

This piece by our symposium participant, Tera Hunter, Professor of History and African-American Studies at Princeton appeared as an op-ed in a recent NY Times.

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Putting an Antebellum Myth to Rest

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WAS slavery an idyllic world of stable families headed by married parents? The recent controversy over “**The Marriage Vow**,” a document endorsed by the Republican presidential candidates Michele Bachmann and Rick Santorum, might seem like just another example of how racial politics and historical ignorance are perennial features of the election cycle.

The vow, which included the assertion that “a child born into slavery in 1860 was more likely to be raised by his mother and father in a two-parent household than was an African-American baby born after the election of the USA’s first African-American President,” was amended after the outrage it stirred.

However, this was not a harmless gaffe; it represents a resurfacing of a pro-slavery view of “family values” that was prevalent in the decades before the Civil War. The resurrection of this idea has particular resonance now, because it was 150 years ago, soon after the war began, that the government started to respect the dignity of slave families. Slaves did not live in independent “households”; they lived under the auspices of masters who controlled the terms of their most intimate relationships.

Back in 1860, marriage was a civil right and a legal contract, available only to free people. Male slaves had no paternal rights and female slaves were recognized as mothers only to the extent that their status doomed their children’s fate to servitude in perpetuity. To be sure, most slaves did all that they could to protect, sustain and nurture their loved ones. Freedom and

the love of family are the most abiding themes that dominate the hundreds of published narratives written by former slaves.

Though slaves could not marry legally, they were allowed to do so by custom with the permission of their owners — and most did. But the wedding vows they recited promised not “until death do us part,” but “until distance” — or, as one black minister bluntly put it, “the white man” — “do us part.” And couples were not entitled to live under the same roof, as each spouse could have a different owner, miles apart. All slaves dealt with the threat of forcible separation; untold numbers experienced it first-hand.

Among the best-known of these stories is that of Henry “Box” Brown, who mailed himself from Richmond, Va., to Philadelphia in 1849 to escape slavery. “No slave husband has any certainty whatever of being able to retain his wife a single hour; neither has any wife any more certainty of her husband,” Brown wrote in his narrative of his escape. “Their fondest affection may be utterly disregarded, and their devoted attachment cruelly ignored at any moment a brutal slave-holder may think fit.”

He had been married for 12 months and was the father of an infant when his wife was sold to a nearby planter. After 12 more years of long-distance marriage, his wife and children were sold out of state, sundering their family.

Slave marriages were not granted out of the goodness of “ole massa’s” heart. Rather, they were used as tools to keep slaves in line and to increase profits. Many slaves were forced to marry people they did not choose or to copulate like farm animals — with masters, overseers and fellow slaves.

Abolitionists and ex-slaves publicized excruciating details like these, but the world view of pro-slavery apologists like James Henry Hammond, a senator from South Carolina, could not make sense of motivations like Brown’s. “I believe there are more families among our slaves, who have lived and died together without losing a single member from their circle, except by the process of nature,” than in most modern societies, Hammond claimed. Under the tutelage of warm and loving white patriarchs like himself, slave families enjoyed “constant, uninterrupted communion.”

Hammond's self-serving fantasy world gave way to reality during the Civil War, as slaves escaped in droves to follow in the footsteps of Union Army soldiers. Although President Abraham Lincoln had promised that he would not interfere with slavery in states where it already existed, he and his military commanders were faced with the unforeseen determination of fugitives seeking refuge, freedom and opportunities to aid the war against their masters. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler developed a policy of treating slaves as "contrabands" of war, inadvertently opening the door for many more to flee. In early August 1861, Congress passed the First Confiscation Act, which authorized the army to seize all property, including slaves, used by the rebellious states in the war effort.

"Contrabands" became the first beneficiaries of a government appeal to military officers, clergymen and missionaries to marry couples "under the flag." The Army produced marriage certificates for fugitive slave couples solemnizing their marriages, and giving legitimacy to their children for the first time. But it was not until after slavery was abolished that marriage could be secured as a civil right. Despite resistance from erstwhile Confederates, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which extended the right to make contracts, including the right to marry, to all former slaves.

Why does the ugly resuscitation of the myth of the happy slave family matter? Because it is part of a broad and deliberate amnesia, like the misleading assertion by Sarah Palin that the founders were antislavery and the skipping of the "three-fifths" clause during a Republican reading of the Constitution on the House floor. The oft-repeated historical fictions about black families only prove how politically useful and resilient they continue to be in a so-called post-racial society. Refusing to be honest about how racial inequality has burdened our shared history and continues to shape our society will not get us to that post-racial vision.

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