

Dissertation Abstract

Tyler Parry's dissertation, "Love and Marriage: Domestic Relations and Matrimonial Strategies Among the Enslaved in the Atlantic World" argues that the cultural and sociopolitical dimensions of slave marriage were primary issues for diasporic Africans, abolitionists, and proslavery apologists whose lives were intertwined by the cultural and economic connections that framed the Atlantic World throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Through analyzing the interplay between legislation, cultural practice, and political discourse in the early periods of colonial slavery, Parry shows how matrimonial patterns from Atlantic Africa and Britain were re-imagined by diasporic Africans enslaved in Bermuda, the British West Indies, and colonial North America. Subsequent chapters then illuminate how matrimonial precedents established in these interconnected British territories influenced how both free and enslaved Americans approached the legislative restrictions that characterized slave marriage in the nineteenth-century American South.

While past analyses have addressed the social, cultural, and legal dimensions of slave matrimony in specific regions, Parry contends that slave marriage was imbedded within transatlantic discourses that influenced the cultural and political maneuvers of blacks and whites throughout the British Atlantic. Five of his eight chapters specifically concentrate upon the internal dynamics of slave marital relations, and reveal how African-descended peoples reckoned with the circumstances of slavery by creatively re-imagining ancestral marital practices and appropriating foreign customs in Anglophone slave societies. Additionally, the concepts of gender, class, and sexuality are used as analytical paradigms to explore how the concepts of masculinity, femininity, domesticity,

homosociality, social status, and domestic authority were re-imagined by Atlantic Africans and their descendants in the Americas.

The remaining three chapters examine how British abolitionism in the early nineteenth century impacted slave legislation and reform in North America up to 1865. As British abolitionists gained public support in the early 1800s their actions spurred the simultaneous developments of a more vociferous North American abolitionist movement, as well as a formidable unit of proslavery apologists. Abolitionists cited the rupture of slaves' domestic relations as the most abhorrent feature of the slave regime, while slavery's apologists cited examples of lavish slave weddings to demonstrate their supposed paternalistic approach toward enslaved laborers. As slave societies crumbled around them, white southerners followed previous examples established by British reformers in proposing that slaves' marital unions be legalized, hoping that this maneuver would promote the system's survival by making it more palatable to both American and international critics. While the reforms were largely ineffective in curtailing the master's authority, the appeal to the marital contract as a remedy for slaves' circumstances is highly suggestive of the subject's importance throughout the nineteenth century.

For multiple generations slaves who were ensnared within Anglophone slavery survived multiple events that violated their marital rights, such the passage from Atlantic Africa to the Americas; Caribbean sugar production; internal slave trades; and the turbulence of warfare. These multifaceted examples plainly reveal the violence done to slaves' domestic relations, and in turn prompt a single, critical question: What does "marriage" mean to people who are unable to access a legally-recognized domestic relationship?