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RESPECTABLE FAMILIES
AND THE BODY POLITIC

Various family types, including matrifocal and extended families, are common among working class people of African descent across the Americas, and as Heidi Härkönen commendably describes in her article (this issue), Caribbean people living in non-nuclear families and households can rely on a wide range of arrangements for reproductive and care work. A recent debate in the United Kingdom, widely covered in traditional and social media, brought such families and arrangements momentarily into the spotlight, as a sociology textbook was criticized for circulating racist stereotypes and subsequently pulled off the shelves (Badshah 2018; BBC 2018; Lammy 2018). The book, *AQA GCSE (9-1) Sociology* (Hodder Education, 2014) presented the matrifocal variant, characterised by 'absent' fathers and 'child-shifting', as the typical Caribbean family. Unpacking the cultural logics around the debate, I begin by querying the symbolic value of marriage and the nuclear family in the history of the Afro-Atlantic world ('Caribbean' in British public discussions being implicitly Anglophone and black, or 'West Indian'). I explore moral concerns about Caribbean families in the history of slavery and emancipation, focusing on the labour that notions of black sexuality and reproduction have performed in the race-making, dehumanising, discourses that have legitimized social and economic stratification. In the systems of structural racism these discourses continue to reinforce, respectability politics has developed as a means toward social mobility and belonging. It is in these two interrelated contexts—the discursive pathologizing of black sexuality

and family and the respectability politics that counters such discourses—that I wish to read the debate at hand.

RACE AND THE 'NORMAL' FAMILY

During slavery, white worries about social order and fantasies about black sexuality in the Caribbean and elsewhere in the Americas engendered ideas of black families as dysfunctional. Historians of slavery have identified continuities in elements of African kinship systems, such as rituals and naming practices, across the Middle Passage, but such systems could not survive slave trade and the plantation regimes of the New World intact (Shaw 2018). Slaveholders' strategies for controlling and disciplining their work force included the dispersal of spouses, parents and children, or siblings, as well as rape and sexual violence, and although kinship ties—conjugal, consanguineal, and 'fictive'—were important to enslaved people, they had little value in the political economy of the plantation (Cowling et al. 2017). Moralistic judgment of enslaved people, especially women, as dissolute 'Jezebels' legitimized sexual violence against them (Lomax 2018; Turner 2017: 65). Planters' views of their possessions were supported by artistic representations as well as new, scientific knowledge about black sexuality produced far beyond the sugar colonies. Black figures had become icons of deviance in European art by the 1730s, and during the Enlightenment period, natural scientists studied black

sexuality as 'lascivious' (Gilman 1985: 209, 212; Higginbotham 1994: 190; Mohammed 2010).

Toward the end of the 18th century, propelled by abolitionism and eventually, the end of British slave trade in 1807, pro-natalist policies in the colonies sought to increase fertility on plantations, and Jamaican planters purchased enslaved women specifically for reproductive purposes, forcing them into unions with enslaved men not chosen by the women themselves (Turner 2017: 59–67). Separate from planters' practical concerns about the supply of enslaved labour, marriage and the patriarchal family were central to the 'civilising' ideology of the amelioration movement. Reformers of slavery stressed the immorality of slave trade and life in plantation societies, and marriage and the nuclear family were advocated in the amelioration discourse as means toward a stable, malleable enslaved population prepared for emancipation (Brown 2006: 236–237; Browne 2017: 105; Reddock 1985: 70–71). For example, Edmund Burke's *Sketch of a Negro Code*, drafted in 1780, held marriage as a prerequisite of emancipation: 'a state of matrimony, and the government of family, is a principal means of forming men to a fitness for freedom, and to become good citizens' (Burke 1792: clause 20).

In spite of reformers' recommendations, legal marriages remained infrequent after Emancipation. Formerly enslaved women continued to be stigmatised as they tried to build their lives in harsh material circumstances (Ariza 2017; Lomax 2018; Ono-George 2017). Detached from their socioeconomic context and historical background, 'irregular unions', 'illegitimacy', and 'outside children' were considered not only as immoral, but as causes of poverty and crime (Barrow 1996: 150–151). To 'correct' aberrant patterns of reproduction, Baptist missionaries in mid-19th century Jamaica worked to instil values of the English middle

class to the newly emancipated population, and the patriarchal nuclear family in which fathers worked for money and mothers were housewives became an important element in the normative value complex of respectability across the British West Indies (Hall 2002; Moore and Johnson 2004: 96–136). Regulating and policing black families and reproduction aimed at curing illnesses in the body politic, and early scholarship on Caribbean kinship promulgated understandings of pathological black families and male marginality (Barrow 2001: 421–423). The Mass Marriage campaign of 1944–45 in Jamaica aimed at legalising 'irregular' unions in a battle against 'the social, moral, and economic evils of promiscuity' (Clarke 1957: xxiii). 'In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole', notes the infamous Moynihan report of 1965 on African American families (Office of Policy Planning and Research 2015 [1965]: 29). Protestant Christianity informed the legislative and discursive establishment of marriage and the nuclear family as central markers of respectability and middle class status, and by extension, belonging and legitimate subjectivity, among the black populations of the British West Indies and the United States.

While planters' and abolitionists' differently motivated concerns about the family structure of enslaved people drew on the dehumanising ideology of race and reflected economic interests and power relations on plantations and in the Empire, related discussions about working class sexuality and families in Victorian England performed a different sort of labour. The sexuality of the working class, including 'overpopulation' in rapidly growing industrial cities, threatened and fascinated the Victorian bourgeoisie, which sought to differentiate itself

from what it considered a decadent aristocracy and a wild, immoral working class. Not unlike the reformative policies of amelioration during slavery, or the colonial regulation of the bodies and families of emancipated people, policies in England aimed at civilising the masses by regulating their sexuality and family structure. Educating working class women to become better mothers and housewives became an important means toward this end (Skeggs 1997: 42–45). In the metropole and colonies alike, civilisation meant the imposition of English middle class values on labouring people, and the regulation of female bodies and reproduction was key to achieving respectability. However, whereas marriage and the patriarchal nuclear family in the colonies were part of a racist regime that dehumanised the racialised other, in England they helped to reproduce class distinction and inequality without marking the 'uncivilised' as innately different or less human.

RESPECTABILITY POLITICS

Respectability politics, as used by historians and political scientists, refers to a strategy developed among African-Americans in the early 20th century for navigating white supremacy and extreme, violent, and systemic racism by behaving and presenting themselves against white fantasies and stereotypes that had contributed to an understanding of their moral inferiority (Harris 2014). Black Baptist women in the United States, drawing on Victorian values as well as Biblical teachings and Booker T. Washington's philosophy of self-help, countered racism by adhering to respectability as a political resource. While constituting and presenting themselves as respectable was empowering in that it enabled the women to avoid the subject position of a passive victim, it required them to disassociate themselves from people and

practices considered uncivilised or immoral. Respectability politics advocated assimilation to the norms, manners, and morals of the dominant, white society and held 'bad Negroes', particularly black mothers who did not adhere to their duties, accountable for the victimisation and suffering of the community (Higginbotham 1994: 186–187, 202). Today, as African Americans continue to face white supremacy and racism, this strategy promotes upward mobility through respectable, assimilationist behaviour and invests in economic power and entrepreneurship at the expense of political power and awareness. In contemporary respectability politics across the Atlantic world, the downplaying of sexuality, for example by adhering to particular dress codes, responds to the persistent phantasmagoria of black people as hypersexual, dissolute, and immoral. Widely criticised by academics, civil rights activists, and feminists, respectability politics reaffirms white norms, reinforces the neoliberal undermining of social justice as a political objective, and places the responsibility for emancipation on the victims of oppression: according to the logic of respectability, it is up to black people to behave 'better' so as to 'uplift the race', assimilate, and avoid racism (Gaines 1996; Harris 2014).

Like the United States, much of the discursive production of respectability in the Caribbean has taken place in religious contexts, often through powerful, personal experiences of ritual practice and the sacred, and importantly, within religious communities lead by non-white ritual specialists that have served as safe spaces for non-white people. Backed up by the cosmology and moral values of Protestant Christianity, and specifically since the mid-20th century, Charismatic Christianity, respectability, and its emphasis on marriage and the nuclear family have become meaningful elements in the cultural logics of Caribbean societies. Although

cohabitation and 'visiting' unions as well as variants of matrifocal families remain common among the working class, values of respectability have been appropriated and advocated by working class women in the Anglophone Caribbean (Austin-Broos 1996; Reddock 2005). The religious transformation of being born again, but also material practices of cleanliness, dress code, language use, spatial divisions, and other performances of respectability can be experienced as rewarding and fulfilling acts of self-making, regardless of marital status or family type. The religiously sanctioned logics of respectability have been internalised across social classes over the years, and respectability politics continues to make cultural sense in the contemporary Caribbean.

This is not to say that the discourse has remained unchanged or unchallenged. Economic and political power relations have certainly changed since the days of amelioration, the Baptist missions, or the Mass Marriage campaign, and political decision-makers and religious leaders are no longer white or European. Feminist and civil rights movements across the Atlantic world have widened the possibilities for subject formation for women, including more options in their reproductive lives, and cohabitation no longer incurs similar shame or stigma as before (Reddock 2005: 83). The social deficit perspective has been rejected in revisionist scholarship on African American families since the 1960s, and Caribbean feminist writers have critiqued portrayals of black working class sexuality or family as aberrant in social scientific research and policymaking since the 1980s (Hill 2006; Mohammed 1999; Reddock 2005; Slocum and Shields 2008; Trotz 2003). However, marriage and the nuclear family have not lost their symbolic value in the discursive construction and performance of normative, legitimate selfhood in the

contemporary Anglophone Caribbean, and concerns about 'broken families' and single-mother households as sources of social problems continue to be voiced in public discourse (Barrow 2001). A recent UNICEF report notes that Trinidadians attribute youth involvement in crime to 'poor parenting, lack of care and control, and an increasing number of single-parent households headed by women' (UNICEF 2017: 13). 'Dads [sic] absence from home a major cause of crime', submitted a Methodist minister in St. Lucia (Ampadu 2018), whereas a public health specialist at the Ministry of Health in Jamaica saw 'fatherlessness' and 'the decline in healthy marriages' as the 'greatest threat to the natural family', suggesting that cohabitation caused domestic violence and that 'fatherlessness raises crime risk' (Coombs 2016; 2017; 2018). The opposition of nuclear/dysfunctional family, rooted in racist, colonial representations and policies, can be weaponised in societies grappling with poverty, inequality, and crime as a marker of class distinction, separating a pathologized lower class from the rest of the society. Othering the poor assists in the constitution of respectable middle class subjectivity.

The causality between 'broken families' and social problems imagined in this discourse allows neoliberal policymakers to treat social suffering as resulting from the immorality of the lower class instead of addressing the deep socioeconomic disadvantages and inequality entrenched in the region.

RESPECTABILITY AND THE BODY POLITIC

The meanings and uses of respectability across the Atlantic are not lost on the Black British population of Caribbean descent. In Victorian England, black people along with

the white working class were the 'other' against which respectable middle class selves were constructed (Skeggs 1997: 121). The Windrush generation grew up in colonies where values of respectability guided social stratification, and for their descendants, who continue to navigate various forms of marginalisation in contemporary Britain, respectability remains recognizable as a marker of intersecting racial and class difference. This is apparent in a central contribution to the critique of the controversial paragraphs on Caribbean families in the AQA Sociology textbook. David Lammy, the Labour MP for Tottenham and vocal advocate for racial justice, articulated many of the grievances expressed on Twitter and Facebook over the textbook in his opinion piece in *The Guardian* of 10 October 2018. Although Mr. Lammy, who is of Guyanese descent, discusses his own experience of being raised by his mother, he does not question the normative, natural, universal status of the nuclear family. Instead, he explains alternative family forms in the Caribbean as resulting from the dispersal of families during slavery and later, labour migration. Comments in social media and even in the vocally anti-racist and feminist magazine *gal-dem* followed a similar strategy of condemning the stereotypical and generalizing approach of the textbook but leaving the normative status of white middle class ideals intact (Lawless 2018).

One way to read this debate would be to simply dismiss it as respectability politics, where Lammy and others seek to prove that Caribbean values and families are not different from, and therefore not inferior to, mainstream British society. Lammy is writing against the longstanding, hostile discourse of uncivilized Jezebels discussed above, a discourse that has effectively dehumanised black people as innately, irrevocably other. In Brexit Britain, with populist politics thriving world over, imagined 'British values' as well as old stereotypes of racial inferiority are easily mobilised. The ongoing Windrush scandal has made it painfully clear that even a lifetime of contributing to the development of the country does not guarantee belonging or acceptance as an equal, valuable, part of the body politic. In such a climate, negating the othering discourse and emphasizing shared values and common humanity may be politically easier, and more in line with the cultural logics of many Black British and Caribbean people, than challenging the normative value system itself and defending the legitimacy of different ways of being and organising social life.

Many of Lammy's comments imply possibilities for more radical politics, however. He sees the textbook as part of a long continuum of misrepresentations of black people in British curricula and calls for carefully researched, methodologically transparent, and historically accurate teaching materials. This is not about denying cultural difference in the name of respectability politics; it is about normalising difference, learning about difference that is not conflated with inferiority or pathology. Serious examination of the cultures and histories of minoritized communities in Britain and its former empire, including the specificities of Caribbean kinship, in national curricula would go a long way toward countering racist stereotypes and widening the range of acceptable, normal, subjectivities and social lives. The uncomfortable, violent history of the empire should be an integral part of such curricula, as Lammy suggests. Teaching and learning about colonial history and cultural difference— not through sloppy generalisations—can make way to alternative subjectivities and legitimate political selves that have no need for respectability politics.

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