book reviews

Caribbean mothers: identity and experience in the UK

The matriarchal nature of the African-Caribbean family structure has long been cited by sociologists and policymakers as dysfunctional in form, and the source of many socioeconomic problems besetting Caribbean communities within the region and beyond. In the UK today, scrutiny of the Caribbean family has become particularly intense, as black youth educational underachievement, the rise of gun culture among some sections of the black community, the apparent marginalization of black fathers to black family life, and strained relations between black women and men serve to bolster claims that the black family is 'in crisis'. Much of the blame for the perceived 'crisis' has fallen squarely onto the shoulders of Caribbean mothers, maligned by both media and policymakers variously as 'welfare queens', 'babymothers', or ball-breaking 'superwomen'. Yet, as Tracey Reynolds points out in this book, beyond these damaging stereotypical misrepresentations, we know very little about the material realities confronting Caribbean mothers in the UK, for as a category, they have rarely attracted serious scholarly attention. Even within feminist mothering discourses, limited attention is paid to the specificity of Caribbean mothering, with the result that their concerns, identities, and experiences remain marginalized. Reynolds problematizes mainstream discourses of mothering which, in giving primacy to the experiences and identities of white-middle class western women, negate the very different realities of Caribbean mothers. As Reynolds cogently reminds us, motherhood is as much a racialized construct as it is classed and gendered, and in a racialized society such as the UK, Caribbean women's mothering experiences are invariably informed by their racialized identities as black women. To take just one salient instance, Reynolds highlights the historical centrality of labour to black women's lives. Unlike white women whose entry into the labour market was marked by protracted struggles, an essential aspect of Caribbean women's identity since slavery has been that of labourers — indeed, many of the women in this study were recruited as labourers to post World War Two Britain at the invitation of the government, at a time when white women were being 'encouraged' to retreat back into the domestic space after their war-time public service. Consequently, some key concepts deployed by mainstream feminists in explaining women's roles and identities as mothers have less salience for black mothers — two critical instances being the sexual division of labour and the private/public divide. Hence, Reynolds draws on

black feminist standpoint theory and insists on a recognition of the difference that race makes to women's experiences of mothering. It is a regrettable truth that feminist discourse continues to marginalize the voices and experiences of women who are not white and not middle class, thus reinforcing their otherness.

So this study represents a welcome and long overdue exploration of the social realities faced by Caribbean mothers in the UK. Through a series of 40 interviews, Reynolds gives voice to Caribbean mothers of different ages and generations, class and marital status, and differences in family formation. In doing so, Reynolds inserts Caribbean mothers into mothering discourses, allows their multiple voices to be heard, and makes visible their submerged experiences as they struggle to ensure the survival of themselves, families, and communities in a racialized society. Although 'race' remains the unitary thread linking together the mothers in her study, Reynolds also explores the place of gender identity, social class, and generational divisions in shaping Caribbean mothers experiences, practices, and responses to their situations. She also takes care not to present Caribbean women and the Caribbean as homogenous, discrete entities. The mothers in her study all have their roots within the Caribbean region, and share a pan-Caribbean cultural perspective on mothering, yet also draw on their individual island heritages to sustain their individual practices.

Notwithstanding individual differences, Reynolds identifies five crucial factors shaping their collective mothering identity. These are: their predominant roles in the maintenance of cultural and kinship connections to their Caribbean heritage; child rearing strategies that are responsive to racism; their roles as paid workers; 'community' mothering; and their perceptions of men's roles and participation within their families. Their commitment to their families necessitates a greater range of mothering roles that extend beyond the care and protection of their children, as societal racism demands that they actively challenge pervasive norms and values that identify their children and familial experiences as inferior. In this sense, black mothering transcends individual experience, and instead becomes a mode of resistance through which the black community's survival in a racialized society is enabled. As instances, some crucial mothering roles identified were the development of cultural strategies through which they could challenge racism in their own and their children's lives, the transmission of survivalist strategies to their children, and their active involvement in campaigning and organizing for racial equality and social justice for their families and communities.

In debunking the myths surrounding the impoverished, pathologized, and racialized quality of Caribbean motherhood, Reynolds explores three prevalent constructs of black lone motherhood currently in vogue in the media – the lower class uneducated and promiscuous 'babymother'; lazy 'welfare queen'; and the middle-class rational and career-oriented, strong 'supermother'. Reynolds deconstructs these damaging representations, exposing the racial, class, and

gender assumptions that underpin them, but at the same time shows how such constructs carry detrimental implications for the quality of Caribbean family relationships. These uncritical representations of Caribbean lone mothers ignore the diversity of Caribbean mothering, while at the same time, giving support to discourses within which Caribbean families are discursively constituted as being 'in crisis', a discourse that is given further potency by moral panics about the 'fecklessness', promiscuity, and financial irresponsibility of black males. Yet, despite voicing negative views about Caribbean men, the mothers in Reynolds' study challenged extant and dominant representations of Black male marginality within family lives, revealing instead their active participation and performance of key roles such as economic providers, protectors, and child-carers. In reinforcing the importance of the male familial role in their and their children's lives — regardless of whether the father resided within the family household — the mothers in this study disrupt the myths of the all-powerful, emasculating matriarchal Caribbean family and male marginality, and instead, give significance and meaning to black men's family roles, even though the diverse modes in which they participate may not conform to traditional, western ideals of fatherhood.

Reading this book as an [older] first generation Caribbean mother and grandmother, the voices of the mothers held particular resonance, and their robust responses to the challenges of trying to be 'good mothers' in a society that denigrates black womanhood and motherhood and black children, were deeply familiar — an experience, rarely encountered on reading mainstream feminist mothering discourses. Certainly, as an academic who delivers teaching and learning on the family and reproductive issues, I struggle to find texts that speak to my/our experience and it is extremely heartening to finally encounter a monograph that takes Caribbean women in the UK as the primary subjects of analysis. Much scholarly knowledge of black women and mothering derives from US studies, and while there are many parallels that may be drawn, we must remain mindful of the specificities of Black women's lives in the UK and vigilant of tendencies to allow African-American women's experiences to speak for all Black women.

It is difficult to find fault with this book, though I found myself reflecting on the extent to which being a mother of mixed heritage and/or mothering children of mixed heritage might also generate different challenges for Caribbean mothering. However, this is a limitation recognized by Reynolds herself, and will hopefully form the subject of a future study. I am mindful also of the silences over some aspects of the 'darker' side of family life, that while in no way peculiar to Caribbean families, remain taboo subjects within our communities. Black feminists have rightly valorized the black family as a source of refuge from racial oppression, but it is incumbent that we recognize that *all* families can also be a

source of oppression for women, children, and men. That said, these observations do not detract from the overall quality of the work.

Most heartening, throughout the study, Reynolds retains her commitment to giving voice to women who are otherwise silenced and unheard, and their voices are woven into and throughout her narrative. The result is a rich, in-depth, accessible, and often moving study of Caribbean women's experiences of mothering, their struggles, and triumphs. Significantly, what emerges with great clarity is their individual and collective agency and indomitable will to challenge racial inequality and injustice in order to create meaningful existences for themselves, their families, and communities.

Cecily Jones

Sex after fascism: memory and morality in twentieth-century Germany

'The personal is political'. In Germany as elsewhere in the Western World this slogan motivated a broad-based attack on the social and sexual conservatism of the 1950s and the post-war political atmosphere that a younger generation had come to find oppressive and unbearable. It has become a commonplace of progressive scholarship to note the political power of this phrase and the successes that feminists, gay and lesbian movements, and broader campaigns for social rights have achieved under its banner. But Dagmar Herzog's book faces proponents of the strategy to politicize bodily and especially sexual needs with uncomfortable truths. *Sex after Fascism* tells a specifically German story about the trauma of memory in post-fascist society and the particular 'force and fury' of the sexual revolution in a country where the guilt of genocidal crimes became intertwined with sexual politics. And although Herzog is extraordinarily successful in destroying commonly held assumptions about the trajectory of the history of sexuality in Germany, her book demands a broader audience beyond those interested in German history. It should be read by anyone exploring the relationship between sex and politics, anyone researching the social and political impact of historical memory, and anyone seeking to understand the successes and the failures of the make-love-not-war generation.

Herzog initially set out to examine the motivations and arguments of student activists and sexual revolutionaries in the still emerging West German democracy of the 1960s. She quickly discovered, however, that those calling loudly for free