

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

**Rod Bush**

*St. John's University*

**bushr@stjohns.edu**

Wilma Dunaway. 2003. *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 404 pages, ISBN-13: 978-0521812764 Cloth (\$85). ISBN-13: 978-0521012164 Paper (\$33.99).

This is an explosive book, iconoclastic, myth-shattering, and profound. But it is also fine tuned and rich in detail, the work of a master (no pun intended) craftswoman. *You have simply got to read this book*. Wilma Dunaway has issued a provocative rebuttal to those who have argued that slaveholders rarely broke-up enslaved African families; that slaves were adequately fed, clothed, and sheltered; and that slave health or death risks were no greater than those experienced by white adults. According to Dunaway these weaknesses in much scholarly research stem from a flawed view of the slave family, scholarly neglect of small plantations, limited analysis of Upper South enslavement, and academic exaggeration of slave agency. Dunaway's study relies largely on her analysis of slave narratives.

On the issues of the slave family Dunaway questions the findings stated in Herbert Gutman's (1976) classic study of the Black family, as well as studies conducted by Berlin and Rowland and Robert Fogel. Furthermore the errors stated above are said to stem in large part from what the authors of these studies have themselves acknowledged, that they have largely focused on large plantations (owning fifty or more slaves), rather than on small plantations, where more than 88 percent of the slaves resided. In contrast to the picture of slave life on these small plantations being more benign where female slaves may have helped the master's wife in the kitchen, occupying a position like an extended family member, the reality depicted by Dunaway here is much more severe. Dunaway cites studies showing that family separations, slave trading, sexual exploitation, and physical abuse were much more typical of life on the smallholdings.

Much of the conventional wisdom, says Dunaway, is grounded in the political economy and culture of the Lower South. But the world demand for cotton triggered the largest domestic slave trade in the history of the world between 1790 and 1860 resulting in the quadrupling of the slave population of the Lower South via the export of nearly one million Black laborers from the Upper South (fully two-fifths of the slave population of the Upper South). Among Mississippi slaves from the Upper South, one half of the males and two-fifths of the females had been separated from a spouse with whom they had lived for at least five years.

One of the most controversial of Dunaway's claims in this study is that the revisionist literature which emerged during the 1970s celebrating the agency of the slaves (as against those studies which had heretofore depicted the slaves as helpless victims) had overstated their cases to the extent that they were virtually absolving slavery of its very real brutality and ability to inflict harm on the slaves. Most of these studies are said to have underestimated the degree to which slaveholders placed families at risk. Not one of the 600 slave narratives reviewed for her book indicated the kind of autonomy and independence celebrated in some of this literature.

She points out in sharp criticism that despite Crawford's groundbreaking finding that plantation size was the most significant determinant of quality of slave life, hers is the first study of a multi-state region of the U.S. that is characterized by small plantations.

### **In the Context of Slavery**

Dunaway, who is widely respected for her study of the incorporation of Southern Appalachia into the capitalist world-economy, argues that "the Mountain South was a *provisioning zone* which supplied raw materials to other agricultural or industrial regions of the world economy" (pg. 7). The incorporation also involved the subordination of the labor force to the dictates of export-oriented commodity production and thus the increased coercion of that labor, the bulk of which was provided by 300,000 slaves who made up 15 percent of the region's population in 1860, and 30% of the adult labor force. In 1860 this slave population was concentrated on the eastern edge of the region, referred to as the ridge-valley counties. The lowest concentration was in the more mountainous areas with the most rugged terrain.

In contrast to Berlin (1998) who argued that slavery did not dominate the Mountain South because there were not large numbers of plantations or of slaves, Dunaway argues on the contrary that scholars arrive at such a mistaken notion because of their assumptions about the difference between the treatment of slaves on large versus small plantations and that correspondingly their influence in the society would be less. Both of those assumptions are wrong. While it is true that a Lower South farm owner was twelve times more likely to run a large plantation than his Appalachian counterpart (pg. 10), smallholding did not minimize the impact of these landowners in the communities in which they lived. On the contrary, Mountain slaveholders monopolized more of their communities' land and wealth than did Lower South slaveholders. Furthermore, this region was linked by rivers and roads to the coastal trade centers of the Tidewater and the Lower South, and stood at the geographical heart of the antebellum trade routes that connected the South to the North and the Upper South to the Lower South. This strategic location at the crossroads of two major slave-trading networks explains for Dunaway why the "political economies of all Mountain South counties were in the grip of slavery. Even in counties with the smallest slave populations..., slave owners owned a disproportionate share of wealth and land, held a majority of important state and county offices, and championed proslavery agendas rather than the social and economic interests of nonslaveholders in their own communities" (pg. 10). All whites in every county, no matter how small the Black population, benefited from or were damaged by enslavement.

Most Appalachian slave masters applied less slave labor time toward production of staple production than was typical of the rest of the country's slaveholders (pg. 46). This means there were more slaves in the Mountain South than were required to cultivate the agricultural surpluses of the region. It was thus more profitable to sell or hire out slaves than to apply their labor toward the production of export crops (pg. 46). The slaves in this region were thus viewed by their slaveholders as more valuable as investments than as laborers. More than one third of the Appalachian slave population were involved in trading transactions in 1860. Despite the myth that slaveholders rarely separated families, the forced migrations initiated by Mountain owners are said to have resulted in the termination of 40 percent of the marriages among their slaves. Appalachian slaves were more likely to be sold away from their spouses than their Lower South counterparts (pg. 55).

This is not so say that slaves did not develop persistent family ties. Dunaway argues that at least half of slave families in the South were permanently headed by two parents, while for another 12 to 15 percent, one of the parents was absent part of the time. Only one-fifth of all slave families were headed by one parent, and another 15 percent consisted of children living with adults who were unrelated by kinship (pg. 63). Slave children were the property of the owner of their mothers, and fathers who were owned by a different master did not have legal visitation rights. The legal home of the fathers was their assigned worksite.

Dunaway points out that masters structured the absence of males from those households in three ways: removal of fathers through sales or as gifts to their children; reluctance to sanction marriages to slaves owned by someone else; refusal to sanction marriages between slaves and free Blacks. Adult males were also so frequently hired out that Appalachian slave women coined the term "men on the road" (pg. 67). Fathers in these cases are said to have been treated like absent shadows who had no rights to demand continued contact with their children. When mothers died or were sold or hired out, the wishes of the husband/father were not considered.

While children under 13 constituted less than ten percent of all slave sales as a whole, nearly two-thirds of all Appalachian slave sales separated children from their families, 70 percent occurring when they were younger than 15 (pp. 67-68). Furthermore, it was often masters (not mothers) who made fundamental decisions about the nature of child care: when, where, by whom, how much, how little. Enslaved mothers did not have the option of not reporting to work when their children required attention. Moreover the intent of the master was not to foster a mother-child bond, but to foster the allegiance of the children to the master and his proxies. While slave parents lacked authority in relation to the intervention of the master and his proxies into the affairs of the family, the slave family served to reproduce the next generation of workers fitted with the requisite skills and values to be productive. Obeying rules and manifesting a strong work ethic were strategies to avoid punishment and sanctions for the entire family, and also to avoid being sold.

Because of the structured absence of the father, one in five of the Appalachian ex-slaves reported they were indifferent toward their fathers. But most had positive attitudes toward their father, expressing pride in their resistance of the master's authority to infringe upon his visitation rights in various ways, or in the manner in which the father protected them from the master's punishment (pp. 79-80).

Nonetheless because of the masters' forced migration strategies, fathers were permanently or intermittently absent from two-thirds to three-fourths of Appalachian slave families. While parents were tenacious about keeping their family ties alive (the most frequent manifestation of everyday resistance), mothers were often deeply scarred by the removal of family members, and we should be careful not to minimize the long-term impact of separation on enslaved women (pg. 81).

Slave mortality rates were higher in the Mountain South than elsewhere. In 1850 it was 1.4 times that of any other U.S. slaves, while for Appalachian male slaves it was 1.7 times that of the average Appalachian white male. Dunaway attributes these high mortality rates to shortfalls in basic survival needs, environmental hazards, occupational risks, and malnutrition (pg. 85).

Most Appalachian slaves (75 percent) were issued two outfits of clothing annually, one for winter, one for summer. The others were issued one outfit in the fall. These allotments were not only inadequate in quantity, they did not serve well the protective function of clothing from the weather, from occupational hazards, nor for comfort.

The typical slave dwelling was a one-room cabin with one door and one window. About ten percent of the units had wood or stone floors, extra storage space in the lofts, or attached sheds. Some lived in rooms in the big house, or in sheds outside of the big house. Industrial slaves lived in worse housing than agricultural slaves, often dormitories. Sometimes there were no permanent shelter facilities, so that they were reduced to the use of sticks in the ground with blankets thrown over them. Because there were no facilities for the isolation of those with illnesses, infectious diseases usually spread rapidly.

The lack of sanitation and clean water was a leading cause of environmental risk. Because of tighter profit margins than their Lower South counterparts, Appalachian masters were less willing to weatherize slave cabins, to build safe water systems, or to inoculate entire populations. At industrial sites, chemical waste exacerbated the ecological degradation (pg. 95).

Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century writers have debated whether slave diets were adequate. Fogel and Engerman (1974) asserted that indeed they were substantial calorically and probably exceeded levels of most required nutrients (pg. 100). But subsequently some have argued for a more nuanced analysis of the slave diet, emphasizing, for example that much of the caloric intake was from fat and carbohydrates. Furthermore, Kipple and King (1981, pp. 149-151) argued that the issue of caloric intake was less important than the question of whether the diet was adequate for persons of West African descent, whose nutritional requirements were more specific to their own histories. Appalachian ex-slaves, however, report that their masters supplied them with inadequate food almost twice as often as did other U.S. ex-slaves. Meat was the item most in short supply to slaves, so they often had to resort to theft to obtain meat.

### **Reproductive Exploitation and Child Mortality**

Mountain slave families were destabilized by structural control over slave marriages, sexual abuse by white males, and structural interference in pregnancy, breastfeeding, and child rearing. Slave marriages were important to Appalachian masters, so few granted their slaves total independence. Foremost was the denial of the legitimacy of the church via the use of the tradition of “jumping the broom,” a Celtic tradition, derived from their pre-Christian, pagan past, which held no legitimacy among and was not respected among whites. “If masters extended to slave marriages the ‘sanctity’ of the church and the legitimacy of public recording, they would throw into question their racist ideology that blacks did not construct families that were the moral and cultural equivalent of their white owners” (pp. 118-119).

Mountain slave women were on the average 17.2 years old at the birth of their first child. In the U.S. South as a whole the average age at the birth of their first child was about 21 (pg. 125). This is in line with the strategies for maximizing reproduction among mountain masters. Thomas Jefferson argued that “women and children should be managed as investment commodities, not as field workers...with respect therefore to our women and children...it is not their labor, but their increase which is the first consideration with us” (pg. 128).

Despite these strategies, gender oppression, bias, and stereotypes were rife. Mountain slave women endured a death rate that was 1.5 times the national average, and 1.8 times that of local white women. In contrast to national trends, the region’s enslaved women’s mortality rate exceeded that of the region’s enslaved men. Only Black children under ten had higher mortality rates than Appalachian slave women of child bearing age. This was due to the masters’ strategies of malnutrition, high fertility, and inadequate work release during pregnancy and child birth (pp.

133-134). Dunaway focuses on the interlocking oppressions of race, class, and gender in her treatment of structural interference in breastfeeding in that the attitude of male slaveholders was that breastfeeding interfered with business as usual. So they adhered to the notion that babies should be weaned early, except that this dictum was not enforced as rigidly on slaveholding women as on slave women. Appalachian masters structured a regimented feeding schedule for slave infants since women returned to work within three weeks of giving birth. There was much contention between mothers and masters over rigid feeding arrangements, in some cases involving the use of various chemicals or herbs to induce sleep in the infants so that the mothers could work the intervals desired by the masters without breaking for breastfeeding. But since breastfeeding postponed the return of the menstrual cycle and fertility for more than a year, Appalachian masters required that women return to work within three weeks of childbirth and wean children from breastfeeding at the end of the ninth month.

A third form of structural interference in slave women's breastfeeding was the use of slave women who had been required to wean their own children as wet nurses and caregivers for white offspring, who were typically breastfed for nearly two years (pg. 139). Fully one-fifth of slave women who had recently given birth worked as wet nurses for white children. Wet nursing often broke the health of slave women. In addition to physical health, wet nursing used the psychic energies of slave women for nurturing the children of the master class while they were taken from their own children. The affected group in this case, moreover, was much larger, since up to two-thirds of slave women served as caretakers for the masters' children. Dunaway notes that "Sarah Patterson watched all of her own children die except for one while she nurtured the master's children" (pg. 141).

As indicated above, slave children had the highest mortality rate of any age group among the slave population in the United States. In 1850, according to Dunaway, 51 percent of all Black deaths were children younger than nine (pg. 141). A slave infant was 2.2 times more likely to die than a white infant. The differences in mortality rates were attributed to dietary deficiencies of the mother; malnutrition at conception or near delivery; malnutrition of the fetus; maternal and fetal infections; working during pregnancy especially at strenuous tasks; and attenuated breastfeeding. Black children died four times more often than white children from convulsions, teething, tetanus, lockjaw, SIDS, and worms, all attributable to early weaning (pg. 144).

Appalachian masters also maximized profits by structuring shortfalls in minimal survival provisions for older children resulting in malnutrition and exposure from inadequate clothing and shelter.

Dunaway explains that household subsistence production amounts to an indirect transfer of surplus value to the slaveholder. This is so because if the slaves had not done so, it would be the master who would have to pay to cover the subsistence of the slaves, or otherwise the laborer would be lost. In addition to their 58 hours of field work, more than half were assigned to craft production after sunset. Another 16 percent were required to complete evening handicrafts after completing work in their master's house. Slaves also engaged in a variety of forms of subsistence production for which they were able to gain cash, but for which they also had to pay a fee to the master. Slaves were generally aware that such subsistence production benefited their masters more than it benefited them, since they were required to compensate for the cost cutting strategies that the Appalachian masters used to enhance their profit margins.

Although mountain slave households were clearly units of production and resource pooling, Dunaway is careful to point out that members did not share equally the workload. Male

slaves were assigned a greater variety of tasks, including sole claim on the upper echelon of the occupational hierarchy which included drivers, blacksmiths, carpenters, millwrights, wheelwrights, mechanics, coopers, tanners, shoemakers, and skilled livestock experts (pg. 163). Slave women were overrepresented in field labor and domestic labor. Although working alongside men in many of these occupations, women occupied the dirtiest, least-skilled, most backbreaking tasks (164). Although slave women often worked alongside men as indicated above, men did not share the burden of household work. Dunaway points out the hallmark of poor rural women the world over has always been their capacity to weave together a creative tapestry of household and external outputs in order to accumulate “a consumption fund adequate for sustaining and replenishing the labor force” (pg. 167). Husbands spent most of their cash earnings on tobacco, whiskey, or clothing purchases for themselves (pg. 176).

### **The Risks of Emancipation for Black Families**

Fear of uncontrolled Blacks was an ideological justification for deterring emancipation as long as possible. Less than seven percent of Black Appalachians were freed voluntarily during or after the war. Three quarters of the Appalachian slaves were emancipated by Union soldiers during the war or by the Freedmen’s Bureau after the war (pg. 216). But emancipation proved to be a bittersweet, stunning moment in history which provoked both elation and uncertainty among the newly emancipated freed people. They were mostly cynical and frightened about their new freedom since they did not have the kind of economic resources or structural supports to survive the hardships of the communities into which they were discharged (pg. 218). “They had not been liberated from poverty, landlessness, or hunger, and many feared that their circumstances were about to get worse” (pg. 219).

Fewer than one-third of the emancipated Appalachians left the plantations of their former owners within the first year of emancipation. One-fifth left immediately, one third remained longer than five years, and more than ten percent remained for a decade or more. Dunaway cites Berlin’s contention that “federal regulations often undermined the ability of former slaves to support themselves” (pg. 222). Unemployed or irregularly employed Blacks were often viewed as a threat to good order. Pass systems and vagrancy regulations effectively criminalized such irregularly employed freed people. Those who left did so because of the economic losses or death of their former owners, their prior relocation to contraband camps of military labor sites during the war, their opportunities for nonagricultural employment in nearby towns, and mostly their chance to reunite with family who had been forcibly removed by owners.

### **Reconstruction Threats to Black Family Survival**

Between 1865 and 1870 Blacks who migrated moved into the region’s towns, sought jobs in extractive industries, or worked for the railroads. Nearly one-quarter of Black Appalachians relocated to the towns, thus becoming more urbanized than the region’s whites (pp. 238-239). Town work was a large proportion of the nonagricultural jobs between 1865 and 1870, including porters, day laborers, hotel and restaurant workers, street cleaners, artisans, washer women, laundresses, and servants. Skilled positions in the extractive industries, formerly held by slaves, were now reserved primarily for whites. Every town with a railroad terminal attracted ex-slaves.

But the conditions of the ex-slaves were precarious, since now hunger rather than physical coercion was used to compel obedience.

But partisan violence spun out of control throughout the South, including the Mountain South. Although some historians have tended to romanticize race relations in Appalachia, the freed people faced a greater probability of violence in Appalachia than elsewhere in the South. By 1868 the Ku Klux Klan was organized and active in every Appalachian county (pg. 245). But despite the violence Appalachian Blacks built and maintained community institutions. Violence against institutions focused on the churches and the schools. Throughout the Mountain South white opposition to Freedmen schools was bitter. White violence dampened educational efforts, for the vast majority of damaged schools were funded and built by local Blacks with no subsidy from the Freedmen's Bureau or philanthropic associations. Given the unwillingness of counties to allocate public funds Dunaway is not surprised that half of the ex-slaves interviewed in the 1930s were illiterate.

At emancipation two-thirds of the families of ex-slaves were in disarray. The roads of Appalachia were loaded with former slaves searching for their families. Less than ten percent of the families were reunited. Because of these separations some of the partners had remarried, resulting in some difficult situations upon rediscovery.

### **On Getting Past the Moynihan Report**

At the end of this powerful rendering of the African American Family mostly in slavery and immediately after emancipation, I found Dunaway's findings deeply disturbing. We should all be disturbed. I agree that there has been a tendency to overcompensate for the slave family in the aftermath of the tangle of pathology thesis propagated by Daniel Patrick Moynihan. But despite Dunaway's criticism of the manner in which some scholars interpreted their findings on the practices of the slave system to refute the Moynihan report, we could not be further off course if we thought that somehow Dunaway's findings constituted a justification of the Moynihan Report for our times.

In the book Dunaway points out that it is not coincidental that the current dominant paradigm on the African American slave family emerged after the publication of the Moynihan Report. Deriving from Frazier, Du Bois, and Stamp the notion that slavery had broken families, Moynihan argued that "three centuries of injustices have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American" (1965 pp. xi-xii).

I absolutely agree with Dunaway that Gutman set out to rebut Moynihan. Gutman sought to refute Moynihan in the present by showing that he was wrong about the past. While there is much about the Moynihan's larger agenda in the debates about social policy with which I disagree, Dunaway's masterful work on the African-American family in slavery and emancipation provides a far better foundation for understanding the evolution of the African-American family. This is an exemplary work in so many ways, particularly because it really transcends for me the debates about the Moynihan Report.

Dunaway casts a steady eye on the particularities of Upper South slavery, and provides us with a full measure of the systemic pressures which underlay the brutalities of that system. While the romanticism of the alternative paradigm might have been part of an understandable search for agency in troubled times, who could argue that we would be better served by an analysis of the

real structures and alternatives that existed at the time, just as well as we should do for the present.

Dunaway concludes that the best predictors of slave family instability and disruption are (1) ownership by a small slaveholder, (2) residence of the enslaved Africans in a slave-selling region, and (3) frequent slave hiring for distant agricultural occupations (pg. 272). These family disruptions more often than not permanently severed kinship ties, often affecting children younger than fifteen from parents and siblings.

But despite their structural instability Dunaway argues that mountain slave households formed resource pools (material, spiritual, and cultural) which allowed them support during crises. Despite the very real structural disruptions slave households kept alive family histories and myths about the African Diaspora. They organized as well a day-to-day resistance, nurtured a counter-hegemonic culture, and practices a liberation theology (pg. 277). Dunaway argues that these slave households were sustenance pooling structures which insured their short-term survival and intergenerational reproduction.

These coping mechanisms were used creatively to deal with their plight, but this did not make these structures autonomous from the larger system. She calls as well for a recognition of the human pain caused by the frequent severing of kinship ties. At the same time she argues that scholars should not persist in insisting that family stability is a function of the existence of the nuclear family, a standard that antebellum white families did not meet. Nor, she insists has this been the pattern for the American family at any other time. In fact stability is said to characterize nonnuclear family construction in many “nonwestern societies” (pg. 286).

Dunaway concludes with a striking reframing of the plight of the enslaved Africans and the pain of separation from kin. These separations constituted according to the testimony of the ex-slaves a wrenching of their souls away from them. So that poverty, illiteracy, and racial inequality were not the worst legacies of enslavement. Dunaway concludes that “it was the forced removal of family that broke their hearts and generated a community wound that was not healed by liberation” (pg. 287).

Dunaway’s conclusion echoes the memories of the elderly former slaves, and thus captures a sentiment that is crucial to our understanding of the African American family in slavery and emancipation.

## References

- Gutman, Herbert. 1976. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Kiple, Kenneth F. and Virginia H. King. 1981. *Another Dimension to the Black Diaspora: Diet, Disease and Racism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Moynihan, Daniel %. 1965. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Washington, DC: Department of Labor.