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“Us never had no big funerals or weddin’s on de place”: Ritualizing Black Family in the Wake of Freedom

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Introduction:

Searching back over the long arc of her life, Dora Franks was clear in her complaints about her life in antebellum rural Alabama and Mississippi—enslaved people were not allowed to create, celebrate, legalize, protect or ritualize family life. According to her, there were few ritualized events that signified, for most, the beginning and end, or even the existence of kinship ties. "Us never had no big fun'als or weddin's on de place,” she noted. “Didn' have no marryin' o' any kin'. Folks in dem days jus' sorter hitched up together an' call deyse'ves man an' wife.”

On the surface, Dora Frank’s observations do not appear to be correct, or at least not generally applicable. With regard to marriage, for example, certainly some enslaved blacks “jumped the broom” and some even had elaborate weddings. Indeed some of these events will be surveyed in this essay. Still, Franks’ observations does indicate a more profound truth about the social identity of enslaved blacks--none of their weddings signified a legally binding marriage; and few of the designated aspects of their marriage rituals were freely chosen by the participants. There is little doubt that many of those who married, particularly those who did so of their own accord, typically found some meaning, and even joy, in the events that constituted that they were “married.” But no matter how elaborate or cursory the marital ritual, enslaved husbands and wives always were aware of its devastating limitations. For slave masters and mistresses, on the other hand, the

slave marriage ritual, often was a form of entertainment—an imposed minstrelsy--and the beginning of a lucrative procreative design that would regularly produce new enslaved property; rather than some romantic, sacred, binding and life-altering event as ideally expressed in the "free world". After all, it was master and mistress, not the slave couple, who actually held control of the slave's marital bed and its offspring.

This essay explores the marital rituals of black southerners during the postbellum eras of the 19th century as a window into the ways that African Americans marked freedom with public and private ritualized events that designated, and differentiated, their new legal status and individual choices as free men and women. . It points to the legal significance, but also to the psychological, sexual, economic and aesthetic significance.

When no longer a bondswoman, Franks made certain that her new free status included the markers of respectable gendered and familial behavior that had been denied her family when they were enslaved. Two years after the Civil War ended, Dora was pleased to report that she married freedmen Pet Franks. Unlike her mother, who had lived in an unsanctioned, and perhaps unwanted, concubinage relationship with her young master, Dora chose her husband, married legally and bore her children legitimately. She had an elaborate wedding, followed by a "big supper." Her husband Pet, in his own narrative, concurred with Dora's description, noting: "When I was on de Cox place I met Dora an' us married. Dat was a big weddin' an' a big feas'."

Like so many others who struggled to define and live "freedom" after general emancipation in a white South that was bent on denying freedom to blacks at every turn, family life as a free person for Dora and Pete Franks meant, in part, the exercise of legal and public family ceremonies and rituals such as weddings. Unlike those marital performances which had occurred before emancipation, postbellum weddings pronounced to their families, communities and the larger southern world that they too, like the masters who had owned them before, now had a right to legally and publicly claim marital relations, control over the intimate aspects of their bodies, and to bear, take care of, socialize and maintain their children.

As such, freedpersons' perceptions of the importance of legal marriage did not differ substantially from those who had managed to legally gain their freedom before 1865; or those who escaped and forged a freedom for themselves in the nation's free territories, in Canada, Mexico or beyond. Even before general emancipation in 1865 then, blacks who managed to escape their slave status in the largest slave society in the Americas moved forward quickly to legalize their marriages and gain the benefits afforded such legitimacy. Hundreds of thousands, if not more, couples who had been married while enslaved, or wanted to marry after slavery ended, did not hesitate to participate in legally binding nuptials. To do so drew a line between slavery and freedom.

Legalized wedding rituals also clearly meant an ability to express personal choice as well as reunite dispersed families and kinship networks. Equally noteworthy, it was an opportunity for black men and women to openly display African American romantic love and cultural aesthetics. Freedom, after all, also

meant professing one's beauty, talent, emotion and intellect—personal attributes that routinely had been denied, destroyed or exploited under slavery.

Freed People's Marriage Rituals:

After emancipation, many of those who had been married earlier remarried, including in their interviews and autobiographical accounts various levels of detail that indicated the moral, civic and legal importance of their spoken vows and acquisition of official paperwork, but also how they personally, and publicly, expressed love, romance, their physical beauty, and their fashion and culinary preferences. It all occurred against the backdrop of changing legal and cultural landscape that defined black domestic life in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction South.

The federal government implemented policies, primarily through military officials and especially the Freedmen's Bureau, that were supposed to regularize the marriage status of the newly freed in accordance with the ideas, and mostly the ideals, of Christian citizens. Freedmen bureau officials, along with northern freedmen aid and missionary societies who came to the South as early as 1861 to assist in the transition from slavery to freedom, were determined that newly freed blacks should take on the marital constructs to create nuclear, patriarchal families that would project images of a new, civilized black citizenry worthy of freedom and participation in the nation's body politic and society. These cultural pressures intensified as the numbers of black churches increased throughout the South and membership required a certain adherence to rules of abstinence outside of marriage

and monogamous marriage. All of these organizations exhorted ex-slaves to try to remain with the spouses and children that they had at the time of their freedom; to abandon multiple liaisons; to seek written, legal documentation, in the form of marriage licenses and certificates, of their marital state; and to live peaceably as husband and wife under one roof, all working for the support and success of family members. Postbellum southern state legislators, via their constitutional conventions and lawmaking abilities, also weighed in on creating rules and regulations to validate, and control, the institution of black marriage.

Among this confusing, complicated and sometimes conflicting patchwork of "instructions" from various sources, most freed couples sought legitimacy for their relationships and the children that had been, and would be, born of them. While some continued to "jump the broom" even after freedom, and others across the South, like Malindy Maxwell's parents, who had been married while enslaved, were told that their original "marriage would stand long as ever he lived," it was not unusual for newly freed couples, anxious to legalize their marriage relations, to participate in group, or even mass, marriages that occurred at military camps, at churches, at the homes of clergy, in freedmen bureau offices, and in district court houses. Tens of thousands, and perhaps more, were legally joined in matrimony at these sites and under these conditions. Charlotte Forten, while teaching among the freedmen on St. Helena Island, South Carolina under the auspices of the Port Royal Relief Association, displayed some of the typical "Yankee" cultural snobbery when she noted in her diary on November 23, 1863 that:

> Six couples were married to-day. Some of the dresses were unique. Am sure one must have worn a cast-off dress of her mistreses's. It looks like white silk

covered with lace. The lace sleeves, and other trimmings were in rather a decayed state and the white cotton gloves were well ventilated. But the bride looked none the less happy for that. Only one had the slightest claim to good looks, and she was a demure little thing with a neat, plain silk dress on. T'was amusing to see some of the headdresses. One, . . , was very ridiculous. But no matter for that. I am truly glad the poor creatures are trying to live right and virtuous lives."

The recently freed were not at all put off by "amused" outsiders or irate former masters who resented blacks "putting on airs" and "mimicking" their "betters". Freedpeople went right to the point of why they chose to remarry: "My mother married at Thomas Pope's place, and he had old man Ned Pearson marry 'em. After de war many . . . married over agin, 'cause dey didn't know if de first marriage was good or not." Charlie Davis explained in similar fashion: "My mammy and daddy got married after freedom, 'cause they didn't git de time for a weddin' befo'. They called deirselves man and wife a long time befo' they was really married." Willis Dukes wanted to be clear about the legitimacy of his postbellum marriage, noting: "We didn't jump over no broom neither. We was married like white folks wid flowers and cake and everything." As far as Dukes was concerned, because he and his bride shared the same marital rituals as whites—their marriage had to be legitimate. Former slave Gus Clark also was clear: "I'se had three wives. I didn't have no weddin's, but I mar'ied 'em 'cordin to law. I woan stay with one no other way. My fust two wives is dead." Mildred Graves recalled that as a slave, her mistress had given her a cast off dress and she "stepped over de broomstick," but "Arter de war we had a real sho' nuff weddin' wid a preacher. Dat cost a dollar." Mary Reynolds, who also had been married by

stepping across the broom noted: "After freedom I git married and have it put in the book by the Preacher." Mary Biddy added that, soon after emancipation: "A big supper was given, it was early, about twenty-five slave couples attended. There was gaiety and laughter. A barrel of lemonade was served. A big time was had by all, then those couples who desired to remain together were joined in wedlock according to civil custom. The party broke up in the early hours of the morning."

Those who decided, or had the ability, to marry as individual couples, brought serious thought and planning to the manifestations of their marital bonds. Clothing, food, location, audience, their vows, the license, the celebrant, and the dance party were all important items to consider. These preparations also suggest the communal efforts and ties, black and white, that shaped black life in the first decades after slavery ended.

Both freed men and women believed that the clothing that they wore when they married were important indicators of their new status as free people who had the right to commit themselves to a legally binding and/or God ordained union. For women, it also was the opportunity of a lifetime to show off their physical beauty and proclaim their moral purity, two images that stood in stark contrast to popular white ideas of black womanhood as morally debased and physically unappealing.

Not surprisingly, even decades after their weddings, freed women spoke lovingly of their bridal dresses. Some of them were long and white; and many

brides wore white veils as well—symbols of moral and sexual purity. Molly Horn, recounted that, "Mama bought me a pure white veil. I was dressed all in white." So too was Mandy Hadnot who explained that she "had purty long, black hair and a veil with a ribbon 'round de fron.'" Nellie Smith was delighted to give the details of her first wedding, especially her attire: "I wore a white dress made with a tight-fittin' waist and a long, full skirt that was jus' covered with ruffles. My sleeves was tight at the wrists but puffed at the shoulders, and my long veil of white net was fastened to my head with pretty flowers. I was a mighty dressed up bride." Nellie wore a "very pretty, plain, white dress" when she married the second time. Liza Jones wore a "white Tarleton dress with de white Tarleton wig." These, Liza explained, were signs "you ain't never done no wrong sin and gwinter keep bein' good."

Other colors and styles for bridal wear also prevailed—attitudes of fashion determined by age, generation, previous marital status, locale, religious beliefs, and financial status. Less elaborate bridal clothing, no doubt, indicated operative class distinctions--most certainly could not afford Liza Jones' "Tarleton" look. Still, the relative "finery" of a woman's wedding ensemble allowed her to claim a physical beauty, femininity and moral character denied in slavery. Josephine Anderson recalled that her wedding dress was blue, "blue for true," she explained. "I thought it was the prettiest dress I ever see." "I ain't never seed nothin' lak dat pretty flowerdy weddin' dress dat I wore and I had de prettiest hat and things dat I ever seed." Julia Larken, whose financial resources, no doubt probably were more

typical of freedwomen, wore a "new calico dress." Nettie McCree wore a "black silk dress . . . . [That] had a overskirt of blue that was scalloped 'round de bottom." The dress I married in was red silk," Susan MacIntosh of Georgia indicated. For most, their wedding dress was the most beautiful they ever owned. Some even planned to be buried in theirs.

Wedding attire was so important that brides rarely refused assistance in acquiring the various items needed for their presentation/transformation. They reached out to former mistresses, current employers, kin and grooms for help. Lula Taylor's father, for example, purchased all of his wife's wedding clothing. Bunny Bond recalled that the woman she was keeping house for at the time, gave her a "nice white silk dress," while her previous owner "lent" her "one of her chemisette, a corset cover, and a dress that had ruffles around the bottom. It was wide." Bunny borrowed a used veil from a freedwoman associate. Harriet Jones wore one of her former mistress' dresses, "red stockin's and a pair of brand new shoes and a wide brim hat," when she married Bill Jones the year after freedom. Betty Curlett's employer, who also was the white woman who raised her, made her wedding dress.

Freedwomen brides indicated, in the assemblage of clothing that they wore on this most special day, who were operative members of their communities and kinship networks as freed people. The necessity to beg, borrow and, in some instances, steal wedding clothing also suggest the precarious economic status of freed women, many of whom could not afford, on their own, this special clothing.

(Grooms sometimes found themselves in the same predicament.) Some of this activity indicates as well the fledgling economic relations between working southern white and black women at the time when fledgling local economies were a burden for both. Susan MacIntosh, for example, bought her clothing second hand from a local white woman, Mrs. Ed. Bon. A local white seamstress whom Nettie patronized, Miss Blanche Rutherford, for example, gave the white silk gloves that Nettie McCree wore at her wedding, to her.

Grooms also placed great importance on their wedding attire. Dressing for their wedding afforded them the chance to doff their work clothes and take on the look of sophisticated gentlemen, in striking contrast to 19th century racist stereotypes of freedmen being beastlike in manners, intelligence, appearance and appetite.

Ike Derricotte sported a Prince Albert coat that he was so proud of that he intended his children to inherit it. Sam Bond wore a tie, white vest, a watch and gold chain, all borrowed from a local attorney, Mr. Rollwage. Nellie Smith's bridegroom stood at the altar in a "real dark-colored cutaway coat with a white vest." Julia Larken's private wedding afforded Matthew, her groom, the opportunity to dress much less formally. Given the expense of formal wear, and the inability to acquire formal wear in the rural countryside, Matthew's dress probably was more typical. According to his bride, he "wore some new blue jeans breeches."

Private ceremonies, like that of Julia and Matthew Larken, usually included the couple, kinfolk, a few close friends, and sometimes employers, gathering at the

courthouse, at a preacher's home or at the bride's residence or that of a boss or former owner. Josephine Anderson was married at a local courthouse. Laura Thornton recalled that she had a marriage license and was married by the local justice of the peace. "I was married right at home where me and my old man stayed. Wasn't nobody there but me and him and another man named Dr. Bryant," she explained. Betty Curlett had a minister marry her in her home. A minister in the local Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church married Sylvia Durant. Ministers could be black or white, depending on the communal and/or church/religious service affiliations of the couple.

A local black preacher, Elder Williams, married Fannie Berry, but her wedding hardly was a "private affair." Fanny was not the type of freedwoman to perform any important ritual quietly or privately. She boldly splashed her free status, and the symbol of her new respectability and legitimacy for the entire community, black and white, to see. Fannie held her wedding at night at a white employer's house, and was waited on by two white female friends who accompanied her down the aisle with lighted lanterns. Most of those in attendance at the wedding, and her reception, were black, although Fannie credited her white employers with providing the food and the space for the party. "After marriage de white folks give me a 'ception'," Fannie explained delightedly. "An', honey, talkin' 'bout a table—hit wuz stretched clean 'cross de dinin' room. We had everythin' to eat you could call for. No, didn't have no common eats. We could sing in dar, an' dance ol' squar' dance all us choosed, ha! ha! ha! Lord! Lord! I can see dem gals now

on dat flo'; jes skippin' an' a trottin'. An' honey, dar wuz no white folks to set down an' eat 'fo yo'."

Harriet Jones also recalled with great detail her large, celebratory wedding and the vows that she and her husband took before a biracial crowd under a large elm tree. Her wedding was officiated by a local minister. Two flower girls held her gown's train. Bill gave Harriet a gold ring, a ritualistic luxury item, ripe with multiple public declarations of the couple's unending circle of love; Bill's ability to support his wife and future family; and of the great value Harriet was to her husband. At the end of their ceremony, the happy couple was regaled with a beautifully set table covered by a white cloth and decorated with red berries, provided by Harriet's former mistress. They feasted on "barbecue pig and roast sweet 'taters and dumplin's and pies and cake." After dinner, the wedding party, led by the bride and groom, paraded to "Marse Watson's saddleshop to dance and dance all night."

Ceremonies and receptions, of course, were integral parts of freed persons wedding rituals. Being able to have a legitimate marriage and the rights that it signified were more than ample reasons to celebrate. Night weddings, like Fannie Berry's, were somewhat popular. Molly Horn also married at night. She "borrowed lamps and had em settin' about." Like Fannie, as well, Molly had a sumptuous wedding meal—"roast pork, goose and all sorter pies," along with several cakes. Former slave woman Harriet Gresham grandly married a member of the Company I, 35th Regiment at a military headquarters. Martha Colquitt, who had a "big weddin"

at her sister's house, had two "fine dinners"—one given by her family, and the other by her husband's family, with the help of his former employers. Alex Pope recalled that he 'had a awful big weddin' de fust time. . . Us drunk and et and danced and cut de buc most all night long." Even Pope's white neighbor was impressed, commenting that "he never seed sich a weddin' in his life."

Most receptions, undoubtedly, were much more modest and, like those significantly less elaborate wedding clothes and locations, suggested the class differences found among southern freed people derived from diverse levels of access to the southern economy as a result of varying skill and educational levels, the ability to acquire land, tools and work animals, an operative color hierarchy, and the opportunity to take advantage of white patronage. Most certainly could not afford elaborate rituals. Sylvia Durant, noted that after her marriage ceremony, she, like Susan MacIntosh, had "nothing but pound cake en wine."

Wedding cakes, which symbolized the sweetness of the love and commitment between the couple, were particularly important ritual food objects. They were usual fare, even for the most routine marital celebrations. A favorite was a yellow cake with white icing that had the engagement ring baked inside. Nellie Smith, from Athens, Georgia, bragged of her special dessert: "I think my weddin' cake was 'bout the biggest one I ever saw baked in one of them old ovens in the open fireplace. They iced it in white and decorated it with grapes."

Fannie Berry hardly was the only former slave who accepted whose wedding was subsidized by white employers or associates. Those whites who offered assistance usually were long time associates, often stretching back to the slave era.

Their help suggested how involved white owners/employers remained in the personal lives of the blacks they employed. This seeming act of generosity often hid the continued financial exploitation whites imposed on black laborers, leaving them little financial ability to finance their own weddings or to create new, separate households.

Henry Davis recalled that both he and his bride's employers (who had been their owners before Emancipation) encouraged them to have a large wedding. Not only did they help with the wedding cost and arrangements, they also provided them with gifts to prepare Henry's new household. "Her white folks give her a trousseau," Henry explained, "and mine give me a bedstead, cotton mattress, and two feather pillows." Molly Horn relied on a local white woman's help for both her wedding and reception. Likewise, Walter Cain and his bride married at "Mr. Walther Spearman's house, a good white man" and "the white folks give us a good supper after the wedding." So too did Sam Davis' white "folks." Louisa, Sam's wife, had to complain, however that the cost of their white patronage was irritating—"they sho' did tease Sam dat day," she recounted. One former enslaved women felt so obliged to her employer for helping her with her wedding costs that she put off leaving immediately with her husband. "Ole mistus cry so when I hafter leave dat I stay for three weeks after I marry," she explained. The white assistance lent to former slaves and newly freed persons, who were determined to legitimate their marital bonds, sometimes could have an unwanted effect, allowing these same whites to tighten their hold on black laborers and their families.

Conclusion:

Former enslaved men and women entered their postbellum lives with diverse ideas and ideals of freedom. Most significant for many was the opportunity to have families beyond the abusive reach of former masters and the state that had supported the slave regime. To be free meant to have a legitimate social identity that permitted legal marriages and, through those marriages, parental and patriarch rights meant to support and protect freedwomen and children. Freedom, as such, meant taking on the mantle of respectable and respected man and womanhood and its gendered connotations, symbolized, in part, by the ritualization of marriage. Wedding clothing was supposed to publicly, and privately, transform the stereotypical image of the beastly, uncouth, simple slave male to that of the proper, if not stately, man ready to lead and support his family and to participate as an equal in southern civic society. Likewise, wedding gowns, gloves, veils and other finery, often in white, were meant to establish the physical beauty, virginal purity, moral character and maternal nature of black womanhood, so maligned and savaged by their rampant physical, psychological and sexual abuse as slaves. The ministers, judges, and generals who pronounced freed people's nuptials, handed out marriage licenses and certificates, or recorded the events in bibles and official rosters, helped document a new, and novel, "legitimate" freed black social identity. Wedding feasts and dances underscored the social importance of marriage and reaffirmed familial and communal ties in the black populace, even while distinctions in the actual details of the wedding (size, costs, costumes, gifts received, location and even cultural items chosen to ritualize) may have helped to affirm new, or preexisting,

class and cultural differentiations. The participation of whites in freed persons marriage rituals were reminders of the lingering economic marginality freed men and women. All in all, however, legal marriages, and the rituals that initiated them, were a bright spot in the lives of those free persons after the Civil War struggling against the overwhelming tide of popular southern white determination to deny black citizenship, respectability, political, economic, cultural and parental autonomy, masculinity, femininity and humanity.