

## Gender Roles in Black Communities, 1880s-1930s

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The black community has very contradictory notions about gender roles and black women's work, some of them quite negative. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, her autobiography, Zora Neal Hurston referred to her father's frequent boast that "he had never let his wife hit a lick of work for anybody in her life." He also boasted that his wife had eight children.<sup>1</sup>

Three recent mega-events have drawn attention to gender attitudes in general and the black community's attitudes in particular: the Million Man March, the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill confirmation hearings, and the Mike Tyson rape trial. In each of those cases black women were represented negatively: as, respectively, a distraction, a race traitor, and a harlot. My current manuscript, which discusses black gender norms, focuses in part on the roles of and attitudes toward wage earning women. Those three events led me to entitle the book *Dignity and Damnation*. "Dignity" refers to the fact that the dignity of labor was and is a core value in black communities.

"Damnation" comes from the title of the article "The Damnation of Women," by W.E.B. Du Bois.<sup>2</sup>

Zora Hurston's father was not the only black man to boast about his wife not working. It was a common practice among working class black men in the

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years of my study, primarily the 1880s to the 1930s. Theodor Rosengarten's *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* quotes the emphatic words of an elderly black cotton farmer: "I was a poor colored man but I didn't work my wife in the field like a dog. Just as sure as God is sitting in his resting place, I'd be in the field at work and my wife, I look around I see her coming out there with a hoe and hand. I'd say, what you coming out here for? And she said, I thought I'd come out here and help you."<sup>3</sup> He would send her back into the house. He added that he wouldn't let his wife go washing for white folks, either. That was about more than a man asserting male authority over women; it was also about how hard the work was.

Black women's market work reveals a great deal about the politics of race, work and family identities in black communities. In 1911, Giles B. Jackson and D. Webster Davis wrote in *The Industrial History of the Negro Race of the United States*, "The race needs wives who stay at home, being supported by their husbands, and then they can spend time in the training of their children."<sup>4</sup> Yet in the light of the precarious financial condition of most black households, this call for black mothers and wives to remain at home and to be cared for by their husbands was an unrealistic expectation at best. Clearly, there is a contradiction between perception and reality when it comes to black women's market and family work. That perception, or misperception, more often than not influences both public policy and media depictions of black family and work lives.

There is some evidence that the black community of the late nineteenth century encouraged educated women to give their careers priority over marriage. In 1897, for example, a correspondent for *The Washington Bee*, a Washington, D.C. black newspaper, advised young women to pursue a career rather than enter into “a foolish marriage through lack of occupation.”<sup>5</sup> And yet the outside world made it difficult for professional women to combine work and marriage. Washington, D.C., like most pre-1920s communities, required female (but not male) teachers who married to give up their teaching positions. One teacher wrote in protest that professional women’s “personal obligations to relatives, for example, do not cease with marriage, and therefore, they have legitimate reasons for continuing to work.” Besides, she warned, “in view of the high cost of living in Washington, the proposed motion [to continue the ban against married female teachers] would lead to secret marriages, fewer families and fewer vacancies.”<sup>6</sup>

Mary Church Terrell was one such professional woman whose father did not want her to work, in spite of her having graduated from Oberlin, earning both a B.A. and a Master’s degree, and having pursued a so-called men’s course. Her father reportedly was one of the first black millionaires in the country. When she accepted a teaching position at Wilberforce University in Ohio, he refused to speak to her for a year. She wrote in her autobiography, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, “All during my college course I had dreamed of the day when I would promote the welfare of my race.” Her father, however, wanted her to live “the leisurely life of a typical southern belle” and allow

another African American without resources to do the work, for wages. It did not matter to him that Mary Church was an African-American southern belle. Eventually they reconciled, and Mary Church Terrell's father sent her to travel and study in Europe for two years before she moved to Washington.<sup>7</sup>

Here she taught very briefly and then she married Robert Terrell. But Mary Church Terrell hated domestic work. Instead of playing the role of a housewife, she relied upon her mother and a series of live-ins, which left her free to spend her time on the lecture circuit. She eventually became a founder of the NAACP and the first president of the National Association of Colored Women.

Some of Terrell's public lectures included negative comments about Booker T. Washington. After the lectures, however, and aware of his enormous popularity and wide influence, she would sit on the train home and write to him, "Dear Mr. Washington: When you and your lovely wife are back in the Washington area, please dine at my lovely home." Eventually, however, her comments got back to Mr. Washington, and Robert Terrell was asked to "put a muzzle on his wife's mouth."<sup>8</sup> While Robert Terrell was a Harvard-educated lawyer, he owed his judgeship to Mr. Washington. But there is no evidence that he ever asked his wife to stop her ceaseless and negative talk about Booker T. Washington.

Anna Julia Cooper was among the more prominent African-American women in the nation's capitol. She was principal of the M Street School, later known as Dunbar High School, one of the nation's most prestigious colored

public schools. There were of course those who considered that inappropriate, certain that a woman could not possibly “adequately supervise male students and the male members of her faculty.”<sup>9</sup> W. Calvin Chase, an outspoken editor at the *Washington Bee*, supported Cooper, saying school was a place for women. He made similar comments about every so-called man’s job a woman occupied, usually referring to women’s unique skills in order to justify their presence. Thus women in dentistry were praised because female patients could avoid the embarrassment of seeking the service of male dentists; women embalmers were lauded because they prepared female bodies for burial and provided better comfort to grieving family members.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of the often contradictory views of women’s wage work, paid work provided African-American women and men the ability, however minimal, to assist black community institutions and organizations such as churches and mutual benefit societies. Indeed, the importance of labor market activities for most black women was that it helped to fulfill their personal obligations to family members and to needy kin and non-kin. Sharing and giving were key elements of black culture and religion.

Given the importance of their market work, one wonders why certain views of black family life, and particularly of women’s roles, persist. Historian Leon Litwack, for example, claims that the denial of black men’s rights in the post-Emancipation period meant that there were few spaces in which black men could assert authority within their homes and community.<sup>11</sup> Although the argument has validity, blacks recognized that bourgeois ideals of manhood

and womanhood and wage work are difficult to actualize in impoverished communities. As historian Elsa Barkley Brown writes in her wonderful essay, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” women worked “[N]umber one, because everyone from age eight on up had to work to survive, let alone to get ahead. And secondly, black women were unwilling to accept partial freedom in support of full freedom for their husbands.”<sup>12</sup> As historian Joan Scott has noted, there was and still is a tremendous dichotomy between middle-class norms and ideals and the lived experiences of working women.<sup>13</sup> Yet policymakers seemed not to understand and still fail to understand that dichotomy, which raises the question of why they find it so difficult to grasp. Could it be that multiple realities, especially those of working-class and immigrant communities, challenge preconceived ideas about gender and race?

Post-Emancipation black women in fact viewed their husbands' political rights as their rights. The black man's vote was a joint vote. Black wives often accompanied their husbands to the voting booth and, as Barkley Brown notes, they often would have a shotgun or some other weapon in their aprons.<sup>14</sup> Was it to protect their husbands, or to make sure their husbands voted the way they had agreed at home?

So gender roles in black and immigrant communities were not simple, but some scholars make the same mistake about gender perceptions and practices as do policymakers. Shirley Graham Du Bois was a self-centered leftist who abandoned her children and appears to have used a series of men. But historian Gerald Horne's recent biography of her concludes that she was a mother figure.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, many scholars appear to be unable to accept the reality of the diverse lifestyles and experiences women had in the Black Panther Party. Why does Trayce Matthews publish an essay about women in the Black Panther Party entitled, "No One Ever Asks What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is: Gender and the Politics of The Black Panther Party, 1966-1971"?<sup>16</sup>

My forthcoming book describes the case of a man whose wife was making a little bit more money than he. "If I can get a little pension money to spend now and then," he said, "Maria couldn't domineer over me on account of her being the financial head of the house with I looking to her for all of my necessities." Yet despite his working-class status, his gender views reflected traditional middle-class assumptions. "The Lord never intended a woman to be

head of man's house," he claimed. "But if she makes a living, is able to pinch down on the purse strings then the Lord's will as well of the husband's is made to look foolish." As legal scholar Joan Williams has pointed out,<sup>17</sup> the gendered system of organizing market work and family that began at the turn of the nineteenth century, in which men worked outside of the home while women supposedly stayed behind to rear the children and tend the home, remains entrenched in the American mind.

Fully two-thirds of Americans tell pollsters that it is best for women to stay home and care for family and children. Not only does our society view men as "ideal market workers," but as Robert Gould argues in a collection of essays on "Men and Masculinity," masculinity is often measured by the size of the pay check.<sup>18</sup> The association of paid work with masculinity has persisted in spite of women's growing presence in the labor force and, in the case of black women, their long and persistent presence. In a recent study of blue collar workers, Eleanor Israel Rosen noted that women believe that "their husbands' sense of manhood is contingent on their shared belief that his pay check is supporting the family."<sup>19</sup> So women define their work as helping their husbands, the "primary" bread winner.

The kind of anxiety and tension among American working class and professional men who link masculinity with bread winning is especially apparent among men of color in general and African-American men in particular. As Williams notes, sociologist Elijah Anderson has written that it is black men's "relative inability to get good, steady jobs that often bars them

from the provider role that provides the conventional basis for male dignity.”<sup>20</sup> bell hooks comments that the inability of black men to become the sole economic provider in a family often causes them to be viewed “as failed men.”<sup>21</sup> Yet the pressure of being the sole provider is enormous, even for white men with jobs. Kathleen Gerson has written, “I look at the grief and the anxiety my father had by being a sole provider and I would like to change the definition of being a man.”<sup>22</sup>

Are we ready to follow the strategies that Joan Williams and other scholars have advocated, to deconstruct the ideal worker norm? More critically, are we prepared to propose to lawmakers and policy analysts that they consider the fluidity of gender roles that have defined black woman’s market work and family work as a possible model for deconstructing a gender system built on a nineteenth century concept of domesticity and the ideal middle-class norm? That is the important question we must address.

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<sup>1</sup> Zora Neal Hurston, *Dust Tracks On a Road* (Lippincott, 1942), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Damnation of Women,” from *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903).

<sup>3</sup> Theodor Rosengarten, compiler, *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (Knopf, 1975), p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> Giles B. Jackson and D. Webster Davis, *The Industrial History of the Negro Race of the United States*, 2d ed. (Richmond, Virginia, Negro Educational Association, 1911).

<sup>5</sup> *Washington Bee*, January 16, 1897.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from “An earnest teacher” to Mrs. Raymond B. Morgan, Oct. 23, 1923, Terrell Papers, Box 4, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Founders Library, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Ransdell, 1940), pp. 59-63.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Washington Bee*, July 8, 1905.

<sup>10</sup> *Washington Bee*, May 23, 1896; April 17, 1897; March 29, 1919.

<sup>11</sup> Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (Vintage, 1999), p. 342.

<sup>12</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” *7 Public Culture* No.1 (Fall 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York University Press, 2000). See, e.g.,

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p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Trayce Matthews, “‘No One Ever Asks, What a Man’s Role in the Revolution Is’: Gender and the Politics of The Black Panther Party, 1966-1971,” in Charles E. Jones, ed., *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]* (Black Classic Press, 1998), pp. 267-304.

<sup>17</sup> Joan C. Williams, “Toward a Reconstructive Feminism: Reconstructing the Relationship of Market Work and Family Work,” 19 *Northern Illinois University Law Review* 89 (1998).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Gould, “Measuring Masculinity By the Size of a Paycheck,” in Joseph Pleck and Jack Sawyer, eds., *Men And Masculinity* (Prentice Hall, 1974).

<sup>19</sup> Ellen Israel Rosen, *Bitter Choices: Blue-Collar Women In and Out of Work* (University of Chicago Press, 1987). Cited in Williams, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>20</sup> Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (University of Chicago Press, 1990). Cited in Williams, op. cit., p. 123.

<sup>21</sup> bell hooks, cited in Williams, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Kathleen Gerson, *No Man’s Land: Men’s Changing Commitments to Family and Work* (Basic Books, 1993) or *Hard Choices: How Women Decide About Work, Career, and Motherhood* (University of California Press, 1985). Cited in Williams, op. cit., p. 163.