

H-Net Reviews

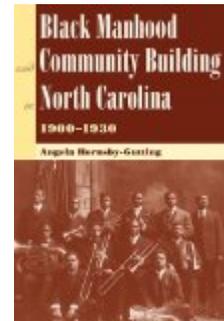
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Angela Hornsby-Gutting. *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina, 1900-1930*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009. xiv + 244 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3293-1.

Reviewed by Franklin Forts (Allegheny College)

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Ambivalent Patriarchs

In 1999 the University Press of Florida began publishing a series under the franchise title, *New Perspectives on the History of the South*, edited by John David Smith, the Charles H. Stone Distinguished Professor of American History at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. The series brings to the study of the American South the dominant explanatory tools used in today's historical research, namely race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Over thirty volumes have been published in the collection to date, many of them interdisciplinary in their approach. Some notable standouts are *Dixie's Daughters: the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (2003), by Karen Cox, one of the first comprehensive examinations of the organization. Another noteworthy volume is *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (2007), by Simon Wendt, which continues a trend in civil rights research that illustrates that black armed self-defense against white racist violence in the American South predates the calls for black self-defense that were defining elements of the Black Power movement. The high quality of this series continues with one of its latest additions, *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina, 1900-1930*, by Angela Hornsby-Gutting.

Professor Hornsby-Gutting's work is a welcome supplement to the historical scholarship on the first half of the Jim Crow era, a period that—until recently—has not received as much attention as slavery and Reconstruction

or the civil rights and Black Power movements. Even C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1956), the seminal study that first examined these seventy-odd years of disenfranchisement and state-sanctioned segregation, was itself a product of the burgeoning civil rights movement. Seeking to answer white supremacist critics of the 1954 Brown decision, Woodward argued that the Jim Crow system was of relatively recent origin and did not have deep roots in southern society.

The contribution of *Strange Career*, though over fifty years old and narrow in its focus, still set the standard of scholarship for these turbulent years. However, since the 1990s many historians have moved beyond the sphere of formal politics as seen in *Strange Career*, in order to broaden our understanding of the period.[1] Their works reveal a more complex and textured period in American history. In accordance with this historiographical turn, Hornsby-Gutting sets out to examine the complex interaction of gender and race during the Jim Crow years in the Tar Heel State. What is unique and refreshing in this work is its starting point. She explores the gender dynamics of what she calls "African-American community building." She uses this phrase to refer to the inward turn of the African American community as it sought communal achievements and racial uplift while struggling with disenfranchisement, racial segregation, and the violence deployed to enforce the new social order. She seeks "to look into the institutional lives of North Carolina's 'best' black men to further illuminate this ongoing narrative

by documenting and comparing black men's activities to that of black women" (p. 3).

Hornsby-Gutting commences her study with the Wilmington race riot of 1898. This violent white backlash, aimed at African American political power and economic achievement, was the culmination of conservative white southern Democrats' violence against African Americans in formal politics. The Wilmington riot was the symbolic and literal end of major African American participation in formal electoral politics in North Carolina until the end of the Second World War. This debarment sets the stage for the key question that guides Hornsby-Gutting's book: after the implementation of Jim Crow, how did black men define and live out the dominant American ideal of manhood in a society that refused to acknowledge black masculinity within the traditional American discursive framework of political and economic autonomy, citizenship, and equality before the law? Her answer is that black men during this period were, if I may coin a phrase, ambivalent patriarchs.

This ambivalence was fueled by two conflicting realities in the lives of black men during the Jim Crow years. On the one hand, Hornsby-Gutting reminds us that black men and women worked together on various projects and programs aimed at community building and racial uplift. This solidarity was based in the legacy of racial oppression and discrimination black men and women had endured since slavery. Yet, there were limits to this cooperation. Black men were also keenly aware of the call to patriarchal manhood that dominated the nation at the time: "Black men's imperative to serve the interests of the whole of black society was complicated by an equally strong impulse to promote a gender consciousness that placed their manhood front and center" (p. 16).

This dialectic is where *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina* offers its strongest and most important contribution to the historical literature on this period. Hornsby-Gutting opens a window into two interlocking systems of oppression: racism and sexism. She does this by examining the cooperative efforts of black women and men in attempts at community uplift and the promotion of racial pride, while at the same time revealing areas of gender conflict and division over the disposition of power and dominance.

"The years 1880–1920 have been hailed as a 'great age of women in politics,'" Hornsby-Gutting reminds us (p. 3). Historians have done a great deal of work to reveal the various social welfare programs and attempts at moral reform led by women at this time. Women staked their

right to engage in the public sphere based on their perceived gifts at moral uplift and innate Victorian virtues. This era of "social housekeeping" helped paved the way for woman's suffrage. Yet, it should be no surprise that this "great age of women in politics" also witnessed a "crisis" in white American manhood. She argues that "The shift from an entrepreneurial economy to a corporate consumer culture that emphasized greed and materialism ... prompted fears among white middle-class men that they were becoming emasculated by feminine appeals for self-restraint" (p. 18)

Out of this social and economic climate of middle-class female activism and white male fears regarding manhood came various movements, programs, and associations to instill into white men what Teddy Roosevelt would call "the virtues of the strenuous life: a life of toil and effort, of labor and strife."² Hornsby-Gutting demonstrates how middle-class black men, like their white counterparts, struggled with these same concerns, all the while seeking to combat Jim Crow wherever they could. All four chapters deal with spheres of influence that were highly contested gendered spaces in the early decades of the last century. Chapter 1 examines conflicts over leadership in the North Carolina Baptist Convention. Chapter 2, looks at the workings of the Asheville Young Man Institute, as well as groups mentoring females as the community sought to imbue the young with a sense of industriousness and respectability. Chapter 3 gives us a peek into the interworking of black fraternal groups and their efforts to carve out a robust masculinity in the face of Jim Crow. Her final chapter looks into black male leadership during public ceremonies of commemoration and celebration connected with state fairs and Emancipation Day events. In each chapter the basic story is the same, a clash between racial solidarity and cooperation that simultaneously reveals tensions over gendered based notions of superiority and inferiority, tensions that arose out of the desire of black men to exercise the trappings of patriarchy over black women.

And here we come to what I will argue is at the heart of all tension between black men and women, and what lies at the core of *Black Manhood and Community Building*. Until black men come to realize that the forces of racism and sexism are inherently linked and see these systems of oppressions as two heads on the one hydra-like body of oppression, tensions over gender will remain in not only the black community, but between men and women in general. One need only look at Hornsby-Gutting's comment on the North Carolina Bap-

tist Convention and the black church: “The black church provided the race with the power to idealize, authenticate and represent itself in opposition to prevailing ideas of white supremacy, white male privilege, and existing racist institutions.... But it also was a place that reinforced codes of social propriety and behaviors among its members by stressing a hierarchy in which men dominated” (p. 23). And to the everlasting shame of the black church, this male domination continues well into our own day.[3]

Black Manhood and Community Building is a good example of the best scholarship on gender. This work reminds the reader that notions of femininity and masculinity are formed in reaction and counterreaction to one another, a Hegelian dialectic, or a Baroque *pas de deux*. A seemingly eternal dance consisting of back-and-forth movements, reactions, and counterreactions, of parries and—forgive the pun—thrusts. Here’s the question *Black Manhood and Community Building* left me with: what if men and women saw themselves first and foremost as human beings, and not as antagonistic gendered beings in constant strife? Would that bring an end to the eternal dance? Now, that’s a thought!

Notes

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[1]. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College Press, 1993); 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); Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[2]. Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1991), 1.

[3]. Africans Americans and American women have made great strides in the political and social realms since the days of Jim Crow and social housekeeping. However, in all the “spheres of influence” examined in this work, only the black church has stubbornly refused to deal with gender equality. This condemnation is not limited to the “African American church.” The same can be said of many “conservative” denominations throughout this country and many places around the world.