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Review: Stormy Weather: Middle-class African American Marriages Between The Two World Wars

Renee C. Romano
Oberlin College, Renee.Romano@oberlin.edu

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Stormy Weather: Middle-Class African American Marriages Between the Two World Wars, by **Anastasia C. Curwood**. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 216pp. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780807834343.

Renee Romano

Department of History, Oberlin College

rromano@oberlin.edu

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As a college student in the mid-1990s, Anastasia Curwood happened upon some old letters her grandparents had written to each other in the 1930s and 40s. Fascinated by the intimate window into one African American middle-class marriage and curious to understand how her grandparent's marriage was influenced by the social, cultural, and political currents of their day, she embarked on a research project that resulted in this slim but engaging volume. In *Stormy Weather*, Curwood explores marriages among the African American middle class in the period between WWI and WWII, years that gave rise not only to the new, more militant racial politics of African Americans who described themselves as "New Negroes," but also witnessed cultural shifts in sexual practices and gender roles that extended well beyond the African American community. Curwood aims to uncover both how changing ideas about sex and gender and the new racial politics affected African American men and women as they navigated their intimate relationships. She offers a fascinating, if somewhat limited, portrait of black elites struggling to build relationships that would both participate in the political project of advancing the race and provide them with romantic love, support, and intimacy.

Based on letters between couples, published prescriptive literature, and African American popular cultural products, *Stormy Weather* first outlines how ideas about

marriage among the black middle-class changed in the years between WWI and WWII and offers a description of the ideal New Negro husband and wife. Curwood then focuses on the relationship between her grandparents to explore how issues like class, skin color, and sex influenced black middle-class couples. She uses the personal story of her grandparents and other black middle-class couples—such as John and Lugenia Hope, Marcus and Amy Garvey, and Robert and Katherine Flippen—to highlight how their personal relationships were influenced by larger ideological, political, and economic structures.

Throughout the book, Curwood seeks to reveal the internal dimensions of private life, to offer a history that highlights the emotional experience of these couples. She focuses the book on black middle-class marriages in part because she could not find sources that would enable her to reconstruct the emotional lives of black working-class couples in the same way. In focusing on the interior lives of blacks, Curwood criticizes historical scholarship, which, she charges, typically discusses African Americans only as victims of racism or as activists against it. Her approach is a welcome addition to the literature on 20th century African American black life, but her blanket commendation of historical scholarship ignores quite a few works that go well beyond the “racial protocol” approach she critiques (Tera Hunter’s *To ‘Joy My Freedom* and Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo’s *Abiding Courage* come immediately to mind). Neither does Curwood address sociological literature that offers a window into the private life of African Americans or that has explored the contours and meanings of marriage in the United States.

The couples Curwood writes about faced many daunting challenges, from trying to retain their middle-class status and remain financially stable during the Great Depression to navigating shifting sexual cultures while insisting upon their sexual respectability. But no conflict loomed larger than that over gender roles and what functions husbands and wives should play in an ideal New Negro marriage. Curwood suggests that both New Negro men and women explicitly understood marriage to have the political function of uplifting the race by creating stable, respectable families who could provide a model for poorer blacks and a supportive partnership for engaging in “race work.” But they differed dramatically on how those political goals should be achieved. Many middle-class men, Curwood demonstrates, believed the ideal New Negro husband should be the primary breadwinner and should have authority over his wife and children. They sought patriarchal families under male domination. Their wives, however, wanted to expand beyond their domestic roles to advance the race through their own professional endeavors. Many of these women not only needed to make money to contribute to the household income, but they also wanted to be active in their communities. The ideals for New Negro wives and husbands, in other words, came into conflict in ways that often created marital tension. Curwood’s grandmother’s desire to work in a settlement home and a nursery school angered her grandfather, who wanted his wife to stay home, or at the most, to do domestic work rather than have a career.

This example—of Curwood’s grandfather encouraging his wife to be a domestic rather than a professional—illustrates some of the challenges of the approach Curwood uses here. As she admits, her grandfather’s preference was not typical; most of these middle-class men did not want their wives to be domestic servants, in part because that

would make them vulnerable to sexual exploitation by white men. Curwood's grandfather was insecure and was always striving to limit and control his much better educated wife. He abused his wife and eventually took his own life. Their story is illuminating and powerful, but it is not always generalizable. And this tension—between the unique and the typical—emerges at several points in this book. In the most problematic example, Curwood delves into the writings of Jean Toomer as an example of black middle-class men's ideas about the proper role of a New Negro husband. Yet Toomer was a misogynist who believed that men were biologically superior to women. Curwood calls him "retrograde" and "regressive." He was ambivalent about his own racial identity and his own marriages were to white women, not to middle-class black women. His rantings about the importance of men being in charge of the household, whether they were the breadwinners or not, does not necessarily reveal much about the cultural values and ideas of the black middle-class during this period.

In the end, one of the greatest strengths of *Stormy Weather*—the wonderful and rich story of Curwood's grandparents' marriage—is also one of the book's major limitations. In focusing so intently on the experience of middle-class blacks, Curwood does not fully address the ways in which their marriages differed from or were similar to those of other groups at the time. And by looking only at the interwar years, Curwood chooses not to carry this story forward in such a way that might shed light on what today has become a marriage crisis among the black middle-class, as fewer are choosing to marry and those who do divorce at higher rates than whites. One hopes that Curwood might one day write a sequel that will continue this fascinating story of how middle-class blacks have understood marriage and navigated this most intimate of relationships.