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Tera W. Hunter. *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century.* Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2017. 404 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-04571-2.

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The zeal with which freedpeople sought to have their longstanding intimate relationships enshrined in law following the destruction of slavery serves as one of the most important trends in African American social history. Having been denied legal recognition of their intimate relationships in bondage, black people took tremendous pride in finally having the ability to enter the state of wedlock. “The Marriage Covenant is at the foundation of all our rights,” exclaimed a member of Virginia’s colored infantry following the Civil War. “In slavery we could not have legalized marriage; now we have it” (p. 7).[1]

For historians of the black family, the pattern suggested that freedmen and freedwomen held a vision of marriage that closely paralleled Victorian notions of matrimony. However, in her dazzling new book, ***Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century***, Tera W. Hunter argues that black Americans’ vision of marriage was actually much more complex than the portrait offered by previous scholars. “At the same time that African Americans acknowledged the fundamental civil rights embedded in legal monogamous marriage, they responded in multifarious ways to the conventional matrimonial script once they legally secured the right to marry,” Hunter argues. “Freedom meant not just access to social conventions but also the ability to reject them” (p. 8).

Hunter scaffolds her argument with a dazzling array of sources. Using slave narratives, court records, congressional hearings, Freedmen’s Bureau reports, sharecropping contracts, and social science research data, she uncovers a century-long battle between African Americans, white southerners, and white northerners over the meaning of marriage in the black community. Showing that African Americans’ conceptions of marriage was more improvisational than ideological, Hunter calls for an African American intellectual history of wedlock that comes from the bottom up. Most importantly, Hunter suggests that nineteenth-century African American history must be understood on its own terms and not simply be positioned as prologue to twentieth-century debates about African American culture.

In so doing, Hunter nudges the rich and raucous historiography on black marriage and black kinship in a new direction. More than any other subfield of African American history, scholarship on the black family has been deployed as a vehicle to support political and policy arguments about contemporary black life. In particular, Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s ***The Black Family: A Case for National Action*** (1965) spurred a renewed focus on the black family among historians. The Moynihan

report cited the work of black and white historians to argue that slavery had done irrevocable damage to black Americans' conception of family life and led to a "tangle of pathology" that included high rates of out-of-wedlock childbirth, the decrease of nuclear families, and the growing presence of female-headed households. In the 1970s, John Blassingame and Herbert Gutman both challenged the arguments about deep-rooted cultural damage and traced histories of community and kinship through existing plantation records and demonstrated counterexamples of black families attempting to preserve two-parent households. Later, as scholars began using Freedmen's Bureau records, the high value African Americans placed on marriage and kinship could be seen in much greater detail as countless stories of freedpeople seeking to find lost loved ones, protect their children from the horrors of apprenticeship programs, and establish their own vision of family following the destruction of slavery became increasingly clear. More recently, Deborah Gray White, Brenda Stevenson, and other historians of black women's experiences in slavery and freedom have challenged the teleological emphasis on the male-headed household and sought to show that patterns of matrifocal families also existed during slavery. Read together, the work on the black family produced over the last forty years has become one of the pillars of African American history.

Building on this existing historiography of black marriage and the black family, as well as on a larger body of scholarship of marriage in the nineteenth century, Hunter demonstrates that over the course of the nineteenth century African Americans "fought for the lives and livelihoods of their families, not for abstract ideals" (p. 204). In slavery and in freedom, black Americans were required to define marriage broadly in response to the legal opposition that both free and enslaved people faced across the nation. To this end, Hunter places marriage within a deliberately muddier taxonomy of relationships that she refers to as "black heterosexual intimacy" or simply "black intimacy." Absent legal protections for their marriages in both slavery and freedom, in the North as well as in the South, African Americans redefined the institution of marriage for themselves based on "mutual consent, association, and cohabitation" (p. 176). While these partnerships at times mirrored the shape and spirit of the idealized nineteenth-century middle-class marriage, the vicissitudes of slavery and racism required black Americans to be less attached to a romanticized version of marriage than their white counterparts. Faced with a circumscribed terrain during slavery, blacks used the dominant social conventions of marriage when it suited their needs but also reshaped the bonds of wedlock to create an institution that could survive and adapt to the perils of bondage. Following the destruction of slavery, freedpeople experienced both the promise of having their marriages legally recognized and the danger of discarding their more expansive vision of black intimacy for the narrower Victorian definition of wedlock heralded by white northern reformers, postbellum southern landowners, and a burgeoning class of black elites.

Bound in Wedlock is organized into six chapters that span the course of the nineteenth century. The first three chapters explore the different ways that slavery affected black marriages. In addition to highlighting the variations of black intimacy in slavery, Hunter demonstrates that it was within antebellum slavery that African Americans crafted an improvisational vision of marriage that included a wider spectrum of heterosexual intimacy. In particular, Hunter's description of mixed status marriages powerfully captures the gap between marriage as an ideal and the reality of the institution as crafted by nineteenth-century African Americans. In several instances, free African Americans chose "voluntary slavery" and reentered slavery to preserve their marriages. After "not being reconciled to live without his wife," one free black Virginian claimed that he "would prefer

returning to slavery to losing the society of his wife" (p. 116).

Chapters 4 through 6 grapple with the various ways that the presence of the federal government in the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction radically altered the shape of black marriages. The federal government, which first arrived in the form of "the flag" of the Union army, and later as the Freedmen's Bureau, began standardizing and legalizing enslaved people's marriages. The white northerners who took part in these federal efforts saw freedpeople as possessing only parenthetical "marriages" and viewed it as their duty to not only provide freedpeople with official marriage certificates but also inscribe Victorian morality upon the relationships of black people. Hoping to stamp out adultery, common-law marriages, and bigamy, these federal representatives attempted to erase the wider variety of black intimate relationships that black couples had maintained before the Civil War. But where Freedmen's Bureau agents saw black couples' relationships as unsanctioned, immoral, and stained by the damage of slavery, freedpeople, Hunter shows, understood the intimate relationships that they had maintained during slavery as embodying the spirit of marriage. "I called him 'papa' and he called me 'mama,'" described one freedwoman to a Freedmen's Bureau agent about her marriage prior to the war. "I told him that if he would take me for his 'bosom wife' that I would not allow any man to come between him and me—that I would not have any thing to do with any other man, and he promised that he would not have any woman than me" (p. 214).

The final two chapters explore the unintended consequences of the standardization of black marriage. As southern black families increasingly organized their families around the structure of the two-parent household, the white planter class transformed freedpeople's desires for nuclear families into a building block for the postbellum sharecropping system. In an effort to attract and consolidate a pool of landless laborers, planters negotiated with black men as heads of households who could then guarantee the labor of their wives and children. The demand for nuclear families, in turn, destabilized extended kinship networks and encouraged the outmigration of unmarried African Americans, especially unmarried African American women, to the South's urban centers.

In an effort to separate themselves from the legacy of slavery, black elites increasingly connected late nineteenth-century arguments about racial uplift to middle-class marriage. Black elites not only heralded their own marriages in the black public sphere but also chastised poor African Americans for not maintaining nuclear families. In the book's final chapter, Hunter highlights how the alarmist paeans to chastity and monogamy espoused by black elites did not actually reflect the marriage patterns of poor and working-class African Americans. "Reformers and scholars at the time could not fully account for many details about African-American marital practices and patterns because the evidence simply wasn't available then," Hunter notes (p. 263). Narratives of proper marriage were propagated and repeated in black schools; black newspapers; women's clubs; and the writings of black intellectuals like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Anna Julia Cooper. By the end of the nineteenth century, the afterlife of slavery, especially as it related to the intimate relationships of African Americans, could only be viewed in negative terms by white and black progressive reformers.

Bound in Wedlock does miss some important avenues of scholarly inquiry. Despite challenging the Victorian narratives white and black elites used to pathologize the intimate relationships of black people, Hunter rarely engages sex and sexuality from the perspective of bodily pleasure. Where her first book, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (1997), spends considerable time exploring the juke joint, the blind tiger, and the lyrics of blues songs to show how unmarried black women creat-

ed new "geographies of pleasure" in postbellum urban spaces, the unmarried women in ***Bound in Wedlock*** seem largely disinterested in reclaiming their laboring bodies. Additionally, there are some dangers in defining "black heterosexual intimacy" too broadly. While Hunter's evidence suggests that black Americans defined marriage in more expansive terms than their white counterparts, she leaves fuzzy what may have constituted the outer reaches of African Americans' definition of marriage during the nineteenth century. For example, it may also be useful to consider what sort of "fugitive intimacies" went beyond the already fluid and expansive vision of marriage held by those who had once been enslaved. What categories of black intimacy, particularly nonheteronormative ones, not only were considered outside of the definition of mainstream marriage but also drew condemnation from members of the black community? Here, court records, periodicals produced by black churches, and the scholarship around delinquency and deviancy, especially around the late nineteenth-century institutions designed to police the behavior of black children, might serve as a useful guide for considering how the surveilling and disciplinary forces designed to guide black Americans to the ideal Victorian marriage also had histories of their own.

Hunter's powerfully written social history calls our attention to a world that was lost in the transition from slavery to freedom. Far from a "tangle of pathology," the history of black intimate relationships Hunter captures in ***Bound in Wedlock*** illuminates the relentless efforts of those African Americans who, even in the face of overwhelming obstacles and oppression, shaped their intimate connections on their own terms and fought for a vision of marriage that could survive both slavery and freedom.

Note

[1]. For the original quotation, see Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., ***Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867, Series 2: The Black Military Experience*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 672. On other uses of the quotation, see Peter W. Bardaglio, ***Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 132; Enola G. Aird, "Making the Wounded Whole: Marriage as Civil Right and Civic Responsibility," in ***Black Fathers in Contemporary American Society: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Strategies for Change,*** ed. Obie Clayton, Ronald B. Mincy, and David Blakenhorn (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 2003), 158; Nancy F. Cott, ***Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 90; Laura F. Edwards, "'The Marriage Covenant Is at the Foundation of All Our Rights': The Politics of Slave Marriages in North Carolina after Emancipation," ***Law and History Review*** 14 (Spring 1996): 81-124; and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, ***Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 271.

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