{essays in history}

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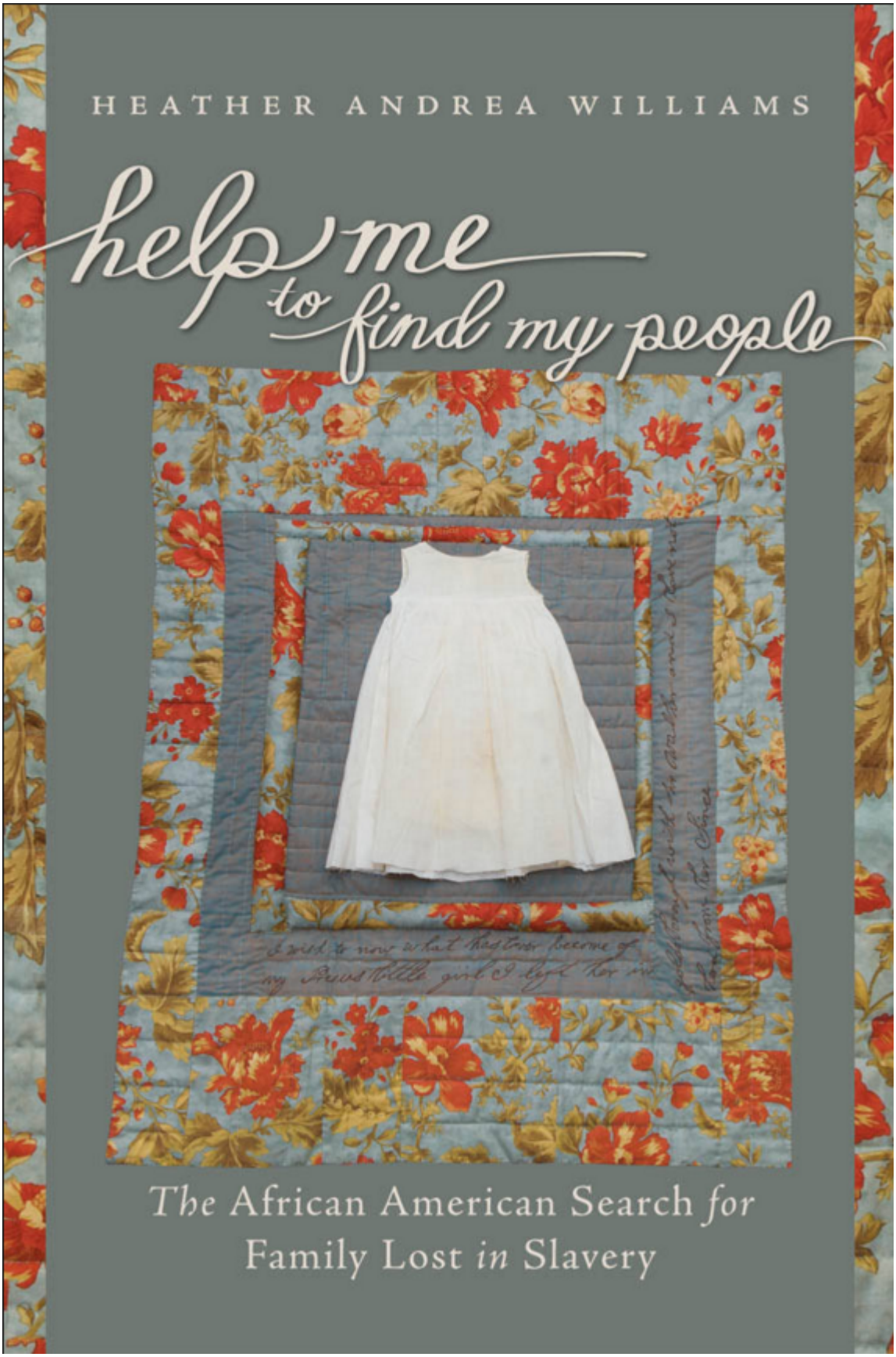
Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery



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Reviewed Work(s)

Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery. By Heather Andrea Williams (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012). Pp. 264. Cloth, $30.00.

In *Help Me to Find My People*, historian Heather Williams describes the pain and hope experienced by the enslaved and the emancipated as they confronted the loss of family in the nineteenth-century United States. Williams traces the history of the separation of American-American families and the subsequent quest of individuals to find their own family members in the legal and social context of American slavery. The genius of her work is to provide a narrative of emotion as a way to paint a vivid image of the long-term impact of slavery, and to challenge our own notions of how family is defined and what constitutes grief.

In *Help Me to Find My People*, the reader encounters the separation of family members and the hope for reunion over time. The book is divided into three parts: separation in the antebellum world, the search to reunite the family during slavery and after emancipation, and reunification. The first section on separation deals with the separation among slave children, the separation of spouses, and white attitudes toward slave separation. Williams ties together the poignancy of loss and the treacherous road to healing. The section, on searching for family members, explores the desperate hope that slaves and former slaves felt, hoping to be reunited through messages, in heaven, or more immediately, in person. The final part of the book, on reunification, describes the details of how some families were able to be reunited, but Williams emphasizes the depth of the loss that can never be restored even when hopes for reunion are realized. In this light, slavery becomes more than an economic or a moral system; it also exacted a steep price on social relationships, on emotions, and on faith.

Williams argues that while slaves often lacked the power to overturn the system of slavery and made the most of the circumstances meted out to them, they internalized their losses in profound ways that impacted their lives and left tangible legacies for future generations. She uses fairly traditional sources: narratives by former slaves, letters written by or on behalf of African Americans, newspaper ads, music and works of fiction.

While these sources are often read as stories of power and control, racial ideas, economic interests, or cultural artifacts, Williams demonstrates that they also capture the raw emotion embedded in the experience of slavery and freedom for both blacks and whites.

Help Me to Find My People responds to a complicated historiography on American slavery. Early twentieth century interpretations of slavery as a Christian project to civilize a barbarous people or a cruel system that dulled the emotions of those involved has been largely overturned. However, Williams challenges more recent works that focus on the agency of the enslaved and emphasize the importance of the slave's nuclear family, arguing that emotional motivations for behavior may reveal more of the tensions inherent in slavery. By tracing the hope and despair among freed people to recover families torn apart under slavery, she complicates the narrative that slavery ended in 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation or in 1865 with the fall of the Confederacy. Rather, aftershocks of slavery continued to haunt the postbellum world as freedmen and freewoman yearned to restore families they remembered from an irrecoverable past.

Williams' work reminds us that the tragedy of slavery is not simply the cruelty of certain masters or the unfairness of one man profiting from the labor of another. The very notion that slaves were always vulnerable to change, disruption, and loss contradicts the claim that there were better forms of slavery. In exposing post-emancipation references to the "wife of my youth" and "my real mammy," the cruelty of slavery becomes more about the ways in which it could arbitrarily rob people of their identity and their heart for no reason other than the whims of others. One might also wonder what the experience of isolation would mean to men and women enslaved in smaller enterprises. The ways in which slavery hindered people from creating their own family must also have a legacy, one that has yet to be explored.

Help Me to Find My People suggests the potential of modern historiography to bring to light the nuanced emotions and pain felt by enslaved and formerly enslaved people. Williams argues that the shared experiences of loss, grief, and the hope of reunion brought freed people together; even if their hopes of recovering blood family members were never met, the experience in and of itself made them a "people". While Williams' book is principally about African American families and the

long legacy of slavery, her study is pertinent to any who study groups of displaced persons or the long-lasting effects that war, crime, disease, and natural disasters can have on families and relationships. It serves as an example of the ways in which the irrecoverable past, even with its emotions, is hidden in the evidence that remains all around us. It makes possible further work on families, further studies of victims of similar disruptions, or even the comparison of efforts to reunite displaced Civil War veterans to that of former slaves and their families. Above all, it points to the universal human experience of loss and hope, the need for healing and the desire for restoration.

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