Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men

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The history of the family is frequently read as the history of women, mothers, and children. Writing against the ideology of separate spheres and moving toward the reality of women’s presence and prominence in the public sphere has, in the course of two generations, fundamentally contested narratives privileging the domestication of women. Gender studies have not, however, to the same degree, inspired the examination of men in the family. A growing historical scholarship does exist, from Robert Griswold’s *Fatherhood in America* to Shawn Johansen’s *Family Man*, but the discussion of the raced nature and racial implications of husbandhood and fatherhood are frequently muted.\(^1\) With the exception of a series of studies examining the marriage and courtship of specific, usually highly accomplished, African American couples and families, and the new work on black sexualities, the scholarship on black families still primarily focuses on women.\(^2\)

To date, the most robust literature on black family men and the dilemmas of husbands and fathers in the African American community has been produced by literary scholars, cultural critics, and social scientists.\(^3\) The historical scholarship on black family men focuses largely on
the nineteenth century and interracial relationships. And yet it is in the twentieth century that the qualifications of the black family man and questions about his presence and absence have generated some of the most vigorous and sustained national debates. These debates peaked, first, in the wake of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965) and, again, in 1995 with Louis Farrakhan’s Million Man March. Both the Moynihan Report and the march drew generously, if imperfectly, upon the scholarship of African American intellectuals, from Edward Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) to Jawanza Kunjufu’s *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boy*, respectively. Notwithstanding their attempts to start a national conversation and set a broad agenda, the Moynihan Report’s and the Million Man March’s emphasis on black boys’ needs for strong black fathers as male role models are most useful for what they reveal about the social scientific assumptions of the sixties and their cooption by black nationalists in the nineties. At the same time, each has managed both to obscure black scholars’ nuanced work and the broad vision of black family manhood prevailing at mid-century.

Most early black social scientists dwelt briefly on male bonding and father-son psychologies, instead focusing on family men as patriarchal cultural producers, interracial proletariats, and democratic role models. Moreover, relationships between fathers and daughters and husbands and wives garnered the most sustained attention. While contemporary crises in the African American community are depicted as hinging fundamentally on the problems of black boys and the father-son relationship, what this formulation hides is the extent to which the meaning of the black family man has narrowed and evolved from a vital constructive historical force to a political and economic model for democratic living to a series of apolitical personal and interpersonal relationships between fathers and sons.

Throughout the twentieth century, the black family man has been cast as a vital but shrouded figure in the African American struggle. But it is only since the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts that he has been called upon to arrest the problems of racism, discrimination, and inequality by showing his sons how to be hardworking men, hands-on fathers, and loving husbands. Ironically, we must turn to the era of jim crow to catch a glimmer of a broader, potentially more progressive, and fundamentally more political vision of the black family man. This should come as no surprise, since during the latter half of the twentieth century at just that moment when African Americans stepped up their struggle for
full citizenship rights, the family was increasingly identified as the most
important institution in personality formation, community development,
and racial advancement. That is to say, when blacks were most fervently
asserting the need for institutional and structural changes on a national
scale, intellectuals like Moynihan claimed that no change in the status
of African Americans was possible without fundamentally transforming
the black family, whose “vicious” “tangle of pathology” was circular and
largely self-sustaining. Moynihan and others came to this conclusion at
least partially through the work of black scholars who stressed the role
and power of the family. Still, black scholars rarely lost sight of the over-
whelming power of racism, economic inequality, and political discrimi-
nation in shaping family fortunes and potentials.10

In the decades following the freedom movement and up through the
Million Man March, connections between the family and the social, eco-
nomic, and racial forces determining its shape have deteriorated and been
replaced by the idea that families ought to be strong enough to tran-
scend these forces. African Americans were among the popularizers of
this theory, but the genesis of this idea came to life in the wake of the
disillusionment caused by the half gains and lost promises of the rights
movements.11 As full integration failed to materialize and the hope for
equal access and opportunity hit up against the reality of continuing sub-
ordination, social scientists argued that African American parents needed
to raise children impervious to the gap between American ideals and
American racism. These scholars did not doubt that black families were
largely limited by their second-class status, but they still counseled them
to protect their children in anyway possible. One popular mid-century
method focused on the development of strong individual personalities
capable of withstanding the frustrations caused by the persistence of prej-
udice.12 Others counseled parents and schools to raise dissatisfied youth
with activist mentalities who would carry the struggle forward.13 African
American scholars’ emphasis on family fortification as both a stabilizing
force and a defense mechanism, however, has been displaced by a theory
of the family that makes it the most important institution with the ability
to overcome race problems singularly and of its own accord.14 It is this
late-twentieth-century worldview that has managed simultaneously to
make the black family man responsible for solving the race problem and
to ensure his failure by suggesting that most of this work can be confined
and resolved within the domestic sphere.

At the same time, the purview and the vision of the black family
man have shrunk to a series of reproductive, interpersonal, and economic
relationships with no larger political or social vision.\textsuperscript{15} By making the domestication of black men the central front of the struggle, the extent to which the power of the family man historically lay in his ability to move between the private and the public sphere, family and community, and affection and politics has nearly vanished. At mid-century the black family man was characterized as a freedom fighter, patriot, community pioneer, man of distinction, or cutting-edge member of an interracial proletarian social movement. Moreover, E. Franklin Frazier depicted the most innovative black families as ones in which family men and women learned important lessons from each other. Fathers were encouraged to build affectional and sympathetic ties as modeled by devoted mothers and mothers were encouraged to claim an equal footing in the family through their labor (wage and unwaged) and by fostering a working-class consciousness in their children. The late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century notion that fathers need to be heroes to their endangered, embattled, and embittered sons clearly has a certain provincial self-help appeal and partially resonates with Frazier’s early emphasis on family pride and late emphasis on male role modeling. In an era of continuing racial disparities and entrenched segregation, however, Frazier was suspect of any theories of family manhood that lacked a broader political, social, or economic perspective and focused on highlighting the differences between mothers and fathers as opposed to building strong, progressive families around a community of shared interests.

Today we take for granted the importance of fathers as moral, economic, and psychological resources, leaders, and role models in the family and gloss over how fatherhood has been reinvented and reimagined over the course of the twentieth century. We inculcate a confused and even dueling notion of fatherhood as, on the one hand, a biological reality and an organic product of nature, and, on the other hand, requiring nurture through public and private, local and national fatherhood initiatives.\textsuperscript{16} As a nation, we remain of two minds on the matter, certain that biology binds father and child and simultaneously confident that social forces, policies, and commentators can and must strengthen these potentially tenuous natural bonds.

Writing eight decades ago, the acclaimed African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (1894–1962) was not compelled to straddle this divide. He argued that while males were biologically connected to their children, fatherhood was not solely or even primarily a product of biology. Whereas females, according to Frazier, were transformed into mothers through the act of reproduction, sentiment, and nurture, males were
transformed into fathers, not only through reproduction but, even more importantly, via cultural and historical traditions; labor, class-consciousness, and political vision; and only much later through psychological bonds. According to Frazier, family men were manufactured and manly production, not simply biological reproduction, established men’s interest and authority in the family and made them fathers. Whereas motherhood was described as a natural, organic state for women, fatherhood was a cultural, economic, social, political, and creative process. Its malleability also left it open to reform. As a sociologist, Frazier set for himself the task of examining, historicizing, challenging, and transforming the role of the black family man.

Frazier is most remembered for his work on the black family. Earning his doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1931, his sociological career spanned four decades in which time he authored seven books, four on the black family, and over a hundred articles. Incredibly prolific, Frazier, like most black scholars of his generation, remained a segregated scholar, spending his career in underfunded historically black colleges and universities at Morehouse (1922–27), Fisk (1929–34), and Howard (1934–59, where he chaired the Department of Sociology). Still, his accomplishments were highly respected and his colleagues elected him president of the American Sociological Society in 1948. Writing and publishing throughout the era of jim crow, primarily between 1922 and 1961, Frazier identified the family as a vital source of racial development, a vehicle of assimilation and acculturation, and the “final frontier” in the race relation’s cycle. Family was the foundation upon which communities were built; it was where traditions were grown, assimilated, and acculturated, and fathers, according to Frazier, played a major role, if not the major role, in this process. Without the fathers’ gifts, first, of a tradition of distinction; second, of economic stability, working-class values, and interracial political solidarity; and, third, of male role modeling, no reasonable racial accommodation could be achieved.

Unwrapping the notion of “the family” and looking beneath its surface, we find that for Frazier the family constituted a means of expressing his concerns about and interest in family manhood, culture, and class. At work on a group biography of eminent sociologists at midcentury, Howard Odum, the famous University of North Carolina sociologist, solicited an intellectual autobiographical statement from Frazier, who identified race relations and the family as his primary areas of research. Frazier elaborated, “I have been interested in studying such purely sociological
problems as the development of the interest of the male in the family, the
establishment of masculine authority and discipline in the family life, and
the influence of family traditions on the stability of the family and the
behavior of its members.” Moreover, the family and paternal author-
ity were not static concepts but dynamic constructs. Their meaning and
importance evolved as he matured as a scholar, reflecting both social and
economic change as well as the intellectual currents of the mid-twenti-
thieth century. Thus, Frazier’s corpus offers the historian an opportunity
to reconstruct and expose the evolving significance of family manhood
and the changing definitions and requirements of black fatherhood and
husbandhood in the mid-twentieth century before Moynihan and the
Million Man March moved the father-son relationship to the center of
discussions about the black family. Moreover, I suggest that the feminist
slogan “the personal is political” finds its counterpoint—the political is
personal—in Frazier’s theory of family manhood, a theory that simul-
taneously posits the significance of the family man, while refusing to
concede his political orientation. Instead, it is through men’s values and
politics that we can best understand their role in the family.

Frazier was not the only scholar to emphasize the importance of
masculinity in his work. Gender and manhood, in particular, figured
prominently in the work of a number of black social scientists from
W. E. B. Du Bois, George Edmund Haynes, and Oliver Cox to Horace
Cayton and St. Clair Drake. Each of these scholars took for granted that
“exceptional men,” “talented men,” “intelligent men,” “best men,” and
“Race Men” were to play the decisive role in the struggle for African
American advancement and equality. While the emphasis on excep-
tionalism, especially intellectual, economic, or political distinction, in
the public sphere in conjunction with the gendered division of labor
implicitly encouraged these scholars to accentuate men’s leadership in
the community and in institution building, most recognized, even if they
did not equally value, the role men played in the family. Yet, for schol-
ars like Frazier, who asserted that the family was “the basic social group
through which changes in status [we]re mediated and accommodations
to the urban environment [we]re made,” the family man’s importance
grew exponentially.

Frazier’s sense of black manhood stood in contrast with many of his
contemporaries: Du Bois’s Talented Tenth, the highly educated, cultural
missionaries to the masses; Cayton’s and Drake’s Race Man, who earned
his status by aggressively vindicating African Americans in a hostile white
world; and the Marginal Man, whose bicultural experience and worldview facilitated and propelled his mobility between both racial worlds allowing him to act as a conduit of information and values. Instead, Frazier emphasized the significant role black men played in the family. He deemed paternal authority in the private sphere as inseparable from masculine “distinction” in the public sphere and masculine “distinction” in the public sphere as vital to the growth and proliferation of stable black families.

Like many of his contemporaries, Frazier’s early work suggested that manhood was limited to the most “intelligent,” “energetic,” and “talented” black men. Examining the family in light of its historical context, he argued that the roots of the institutional black family could be traced to the free, patriarchal, and frequently artisanal “founding fathers” and “fountain heads” of antebellum “family lines.” However, as Frazier witnessed the displacement of patriarchal family traditions by bourgeois lifestyles following decades of migration and urbanization, he clarified that the “mark of distinction,” which turned ordinary men into “founding fathers” and created a proud “self-concept” and “family consciousness,” was not gained through idle wealth but through constructive labor. The stability of the contemporary twentieth-century family, he argued, rested on a firm paternal working-class foundation. This shift in perspective led to the democratization and working-class orientation of Frazier’s theory of the modern family man. Whereas Du Bois, Drake, and Cayton largely espoused middle-class ideals of black family manhood, Frazier maintained that as more black men entered the urban industrial economy or self-identified as members of the working class, as expressed through their lifestyle, family values, labor activism, and politics, their working-class consciousness would create a vital and viable family manhood. The working-class orientation required to generate modern family manhood is conveyed perfectly in one of Frazier’s favorite and oft-cited family life history documents. His source described the working-class family man and his legacy in the proudest of terms, writing:

So it was very early that we acquired a deep and abiding respect for the people of the working class because we were and are part and parcel of them. We were taught early by both our parents to respect personality as it showed itself through constructive labor. The men who worked for Dad, the mechanics as well as the laborers, we thought of as constructive forces in the community. It was probably because of these ideas that we regarded with pride all the male members of the family.
While emphasizing the political and classed nature of family manhood, Frazier’s theory also created new divisions among African Americans. He celebrated the masculinity of the industrial proletariat of the 1930s and 1940s and castigated both the estranged, wandering individuated masses and the feminized, society-driven black bourgeois.

Using family manhood to reinterpret class and occupational divisions within the community, Frazier equally deployed black fatherhood as a discursive tool to challenge white oppression in the sciences, regarding the slave trade, and on the question of segregation. Frazier’s specific sociological emphasis on questions of “masculine authority,” “discipline,” “tradition,” and male development directly challenged the paternalist tendencies in white sociology that infantilized and cast African Americans as immature dependents, hereditary outcasts, or backward, underdeveloped African savages. Rather, he emphasized the extent to which the transatlantic slave trade, emancipation, migration, and urbanization eroded “social controls” that undermined masculine development and destabilized and demoralized families. His analysis of these transformations both took into account black agency and initiative, while also holding white Americans responsible for the continuous erosion and disruption of black family life. Thus, black family manhood was not merely a historical construct whose meaning changed over the course of three decades; it was equally a relational and highly political concept both at the level of practical politics and as an abstraction.

**Culture, Class, Psychology, and the Politics of Family Manhood**

Through E. Franklin Frazier’s scholarship we can trace the evolution of family manhood from a cultural to an economic to a psychological construct. Moreover, to understand Frazier’s 1950 call for black fathers to “provide the model or image of the values which should shape their [children’s, especially their son’s] personalities” requires an awareness of Frazier’s broader vision of family manhood as expressed in his series of family studies. His four book-length family studies—*The Negro Family in Chicago* (1932), *The Free Negro Family* (1932), *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), and *Black Bourgeois* (1957)—offer a powerful prism through which the intellectual history of the black family man can be recounted. Moreover, together they historicize and help to differentiate between the nature of contemporary apolitical theories of the family
man and Frazier’s early-twentieth-century emphasis on identifying and
cultivating a politics of family manhood.

Coinciding with and in response to the raging debates about the cul-
tural basis of race and the race problem in the 1920s and 1930s, Frazier’s
1931 dissertation, “The Negro Family in Chicago,” published the follow-
ing year under the same title as his first book, focused primarily on the
cultural and historical aspects of paternal authority. Published that same
year, *The Free Negro Family* (1932) expanded on Frazier’s thesis, which
traced the cultural germ of stable black family life back to free black
families and more specifically to a set of founding family fathers whose
talents (artisanal, agricultural, religious) and embrace of a democratic pol-
litics, love of freedom, and independent and rebel spirit, permeated the
family culture, reinforced social controls that stabilized their families, and
created traditions that sustained future generations. In both early stud-
ies, Frazier contested arguments that traced the demoralization of black
families to Africa, slavery, or racial immaturity asserting that black family
disorganization and the excessive masculine freedom of single men were
the products of the black families’ loss of paternal authority, memory, and
tradition.

Reflecting post–World War I occupational stratification as well as the
economic anguish of the Great Depression, *The Negro Family in the United
States* (1939), Frazier’s third monograph, captures the evolution of black
fatherhood from a cultural to primarily an economic product and philos-
ophy. Here he narrated an explicitly gendered natural history of the black
family that moved from slave to matriarchal to patriarchal and, finally,
to the emergence of middle-class and proletarian families. Approaching
patriarchy primarily as a historic pre-urban family form that stabilized
the first institutional black families and helped sustain their family lin-
eages, he suggested that in modern America, a land of corporate wealth
and capitalist exploitation, the rebirth of family manhood and stable black
families was contingent on the industrial integration of black men and
their development of a working-class consciousness. Finally, with the
Cold War era publication of *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957) and in the midst
of rampant fears about the softening of American men, Frazier stepped
up his denunciations of middle-class family manhood. As the fifties wit-
tnessed the increasing confluence of sociology and psychology, Frazier
identified the absence of paternal authority among the middle classes as
a psychological and a developmental disorder. The black middle class suf-
f ered inferiority complexes, the stunted development of their sons, and
the feminization, and potentially the homosexualization, of their men. In
the wake of what he understood to be the dilution of the political orientation of black family manhood among a flailing black elite, his promotion of the father-son relationship was both affectional and political.

Questions of morality, culture, and manliness stood at the center of Frazier’s first major study of the black family, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1932). Responding to a bevy of scholars from Du Bois to Howard Odum to Jerome Dowd, Frazier fundamentally contested the connections drawn between unstable black families and their African heritage. Rather, he consistently asserted that demoralization and disorganization were natural, even necessary civilizational processes that black families were going through. To make this point, he put equal effort into arguing strenuously against the homogenization of black family life, demonstrating that both demoralization and stabilization were active and ongoing processes. Documenting rampant dependency, desertion, illegitimacy, juvenile delinquency, and an excess of single men in the inner zones of black Chicago, he also established that most of these problems disappeared in the outer zones where married men predominated. Graphically displaying a geography of irresponsible, isolated nonfamily men and responsible family men, he asserted that family manhood was largely a product of a paternal heritage of distinction and civic engagement. Identifying a lack of culture, traditions, and social controls as key to the proliferation of single, unattached men in the central city, he traced the preponderance of married men in the outer zones to a heritage of paternal family traditions.

On the one hand, Frazier’s Chicago study offered a gendered geography of stable family life, correlating an excess of single men in the central city to demoralization and the increase in married men on the urban peripheries to stabilization. On the other hand, Frazier was equally, if not most concerned with a family’s paternal heritage when differentiating between stable and disorganized families. Actual husbands and fathers mattered, but what mattered even more, according to Frazier, were their fathers and their father’s fathers. Family manhood was a generational concept that was based on and inseparable from a broader engagement in public service, racial advancement, community building, resistance to subordination, and a spirit of independence. The family man, according to Frazier, was engaged in civic life as opposed to the hordes of individuated single men who lacked patriarchal origins, a family life, and productive community connections.

While social and economic status differentiated Chicago’s stable families from the demoralized Southern migrant families and unattached
masses, Frazier maintained what really separated these two groups was culture. By culture he meant “family tradition” and “the extent to which the culture of one generation was transmitted to the succeeding generation.” Culture and family tradition were gendered constructs for Frazier. The key to stable and dynamic black families and communities as far as he was concerned was a vigorous paternal heritage. In the penultimate chapter of *The Negro Family in Chicago*, which overlapped significantly with the thesis of his second book, *The Free Negro Family* (1932), Frazier contended that family traditions were grown by men, in this case founding fathers, and proliferated and strengthened through the act of remembering.

Specifically, Frazier traced these patriarchal family traditions back to a number of “founding fathers,” “fountain heads,” and “family lines” that gained distinction owing to a record of military service; to the pioneering efforts of ancestors; or to educated or highly skilled forefathers. Tracing stable black family life primarily back to the free black patriarchs of the antebellum period, Frazier also asserted that some important family lines and traditions were also derived from and attributable to the largely male, fugitive and manumitted, slaves who escaped to freedom; talented and skilled slaves, who purchased their freedom; and house slaves, whose culture was obtained not through the emulation of their masters, but based upon an “acquaintance with the larger world” afforded by their privileged position in slavery. He argued that stable families essentially shared a tradition, a positive “self-concept,” “pride,” and “family consciousness” as a result of a father’s, grandfather’s, or great grandfather’s services, successes, and distinctions. Whereas unstable families lived a “casual,” “precarious,” “fragmentary” existence with no deep roots and fading memories, stable families were “full of memories,” memories of active civic engagement, service, and accomplishment. These memories bound families to both their pasts and their futures and played a central role in community building. Frazier credited the “ideals and conceptions” growing out of these traditions with “determin[ing] whether one will marry or remain single, have children or maintain a certain standard of life, endure an unhappy married life for the sake of his social status or change mates for the fulfillment of a career.”

Whereas rural traditions and sympathetic bonds had stabilized families prior to migration, the loss of controls, the shallow nature and lack of transferability of rural traditions to city life allowed migration, continuous mobility, and urbanization to destabilize and demoralize families. Yet, the fundamental problem, according to Frazier, was that “these fami-
lies possessed no family traditions to bind the generations together and give continuity to life.” Migration and urbanization were and would continue to be disorganizing forces, but he wrote, “the extent of disorganization will depend upon the fund of social tradition which will become the basis for the reorganization of life on a more intelligent and more efficient basis.” Family men of distinction were the essential glue that stabilized families and bound one generation to the next. Frazier’s concept of family manhood was multigenerational and deeply psychological in its orientation. Contemporary black men could aspire to make a “mark of distinction,” and he saw cities like Chicago as offering numerous opportunities for such manly expressions, but even here he focused more on the generational implications of making such a “mark” as opposed to the immediate impact such successes might bring to one’s family. He concluded it was these distinctions that would determine men’s roles in the community and that would make them “the fountainhead of the family tradition.”

Frazier’s concept of tradition emphasized the “memory” of the father and “knowledge” of the father as a key factor in family stability. Moreover, family manhood was defined more as a generational responsibility and a geographical construct than as a series of actual relationships between family members. Still, if any family ties were privileged, it is fair to say that the father-daughter relationship was a cornerstone of black fatherhood as Frazier understood it in the 1920s and 1930s. A major thesis of his Chicago study was that disorganization, expressed in terms of illegitimacy and desertion, was a direct consequence of the absence of paternal memory and authority. Even here he made a generational argument when he claimed the fundamental source and consequence of illegitimacy was that it literally cut off access to one’s paternal heritage and memory. Illegitimacy and desertion were conceived primarily as cultural problems proliferating in the absence of father knowledge, instead of as the product of social and economic deprivation. Attributing illegitimacy to the disorganization women experienced in their natal families, the proof he returned to again and again was the fact that many unwed mothers had no “knowledge” of their own father or “knew nothing” of him but his name. It was not that the unwed mother was harmed by their father’s or mate’s inability to provide for them financially or even emotionally, but that in not knowing their fathers they were demoralized and crippled by a lack of family traditions and culture, vital social controls that would have protected their chastity. Moreover, Frazier identified mothers and young women as the greatest victims of paternal memory
loss. By the end of his career, the primary victims of unfulfilled family manhood were black boys who did not have fathers either to help them bridge the divide between the private and public sphere or to infuse them with a political orientation ground in a virile paternal heritage and robust, interracial, proletarian activism. Before Frazier turned his attention to the crisis of black boys, however, the patriarchal culture of family manhood was partially eclipsed and complimented by a theory of the economic origins and political responsibilities of the black family man in an industrial society.

**Working-Class Fatherhood**

By the end of the 1930s, the ravages of the Great Depression, in conjunction with Frazier's loss of faith in middle-class politics grew, and his focus shifted appreciably toward a class analysis of black family disorganization. While not ignoring class, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1932) downplayed its importance and emphasized the acquisition of culture through the black patriarch and transmitted to future generations as a solution to demoralization. *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), on the other hand, argued that cultural forms were a product of one's class values as opposed to patriarchal traditions spearheaded by founding fathers. Frazier also paid more attention both to the division of labor, the Great Depression, discrimination in the labor market, and segregation. Moreover, masculine authority and family stability were less a matter of father memory or the father-daughter relationship and increasingly a product of an interracial proletarian politics, the rebalancing of the spousal relationship, and the simultaneous democratization of family life. Frazier's emphasis on class politics was in many ways in line with the theories and politics generated by other young Howard University scholars in the 1930s, like Abram Harris and Ralph Bunche, but Frazier extended this argument to the family and offered a gendered, historical narrative for an emerging black proletariat that placed the working-class black family man at its center.

Frazier's new vision of working-class black manhood and fatherhood was powerfully captured in two artistic interpretations of his award-winning study, *The Negro Family in the United States*. In the linoleum cuts incorporated throughout the text and in his description of a set of dioramas commissioned for the 1940 American Negro Exposition held in Chicago, Frazier traced racial progress to the development of working-
class paternal authority in the family. The absence of the father from the family was equated with the absence of authority and economic, cultural, institutional, and political vitality. In the presence of the father, the family formed a coherent social group with a common set of interests and all sorts of racial development were possible.

The first linoleum cut depicts black bodies probably though not necessarily male laboring strenuously in a field. “In the House of the Master” makes it clear that the control of a black labor force, not family formation, was the primary purpose of slavery. The central figure in the second linoleum cut, “In the House of the Mother,” is a black mother surrounded by two small girls and two other women fill the background. The black man is absent from this family group. Capturing Frazier’s theory that the maternal family was the original family group, the naturalization of motherhood and maternal bonds is further exemplified by the naturescape that enfolds this all-female clan. Frazier frequently asserted that the matriarchal family was a strong, resilient, and nurturing family type in simple rural areas, but the linoleum cut’s allusions to female sexuality and the absence of any signs of development is equally evocative of how Frazier conceived of matriarchy as stable but fundamentally undeveloped.

A black father with a hoe, the evidence of his labor and economic self-sufficiency, is the central figure in the third linoleum cut, “In the House of the Father.” He is larger than his wife, who stands behind him nursing their youngest child, and a very small girl stands to his right. The “In the House of the Father” diorama commissioned for the American Negro Exposition was even more explicit about how the incorporation of the black patriarchal father into the family transformed the African American community. A male farmer attended by his wife and children were in the foreground, and a rich institutional life blossoms in his midst. The appearance of this individual black family man was equated with modernity and wrought far-reaching consequences extending beyond the confines of his family. Describing the diorama for the artists, Frazier stated, that since the black man “is a pioneer in building up the institutional life of the Negro[,] . . . this scene should include a picture of the school house and the church in a rural setting as well as the Negro cabin.”

The presence, labor, and civic engagement of the father fundamentally changed family and community dynamics. Maternal dominance was reigned in as wives submitted to their husbands and paternal authority and self-sufficiency in the family translated into institutional advances in the larger community. Expanding on the themes originally
raised in his first two books, Frazier dramatized the extent to which patriarchy was based on the subordination of women, especially the husband’s right to control his wife’s labor, as well as on the acquisition of property, and a man’s ability to distinguish himself. The actual sequence of events fluctuated, but together these three events, according to Frazier, solidified men’s authority and interest in the family and created the necessary tradition that stabilized family life from one generation to the next. Patriarchal family stability was also inseparable from institution building since, on the one hand, founding fathers were frequently responsible for these feats and, on the other hand, the institutions they built, such as black churches, set out and were set up to reinscribe the authority of the family man.

Another linoleum cut, “In the City of Destruction,” leaves behind the rural world and transports the viewer to a cityscape as we follow the northern and western paths of nearly two million Southern black migrants. Dilapidated tenements cloud the horizon, oddly shaped geometric symbols of industry crowd the middle ground, and a dead body is highlighted in the foreground. The viewer’s eye is drawn to the ambiguously gendered, solitary figure standing with his or her arms raised prostrate with fear and despair. The overall effect is one of disarray, disorder, resignation, defeat, and most important utter alienation. The family is absent from the scene, the city has clearly ravaged it. Frazier was an advocate of migration and urbanization, two forces that he believed would eventually improve the quality of African American manhood and family life, but in the short term the migration and urbanization of an undereducated people led to the dissolution of families, tearing asunder many of the rural matriarchal and patriarchal families that had been able to survive in the South.39

Still another linoleum cut, “In the City of Rebirth,” contrasts with “Destruction,” presenting a world that is calm, orderly, and precise. A state building hovering in the background indicates African Americans’ political awakening and the central figures are men, the forbearers of the new class traditions that will stabilize African American families and fundamentally transform their status through a culture of civic, political, and labor activism. In the foreground, a well-dressed scholar sits at his desk writing and over his right shoulder a skilled artisan is busy constructing the structures and institutions of urban life. With his square in hand, he symbolically measures and is a measure of racial and family progress.40 The family itself is strikingly absent from this last image.
In its absence, however, it is clear that these perfect specimens of skilled black family manhood are both the products and disseminators of a new masculine authority, which economically, politically, and culturally stabilizes the family and makes modern, democratic institution building possible. Frazier’s sociohistorical theory of the black family was inextricably connected to the paternal authority that only gainfully employed skilled black men could marshal. What is reborn in the city are families headed by skilled black men, men whose success, virility, and working-class consciousness make the formation of healthy modern African American families and communities possible. The emphasis on the power of patriarchal memories has been replaced with an emphasis on the class-based paternal authority and politics of the modern black male worker.

According to Frazier, patriarchy was a historical family form, and its memory alone was of less service to modern urban black families than it had been in the past. In fact, he compared some of the remnants of these “old families” to an “animated museum,” suggesting how out of place the patriarchal family was. Rather, he forecasted the mid-century reconstitution of paternal authority through the integration of black men into organized industrial occupations. As the “old families” disappeared or intermarried with members of the emerging brown middle class, he maintained that the old division between the black upper class and the black masses was no longer an accurate or even a relevant description of the community. Rather, he described the appearance of occupational classes as the “most significant differentiation” African Americans experienced in the post–Civil War era. These new classes created two new family types—the brown middle class and the black proletariat. Whereas family culture was originally the product of the traditions created by the accomplishments of individual patriarchs and projected downward through the generations and sustained through memory, the transfer of property and heirlooms, and patriarchal institutions, now family cultures were bound to where and how black family men earned their living and the class values and civic orientation inculcated. The democratic proletarian family represented the new heights of civilization and a wellspring of paternal authority based in large measure on the father’s embrace of an interracial proletarian politics, the rebalancing of authority between men and women in the family (with women losing some and men gaining an equal measure without reinscribing patriarchal domination), and the subsequent democratization of the family. The brown middle class, however, was plagued by an assortment of gender
dysfunctions and conservative racial and class politics that were largely the product of the middle-class family man’s inability to embrace an appropriate class identity and civic mentality.

Frazier was confident that the entrance of black workers into industry was transforming African Americans’ status, restoring paternal authority, and invigorating African American husbandhood and fatherhood. He correlated manly industrial work and the proletarian family with the rebirth of “masculine authority.” Grouping black workers into four categories—skilled, semi-skilled, laborers, and domestic servants—he argued that although most black men were workers, each category of workers had not yet developed a working-class consciousness. In the case of industrial and organized black workers, he wrote, their “working-class consciousness has been influenced by their experience in industrial struggles, including, of course, cooperation with white workers.” He also explored the struggle that these workers faced, not only to “prove” their “discipline” to their white employers and coworkers, but also in terms of the challenges they faced in the African American community, due to the “middle-class outlook” promoted in black schools and churches. While this group continued to face real obstacles in housing and the labor market, he maintained that as their class values coalesced and the labor movement integrated, an empowered, interracial proletariat would see no need to resort to racism.

Frazier further defined the rewards of working-class consciousness quite clearly, deeming these men the new models of black family manhood. It is in the households of working-class family men that he identified the roots of a new modern masculine authority. Mothers and wives were economically dependent, but “occup[ied] position[s] of authority and [were] not completely subordinate[d] to masculine authority.” Frazier explained that “the authority of the father in the family has been strengthened, and the wife has lost some of her authority in family matters.” The father gained authority and the mother gained support. Frazier was also more hopeful about the children of the black proletariat. While a significant portion of working-class children were neglected as a consequence of “economic and social factors,” he deemed them, on the whole, less spoiled than middle-class children and essentially manlier. According to Frazier, the well-organized proletarian family produced “a spirit of democracy.” Moreover, unlike the uncompetitive, insecure, spoiled boys of the middle class, the children of the proletariat often developed “a spirit of self-reliance.” Frazier concluded, “As the Negro has become an industrial worker and received adequate compensation, the father has
become the chief breadwinner and assumed a responsible place in his
family.” 46 Put another way, the economic and the political were personal.

Frazier’s portrait of the feminine brown middle class offered a stark contrast to the masculine black proletariat. While Frazier asserted that both classes were still in their initial stages of growth, he traced the brown middle class’s lack of viable father figures to their “naïve profession of faith in individual thrift and individual enterprise in a world that was rapidly entering a period of corporate wealth.” 47 Their economic philosophy infused them with the “psychology of the modern businessman” and encouraged their embrace of conservative economic and political outlooks. Unlike the black proletariat, the brown middle class tended toward Republicanism, opposed socialized medicine, were unable to identify and sympathize with the plight of the Scottsboro boys, and were invested in segregation since it allowed them to “monopolize the Negro market.” Frazier exhorted: “They prefer the overvaluation of their achievements and position behind the walls of segregation to a democratic order that would result in economic and social devaluation of themselves.” Not wanting to leave the readers with any doubt about the black middle class’s failure to realize a modern family manhood, Frazier likened the middle class’s security in segregation to a “mulatto woman . . . who, enjoying a position in the Negro group far beyond her social and personal worth, views with the fiercest antagonism the competition of white women.” 48 Lacking a working-class consciousness, Frazier described a brown middle class whose values were organized around “standards of consumptions” and emulations of whiteness, which increased criminality as black men attempted to consume at a rate beyond their limited economic means and encouraged a focus on “social life” and frivolity. 49 While middle-class incomes allowed portions of the brown middle class to purchase homes, a major indicator of family stability, Frazier maintained that incomes without the appropriate cultural and political values could lead just as quickly to family instability and disorganization. Identifying a small portion of the brown middle class as “equalitarian” and counseling “salaried workers” to adopt a working-class consciousness, Frazier’s overall estimation of middle-class black men and the families they produced was less than optimistic.

According to Frazier, middle-class marriages suffered significant gender dysfunctions, and the few children they raised were characterized by their “softness” and “unfit[ness] for life in a world of competition.” Economically dependent wives were forced to “show strict regard for conventional standards of conduct,” while their husbands “enjoyed con-
siderable freedom and in some cases may even have outside affairs.” In other cases, these same wives were “dominant,” making their husbands “slave to her whims and extravagances.” Conversely, economically independent wives “submitted to extreme domination by their husbands.”

These distorted gender roles and role reversals were symptomatic of families without the leadership and common set of interests fostered by working-class-oriented family men. Furthermore, Frazier found the children socialized by middle-class families spoiled and poisoned by the cult of conspicuous consumption that was practiced in the home and preached in black colleges. Meager class traditions were making them “soft” and unmanning their sons, who, Frazier explained, were “often as spoiled as their sisters.” Their sons, he attested, were competent only to secure incomes in philanthropy, through the state, or in a segregated economy.

In *Black Bourgeois* (1957) Frazier took these arguments to the next level. While Robert Ezra Park of the Chicago School of Sociology described African Americans as “the lady of the races” (1918) and the *Moynihan Report* (1965) popularized the idea that poor black women were to blame for the emasculation of black men, in *Black Bourgeoisie* Frazier suggested that if we restrict our observation to middle-class males then blacks truly were the “the lady among the races.” While the Moynihan Report highlighted a cycle of lower-class black emasculation, Frazier depicted a cycle of middle-class emasculation and worse yet homosexualization as a consequence of segregation-inspired inferiority complexes. Their resulting inferiority complex encouraged middle-class black men to seek compensation through a sort of feminine consumption or sexualization rather than via working-class masculine production or protest.

Throughout the 1950s, Frazier’s repulsion with the middle class was balanced with his continuing concerns about unstable families at the lower end of the economic spectrum where fathers were literally, not figuratively, absent. Their absence was troubling to Frazier for a variety of reasons, which Frazier laid out in an essay written in anticipation of the Midcentury White House Conference on Children. Here Frazier revisited the importance of paternal heritage; he wedded it to men’s “limited economic opportunities in industrial occupations” and repackaged it as a call for “the male to serve as a model for the children, especially male offspring.” Frazier, however, described the primary problem in these terms: black children were “handicapped [ . . . ] in their relations to the institutions in the community.” There was no relationship between
their private values in the home and their public values in the community. This bridge, spanning the political and the personal, was one that Frazier determined black family men were responsible for and capable of building once they developed a working-class consciousness. This was the bridge that Frazier’s own father built for him, he stated as much when attributing his own “militant character” to “the example and indoctrination of his father,” and this was the bridge that he sought to repair.56

The black father, in both his absence and his presence, stands at the center of Frazier’s sociological corpus. Posthumously Frazier’s name has become associated both with the black matriarchy/patriarchy debates, fueled by the Moynihan report in the 1960s, and the underclass debates of the late twentieth century. In the years following his death in 1962, Frazier has been accused of castigating black matriarchs and promoting the installation of black patriarchs by a number of historians, sociologists, and feminist scholars, who have accepted Moynihan’s distortions of Frazier’s family studies rather than returning to the original text. However, when read in light of his long scholarly career and the debates of the mid-twentieth century, it is quite clear that Frazier believed that matriarchy and patriarchy were historical concepts with no particular baring on contemporary issues in the modern black family. Anthony Platt, Cloves Semmes, and Robert Hill have begun the work of recuperating Frazier’s voice in his own words as opposed to reifying Moynihan’s very selective reading of well over forty years of scholarship on the black family. This essay is a part of that project. The point is not to absolve Frazier of all charges of sexism. Feminist scholars, like Melinda Chateauvert and Joy James58, are right to note and problematize masculinist visions of social change that marginalize women and reinscribe racist, heterosexist, and middle-class ideologies. However, the now all too common tendency to reduce and dehistoricize the richness of Frazier’s scholarship down to the singular problem of matriarchy as defined by Moynihan, is troublesome. First, Frazier never characterized the challenges of black family life in such narrow terms. And, second, and more importantly, misreading Frazier encourages scholars to miss the very complex portraits and amazing resilience of black family life (that grew out of the love and the political, social, and economic ambitions of black mothers and fathers) so powerfully documented by Frazier’s scholarship.

Rather than attempting to trace the conservative and highly inflammatory “politics” of the black family to an erroneous reading of Frazier’s corpus, we might, in returning to his work and his words, actually identify a progressive, masculinist vision of the black family, which problema-
tizes both maternal and paternal dominance and asserts that the strongest families are infused with an egalitarian or democratic, not authoritarian, spirit. Frazier was not the only witness to these dramatic transformations in gender norms, but he was one of a few scholars who captured these changes in the African American community. The same year *Black Bourgeoisie* hit the bookstores, a short essay entitled “A Century of Declining Paternal Authority” was published. The author, an English scholar, J. M. Mogey charted a similar transformation in the meaning of paternal authority, from an authoritarian social control for the family and society to an emphasis on the social role of the father in the family. Whereas the economist Frederic Le Play (1855) had asserted that familial and societal stability were a product of the absolute legal and customary right of the father over his wife and children, Mogey suggested that contemporary family and societal “stability rests upon a new base, the redefinition of the father role.” Frazier would surely have agreed with Mogey about both the continuing redefinition of family manhood and the modern challenges it posed. Frazier’s story, however, was as much a declension narrative as it was a story of masculine rebirth revitalized through its commitment to and active participation in the extension of democratic, interracial, proletarian values through the family man. These values sustained Frazier’s vision of modern family manhood and bridged the divide between the public and private sphere, and between the political and the personal.

**Notes**


8. W. E. B. Du Bois and Kelly Miller also promoted a more scientific approach to black family planning that was open to the use of eugenics in building better mar-


11. William Robinson, “Integration’s Delay and Frustration Tolerance,” *Journal of Negro Education* 28:4 (Autumn 1959): 472–75. Robinson asserted that “frustration tolerance” might provide African Americans with a sort of psychological immunity. He put it in these terms: “In the Negro home and community the child develops a resistance against the internalization of attitudes of racial inferiority, while seeking for a realization of the desirable values found in the total cultural pattern of American life” (474).


15. At this point, it might be instructive to differentiate between my argument and Melinda Chateauvert’s. We both agree that “the negro family” and “the black family” became powerful and obstructive political fault lines at the legislative peak of the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s. But this politicization of “the black family” went hand in hand with the domestication and depoliticization of black family manhood. Chateauvert demonstrates the political consequences of perceived personal failures, but in the case of Frazier, I am asserting that he understood family manhood as a simultaneously personal and political construct to begin with. Frazier increasingly linked family disorganization to family men’s failure to fulfill their political responsibilities and obligations. While black women faced political censure for their sexual decisions, Frazier argued that political failings just as frequently undermined black family life. See Chateauvert, “Framing Sexual Citizenship,” 198–99, 205–9.


17. While many feminists, from Joyce Ladner and Paula Giddings to Dorothy Roberts, have identified Frazier as originating the idea that most black families were matriarchal and pathological, Frazier never made any such assertions. Rather, he argued that the primary and most natural family bond was between the mother, regardless of her race, and her children (except in the case of the white slaveholding family where he asserted that the children of white slaveholders formed their strongest attachments with the enslaved, black surrogate mothers). Moreover, when Frazier used the term “matriarchate,” he did so to designate a pre-urban mother- or grandmother-centered family group. The term was frequently geographically and historically specific. Central to Frazier’s sociological research was actually how and why fatherhood developed. There is no doubt that his perpetuation of the notion that motherhood was static and natural in comparison to a virile and dynamic fatherhood bespoke a sexism common for his time and invoked the masculinism that deeply informed his sociological worldview; but that is a far cry from the assertion, frequently ascribed to Frazier, that most black families were matriarchal and thus pathological on these specifically misogynist grounds. See Joyce Ladner, Tomorrow’s Tomorrow: The Black Woman (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972), 15–17; Dorothy Roberts, Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 15–16; and, most importantly, Clovis Semmes, “E. Franklin Frazier’s Theory of the Black Family: Vindication and Sociological Insight,” Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare 28:2 (June 2001): 3–21, for an insightful assessment of the many ways in which Frazier’s work has been misinterpreted and misrepresented by a variety of scholars across disciplines.

18. For more on the experiences of segregated social scientists like Frazier, see Francille Wilson, The Segregated Scholars: Black Social Scientists and the Creation of Black Labor Studies (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2006).


23. Frazier primarily used the term “patriarchy” to describe the highest stage of development for the pre-urban black family. He used the term “paternal authority” more broadly to describe the cultural, social, and economic power of male-headed households.


27. Ibid., 270.

28. Ibid., 289.

29. Ibid., 289.

30. For a fascinating critique of black social scientists’ attempts to curtail and problematize black migration, see Marlon Ross, Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era (New York: New York University Press, 2004).


32. Ibid., 299.

33. Ibid., 287.

34. Ibid., 187–88.


36. For more on this generation of scholars and their politics at Howard University, see Jonathan Scott Holloway, Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris, Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).


38. Oliver Cox argued that African Americans married earlier because they arrived at cultural maturity earlier due to their limited racial status and their higher rates of employment. Oliver Cox, “Employment, Education, and Marriage of Young Negro Adults,” Journal of Negro Education 10:1 (January 1941): 39–42; and Oliver Cox, “Farm Tenancy and Marital Status, With Special Emphasis upon Negro Marriage,” Social Forces 19:1 (October 1940): 81, 84.
41. Ibid., 414.
44. Ibid., 453.
45. Ibid., 469.
46. Ibid., 487.
47. Ibid., 420.
49. Charles S. Johnson, on the other hand, documented the extent to which poor rural African Americans were equally limited by their emulation of the “backward or narrow or stagnant white element of the culture and thus offer[ed] no advantage.” See Johnson, “The Education of the Negro Child,” *American Sociological Review* 1:2 (April 1936): 266. For a wonderful example of the generational tensions over the meaning of middle-class status in the early twentieth century, see Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
51. Ibid., 443, 445.
52. Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 220–21. In the original handwritten text, Frazier referred to black men in general, but as he edited, he narrowed his critique to focus on middle-class men specifically. “Black Bourgeoisie, unsorted drafts,” Frazier Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Collection, Howard University.
54. Ibid., 272n6.
55. Ibid., 276.