

James O. Horton*

Today's conversation reminds me of discussions and debates that we had in the 1970s and 1980s about the state of the black family and the black community. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*¹ described the black family as dysfunctional and the black community as pathologically disorganized. As a result of the Moynihan Report, a cottage industry developed of scholars sprung up, seeking to disprove Moynihan's thesis of chaotic black community life.

These pathologies, Moynihan claimed, were the legacy of slavery. **These pathologies, Moynihan claimed, were the legacy of slavery. His claims were rebutted at length by historians seeking to write a new, more inclusive, history that focused on the lives and experiences ordinary people, a "new social history" as it was called at the time. In the early 1970s, scholars such as John Blasingame, Herbert Gutman, Eugene Genovese, Les Owens, Lawrence Levine and others put their expertise and skills to work to find evidence of a black family tradition that was not pathological, that was not destroyed by the legacy of slavery, and a black community that was both structured and functioning.**²

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The argument blazed for most of the 1970s and well into the 1980s and then disappeared for a while, with the Moynihan thesis in full retreat. By the early 1990s, most scholars agreed that although the black family might not have looked like the middle-class white family in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, it was nevertheless functional and supportive of its members. The fact that the black community could not depend upon the same financial resources and facilities as the white community did not mean that it was unstructured or pathological.

In 1998, Orlando Patterson of Harvard University reopened the discussion in his book, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery for Two American Centuries*. Patterson suggested that scholars might have dismissed Moynihan a bit too quickly, and that there was still a lot more to learn about the problems of black family, the legacy of slavery and the structure of black community. He argued, for example, that black men could not function as husbands and fathers during slavery. He believed that “[a]gainst the Euro-Americans both on and off the plantations and farms, he [the black slave man] could offer his offspring and his partner no security, no status, no name, no identity.” Patterson went on to charge that African Americans have known this to be true but have “[swept] the problem under the rug with talk about not washing dirty linen in public.”³

That statement is an exaggeration. It is true that there is a sensitivity among blacks to the charge that slavery robbed black men of

their manhood, but scholars have not ignored the complicating effect of centuries of bondage on gender roles and consequent gender relationships within the African American community. In 1986, I published an article on black women in black communities in the North before the Civil War that spoke directly to this issue. Later it appeared as a chapter in my 1993 book Free People of Color.⁴ Patterson took note of my work but misunderstood my argument when he said, "As Horton shows, African-American women were systematically excluded from the public sphere of politics and religious leadership by their African-American male counterparts." I focused specifically on the free black community in the antebellum period. Although gender expectations in nineteenth century American society reserved public leadership roles for men, political and economic necessity broadened the public functions of black women far beyond those open to white women. Patterson quoted my statement that "manhood and freedom were tied to personal power which within the household meant power over wives who were expected to be models of feminine rectitude" as evidence for his point that black men, "slavishly modeled gender attitudes on Euro-American bourgeois norms."⁵ But he omitted my qualification of that statement: "Nevertheless, it would be an oversimplification to assume that black women and men simply accepted a nineteenth century male view of female inferiority." I further explained that "[a]t a time when white women were condemned and punished by white men for public speaking and other 'unladylike' activities, the

contributions of black women to abolition and civil rights were encouraged by black men.” I then quoted black men like Martin R. Delany who believed that “[t]he potency and respectability of our nation and our people depend entirely upon the position of our women; therefore, it is essential to our elevation that the female portion of our children be instructed in all the arts and sciences pertaining to the higher civilization.” The point is that African-American men understood that they could not “elevate the race” alone. Regardless of societal gender norms, it would take the efforts of both black women and black men to secure what they often referred to as the manhood of the race.⁶

My official entry into this debate on the structure and function of black family and community came in a 1979 book that Lois Horton and I co-authored, called *Black Bostonians*.⁷ In that study we looked at African Americans in the city of Boston during the years before the Civil War. We wanted to test the Moynihan thesis by examining a time when slavery existed, since he argued that slavery produced a pathology in black family relationships. He also argued that poverty was a major factor in the destruction of a healthy black community and family life. Our study focused on people, many of whom had come directly out of slavery, and most of whom were poor. Our findings surprised us. Whereas Moynihan found that in 1965 twenty-five percent of black households were single-female-headed households, without male presence, in 1820, only 15% of Boston’s black families fit that pattern. Our expanded study that

included eight different northern cities in the antebellum era confirmed our Boston findings. Other northern black communities were also overwhelmingly, two-parent-family communities. In Philadelphia in 1820 only 12% of black families were female-headed and in New York it was 19%.⁸

The number of female-headed households increased in northern cities as the nineteenth century wore on towards the Civil War in the 1860s, as increasing numbers of fugitive slaves escaped to the North, leaving parts of the family behind in the South, and because black men were increasingly forced to travel without their families in search of employment. In seaport cities like Boston and New York, or river front cities like Cincinnati, substantial number of black men found work as seaman or river-boat workers, jobs that took them away from their families for extended periods. But these were the demands of limited employment opportunities, not the signs of the declining value of family life. The family experience of the vast majority of black children remained that of a two-parent family. Of the more than 5,000 black children Lois Horton and I studied in the two decades before the Civil War, almost 2 of every 3 lived in a two-parent family. We also discovered a considerable number of children living in households with adults who were not their biological parents. This practice of taking in children was the community's way of looking after the children when parents were not available. We also found a common practice of taking in boarders,

providing a home for those, especially recent migrants to the community, who had no home of their own. These and other cooperative practices were made necessary by the general poverty of black individuals. They are also unmistakable signs of a healthy and cooperative community.⁹

The idea of a strong and supportive community among black people remains a particularly controversial subject. Patterson agreed with Moynihan's analysis of the pathology of black community life and questioned the historical existence of a well-structured black community. In fact, he referred to notions of a cohesive, supportive black neighborhood as "the myth of the hood." Much of the latest historical research however, strongly suggests that, especially in the black communities of the antebellum North, it was no myth. I was amazed to find the extent to which the black community was organized in Boston and elsewhere in the North during the pre-Civil-War years. Black churches were often the heart of the community, but church activities went well beyond strictly religious matters. Many free blacks used their churches as part of a community based court system. I found a variety of court trials that took place in the churches, during which church elders, members of the congregation, men and women, sat as juries to hear complaints and resolve community disputes. Some of the cases grew out of the fact that by the time of the Civil War, only ten percent of the black population was free, while ninety percent was enslaved in the South. That meant virtually every free black person had a personal

relationship to slavery. The trials in the churches often revolved around the complexity of having part of a family in slavery and the other part of the family in freedom.

In Cincinnati, for example, a man came before one church court seeking permission to marry. He had escaped from Louisiana, and he wanted to marry a free woman living in Cincinnati. His problem was that he already had a wife in Louisiana who was still in slavery. How could he marry a free woman when he had a wife in slavery? The court sitting in the church decided that in order for him to marry the woman in Cincinnati, he had to get a release from his wife. But how could he, a fugitive slave, secure such a release from his wife, who was held in slavery in southern Louisiana? The solution was difficult but very ingenious. The black boatmen who traveled the Ohio River to the Mississippi River and down to New Orleans were often message carriers. He used one of them to get a message to his wife. The boatman brought a reply, reportedly containing enthusiastic support for the husband's request, and the new marriage was approved by the church.

Thus, the church became an important forum for many types of community discussions. Yet, organization went far beyond church-centered activities. There were a variety of formal and informal community centers that served the needs of black people. These were often black businesses doing double duty as community centers. We think of barber shops as places where people get haircuts, but barber shops were also major political forums. These establishments hosted all kinds of

community debates, important political conversations, and organizational planning meetings. Charles Sumner, a Senator from Massachusetts, reported going to black barbershops to assess the political tenor of the black community. When the United States finally decided to enlist African-American troops in the Civil War, and the 54th Regiment out of Massachusetts, the Colored 54th, the Glory Regiment was being formed, many of the men reported going to enlist and then going back to the barber shop to talk about the fact that they had enlisted. One new soldier said, “We went back. Some of us got haircuts, but most of us just got drunk.”¹⁰

The black barbershop may or may not fit the general conception of community organization, but it certainly played a major role in these African American communities. There were other black-operated businesses that provided services beyond those generally assumed. Grocery stores and clothing stores often operated as makeshift banks, making loans and providing credit to those who could not depend on the financial institutions of the wider society. There were also organizations and associations set up to provide for specific needs. **Mutual aid societies, like the African Society in Boston, the Free African Society in Philadelphia, the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society in Newport, Rhodes Island, or the New York African Society provided resources for the poor and the unemployed, for widows and orphans. And there were** drama groups and orchestras and choirs and debating societies. Organizations like these existed not only in black communities in the major cities but in small towns as well. In Oberlin,

Ohio, the black community was well-organized with formal and informal institutions serving its members, providing for the needs that the wider society would not serve.¹¹

Significantly, building these community structures was not a single-sex operation, but one with the participation of both black men and black women. It was interesting to discover that as people built these communities, they described their activities in the masculine language of the nineteenth century. They were clear that there were building these communities to support the “manhood of the race.” When I first heard this term I assumed that these were black men trying to establish their manhood in the way that might be expected, given the Moynihan/Patterson model that places particular stress on the dysfunctional roles of black males. But I found that women also used the term. Women often declared, “We must achieve our manhood,” and when they did, they were using the nineteenth century language of citizenship. Manhood rights were citizenship rights, including voting rights. When black people pressed for their manhood rights, they sought the rights of full citizens. In the eyes of the black community, those rights belonged to the race, not only to men.¹²

Historically, white women, black men, and black women have been limited in their ability to articulate their goals and protest the injustices that they faced in America, not only because of racial and gender prejudice, but also because of assumptions built into the American language. The American language of citizenship is a language of masculinity. Speaking of African-

Americans in a “feminized language” was a strategy of those who would discriminate against, limit, even enslave African-Americans. Pro-slavery advocate and anti-capitalist George Fitzhugh defended bondage as a shelter for the weak. Slavery, he argued, “fostered love between the master and the slave for the same reason that it fostered love between a husband and wife, whereas in the state of independence there was jealous rivalry and hostility.” A father loves his children, Fitzhugh asserted, until they grow to independence. Then he transfers his affection to his grandchildren. A good slave, like a good wife – note the slave-wife comparison in this context - was one who did not become masculine or rebellious. Regardless of gender, this argument would have the good slave display a stereotypical nineteenth century feminine character and he or she, never outgrowing dependence, would thus retain a master’s fondness forever. Those who defended slavery denied that blacks could be men in the nineteenth century sense of the term. The comparison of black men to women and children was part of the equation of black inferiority with the lack of the quality of manhood. While boys would eventually outgrow childhood and dependence, describing slaves as feminine meant they would be in a permanent status of dependence and inferiority.¹³

Even white reformers, friends of African-Americans, frequently accepted the assumptions built into this language. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe described Uncle Tom as the representative African. He was “pure black,” a person of gentleness. “Pure black” slaves were people of a “lowly docility of heart.” Stowe described their “tendency to repose on a

superior mind and rest on a higher power,” their childlike simplicity of affection, and their facility for forgiveness.¹⁴ That paralleled the nineteenth century stereotypical description of women. Uncle Tom became the embodiment of romantic racist notions of what black people were. Ironically, this stereotype was often used to justify the abolitionist zeal of many white northerners, who felt that slavery’s greatest wrong was that it was brutal to the mildest of all races.

Contrast that with the way Stowe described George Harris, the most rebellious slave on the plantation. He was related to “one of the proudest white families in Kentucky.” George was a mulatto who had inherited a fine set of European features and a high indomitable spirit. Unlike Uncle Tom, who resisted slavery only passively, George refused to accept slavery in any form and eventually escaped. Significantly, it was the mulattos of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s fictional plantation who were most likely to run away. Stowe’s plot reflected her belief that should a slave rebellion overtake the South, and I quote her here, “Anglo-Saxon blood will lead on that day.”¹⁵ In other words, if slave rebellion were to come, it would be through the efforts and leadership of mulattos: people moved to action by their white heritage.

Stowe was not the only white reformer to think of black people in feminine terms. Another was Theodore Tilden, probably one of the most steadfast male supporters of the woman’s rights movement in the mid-nineteenth century. He insisted that blacks were “a feminine people.” “In all the intellectual faculties which take their strange quickening from the moral

faculties which we call instincts, intuitions,” he said, “the Negro is superior to the white man and equal to the white woman.” He added that the Negro race is sometimes called the “feminine race of the world.” That, he said, “is not only because of the Negro’s social and affectionate nature but also because he possesses that strange moral, incentive insight that belongs more to women than to men.”¹⁶

Slavery obviously attempted to emasculate black men, but African Americans also recognized that slavery hoped to emasculate black *people*; that is, make it impossible for black people to be citizens in America. In this regard the federal government played a significant role. Before the Civil War, the Supreme Court declared in the *Dred Scott* decision¹⁷ that African-Americans could never be citizens of the United States. That ruling was the law of the land until the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified in 1868. Ironically, the over 200,000 black people who fought for this nation in the Civil War fought as non-citizens.

The Civil War ended slavery and forbade the abridgement of citizenship rights because of race. While these rights could not legally be limited by race, gender remained a bar to full citizenship. Of course, African-American citizenship was all but ignored by the end of the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth century, but for a brief moment during the mid-1860s through the mid-1870s, racial manhood seemed to be at hand. **There was, however, an important complicating factor. Although black people speaking before the Civil War about the manhood of the race had accepted**

the idea that “manhood” knew no specific gender, the Constitution’s Fifteenth Amendment was explicit: manhood rights went only to black men.

Yet black people, and especially black women, continued to regard the newly-won citizenship rights as those of the race. After the war was over, African-American women exercised citizenship rights in almost every way except by casting a ballot. They lobbied, they planned political strategy, and they campaigned. Voting day became a kind of black community festive occasion. In Washington and other places, black women set out picnic lunches and gathered their neighbors at the polling places. They brought large celebrating crowds to what they called “the voting.” Before men went in to vote, they often stood and caucused with black women: what are we voting for? who are we voting for?

There are interesting stories that illustrate the significance of politics as a community venture among African-Americans. In South Carolina, almost all black men were Republicans, as they were in most places in the country. Like their white counterparts, black women routinely attended conventions and meetings. But while white women sat in the balconies and observed the men, black women went down onto the floor to participate in the political debate. Finally one of the white Republican delegates attempted to persuade the black male delegates to “leave their wives at their firesides, or better still, to ‘cut grass’.” The effort apparently was unsuccessful, for black women continued to be active advisers to their male “representatives.”¹⁸

Black women did not remain by the fireside, at least not while the important political meetings were going on. They continued to make significant contributions to the politics of the Reconstruction period. In some cases, they placed great pressure on their men to vote “the right selections.” One South Carolina Republican reported that black women often applied the sanctions of the bedroom to whip male political defectors into conformity. In rural Mississippi a similar sanction was threatened, and in other places black women employed a more direct method of controlling black male votes. One black woman in South Carolina attacked her husband with an axe after she learned that he had sold his vote to a Democratic candidate.¹⁹

The fact that black women weren’t given the right to vote didn’t mean they were not going to be active politically. They were unwilling to be powerless in the face of overwhelming power. **As black people had done during the days of slavery, so these women did in the early days of emancipation. They worked with their men and took control of their situation in surprising ways. If they could not work directly through the system with power, they would work around power, bending it to their advantage. Surely the limitations imposed by slavery and its legacy complicated relations between black men and black women, as they did for all relationships in black communities. It is certainly true that slavery had a terribly detrimental effect on all aspects of African American life. Black families and black communities would have been infinitely better off had slavery not existed – of that there can be no doubt. Yet, try as it might, slavery did not**

destroy the tradition of family, or family values, or the concept of communities among African Americans. The restoration of families, broken by slavery became the object of former slaves in the immediate aftermath of emancipation. When former slave Jonas West was confronted by a member of the Freedmen's Bureau who questioned him about his travels from Mississippi to South Carolina to North Carolina to Virginia and back to Mississippi, Jonas assured the official that his was not aimless wandering. Jonas West, like tens of thousands of other freedmen, was searching for family members torn from him during slavery. When the Freedman's Bureau official inquired about the whereabouts of his family, West made it clear that even though his family had been broken apart by slavery, it had not been destroyed. Those who doubt the resilience of African American families would do well to heed the words of Jonas West. "We is all family," he explained. "We is family nearby. We is family way gone. We is family no count, but we is all family."²⁰

That is a very telling story. Is Jonas West's family diminished? Is it hopelessly weakened because it is scattered? Is it pathological because its members are not all living together? **Jonas West would no doubt have preferred to have one compound in which he could gather all of his family together, but the fact is that he, like most black people in the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century and the middle part of the twentieth century and the first part of the twenty-first, for that matter, was making do in a difficult situation. If you have power, you**

change the situation; if you don't have power, you work around it. You take control in ways that are possible. That is what the Moynihan/Patterson analysis fails to recognize. Yet that is precisely what makes the African-American family, the African-American community, so remarkably, and perhaps surprisingly, supportive of African-American people.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

...Question:

Did the fact that black women also talked about “getting my manhood” mean they were breaking down gender stereotypes?

James Horton: Both black men and black women used the term manhood, not manhood of men but manhood of the race. Since before the Civil War black men had no vote, the black community had no political power. Even though black women who pressed for the manhood of the race weren't given the vote in the Fifteenth Amendment, their community did get a kind of representation through the political participation of black men, although that participation was all but extinguished by the discrimination of the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Slavery and segregation, as I've mentioned, did tend to focus on making the man less masculine in the stereotypical nineteenth century sense of the term, making him more like the feminine human being. By the same token, slavery was calculated to make the woman less stereotypically feminine. Slave women weren't allowed to stay home and wear the apron and do the cooking for the kids. They may have done housework, but they also did field work. Slave women were out there when the crop needed to be harvested. They were out there plowing or harvesting or weeding or whatever needed to be done. Sojourner Truth used to hold up her arms and say, “I can do as much work as any man.”²¹

¹ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (U.S. Department of Labor, 1965).

²John W. Blasingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press, 1972); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery & Freedom, 1750-1925* (Pantheon, 1976); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (Pantheon, 1974); Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (Oxford University Press, 1977); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1977).

³ Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (Civitas/CounterPoint, 1998), pp. 32, 4.

⁴James O. Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

⁵Patterson, *Rituals of Blood*, p. 52.

⁶Horton, *Free People of Color*, p. 117

⁷James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (Holmes & Meier, 1979).

⁸James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 86-91.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰ Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians*, p. 38.

¹¹Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, pp. 125-132.

¹² James Oliver Horton, "Defending the Manhood of the Race," in Martin Blatt et al., eds., *Hope and Gory: Essays on the Legacy of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

¹³George Fitzhugh: *Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters* (Richmond, Va., A. Morris, 1857); *Sociology for the South, or, The Failure of Free Society* (Richmond, Va.: A. Morris, 1854); cf. Harvey Wish, ed., *Ante-bellum Writings of George Fitzhugh and Hinton Rowan Helper on Slavery* (Capricorn Books, 1960).

¹⁴ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (J.P. Jewett and Company, 1853). See Horton, "Defending the Manhood of the Race," pp. 12-14.

¹⁵ Horton, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁶ Horton, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁷ *Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1856).

¹⁸ Thomas Holt, *Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina during Reconstruction* (University of Illinois Press, 1977), pp. 34-35.

¹⁹ Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (Indiana University Press, 1999).

²⁰ Victor Smalls to Thomas Brad, February 18, 1866, filed in the Records of the Assistant Commissioners, Mississippi (Letters Received), Freedman Bureau.

²¹ Horton, *Free People of Color*, p. 94.