate a whole host of issues and generally offer a complicated story about slavery. As Ira Berlin has written, historical scholarship about American slavery presents "a history in which slavery was made and remade by men and women on their own terms, if rarely to their own liking."⁵

When teaching slavery in U.S. history survey courses, I have struggled with how to promote a sophisticated historical conception of slavery, to achieve my primary objective: I want students to understand that slavery in the antebellum South was a complex social system. After much reflection, I developed a three-pronged method. The first step is to focus on a key concept to give meaning to the learning process. The second is to relate this concept to students' own lives, so that they can apply the concept personally. The third is to design an assignment that asks students to construct their own understanding of the subject based on primary sources.

In designing my approach to teaching the subject of slavery, I asked myself a series of questions in an effort to discover an effective method for teaching slavery. I went through this process to be self-reflective about my own teaching, with particular attention to my objectives and the methods I use to achieve those objectives.

The first question I asked myself was: **How can I better enable students to understand that slavery was a complex social system?**

I approached the answer to that question by looking at Ken Bain's study of successful college instructors. He found that the most effective college teachers seek to "transform" students' "conceptual understanding" of a given topic by providing them with new frameworks. That is, successful teachers "challenge" the ideas students already hold on a given issue and present new models for understanding it.⁶ I applied this suggestion by thinking about how to offer an historical perspective on slave-owners, one that would encourage students to move beyond the simple characterization of slave-owners as evil. I also looked for a unifying concept that might reveal that slavery was a complex social system while also providing students with a new meaning of slavery in terms they could understand. To help students fully grasp the complicated

⁵Berlin, "American Slavery and Memory and the Search for Social Justice," 1262.

⁶Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, 46-51, 110-112.

relationship between masters and slaves, I arrived at the concept of “paternalism” based on Eugene Genovese’s classic work on American slavery, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.⁷

In contrast to previous historians of American slavery, Genovese argued that slaves were not passive victims. Rather, he maintained that they asserted their humanity within what he defined as a “paternalistic” system in which they accepted white domination while demanding a degree of autonomy. In this portrayal, slaveholders saw themselves as being paternalistic, and thus in very positive terms. In their minds, they were taking care of blacks. Slaveholders even referred to slaves as family members. Genovese thus uses familiar terms to describe the master-slave relationship because that is how slave-owners viewed it—slaveholders managed their slaves as if slaves were included within a patriarchal system. This, Genovese shows, demonstrates the contradiction of slavery: Masters viewed slaves as both property and as human beings. Slaves, according to Genovese, accepted this system of paternalism because they understood how they could use it to their advantage: They could demand some rights and manipulate the system.⁸

A danger in using the concept of paternalism as the centerpiece of a class session on slavery is that students might come away believing that slaves were actually treated well. Certainly that is not my goal. Rather, I want to show the dualism of slavery, that slaves were treated as both objects and humans and that slavery was ultimately about power. I also find the concept useful because it humanizes slave-owners—students might want to label them “evil,” but slave-owners did not see themselves that way. I am careful to emphasize that paternalism does not mean that masters treated slaves well; it means they took a personal interest in their slaves because of their own “self-image” as being “good” masters. This distinction is extremely important to make. According to Genovese, slaves manipulated this system by appealing to their masters’ paternalistic self-image to get what they wanted.⁹ Since Genovese’s work appeared in 1972, while historians have generally accepted the importance of paternalism in slavery in the antebellum South, they disagree on the extent to which slaves had autonomy. Peter Kolchin, for example, believes that many “arguments for slave autonomy have been overstated and eventually will be modified on the basis of future evidence.”¹⁰

Once I decided that the concept of paternalism would form the focus for how I would teach slavery, my next question was: **How can students begin to appreciate**

⁷For an alternative view, instructors might consider using Stanley Elkins’s classic work which discusses how slaves adjusted and adapted to the system of slavery. See Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

⁸Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

⁹*Ibid.*, 3-7, 133-149.

¹⁰Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 137-138.

what the historical concept of paternalism means? Here again I turned to Ken Bain's study that found that effective college teachers draw "solid connections" between the subject under study and students' lives. When they see a relationship between the subject being taught and their own experiences, students find new meaning in the topic and their motivation to learn increases.¹¹ But how can this be accomplished with slavery as the subject? It is difficult for students in the twenty-first century to relate to the slave experience. In addition to viewing the history of slavery solely within a rudimentary moral framework, slavery is an institution so foreign to them that many have trouble seeing its relevance.

A key question for me, then, was how to enable students to relate to the lives of slaves. Scholars who have studied slave courtship, such as Emily West and Marie Jenkins Schwartz, provided me with a direction. West and Schwartz discuss courtship between slaves, showing both the ways in which masters interfered in this intimate aspect of slaves' lives and slave efforts to maintain autonomy in courtship rituals.¹² Since courtship or dating is a topic that interests many college students, I decided that highlighting the relationships of slave couples might be an effective way to help students understand slavery, particularly because they could see how different their own lives are from that of slaves.

After lecturing on paternalism, I begin a discussion. The focus, however, is not immediately on slavery. Instead, the discussion centers on students themselves, putting them in relationship to the topic by posing the following questions:

1. Has anyone ever had parents tell you they don't like who you are dating?
2. Has anyone ever had a teacher or a boss tell you that you should or should not date someone? How would you react if they did?
3. What is the difference between having a parent tell you who you should and should not date and having a teacher or boss dictate this for you?

Once I elicited students' attitudes and experiences relating to interference from authority figures in dating, we compare that to slavery. I begin by explaining to students that masters involved themselves profoundly in the courtship of young slaves: Masters arranged for couples on different plantations to meet, encouraged specific matches within their own plantation, required permission for marriages, rewarded

¹¹Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, 39-40.

¹²See Emily West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 26-39; Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Born in Bondage: Growing Up Enslaved in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), Chapter 7.

mariages they liked, and presided over wedding ceremonies.¹³ Masters, in other words, took the role one would expect parents to take in relation to their children's courtship. I ask students to take a minute and speculate as to why slave-owners would care at all about romances between slaves. Here, I have a quick assessment tool to begin to evaluate whether or not students are able to apply the concept of paternalism.

Slave courtship, I expect students to understand, demonstrates how paternalism operated and the complexity of slavery. Unlike other societies with slaves, such as Brazil and Jamaica, where masters exhibited little concern about their slaves' personal lives, in the antebellum South owners interfered in the most intimate aspects of slaves' lives.¹⁴ They presented themselves as surrogate parents. They sought to maintain a paternalistic self-image through control of courtship. As Emily West writes, masters "believed they knew best when it came to their slaves' affairs of the heart." Yet, their primary concern was how romances would benefit them. Masters wanted slaves to procreate because the children of a female slave belonged to the master. Some masters helped couples they liked get together and stay together; other masters literally tried to "breed" their slaves.¹⁵

A discussion on how masters involved themselves in the courtship of slaves helps students appreciate the meaning of paternalism and begin to reconceptualize their understanding of slavery. Nevertheless, the ways in which slaves responded to paternalism also needs to be addressed. A lecture summarizing West and Schwartz on this issue could suffice, but not when I asked myself the following: **How can I engage students in such a way as to ensure that they fully understand the complexities of the master-slave relationship?** Here studies of history-specific cognition are instructive. They highlight the effectiveness of having students engage in historical thinking, particularly by having students work with primary sources. Such exercises enable students to understand better the nuances of topics being studied. As Robert Bain has argued, working with primary sources immerses students in the discipline of history, and helps them participate in the process of history cognition. The use of primary documents is also a way to apply constructivist educational theory to the field of history, as Michael Henry has shown. Constructivist theory, in summary, holds that students understand material better when they are engaged in a process of constructing their own knowledge by interpreting "materials to develop conceptual understandings." The basic premise is that this approach, instead of summarizing material, encourages students to create new ideas through analysis of primary documents. Primary documents also provide a means for the voices of people in the past to come alive in

¹³West, *Chains of Love*, 26-39; Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, Chapter 7.

¹⁴Peter Kolchin, "Reevaluating the Antebellum Slave Community: A Comparative Perspective," *Journal of American History*, 71 (December 1983), 579-601.

¹⁵West, *Chains of Love*, 26-39; Schwartz, *Born in Bondage*, Chapter 7.

authentic ways and vividly demonstrate to students the historical drama of a given time period. Exercises developed around students' analysis of primary documents, moreover, provide a method for assessing students' understanding of the topic.¹⁶

One pedagogically useful primary source for the history of slavery in the Antebellum South is slave testimonies available as a result of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews with thousands of ex-slaves during the 1930s. These testimonies are available at the Library of Congress website.¹⁷ They are also available in published collections, including *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*.¹⁸ Many of these slaves discussed their teenage years in their interviews and often referred to their courtship experiences as slaves.

After a lecture on paternalism and a discussion of slave-owners' interference in slave courtship, I create a workshop atmosphere for students to do the work of history and examine these slave testimonies as historians. I pass out a series of questions that ask students to search for patterns among the documents and explore the concept of paternalism in terms of these documents (see Appendix).

Before handing out a selection of slave testimonies, I give students some background as to how the WPA gathered the testimonies. Significantly, there are limitations to this source that must be acknowledged. Most of the WPA interviewers were white southerners with some racial prejudices. Many of the ex-slaves, moreover, lived near their former master's descendants upon whom they depended for old-age pensions. Hence, some of those giving testimony might have been reluctant to speak negatively about their former masters. Continuing racial tensions in the Depression-era South, combined with black dependency on whites, inform both the questions and answers in the interviews. Finally, the reader cannot ignore the problems of memory when asking an elderly person to recall their youth. The language also sometimes makes the interviews difficult to read. The term "Marse," for example, referred to "Master" and the term "Ise" meant "I was." That said, the slave testimonies provide an invaluable source because they offer a first-hand account of slavery. Slave narratives written in the nineteenth century also do that, but only the most exceptional

¹⁶Robert B. Bain, "Into the Breach," 331-336; Michael Henry, "Constructivism in the Community College Classroom," *The History Teacher*, 36 (November 2002), 65-74.

¹⁷"Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>.

¹⁸Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991).

slaves were able to escape from slavery and later write about it. With slave testimonies, students get the view of the "typical" slave.¹⁹

This exercise provides an opportunity to evaluate students' learning.²⁰ My objective in providing students with a short series of documents with questions is to evaluate the extent to which they have understood the theme of the class session. Their answers, which I do not grade, provide me with a source to assess their understanding of slavery, particularly the concept of paternalism as it applies to slavery.

In evaluating the exercise, I am most interested in generalizations students make about what the documents illustrate in terms of the paternalistic relationship between masters and slaves. (See Appendix, Section B, question 1.) In their answers, the majority of my students appear to understand that the relationship between slaves and masters revolved around power. Students grasp that masters saw slaves as human beings, but saw themselves as having the authority to arrange everything for these human beings. The more difficult concept, that slaves were able to assert their humanness, but only within the limits of power set by masters, is not apparent to all students immediately. I have thus found it productive to follow up the exercise with a class discussion that focuses on the slave response to paternalism. We return to the primary documents and examine them more closely. For example, I ask students what it means that Mildred Graves (see Appendix) told her interviewer that when she and her husband were married "we jus' stepped over the broomstick" *before* they told their master. I also ask students why it might be significant that Fannie Berry (see Appendix) makes reference to slaves wanting to marry people on other plantations. What does that tell us about how slaves courted? This type of follow-up discussion enables me to address issues in students' understanding that are apparent in my assessment of their work on the exercise.

The student response to this exercise has been positive. Two themes are evident from their written comments in end-of-the-semester evaluations. First, students expressed a motivation for learning because the material "involved" them and "related" to their lives. Secondly, a significant number of students commented that they found

¹⁹John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," in *The Slave Narrative*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 78-98. Also see Donna J. Spindel, "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 27 (Autumn 1996), 247-261.

²⁰Angelo and Cross point out that effective classroom assessment methods are "formative rather than summative," and thus do not need to be graded. Quick exercises provide instructors with "feedback" on student learning. Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*, 2nd Edition (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1993), 5-6.

“meaning” in the material because of the “emphasis” placed on understanding a key “concept.”²¹

From my perspective, the strategy described in this article has been successful for several reasons. I have achieved my objective of providing a forum for students to better understand the master-slave relationship. But more broadly, this strategy has brought history to life for students, and many arrived at a better appreciation of what history is.

Appendix

Worksheet: Paternalism and Courtship in the Antebellum Southern Slave System

Directions: Break into groups of 3-4 students. In Section A, each student in the group should answer the questions for one of the documents. Then as a group answer the discussion questions in Section B

Section A

1. MRS. MILDRED GRAVES (B. 1842)

Yessir, I'm 95 years ole bit I kin lay here in my bed an' think 'bout my honeymoon jes' as if it was yestiddy. Sho' us jumped de broomstick. One day my husban'—course he wasn't dat den—well he come to me in de meat house an' say he want a word arter supper. I was a house gal, an' stayed in de house, an' he work in de field, so we didn't git chance to git together often. I met him dat ev'nin', an' we walked down to de pines an' set on de fense. Down dere he asked me to marry him. I say all right 'cause I was tired of livin' in de house where dey wasn't no fun. So we jus' stepped over the broomstick de next day, an' we was married. When I told Miss Julia, she gave me a cast-off dress of her'n dat fit me puffedly. Arter de war we had a real sho' nuff weddin' wid a preacher. Dat cost a dollar.

Source: Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 122. Reprinted with permission of the University of Virginia Press.

Questions: How does Mrs. Mildred Graves describe slave courtship? What does the document show about the master-slave relationship?

²¹Student Evaluations of Daniel Kotzin, HIS 025-070 and HIS 025-080, Spring 2006, Department of History, Kutztown University, Kutztown, PA.

2. MRS. FANNIE BERRY (b. 1841)

Miss Sarah Ann only had twenty, or thirty slaves. Sometime some 'ud die, but den dere was al'ways some bein' born, an' if a slave wanted to git married he had to come to Miss Sarah Ann an' git her to say it was all right. If you wanted to marry one on 'nother plantation, Miss Sarah Ann would fust fin' out what kinda nigger it was you wanted to git hitched to, an' if de nigger was a good nigger an' Miss Sarah Ann would try to buy him so husband an' wife could be together.

Source: Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 40. Reprinted with permission of the University of Virginia Press.

Questions: How does Mrs. Fanny Berry describe slave courtship? What does the document show about the master-slave relationship?

3. MR. CHARLES GRANDY (b. 1842)

In slavery days ef you want to git a woman an' you didn't have one, you an' de marser would stan' side de road 'till a big wagon loaded wid men, women an' chillum slaves would come by. Den de marser would stop de wagon an' buy you a woman. She would git off de wagon an' he would lead you bof to yo' cabin an' stan' you on de po'ch. He wouldn't go in. Nossuh, he read to you right at de door. He say sompin f'om de Bible an' finish up wid dis:

Dat yo' wife
Dat you' husban'
Ise you' Marser
She yo' Missus
You're married.

Today you don't stay together ez long ez Pat stayed in de army. Love was a lot mo' bindin' in dem days.

Source: Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 118. Reprinted with permission of the University of Virginia Press.

Questions: How does Mr. Charles Grandy describe slave courtship? What does the document show about the master-slave relationship?

4. MRS. KATIE BLACKWELL JOHNSON (b.ca. 1860)

Who married the Slaves? Man, folks didn't get married then. If a man saw a girl he liked he would ask his master's permission to ask the master of the girl for her. If his master consented and her master consented then they came together. She lived on her plantation and he on his. The woman had no choice in the matter.

Some good masters would punish slaves who mistreated their womenfolk and some didn't. No man, they didn't marry, 'twas as bad then as 'tis now. The masters were very careful about a good breedin' woman. If she had five or six children she was rarely sold. They generally made a present of the woman and her children to one of their children when they married.

Source: Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, Robert K. Phillips, eds., *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 40. Reprinted with permission of the University of Virginia Press.

Questions: How does Mrs. Katie Blackwell Johnson describe slave courtship? What does the document show about the master-slave relationship?

Section B

Conclusions based on group discussion:

1. Based on these documents, what generalizations can you make about the paternalistic relationship between masters and slaves? What have you learned about slavery by studying slave courtship?
2. What are the limitations of these documents? What other primary sources would you want to examine to test your answer to question #1?
3. None of the documents mention how slave parents involved themselves in their children's love life. As a group, answer how you think an ex-slave being interviewed in the 1930s would respond to the following question: How did biological slave parents involve themselves in the courtship of their children?