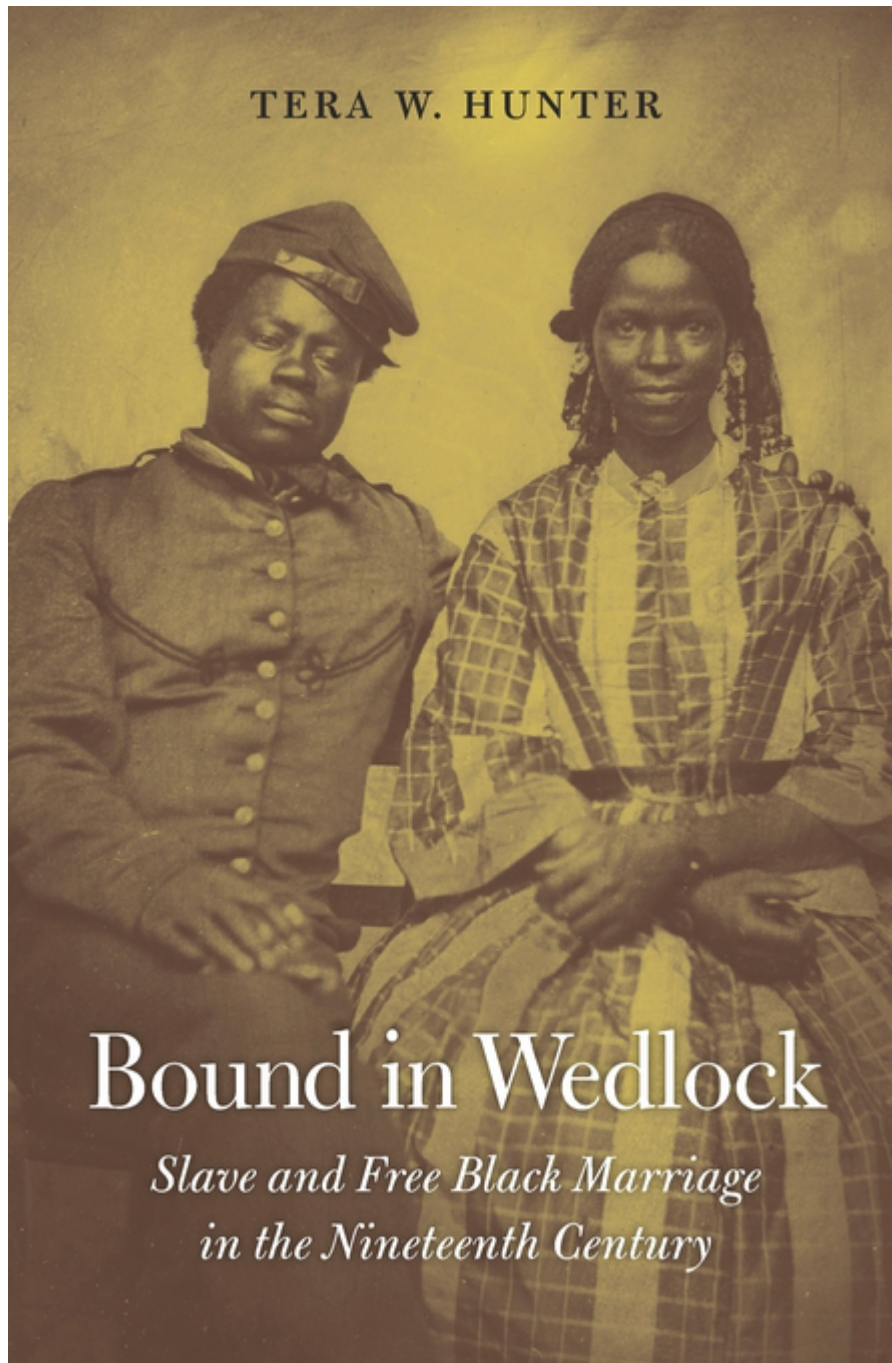
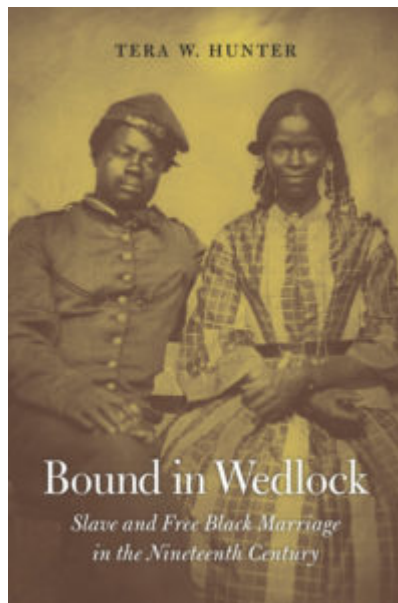


# Marriage under Adversity





Tera W. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017. 416 pp., \$29.95.

As Tera Hunter points out in concluding her meticulously researched, eloquent and accessible book, who can (and cannot) legally marry in any society has always been subject to state sanction via the right to enter wedlock and wider issues of legal citizenship. For example, only in the twenty-first century have same-sex couples been able to marry on the same footing as heterosexual ones. But as well as sexual affiliation, race and ethnicity have shaped the contours of state policies on wedlock, largely because of the exclusionary ethnic barriers to legal citizenship in the United States. Hunter explores these contentious issues through the prism of black marriages over the course of the nineteenth century. This chronological spread is one of this impressive book's strengths. Only by tracking wedlock through slavery, the Civil War, emancipation, Reconstruction, and then the era of Jim Crow segregation, can we fully understand how the nature of black marriage changed over time. In addition to her chronological breadth, Hunter also engages with a range of perspectives on nineteenth-century black marriage. She includes the views of enslaved and formerly enslaved people themselves, notwithstanding the methodological challenges posed by a limited source base. She explores a large amount of legal evidence and official policies related to marriage at both the federal and state level. As such, Hunter successfully integrates disparate historiographical strands of social, political and legal history. This is a real achievement in itself.

The introduction sets out the book's main themes. Marriage under slavery ultimately depended upon the will of slaveholders, but despite the association of wedlock with liberation in the emancipation era, new forms of subjugation via marriage developed in the late nineteenth century. Rather than presenting a positive story of change over time, Hunter argues the opposite—matrimony went from being a source of empowerment to one of containment. Thereafter the

chapters follow a broadly chronological format, but her structure also cleverly weaves different perspectives and themes into each chapter—some focus more on the social history of African Americans, others on legislative debates about black marriage by the white men working in state and federal government. However, the chapter titles, taken from primary evidence, are unclear and give little indication about what the overall focus of each chapter might be.

Chapter one considers the nature of enslaved marriage. Although not sanctioned by law, slaves entered a number of different intimate relationships, including the more casual “taking up” with another and entering trial marriages. Some lived with their spouses while others lived on different plantations. Fluidity was important for these relationships because white slaveholders separated couples, sexually violated enslaved women, and occasionally forced intimate relationships between enslaved people. Chapter two takes a different angle on the same era, considering the various legal barriers to enslaved marriage. Hunter traces the origins of these legal debates in the colonial era and explains that by antebellum times, decisions about slaves’ intimate relationships were ultimately left to individual slaveholders. Thus, slave marriage became tautological—neither prohibited nor legally possible but a recognized custom. In her third chapter, Hunter shifts thematic focus again—this time to consider the marriages of free people of color, focusing mostly on the South. Over time it became harder for these people to gain their freedom, but also to marry enslaved people or each other. Nevertheless, marriage was a tool by which free black people sought to control their own lives, sometimes through “nominal” or “voluntary” forms of enslavement.

The Civil War was a watershed moment in African American marriage, since only with freedom could people legally wed. In her fourth chapter Hunter provides detailed evidence about how and why those formerly enslaved people legitimized their unions with federal officials. She argues the conflict complicated family formations yet further—some were broken by war and some were unexpectedly reunited by it. Hunter concurs with the views of other historians that the federal government expected a “breadwinner ideal” within Union camps, and she notes that the move to legal marriage created new gendered hierarchies for women. Chapter five switches perspective again to policymakers’ debates over black marriage in this era. Unsurprisingly, arguments about these marriages could be contradictory. Hunter includes a lot of evidence here, even if her conclusions—that legislators privileged freedmen over freedwomen—are not highly original but rather supportive of the views of others.

The final three chapters explore African American marriage after emancipation, with the sixth focusing on the Reconstruction era. Here, Hunter again stresses the fluidity of freedpeople’s intimate relationships, arguing that they existed on a continuum ranging from more informal patterns of “taking up” through legal marriage itself. Importantly, such flexible and adaptable family formations were not simply a legacy of slavery, but rather a response to wider power structures and gendered norms. Chapter seven reaches similar conclusions, showing how the Freedmen’s Bureau helped to establish a structure for legal

marriage, albeit one dependent on a breadwinner ideal that African Americans were both unfamiliar with and found impossible due to racial discrimination, the emergence of sharecropping, and the necessity of women's paid laboring. These chapters contain a wealth of evidence, including, for example, some very detailed analysis of individual family trees, and the debates and legislative measures of individual states about black marriage. Longer-term trends in marriage patterns are traced in chapter eight and the epilogue, which also compare black and white marriage rates. Ultimately, economic and emotional needs, along with demographic patterns, have shaped African American wedlock in various ways, and black marriage remained complicated and fluid by the century's end. Moreover, for women, marriage could often be a double-edged sword.

Although this book is already broad in terms of its chronology and the way in which it covers the marriages of those both enslaved and free, more weight might have been given to the lives of African Americans in the North, who receive rather scant attention here. The book would also have benefited from the occasional point of comparison with other groups of people with contentious relationships to legal marriage—for example, Native Americans or Asian immigrants. Finally, and understandably considering available evidence, Hunter's book explores only heterosexual relationships so is heteronormative in scope. Nevertheless, since Hunter argues that black marriages were both fluid and diverse, it is a shame not to see more discussion on how same-sex intimate relationships might have taken place.

Some of the book covers well-trodden ground, for example in the historiographical section of the introduction, and at certain points in the individual chapters where Hunter moves away from the more immediate focus on intimate relationships to instead track broader economic and social changes. There are sometimes poignant images dotted throughout the book, which concludes with an important and passionate polemic about the relationship between economic inequality and declining rates of African American marriage. Sadly, Hunter argues, marriage is now a privilege of affluence rather than a strategy for survival. It is an aspiration (309). This timely piece of work reminds us that the rights we sometimes take for granted have not always been available to all.

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