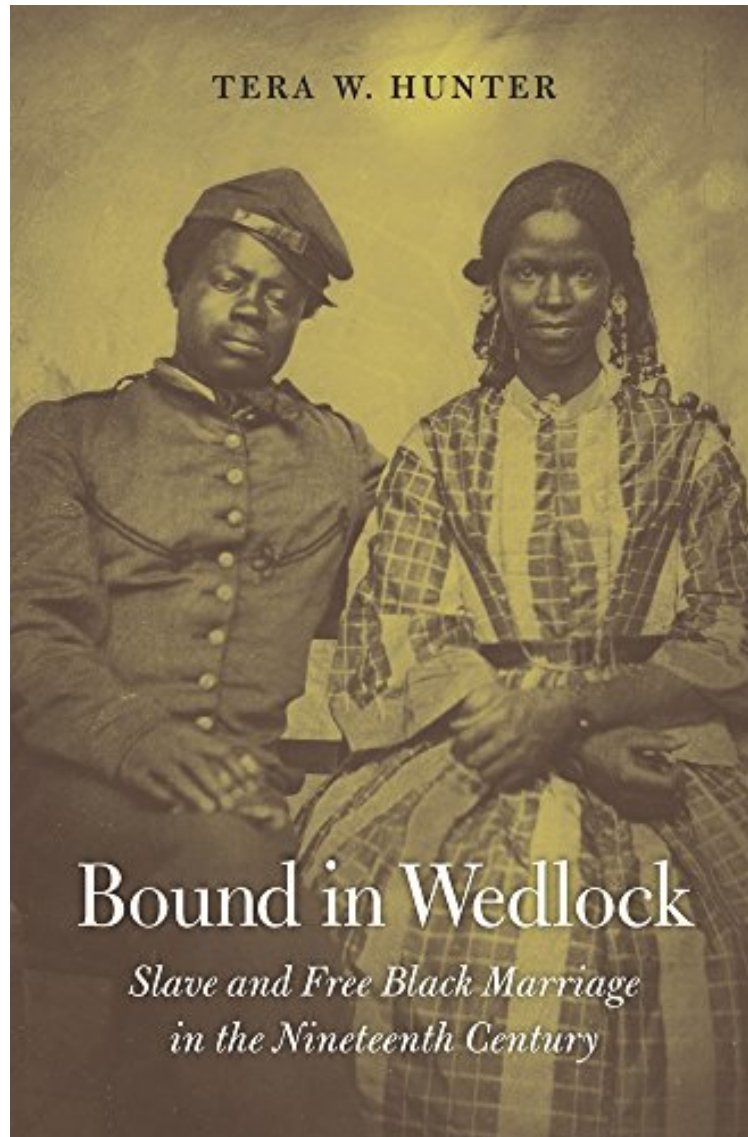


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# Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century

*Tera W. Hunter*

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Americans have long viewed marriage between a white man and a white woman as a sacred union. But marriages between African Americans have seldom been treated with the same reverence. This discriminatory legacy traces back to centuries of slavery, when the overwhelming majority of black married couples were bound in servitude as well as wedlock. Though their unions were not legally recognized, slaves commonly married, fully aware that their marital bonds would be sustained or nullified according to the whims of white masters. *Bound in Wedlock* is the first comprehensive history of African American marriage in the nineteenth century. Uncovering the experiences of African American spouses in plantation records, legal and court documents, and pension files, Tera W. Hunter reveals the myriad ways couples adopted, adapted, revised, and rejected white Christian ideas of marriage. Setting their own standards for conjugal relationships, enslaved husbands and wives were creative and, of necessity, practical in starting and supporting families under conditions of uncertainty and cruelty. After emancipation, white racism continued to menace black marriages. Laws passed during Reconstruction, ostensibly to secure the civil rights of newly freed African American citizens, were often coercive and repressive. Informal antebellum traditions of marriage were criminalized, and the new legal regime became a convenient tool for plantation owners to discipline agricultural workers. Recognition of the right of African Americans to enter into wedlock on terms equal to whites would remain a struggle into the Jim Crow era, and its legacy would resonate well into the twentieth century.

In this extraordinary book, Tera Hunter builds on vast research to discern the resilient marriage forms that African Americans devised during the nineteenth century to cope with the havoc of bondage, the fleeting promise of emancipation, and the fresh compulsions that came with freedom. Written with eloquence, teeming with evidence, comprehensive in its sweep, challenging in its conclusions, *Bound in Wedlock* is a momentous achievement. (Sydney Nathans, author of *A Mind to Stay: White Plantation, Black Homeland*) Tera Hunter's fascinating and intensive assessment of slave and free marriages in the nineteenth century details powerfully both the supreme importance of kinship relations and the complex ways that the persistence of post-Civil War white supremacy vexed and hampered African American family integrity even more directly than legacies of slavery did. (Nancy F. Cott, author of *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*) *Bound in Wedlock* is a groundbreaking history that challenges the belief that the crisis of black marital and familial relations can be traced directly to slavery. With a vast arsenal of archival evidence, Hunter illuminates the complex and flexible character of black intimacy and kinship and the precariousness of marriage in the context of racial and economic inequality. It is a brilliant book and one destined to invite vigorous debate. (Saidiya Hartman, author of *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*) *Bound in Wedlock* demonstrates that the history of African American marriage is far more than a legacy of slavery. Instead, it is a story at once rooted in a distinctive collective experience, intensely personal, and at the same time bound up in the legal, social, and cultural transformations that re-made marriage for all Americans. Wide-ranging, learned, and deeply researched, it is a splendid accomplishment. (Dylan C. Penningroth, University of California, Berkeley, and the American Bar Foundation) An important and comprehensive work that is worth reading by all, especially those interested in the affects of slavery on society today. (Amy Lewontin Library Journal (starred review) 2017-04-15)[A] remarkable book... Her powerful, meticulously researched book describes how the grinding demands of slavery, white standards of marriage and the steady retreat from the qualified gains of the Civil War not only posed abiding challenges to African-American families but also inspired in them a tenacious commitment to marriage... Through careful use of difficult legal sources and close reading of slave narratives, ex-slave interviews, government agency reports, congressional debates, pension records and church minutes, Hunter gives resonant voice to the often illiterate people she studies... Hunter has harvested stories of human resilience from the cruelest of soils. *Bound in Wedlock* is an impeccably crafted testament to the African-Americans whose ingenuity, steadfast love and hard-nosed determination protected black family life under the most trying of circumstances. (Mark M. Smith Wall Street Journal 2017-06-09) About the Author Tera W. Hunter is Professor of History and African American Studies at Princeton University.