

Mary Todd Lincoln, President Abraham Lincoln's wife, was involuntarily committed to a state mental hospital in 1875 – ten years after her husband's assassination. Her eldest son, Robert had her committed. Seventeen witnesses testified to her insanity; none were called in her defense. But four months later with the help of two new lawyers, Mary Todd earned her release.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, notions of insanity and of madness were intricately linked to the changing conceptions of citizenship as well as to emerging ideas about American democracy. Women were actively seeking suffrage and Black men and women had recently earned their freedom from enslavement; traditional formulations of mental competency for citizenship as well as what it meant to live in a democracy were thus under review. Many women were no longer satisfied with their place in republican motherhood without the right to vote, and those recently freed now sought autonomy without the paternalism of the plantation.

For women, primarily white women, the spiritualist movement gave them access to communication, knowledge, and to a kind of authority exempt from the oversight of their male patriarchs – whether father, husband or even son. And Mary Todd was just such a spiritualist – in fact, she had persuaded even her husband, Abe to attend a few seances so they could communicate with their dead son, Will. But spiritualism was also aligned with madness in the American imagination – it was all gibberish and delusions, so medical men protested. But faithful women persisted and insisted - *God did speak in mysterious ways*. And, apparently, He had quite a bit to say to 19th-century American women.

Similarly, the newly freed slaves with their release from the plantation if not yet entirely from the plantation economy were imagined to be particularly at risk for mental turbulence. Freedom was overwhelming; counter to their nature or so their former masters and white counterparts proclaimed. Black folks needed the banisters of confinement to be sane, they argued. Consequently, many freed slaves, particularly Black men were committed to asylums where they served again the white women who had also been committed for violating the protocols of gender hierarchies.

It is a fascinating and complicated story. And this talk will begin to detail some of the parameters of this complicated matrix of sanity and insanity, of race and gender, and of American traditions and expansions. It is a frontier not only of advancing medical knowledge but also a site for the exercise of political and social power.