Summary

Despite the publication of hundreds of books and articles on the history of American slavery, our understanding of many aspects of enslaved people’s culture remains clouded by disagreement among contemporary scholars. The nature of slaves’ family lives has proved to be an especially thorny issue, and a general consensus among historians regarding the daily experiences, structure, and stability of families in bondage has been slow in coming.

A perusal of the historical literature suggests that two broad issues lay at the root of this disagreement. First, scholars have long disagreed over the extent to which slave family life was shaped by the external factors of slavery, or rather by slave agency. Was family life among the enslaved most strongly influenced from above, promoted or thwarted by slaveholders, the slave-based economy, and the institution of bondage? Or was it the cornerstone of a semi-autonomous slave culture, the product of enslaved people’s own negotiation and resilient determination to reassert their humanity and dignity in the face of oppression? Second, scholars appear reluctant to abandon their singular views of slave family life. Until recently, historians rarely considered the diversity of slave culture across time and space, and the experiences of the family unit have in the past too often been generalized. Studies of antebellum slavery in particular have tended to magnify the experiences of slaves living in the southern interior (where cotton prevailed) and present them as the norm. This overemphasis on the cotton South has certainly not gone unnoticed, and the past generation of scholars has produced a myriad of regional studies which illuminate slave culture in various communities of the non-cotton South, but none of these studies have employed a comparative approach, and indeed many also claim to present the norm, thereby simply rejecting the conclusions of earlier research. In other words, few historians have taken an inclusive — rather than exclusive — approach to slave family life. The generalizations of past studies severely underestimate the social and economic diversity of the antebellum South, which was far more varied and complex.

This dissertation offers a reinterpretation of enslaved people’s family lives in the nineteenth-century South, namely by formulating a middle ground in the historical debate over slave agency and by redefining slave family life in plural form. A comparative study which examines the importance of time and place for slave families, this work points to the varied nature of regional agriculture in diverse southern localities as the most important underlying factor in the development of slave family life — not necessarily because it dictated the experiences of slave families from above, but because it provided them with a basic framework of boundaries and opportunities with respect to family contact, childcare,
family-based internal production, marriage strategies, and long-term stability. Specifically, this book addresses the following central question: *How did the nature of regional agriculture affect slave families in various localities of the non-cotton South?* This question is examined for simple families living in three regions of the antebellum South: Fairfax County in northern Virginia, Georgetown District in lowcountry South Carolina, and St. James Parish in southern Louisiana, respectively.

Part I provides an introduction to both the topic and the setting. Following an introductory chapter which discusses historiography and methodology, chapter one offers a broad examination of slave-based agriculture in each of the three above mentioned slave societies, including themes such as profitability and general economic trends. It demonstrates that between 1800 and 1860, Fairfax County in northern Virginia suffered significant economic and demographic decline, as it devolved from a tobacco slave society in the direction of a society with slaves. As the economy shifted to mixed grain farming, slave labor became increasingly marginalized in local agriculture. Meanwhile, Georgetown District in lowcountry South Carolina showed no signs of decline in the antebellum period; indeed the empire built on rice expanded and consolidated during that time, resulting in a slave society where plantations containing hundreds of slaves were the norm and spectacular wealth and grandeur were widespread. In St. James Parish in southern Louisiana, the sugar boom of the early 1800s transformed a once quite Mississippi River parish into an American slave society. St. James showed all of the telltale signs of a rapidly expanding slave economy, from the exponential growth of slaveholding size to the male surplus in its enslaved population.

In Part II (which includes chapters two through four) the focus is on the effects of work on slave families’ daily experiences. Chapter two explains the daily and seasonal tasks and work patterns of enslaved people living in antebellum northern Virginia, lowcountry South Carolina, and southern Louisiana. It traces the time-work (sunup to sundown) system applied to farm work in Fairfax County to the legacy of tobacco, and describes the transformation of monoculture field hands into jacks-of-all-trades; outlines the straightforward yet unhealthy nature of rice cultivation in Georgetown District, as well as the unique task system by which enslaved hands there worked; and describes the furious haste of cane cultivation in St. James Parish, with its almost military application of gang labor and factory-like shifts in the sugar house during the grinding season.

Chapter three examines how work and the nature of regional agriculture affected the lives of slave families during their time for the master. What kinds of boundaries and opportunities did work patterns and the specific demands for cultivating various cash crops create for parenthood and childcare during working hours? Under what circumstances were enslaved people afforded the opportunity to work together or otherwise spend time with their family members during the day? And how did slave families react to these boundaries and
opportunities? It concludes that time-work and the economic decline that plagued slave-based agriculture in Fairfax County, which triggered a decline in slaveholding size and made fewer slaves responsible for more tasks, burdened enslaved parents (and especially women) with formidable boundaries and inflexibility when it came to reconciling their formal work with parental duties. Pregnant women were afforded only very short confinement periods (as they could not be missed in the fields), and children were often left under the loose supervision of domestic servants, the white mistress, or sometimes nobody at all; children were moreover put to work at a very young age. In the fields, new mothers lacked the flexibility to return to the quarters at regular intervals to nurse their babies. The small number of slaves on most holdings, however, afforded slaves of working age limited opportunities to work together with family members during the day.

In Georgetown District, the unhealthy nature of rice cultivation afforded pregnant women and new mothers opportunities to take advantage of lighter workloads and longer confinement periods (usually at least a month). When they returned to work, the vast size of local slaveholdings allowed for the widespread use of organized childcare in the form of nurseries, and the flexibility of the task system enabled new mothers to return at regular intervals to nurse their babies. Task work also allowed families opportunities to work together in the fields, and men often came to the aid of their wives to finish their tasks early.

In St. James Parish, the developing nature of a booming slave society shared characteristics found in both northern Virginia and lowcountry Carolina. Cane cultivation was so physically demanding (and thus unhealthy for childbearing women) that new mothers were usually assigned lighter tasks during pregnancy and afforded month-long confinement periods. Gang labor and shifts in the sugar house deprived new mothers of the flexibility to return for breastfeeding, but planters often allowed them short breaks to nurse their babies—child mortality was appalling and every new addition to the labor force was desperately needed. Not all planters were so generous, however; many favored labor over leave, limiting confinement periods and nursing time to the bare minimum. Children were left at nurseries on the largest plantations, but not all cane plantations were large enough to provide such facilities, and many children were left under the supervision of domestic servants or the white mistress while their parents were working. In the fields and in the sugar house, work was strictly divided by gender; family members who worked together were of the same sex, thereby strengthening family ties along gender lines.

Chapter four traces the development of family-based internal economies among slaves in each of the three regions back to the nature of regional agriculture. In Fairfax County slave family economies remained underdeveloped throughout the antebellum period. Time-work deprived slaves of much time to voluntarily hire themselves out, and the increasing prevalence of cross-plantation families discouraged men from performing paid
overwork on Sundays, their one free day to visit their wives and children. Moreover, in the declining slave society family gardens were increasingly only granted to the elderly and particularly industrious slaves, mainly as an incentive for the rest to increase productivity, but also to curb slave behavior which smacked of independence in the eyes of failing planters. With few legal opportunities to improve the material conditions of their families, slave men often stole from the master and earned a stubborn reputation as petty thieves.

In Georgetown District slave family economies were highly developed in the antebellum period. In this stable and affluent slave society, all families were granted garden plots and the permission to raise livestock; and the task system afforded most families ample time to work for themselves. As a result, slave families there were often able to improve their material conditions, even if all of these incentives ultimately served the master’s interests.

In St. James Parish, slaves were afforded very little free time indeed, but the sugar masters provided them with various opportunities to develop family economies on Sundays. Families were given garden plots and provision grounds, men were regularly called upon to perform paid overwork, and many plantations contained commissaries where goods could be exchanged. Again, all of these incentives served the master’s interests, but slaves seized the opportunity to develop moderate family economies.

Part III (which includes chapters five through seven) examines the effects of regional agriculture on slave families’ social landscapes, specifically with respect to family structure and the stability of family units over time. Chapter five provides a basis from which to further explore enslaved people’s experiences with family formation and long-term stability by clarifying the social landscapes of slave populations in northern Virginia, lowcountry South Carolina, and southern Louisiana. It follows the spectacular decline in slaveholding size in Fairfax County, which was triggered by economic troubles and the shift from tobacco to mixed grains. By the eve of the Civil War some 84 percent of slaves lived on farms (not plantations), and 58 percent lived on farms which contained ten slaves or less. Most of these were near the Potomac River, especially within easy reach of Alexandria and Washington. The slave population itself was slashed by 47 percent, mostly from sale and emigration, but sex ratios between men and women of reproductive age (14 to 45) remained relatively balanced.

Slave-based agriculture in Georgetown District, which had always been highly profitable, underwent a steady phase of expansion and consolidation in the antebellum period, resulting in the growth of local slaveholdings to enormous proportions. The percentage of slaves living on holdings which contained more than one hundred slaves increased from 44 percent in 1800 to 69 percent in 1860, with some 38 percent living on holdings which contained more than two hundred slaves. Some bondspeople lived on estates which counted several hundred slaves; one estate counted over a thousand. Most slaves lived along the rivers
near Winyah Bay, and especially the Waccamaw Neck contained some of the largest holdings. The sex ratios between men and women of reproductive age remained relatively balanced over time.

The social landscape of slaves living in St. James Parish reflected the region’s rapid transformation into a slave society. Slaveholding size underwent mushroom growth. In 1810, 62 percent of slaves still lived on farms, but by 1860 some 76 percent lived on plantations, and 40 percent lived on plantations containing more than one hundred slaves. Small cane farms with a limited number of hands still existed as late as the Civil War, however. The slave population itself grew exponentially (by 363 percent between 1810 and 1860) from massive imports, but these imports were skewed to a significant male majority.

In chapter six the focus is on enslaved people’s marriage strategies and family formation, and concludes that while antebellum slaves strove to establish two-parent households whenever possible, not all were able to realize that ideal, and those that could not adapted their marriage strategies and family lives accordingly. In Fairfax County, where slaveholding size had diminished to farm proportions, opportunities to find partners on the home place and establish two-parent households were few, and they decreased over time. Consequently, cross-plantation marriages overwhelmingly prevailed throughout the antebellum period, as slaves transcended the geography of containment by seeking each other out across property lines. On the few large holdings in the county, especially in the early decades of the nineteenth century, we find more evidence of two-parent and co-residential households.

The rice plantations in Georgetown District contained vast numbers of bondspeople, and most slaves availed themselves of the opportunity to marry on the home place and establish co-residential families. While two-parent households prevailed, however, not all were able to find resident mates, and those that could not usually married abroad. Interestingly, broad marriages very often consisted of slaves who lived on adjoining plantations, which reduced travel time and increased time for divided families to be together.

In St. James Parish one-third of slave men were consistently denied the opportunity to marry and establish families at all. Those who did succeed, however, usually chose to marry women from the home estate, forming co-residential households. Even on smaller holdings in St. James, such domestic arrangements were often possible because—due to massive imports—less slaves on the cane farms were related to one another. Broad marriages were less common but certainly not unknown. As in Georgetown District, however, slaves who married abroad usually married slaves who lived “next door”—in St. James this often meant within sight of one another, as plantations were unusually narrow.

Chapter seven examines slave families’ long-term stability by focusing on their experiences with forced separation (through estate divisions, sale and long-term hiring). The
economic decline and devolution of Fairfax County from a slave society into a society with slaves plagued slave families with the omnipresent threat of forced separation. Slaveholdings were too small to take family ties into account during estate divisions; adolescents and young adults were frequently plucked from their families and sold to the Deep South in order to settle their masters’ outstanding debts (the slave population declined by 47 percent in the antebellum period, mainly due to excessive sales); and surplus slaves were often hired out by the year in Alexandria or Washington—at one point this included 25 percent of the able-bodied slave population. When scattered locally, however, slaves went to extraordinary lengths to maintain family contact by weekend visiting.

Slave families living in Georgetown District enjoyed a relative peace and more stability. Slaveholdings were large enough that families (indeed plantations) could often be bequeathed intact; and their masters were wealthy enough to prevent the need for excessive sales or long-term hiring. Moreover, slaves resisted collectively when faced with the threat of forced separation. Forced separation did occur, of course, but not anywhere near as frequently as it occurred in Fairfax County.

St. James Parish again takes a middle position in the extent of forced separation among its slave population. The promise of spectacular profits prevented sugar masters from selling their slaves—their demand for labor was indeed insatiable. Upon their deaths, however, outstanding debts to the creditors upon which their establishment in the sugar business depended often (but not always) forced their heirs to sell large numbers of slaves, usually to other local planters. This practice was to some extent cushioned by the decision of many heirs to jointly run and operate their inherited plantations, which prevented disruptions among slave families. Long-term hiring does not appear to have been widespread; indeed, planters hired on slaves from other parts of Louisiana during harvest season.

The conclusions of this study—namely that the boundaries and opportunities for slave family life were contingent upon the nature of regional agriculture and therefore varied across time and space—are formulated in the final chapter entitled “Weathering Different Storms”.