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MAPPING MORAL TREASON: ADULTEROUS COHABITATION WITHIN BLACK UNION WIDOW PENSIONS

Camille Borders

Mentor: Iver Bernstein

Denied widows pensions from the Civil War provide insight into the early welfare state as a regime that policed and surveilled black women's intimate lives. After emancipation, black women built intimate relationships which allowed for community growth. Representing a threat to patriarchal hegemony, these African-American households, including the popularity of flourishing fictive kinships structures, represented deviance in contrast to a normative nuclear heterosexual family structure. During emancipation, the Pensions Bureau criminalized adulterous co-habitation as a high stake moral infraction which tied black women's access to citizenship to their sexuality and their husbands. In response to invasive pension laws widows utilized techniques of diversion, distraction, creative storytelling, and active community action to limit the surveillance and access of the Pension Bureau to their intimate life. These tactics were deployed during special examinations and allowed freedwomen to glimpse relationships based on new forms of advocacy and allegiance. Ultimately, these high-stakes negotiations over material survival began a legacy, in which black women's intimate lives have been the price for citizenship and government benefits. Modern understandings of the Welfare Queen can be traced to the stories and actions of Black Union Widows in the nineteenth century.