

Anastasia Carol Curwood. *Stormy Weather: Middle-Class African American Marriages between the Two World Wars*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xiv + 196 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3434-3.

Reviewed by Tamar W. Carroll (Rochester Institute of Technology)

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## Love and (Gender) Trouble in Interwar African American Marriages

This intriguing exploration of gender politics within middle-class and aspiring middle-class African American marriages during the interwar period began with Anastasia Curwood's discovery of several hundred love letters between her paternal grandparents, composed between 1935 and 1949, documenting their courtship and early years of marriage. Curwood mines the letters for clues into the source of conflict in her grandparents' ultimately tragic relationship, as well as into the social and cultural pressures facing African American couples more broadly, including the ramifications of pervasive racism as well as changing sexual norms and expectations of marriage. For both her grandparents and many other couples, Curwood concludes, divergent understandings of appropriate gender roles created turbulence and misunderstanding between men and women who nonetheless sought to create fulfilling and lasting partnerships that would enhance their own lives and be a credit to their community.

Curwood is particularly interested in the marriages of New Negroes, migrants to the urban North who sought self-definition and racial progress through the structuring of their private lives and through public action. This group of intellectuals, political leaders, professionals, businessmen, and other middle-class-identified African Americans saw marriage as a key site to "improve the standing of the race" by "living up to class and gender role ideals." In practice, this proved "virtually impossible," however, because sexual and marital norms for Americans as a whole changed rapidly during the interwar

years, making these ideals "a moving target" (p. 4). In her first chapter, Curwood examines competing models for ideal African American marriages charted across a wide variety of sources, including literary works, intellectual tracts, and popular culture, particularly black films. She ascertains that in the 1920s and 1930s, for both black and white Americans, sexuality and individual satisfaction became more important within marriage, as birth control became more widely available and accepted and leaders like W. E. B. DuBois supported Margaret Sanger and her belief that women had a right to sexuality apart from procreation. In contrast to Michelle Mitchell's findings about turn-of-the-century African American marriages which emphasized women's chastity, respectability, and race work, Curwood argues that African Americans in the interwar years came to expect sexual pleasure within marriage and elevated romantic love as a goal, while somewhat de-emphasizing racial activism as a component of marriage itself.[1]

While both middle-class African American men and women aspired to romantic unions in which they were sexually and personally fulfilled, they often differed in their ideal of gender roles within marriage. Chapters 2 and 3 explore men and women's writings on marriage, and find that while New Negro men believed wives should play a decidedly supporting role to their husbands, New Negro women sought greater autonomy and independence. To uncover how New Negro men conceptualized their roles as husbands, Curwood focuses on so-

cialists A. Philip Randolph's and Chandler Owen's magazine, the *Messenger*, the writings of sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, and the unpublished journals and correspondence of Harlem Renaissance novelist Jean Toomer. In all three visions "male domination within families remained entrenched" and masculinity was equated with economic and/or emotional authority (p. 58). Randolph, founder and head of the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, endorsed "manhood rights," including a family wage, as a key demand for union workers, and discouraged both middle-class and working-class African American wives from wage work or independent political action, asserting husbands' roles as providers and decision makers (p. 59).

Similarly, Frazier's highly influential studies of African American families "measured the health of African American families" by the degree to which they conformed to a male breadwinner and decision-maker model (p. 61). Frazier, whose scholarship provided the intellectual scaffolding for the important and controversial 1965 Moynihan Report, "pointed to distorted gender relations, disempowered black men, and deviant sexual behavior as legacies of slavery" (p. 62).[2] Frazier's belief in the necessity of patriarchal family structure for the advancement of African Americans was so strong that he had originally titled his 1939 *The Negro Family in the United States* "In the House of the Mother," to indicate the matriarchal (and in his view, deficient) structure of African American families originating in slavery and continuing for some into the twentieth century. Curwood notes that Moynihan took from Frazier the belief that "any family without a male head was deficient" but she does not elaborate on the long-lasting political consequences of this normative judgment, including the ongoing criticism of single mothers as inherently bad parents that helped contribute to President William Clinton's "end of welfare as we know it" and the replacement of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) in 1996 (p. 70).[3]

If Frazier desired for all African Americans to reside in "the House of the Father," novelist Toomer's unpublished draft "To train a woman to be the wife of a genius" appears to be directly specifically towards his own marriage, in which he tried to live out his patriarchal ideals while being financially supported by his wife's inheritance (pp. 66, 174). We don't know what Toomer's wife made of his training (or his genius) but Curwood shows that other New Negro women believed themselves to have responsibilities "to themselves, to their families, and

to their race" and sought fulfillment "both inside and outside the home" (pp. 84-85). African American feminists, such as Amy Jacques Garvey, wife of Marcus Garvey, argued that equality between the sexes was necessary for the advancement of the race. Although they experienced gender-based discrimination, New Negro women such as writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston and economist and lawyer Sadie Alexander through both their words and actions "worked to increase women's share of power for their own good and the good of their race" and "advocated a blending of family, career and self-determination" (p. 107). Some New Negro women, like Alexander, did so within happy marriages, others, like Hurston, struggled to balance their need for autonomy with their husbands' desires for preeminence in the relationship.

The asymmetry in men and women's understandings of appropriate gender roles within marriage could lead to considerable personal strife, as Curwood documents in her final two chapters, which focus on the "intimate negotiations over marital divisions of labor" between several couples, including her grandparents (p. 107). More so than previous scholars of black family life, who have tended to characterize African American families as cooperative partnerships with wives' economic contributions appreciated and accepted, Curwood emphasizes that "wives' work did create real conflict between men and women over their gender roles" (p. 137).[4] Certainly this was the case for her grandparents' marriage, as James clung to a male breadwinner ideal and descended into mental illness and alcoholism, unable financially to achieve the domestic vision he sought and unable to convince Sarah to give up her professional work, which she found meaningful as well as necessary for the family budget.

Curwood's analysis of her grandparents' marriage is poignant and insightful, and makes for the most captivating sections of the book. Curwood also provides counterexamples of other couples who did form cooperative economic and personal partnerships, accomplishing her goal of demonstrating the "heterogeneity of married lives" but making it unclear which experience was more common (p. 163). Furthermore, since Curwood examines a limited number of middle-class marriages and since this is not a longitudinal study, it is hard to know the extent to which conflict over women's work outside the home dominated African American marriages, and whether this varied by class or changed over time. While it is difficult to generalize from a relatively small sample of couples, Curwood makes it clear that this is not her

goal; rather, her close analysis of individual marriages allows Curwood to access her subjects' interior lives, their feelings and emotions, which statistical evidence would not.

Curwood argues that studying individual marriages both reveals the influence of social, political, and cultural structures on intimate life and desire, and, at the same time, "takes us another step away from thinking of black people merely as units of race" (p. 140). Her readings of marriages compellingly demonstrate both the pressures on couples that were specific to their racial identity—especially the intraracial politics of skin color and economic challenges stemming from racial exclusion—and those that are perhaps universal, including lack of time for each other, geographical distance, and infidelity. Curwood sees her greatest contribution as moving beyond the "racial protocols" of scholarship on African Americans which focuses solely on racial politics, and challenging traditions of dissemblance, or the hiding and denying of private emotions among African Americans (p. 7). Along with Danielle McGuire's recent recasting of the civil rights movement as fundamentally rooted in African American women's struggles against white rape and sexual assault, *Stormy Weather* inaugurates a discussion of intimate life among African Americans that is sure to be lively and productive.[5]

#### Notes

[1]. Michelle Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), also

found that for African American reformers in Detroit, female respectability, especially "domesticity, charity, and self-restraint" became less important than male self-defense in the form of "civil rights, unionization, and self-determination" in the 1930s (p. 9).

[2]. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*. (Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965).

[3]. For a critique of the Moynihan Report and the Great Society liberal consensus favoring male breadwinner families, see Marisa Chappell, *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 2010). For a sympathetic account of the Moynihan Report, see James T. Patterson, *Freedom is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle Over Black Family Life—From LBJ to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

[4]. Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985 and 1999); Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); and Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) all emphasize cooperation and an acceptance of women's economic contributions as well as their community work within African American marriages.

[5]. Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2011).

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