

Collating individual experiences into collective consciousness: understanding Caribbean motherhood

Lawrence, Patrice

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Book Reviews

COLLATING INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES INTO COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS: UNDERSTANDING CARIBBEAN MOTHERHOOD

Tracey Reynolds

Caribbean Mothers: Identity and Experience in the UK

London: The Tufnell Press, 2005, 204 pp., ISBN 1872767-524

Caribbean Mothers: Identity and Experience in the UK has arrived at a time of intense political and social scrutiny on parenting, 'race', nationality and childhood. Families are frequently reminded of their role in producing responsible, well-behaved citizens with threat of criminal prosecution and financial sanctions if they fail to do so. Politicians champion the rights of 'decent, hardworking families' as a salve for justifying the introduction of potentially controversial new policy. This politicization of parenting runs parallel with heated debates on Britishness, the success or failure of multiculturalism and prophecies of minority ethnic communities segregating themselves from the mainstream, white society. Into this brew, stir the 2005 London bombings, igniting a fear that even those who appear 'integrated' may harbour ill-intent after all.

Reynolds stakes her ground clearly in her opening line: 'In the UK today, Caribbean mothers are much maligned and misunderstood' (p. 1). This signals that the book will not be a detached assessment. The author acknowledges her own subjectivity, being 'especially concerned with thinking reflexively about how my status, as a Caribbean woman and not a mother, would influence my interviews with the mothers' (p. 6). Yet it is that very subjectivity that makes the book attractive to me, as a Caribbean woman and a mother. I have come across studies of black people in the UK that make me feel uncomfortably voyeuristic. It is rare that I sit on the top deck of a bus reading an academic book and nodding vigorously in agreement.

The book explores motherhood through the experiences of 40 mothers aged 19 to 81 years old in five cities across England. More than half the women are 'second generation', born in the UK, 14 are first generation and four, the youngest group, are 'third generation'. The information was gained through individual in-depth interviews lasting around three hours. The book is heavy on quotes (a bonus for me) that ensure that the black women's voices do not become subsumed by the theoretical considerations. We come to understand their views of work, community, education, fathers and 'Caribbeanness' itself.

But this is more than a book about individual or collective experience. It presents a robust challenge to a mothering discourse that has frequently omitted black

perspectives. Reynolds points to a number of opposing stances taken by black and by white mothers on issues such as education, childbearing and employment. While white mothers worry about choice in children's schools, she contends, black mothers focus on exclusions and underachievement. Similarly, white feminists' criticism of the family as a site of oppression is sometimes countered by black feminists' experience of the family as support and protection against racism. Mothering, she argues, cannot be explored in isolation from factors such as race, class and gender. But where on that intersection do you find a 'good' Caribbean mother, and what exactly does she do?

The book endeavours to unpick the construct of Caribbean mother in many ways, not least by exploring the notion of 'Caribbean' itself. Through interviewing mothers of diverse national backgrounds and income brackets, of varying ages and marital statuses, Reynolds aims to highlight the diversity of the Caribbean mothering experience, challenging the pervasive stereotypes of lone 'babymothers' and ball-breaking 'superwomen'. I was particularly absorbed in the chapter on 'Paid Work, Mothering and Identity'. Not least, because I am bang in the middle of the working lone-mother demographic! And topically, the interim report of the Equalities Review convened in 2004 to explore the causes of persistent discrimination in the UK has found that mothers, whether lone or partnered, still face severe inequalities in the workplace – a formal acknowledgement that 'motherism' is rife.

The women interviewed acknowledged the centrality of employment to their lives, forming a continuous line of paid black female labour that may have been catalysed by slavery. Reynolds points out that a large number of Caribbean women migrated to Britain in the postwar period to work in public services – many were mothers or became mothers within a few years of emigration to the UK. 'I have always worked and will continue to do so because my mother worked, my grandmother worked and my foremothers before that, so I don't see why I should be any different', claims one 28-year-old second generation lone mother (p. 100). 'Going out to work is part and parcel of being a good mother' agrees a second generation lone mother, aged 39 (p. 101). But there is some dissent: 'I don't know where it says that black women are automatically expected to keep working all the time. It just seems to be the done thing for black women to work until we drop dead' (p. 102). Given mainstream societal disapproval, ingrained gender and race inequalities in the workplace, the constant juggling of work, home and family needs, the struggle to organize appropriate childcare and the perceived tension it causes between black women and black men – why indeed?

The answer is that there is a strong tradition of work often because, from slavery onwards, there has been little choice. Most of the women interviewed, regardless of whether there is a resident partner, need the income to provide for their children. One lone mother talks about the exhaustion of 'putting in 36 hours a week, every week', but is very clear that 'handouts from the state' are not an acceptable alternative (p. 107). Reynolds also asserts that for many Caribbean mothers, employment has a role beyond income generation. As well as an integral function of their motherhood, it can be an opportunity to 'give back to the community'.

Caribbean mothers' high level of economic activity is also explored in relation to the role of black men. Reynolds firmly reinserts black fathers into the parenting discourse because 'generally speaking the analysis of black masculine identities is restricted to the specific realms of urban youth culture, sport, music, crime and

entertainment' (p. 141). It is a potentially tricky path. The high number of lone mothers interviewed, and the admission that some fathers are not fulfilling their financial responsibilities towards their children could easily reinforce the absent black father stereotype. Reynolds attempts to negate this by scattering references throughout the book to black fathers' contribution to childrearing. Furthermore, the mothers' own activities are mediated by their recognition of racism. Many work, for instance, because of the high unemployment rate for Caribbean men. Lone mothers often do not see the Child Support Agency as an appropriate route to increase household income, believing that it is yet another institution eager to label black men as criminals. These, again, are issues unlikely to face most white mothers – or to be considered by policy-makers.

The most thought-provoking commentary unpicks Caribbean identity. For at least the last 300 years, economic forces have driven Caribbean peoples from country to country, be it through forced labour, indentured labour or homeland poverty. Even now, many women, often mothers themselves, come from overseas to carry out domestic work and childcare for affluent families in the UK. The majority of women interviewed were born in the UK, but had varying views about how far they considered themselves 'British' or how they were viewed as 'British' by mainstream, white society. 'I'm Black British, this is my home no matter what those racists say', argues one mother, '... but we have our own style, our own way of being British that I suppose is different to white people's Britishness' (p. 52).

So how do mothers promote a sense of belonging in their children for a country that can't agree whether it wants them? There is, of course, the strength of 'the community' – be it faith, educational or familial. Mothers also harnessed the power of heritage – be it 'Caribbean' or 'African'. Reynolds suggests that there can be an idealized, almost mythical element to these identities. Certainly, the heritage is mediated through a British context. The concept of 'Caribbean' rarely exists in the Caribbean itself, where people affiliate with their island of descent. Likewise, 'traditional' cultural values such as respect and good manners are likely to be viewed positively by any number of non-Caribbean communities. Reynolds also points to Paul Gilroy's commentary on a 'heavily mythologised Africanity', a product of contemporary black America rather than contemporary Africa (p. 90).

The book's interest lies in the collation of individual experiences into collective consciousness. However, there were times when I wanted Reynolds to adopt a more challenging perspective. The justifications given for 'beating' children, whether for 'cultural' or any other reason, were far from convincing. However, the commonalities Reynolds found between mothers are reassuring, because it validates my own mothering practice. I, too, have the 'African' statues and the 'Caribbean' counting book! I, like the mothers interviewed, acknowledge the impact of racism on our children and develop strategies to counter it. We are all aware of the extra surveillance that our children may encounter and encourage them to modify their behaviour accordingly. We all want our children to 'belong' and summon up 'heritage' to help them find something to belong to. We all want equality, but it looks like we have some waiting to do.

Patrice Lawrence
National Children's Bureau, London