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Caribbean Mothers: Identity and Experience in the U.K.

By Tracey Reynolds
2005. London: Tufnell Press, 204pp

Book review:
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To write that black mothers in general, and Caribbean mothers in particular, have long been denied a history of their own making may seem an obvious introduction to the audience for whom this book seems intended. In fact, it is within this context that many feminist writers follow a well-used pattern of argument: they highlight the dearth of literature on the topic, they acknowledge and celebrate prior work and usually they emphasize the limitations of their own work, thereby pointing out further gaps. The recognition that feminists do not write only for one another, that black women do not only write for audiences that are black and female is the point Tracey Reynolds is making. Whether there is growing interest (or not) in writings about and by the black women of Britain, the fact that black mothers in the United Kingdom (UK) both shape and are shaped by constructions of mothering that emerge out of the societies in which they live and that their presence is not invisible is a point worth stressing. Indeed the acknowledgement of this may help to expand the book's audience.

Writers documenting the experiences of black women often uncover fresh insights and, although they inevitably build on the work of feminists before, each contribution should add something to the ferment of black women's voices, if only to remind us that there is no one voice that speaks of homogenized experiences. Reynolds' book is a contemporary analysis of Caribbean women's experiences that may be considered, in time, such a

contribution. From the outset, Reynolds makes the assertion that Caribbean mothers are “much maligned and misunderstood” in the UK. While this is not news, Reynolds chooses to explore areas in the context of modern British society that categorize all non-whites under umbrella terms such as “ethnic minorities” and view their culture as symbols of “diversity”. No one, either witness or participant, who has lived through the various incarnations and manifestations of racism and sexism in the UK, and the oppositional politics spawned in their wake, would argue with her claim.

Caribbean Mothers: Identity and Experience in the UK is based on research on the mothering experiences of 40 women, the ways in which their sense of mothering has been fashioned by the Caribbean societies they came from, and the society in which they now live. Reynolds crafts her interpretive framework from a substantial body of anti-racist and feminist literature and makes good use of her sources. The age of the women interviewed ranged between 19 and 81 years, and they include second- and third-generation black women whose view of mothering differs from first-generation women. This view has been shaped less by lived experiences of Caribbean culture than by creating their spaces in the English towns and cities in which they were born. However, through the narratives their own mothers and fathers weaved into their upbringing, even the younger women attribute some of their views of mothering to a Caribbean history. Reynolds reminds us here that the “journeying” of Caribbean peoples and experiences of migration and relocation of home occurs at both the material and the discursive levels. Constructions of self, therefore, are linked not only to places claimed in the present, but to the birthplaces of generations before. Also linked to this is Reynolds’ articulation of the notion of a “collective memory” as currency for political mobilization; a particularly interesting point.

The book is divided into nine chapters, which include sections on difference, identity, child rearing, fathers, community mothering and the socioeconomic impact of life in the UK on mothering. The author examines the meanings ascribed by Caribbean mothers to the relationships they have with their own mothers, their children, the fathers of their children and their communities. Reynolds examines the ways in which women have defied, defined and embraced societal and cultural norms about mothering and what emerges, inevitably perhaps, is diverse and complex – offering in Reynolds’ words, “differing conceptualizations of difference”. The individual accounts lead to a broader reflection on the various social factors that impinge on their lives, with lessons for understanding that mothering takes place within a context. The author also attempts to provide a deeper appreciation of the inter-relationship of race, class, gender and culture in present-day British society, although in the discussion these factors are sometimes conflated rather than explored as inter-related themes. The author takes care to ensure that taken-for-granted notions of ‘community’, ‘identity’ and ‘culture’ are teased apart. Her assertions, however, would have benefited from a similar scrutiny in certain instances; for example, the phrase “mothers as gatekeepers of culture” (48) is presented as universal and uncontested.

Reynolds writes about the unsung, the “unheroine”, the ordinary Caribbean woman. She uses her interpretive style to highlight a small section of what is inevitably a snapshot of

life experiences. She does this by searching out hidden meanings, exploring both explicit and implicit messages, and then delving into whatever meanings flow unspoken beneath the bridge that links the personal with the political. This is the art of making the invisible seen and the inaudible heard. Most importantly, by focusing on the 'ordinary', Reynolds challenges the privileging of the image of the 'authentic' black woman that emerges time and again in essentialized versions of black womanhood in some literature. That the 'ordinary' Caribbean mother matters not only to her family, but to the society in which her mothering takes place is the admirable intention and achievement of this book.

Despite its strengths, though, it contains omissions which are more notable because of Reynolds' concerns about universalized representations of mothers in general and the marginalization of Caribbean mothers in particular. She does not, she points out, speak for *all* Caribbean women and neither does she present her work as representative. Indeed, she stresses the importance of acknowledging diversity. Nevertheless, she should have grappled more forcefully with that all-evasive goal: 'inclusivity'. The absence of discussion about the ways in which Caribbean women of Indian descent experience and express mothering, for example, is especially problematic given that Indian women have been a significant part of the Caribbean landscape (in countries such as Guyana and Trinidad, certainly) for well over a century. Also missing are discussions of sexual diversity, especially lesbian mothers, and the impact of sexuality on parenting. Since the book is based on her research subjects and is thus inevitably self-limiting, these omissions are forgivable. However, Reynolds' mistake lies in her uncontested use of the term "Caribbean mothers" and the fact that in her search for the hidden, she has missed some of the more obvious areas.

This book should take its place among the increasing swell of black feminist literature that is slowly but surely washing its way through the hallowed libraries of British academia. Whether it achieves acclaim and recognition remains to be seen. The sharp writing; the commonalities and differences among and between first-, second- and third-generation Caribbean mothers; and the insightful analysis should help considerably in this regard. Despite its importance (and it does contain some important insights) however, it may find itself on the margins of feminist literature, largely because the editing is not tight enough and the overall effect is somewhat fragmented, assisted in this regard by some typographical errors. Turning a PhD thesis into a book always presents challenges and perhaps it might have been better presented as a series of inter-related essays. It has many strengths but greater attention to making the structure more cohesive would have produced a more readable work.