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Memorializing and Moralizing Young Motherhood in Barbados

Women in a fast-growing and underserved urban community in Barbados resist the increasing denigration of young motherhood by sharing stories of the young slave mothers of centuries ago. These stories emphasize the strength and resilience of youthful motherhood, and as such they counter the globalizing discourse of young motherhood that casts it in negative light. The collective remembrances of slave motherhood by the women who participated in a five-year ethnographic study of community well-being can be understood as a rarely studied kind of memorialization, that which is narrative-based, informal, and intergenerational.

Introduction

> *"I'm a mother from the islands, I've been mothering since I was young, and I'll damn well do what I want. That is my mother-right."*

In the Departures area of the Los Angeles airport, a young man stood at the check-in counter arguing loudly with an airline representative about whether he did, or did not, owe money on his ticket. He would not be issued a boarding pass, he was told, until he paid the outstanding balance of $100. Growing more frustrated by the man's refusal to pay, the attendant finally admonished the young man. In a stern tone and with a thick Caribbean accent that had been reasonably undetectable in the earlier portion of the conversation, she told him that, at 21 years of age, he should be "getting his life together, getting a job and paying the money that he owes." She completed her admonishment by saying, "And don't be telling me that you don't like the way I be speaking to you. I'm a mother from the islands, I've been mothering since I was young, and I'll damn well do what I want. That is my mother-right." The young man

acquiesced, paid the money and headed for the departure gate.

I witnessed this exchange in early October, 2005, and it caught my attention not only because of the volume at which both participants were speaking but also because it rang very familiar. Between 1999 and 2004, I worked with 22 women in Bridgetown, Barbados who live and work in a rapidly growing and underserved community characterized by transience and poverty. Through the over 30 interviews I conducted with these women across four research trips, it became increasingly clear that they had very serious concerns about the changes that were occurring in their community. What the women saw as an increase in the violence, poverty, unemployment, drug use, and sex work occurring in their communities was the source of tremendous stress and ongoing fear. As they talked about these stresses and fears in great detail, it also became clear mothers, and particularly young mothers, were cast as central figures in the women's stories about community change. Unlike the globalizing discourse of teen mothering—emanating primarily from the United States, Canada, and Britain—that demonizes young mothers and attributes negative community change largely to them, the women participating in this research saw young motherhood as a historically generated site of strength and community well-being. The "mother-right" that the frustrated "island mother" claimed for herself at Los Angeles airport, then, not only reflects the central position of mothers in Caribbean cultures, but it also speaks to the centrality and rights of young motherhood. In this paper, I explore the way in which young motherhood is constructed as a site of empowerment and strength by women living in a poor, urban neighbourhood in Barbados, and I do so to counter the largely negative and North American criticisms of young motherhood.

The 22 women who participated in this research did so as part of a larger study I was conducting on the narratives of community well-being. They ranged in age from 19 to 91 years of age, with the average age being 44. All of the women are mothers; nineteen lived with their children at the time of this research; and fourteen also actively cared for other children, including grandchildren, stepchildren, cousins, nieces and nephews. The six-block area that constitutes this community was, and continues to be characterized by high residential turnover; no one I interviewed had lived there longer than five years, and most choose to leave after several months of residency (although after moving away several women returned). The houses in this neighbourhood were in poor repair, constructed with scrap wood and corrugated steel, and only a few had adequate water supply or plumbing. In sum, the women described a community that is vastly different from the primarily rural areas from which they migrated, and they described maternal care in the context of cultural dislocation and in light of what they perceived to be the government's apathy towards the poor. In this difficult environment, however, lively stories about young mothers of centuries ago were shared quite frequently, sometimes spontaneously, and other times in response to my specific questions. Perhaps because the women participating in this research found themselves in dire cir-

cumstances, awaiting what one woman called the "hurricane of health-breakers" to descend fully, they sought and found inspiration from these stories. What were these stories? Why did they resonate so strongly?

Young slave mothers: Stories of strength[1]

> *"It be like a slave-mother is right here with me saying 'stay strong, stay strong'."*

Motherhood has long been a central feature in defining Caribbean womanhood. Unlike in the British and Spanish traditions that shaped Barbados' history, motherhood for women in the Black majority is generally seen neither as an inevitable destiny nor as a source of oppression. Instead, it is seen as a way to engage across generational lines with the giving and receiving of social gifts (nurturance, financial support, humour, spiritual care, friendship, mentoring). Not at all defined only in terms of a mother-child dyad, as it is so often in Euro-American societies, motherhood in the eastern Caribbean is seen as a collective exercise that is highly gendered. In Barbados, community mothering, other-mothering, and biological mothering are recognized as being individually distinct but they coalesce and together constitute matrifocality.

Andrea O'Reilly (2004), Karen Flynn and Cindy-Lou Henwood (2000), Wanda Thomas Bernard (2000), and Miriam Johnson (1990) are among the many feminist scholars who offer profound insights into how matrifocal social arrangements characterize many Caribbean societies and African-American communities. As these scholars demonstrate, matrifocality defines women's social positions not in relation to men (as is often the case in non-matrifocal and patriarchal contexts) but in relation to intergenerational gift-giving and receiving. In matrifocal communities, mothers tend to assume the financial obligations as well as hands-on care of children and elders. While this certainly causes hardship, it is not understood culturally as a burden, just as an expected part of motherhood. The relational line of economic as well as emotional interconnection then is extended from women to elders and children. Adult men figure secondarily in this line.

A young mother with whom I worked in Bridgetown explained,

> *It takes determination to make sure I got what I need to feed my children and I pay for everything they need. But I got lots of determination. I'm a mother not just at home but in the whole community as well. Some of the men here are good men, but it's all on me. That's just how it has always been.*

In a matrifocal context, that the care of the children and community would be "all on her," is naturalized, taken for granted not as a burdensome task but as a responsibility that offers her authority and strength. This mother's age and youth is not incidental to this process. Indeed, with a mother's average

age at first birth being seven years younger than that in the United States and five years younger than on the neighbouring island of Trinidad and Tobago (Mohammed and Perkins, 1999), young motherhood in Barbados plays an important role in naturalizing the prevailing matrifocality.

For the women participating in this study, young motherhood creates a connection with the strength and perseverance of the slave mothers of the past. As a nation founded first on the labour of enslaved men and then on enslaved women and men, there is an enduring public memory—as Michael Lambek (1996) and Linda Garro (2001) would call it—of a past marked not only by violent subjugation but also by survival and ultimate political victory. In most accepted historical accounts (Beckles, 1989; Shepherd, 1999), the young slave mothers, who endured sexual assault and exploitation, were fundamental in achieving community cohesion, administering care, and creating inter-plantation alliances among slaves. In times of extreme stress, the stories of these young mothers' strength and leadership offer inspiration and consolation to women, like those participating in my research, who feel disempowered by the desperation of their community. As Lainie, a 55-year-old woman who I came to know very well explained it,

> *A hurricane be coming. A hurricane of health breakers be on its way. The community is infested with drugs and layabouts [unemployed men]. The mothers we be doing our best to keep everyone safe and healthy but the hurricane be coming. We be needing the strong will of the young slave mothers 'bout now.*

When describing what she saw as an intense escalation of crime and violence against women, Delia, a 33-year-old mother of four, told a story of one slave mother in particular who personified this "strong will." As a girl, Delia learned about a young woman who, in the early 1800s, was a slave on the Orange Hill Plantation in the St. James parish on the west coast of the island. According to her story, Henrietta Hutson was 14 years old when she was sexually assaulted by a White plantation manager and became pregnant. She gave birth to a son and by the time she was 18 years old had three more children, reportedly all conceived through rape. In a conversation with Delia in 2001, she recounted the story.

> *Henrietta was a survivor. She loved her children and wept when her oldest son died when he not even be a full year. But the tears did not weigh her down. She got up, like all strong Black mothers, she got up. Got up strong. At 14, she became a mother and she started caring about the world around her. When her son was born, she was born too, as a strong slave mother who knew how to love even while she was in the worst situation. She worked in the cane fields and she'd sing softly under her breath, and in her songs, she comforted the others around her. She'd look at them, and nod, like a*

> *knowing nod that said, "it be alright, alright." And with those songs and the looks, the others around her knew to keep going, that they'd be remembered as strong and healthy and unbreakable. The field manager, he knew it was young Henrietta's song that was going to cause trouble 'cause the spirit of our people just weren't breaking. Night after night, he'd bring Henrietta to the canes, force himself on her and torture her in ways not fitting to recall. But that just made Henrietta love her babies and her fellow workers all the more. She knew how to pray. She taught herself to read. I don't know that she would have had that kind of back [meaning a strong back bone] if she hadn't been young and fierce, fierceful young. That's what kept her healthy. I mean, the caring she did for her babies and for all the Orange Hill babies that needed her, needed Henrietta. We got lots of Henriettas here. Strong girls finding themselves when they find their mother-right. Young strength is good strength and it makes for a strong future.*

Interestingly, I cannot find Henrietta Hutson's name on the nineteenth-century rosters of St. James slaves or on any of the historical records that I consulted from the Orange Hill plantation. Nor does the name appear in any of the books used in the St. James schools or in the written histories consulted. (Of course, this does not mean that Henrietta never existed, only that no written evidence of her life is readily accessible.) This is particularly interesting because it suggests that this iconic characterization of young motherhood (and perhaps others as well) emerges not from official documentation but from a tradition of oral history that provides a great deal of openness and fluidity. More often than not, stories that are not cemented in script or mired in formalized historical detail can be invoked across time and in different contexts to function as a validation of otherwise marginalized experiences. For Delia and the other women participating in this research, the story of Henrietta Hutson may indeed fulfill this function. Sandra, a grandmother of six children, all of whom live in her care, did not make specific reference to Henrietta Hutson but she did recall that her own teen mothering was a source of individual and community health.

> *Back then [the early1960s] there be cholera and polio and so on. But when I was just a young girl having my babies, it was as if a slave-mother be right there with me saying 'stay strong, stay strong'. And so I did right. Nothing protects you from hurricanes of health breakers but if you do right and you be a strong mother caring for the children and for the others, you fend off them diseases. One morning I waken and I hear Michael [her youngest] coughing, coughing something strong. I scoop him up, he be hot, real hot. I waken the others, and I say, we got to go to the clinic and off we set. I not have the money for the bus for all of we, so I give Michael to Andrea [her oldest daughter] and I put them on the bus. Luke [another son] and I start running behind the bus. I was young, before the arthritis come to me, so I*

could do it. And then a van pull up and there be Lainie's mother. "Get in here child" she holler and Luke and I jump in. Lainie's mother and me, we look over at each other, I be dead frightened but I know just looking at her, it would be ok. We be two mothers, one young, one old. And we be doing proud by the slave mother … We be keeping our people safe and healthy. Michael, he be alright. And I know some people be all fussing about them young girls having babies now, I look at them and I see something strong in them. Their Michaels [are] going be alright, too.

In this passage, the nostalgic connection to an unnamed slave mother of the past creates a tie between the motherly strength Sandra sees in herself and in Lainie's mother. Just as Henrietta Hutson is credited in Delia's retelling with fueling the maternal strength of young women today, Sandra sees her own success as a teen mother and community mother as being tied both back in time and to the future mothering skills of young girls in her community today.

Throughout my interview with Sandra, her 15-year-old grandson was listening attentively and at key points in her description was shaking his head in obvious disagreement. Sandra kept holding her hand up to prevent him from interrupting but at the end of her story, and after she finished her cold drink, she said, "Henry, you be wanting to say something here?" Henry immediately began to question Sandra's account, "You really hear a slave mother on your shoulder? You really hear that? You got crazy voices in your head, nan!" Sandra's response was immediate and loud, "Crazy voices? You think that when I be honouring them strong slave mothers, I be crazy? You be a fool for thinking that." Undeterred by Henry's eye-rolling, Sandra proceeded to explain that the slave mothers kept "young fools" like him alive with their "youthful strength" and Henry would "do right" to learn from their lessons. Sandra shooed him away at the end of her admonishment and looked at me with disbelief, "I worry hard for what life going be like for him. He has no good sense of what be important."

That the lives of the young mothers depicted in these narratives are storied with such passion and that these stories circulate, evoking fierce defense, is highly significant. These stories serve as a lived history (Downe, 2006) that casts young mothers as central and venerated members of a distressed community. In these nostalgic narratives, youth is a source of strength and collective survival. As such, young slave mothers are memorialized every time these stories are told and defended.

Memorialization of youthful maternal strength

"We be needing them young ones with youthful strength to be doing all they can."

There has been a recent flurry of academic interest in processes of memo-

rialization, which involve commemorating the people and events of the past through shared remembrances. Most of the existing and emerging studies of memorialization focus on public memorials and built form (Nevins, 2005; Richards, 2002; Santino, 2004) as well as the various responses to state-driven commemorative practices (DeJorio, 2006; Forest, Johnson and Till, 2004), many of which memorialize military conflicts and national loss (Buffton, 2005; Clarke, 2006; Edkins, 2003; Shay 2005). With few exceptions (Sherebrin, 2002), research has rarely explored how historical events and figures are memorialized through informal daily practices and shared narratives. Although some work has examined the gendered dimension of memorialization (Garton and Springthorpe, 2002; Whites, 2005), few have analyzed its intergenerational dimensions of commemoration (Sayigh, 2005) and even fewer have connected memorializing projects with motherhood (Bosco, 2006). Despite the dearth of research, my work with women in Barbados suggests that the informal and narrative-based memorialization of intergenerational maternal care is very significant in how the women connect the past with the present, and how they value their roles as mothers and community leaders. As Lainie points out, "I just don't know how to be talking 'bout what we should be doing here [to address the unwanted community changes] except to talk about where we come from, and what the young mothers before us be doing to get out of the messes they had then."

For Lainie and the others, shared remembrances of the slave mothers create continuity between past and present maternal strength. As such, these remembrances offer inspiration and a way to talk about the lead that mothers take in a distressed community. It is highly significant that the age of the memorialized mothers is continuously stressed. In virtually every interview, Lainie would refer to "them young slave mothers"; Sandra spoke often of the "youthful strength"; and Delia repeatedly characterized Henrietta Hutson as "fierceful young." Although there are not many historical records that detail the age at which the enslaved women in Barbados had children, it is widely believed that birth rates were reasonably high and mothers very young (Higman, 1995). Bridget Bereton's (2003) analysis of the unpublished letters and diaries of slave women and of female plantation owners indicates that in the later years of slavery, motherhood marked a transition from indentured girlhood to enslaved womanhood, and this transition signaled important changes in the informal community expectations put on young women. The women were, Bereton explains, now informal leaders in their communities and young women therefore developed a political, subaltern voice through motherhood.

Tzvetan Todorov (1996) draws a very useful distinction between literal memories that tie past experiences to specific events and people, and exemplary memories that connect past experiences deriving from one (set of) event(s) across time to other events. Exemplary memories therefore open remembrances to analogy and extended application. The shared stories told by the women in the Bridgetown neighbourhood to commemorate young slave mothers stand

as exemplary memories. These stories extend the remembered strength and perseverance of young mothers of centuries ago across time and context as they are applied to the young mothers in Bridgetown today. Through the sharing of these stories, the women participating in this study hope to encourage not only themselves but also, and perhaps particularly, the young mothers to find their political voice and maternal strength to speak and act against what they see as destructive community change; "we be needing them young ones with youthful strength to be doing all they can," Sandra explained.

Remembrances of young mothers as localized resistance

"I'm not sure why I'm mad, but I be spitting mad."

With its emphasis on young mothers, the memorialization of slave-era motherhood is a veneration of young women that stands in stark contrast to the globalizing discourses that denigrate youth (Schissel, 1997). The remembrances of young motherhood shared by the women in the Bridgetown community can be interpreted not only as an attempt to tie the past to the present and to inspire action in the face of adversity, it can also be interpreted as a localized resistance to the transnational recasting of young motherhood.

In his bestselling critique of the globalizing "culture of fear," Barry Glassner (1999) explains that few characters have been held as responsible for the degradation of society as young mothers. Focusing primarily on American political discourse, Glassner (1999: 90-91) explains that by the mid-1990s, news reports and social commentaries were profiling the "epidemic" of teen pregnancies and motherhood. In his 1995 State of the Union address, then President Bill Clinton referred to teen mothers as "America's most serious social problem." The 1996 Federal Welfare Law in the United States included a transfer of $250 million for the promotion of premarital abstinence, but only among those under eighteen years of age, and that same year, Health Canada created an envelope of $2 million for social programming designed to "combat teen pregnancies, and the community degeneration and burdens thereof" (Health Canada, 1996). These kind of initiatives on the part of American and Canadian governments are very significant because they contribute to the writing of a "master narrative" of young motherhood that adopts universalizing language (depicting young motherhood to be the same everywhere) and casts young motherhood, and young mothers, in consistently negative ways.

There is, of course, a large international audience for the primarily American- and British-based journalistic accounts that document the low educational achievements of young mothers (Koch, 2006; "Teen Pregnancy 'Hotspots,'" 2005), the high rates of criminal activity among the children of young mothers (Elshtain, 1996; Goldsborough, 1994), the exorbitant costs young mothers pose to national economies (Caldas, 1994; "Cost of Unwed Teen Birth," 2006), and the greater likelihood that children to young mothers will be born showing the

effects of substance abuse (Dale, 1991; Marquez, 2006). Without controlling for issues of poverty, which render relevant differences in educational achievement and crime rates insignificant, and without addressing the fact that many cases of malnutrition among racially marginalized children of young mothers are misdiagnosed as the aftermath of crack use (Paltrow, 1999), consumers of these sensational reports can easily conclude that the social ills plaguing all kinds of communities around the world can be explained by teen pregnancy. In fact, Wade Hern, Assistant Secretary for children and families at the Health and Human Services Department of the United States, has recently stated publicly that teen birth rates singly drive a lot of negative social indicators including drug use, child abuse and neglect, crime rates, and the need for foster- and state-care (cited in Koch, 2006: O2A).

In his biting critique of the shoddy research that informs these misrepresentations of young mothers, Barry Glassner (1999: 90) argues that "in what may qualify as the most sweeping, bipartisan, multimedia, multidisciplinary scapegoating operation of the late twentieth century," young mothers were repeatedly accused of destroying communities and fostering a sense of hopelessness. This is a far cry from the stories of young slave motherhood that were shared with me through the course of my research, and it is therefore fair to ask how this public British and North American discourse on teen motherhood is relevant to the women with whom I worked in Barbados.

The rhetoric and fear around young mothers in North America and Britain are not bound by national borders; nor is this rhetoric born only within those contexts. There are globalizing discourses which are challenging the nostalgic connections to teen mothers' strength. An editorial appearing in one of Barbados' national newspapers in May 2002 expressed distress over the death of a 14-year old girl who died of AIDS-related causes. Tying the HIV/AIDS epidemic to fears about broader community change, the editorial asks,

> Should we not be learning from our loved ones who have made homes for themselves in Canada, England and parts of America? We are learning from them that crime, unemployment, underemployment, vagrancy, drug use, irresponsible sexual behaviours and reckless teen mothering are ruining communities, communities that are much like ours: newly urban, Black and marked by migration. ("Tragic Times," 2002: A4)

Young mothers are recast in this account, from community leaders and symbols of strength to sources of community ruin. In this view, young mothers no longer lead the way; they—along with those who are addicted, unemployed, criminally inclined, promiscuous—are standing in the way of collective progress with their recklessness.

This editorial is not a solitary account. Five other newspaper articles appeared May, 2002, informing readers that the profile of young mothers in

Barbados should elicit concern. Lainie told me that her minister shared a similar concern with his congregation: "He just stood right up there in front of all us mothers and he say, 'Are we doing Bajan [Barbadian] motherhood any good by letting the young ones breed?' I'm not sure why I'm mad, but I be spitting mad at that." Lainie's response was most likely due to the fact that by questioning the fitness of young mothers, the minister (and all those expressing similar sentiments) is questioning the memorialized accounts that validate the women's claim to a political voice and central place as community leaders. Questioning the iconic characterization of young slave mothers is to question an important source of power—in Sandra's words, "youthful strength"—that Black women in post-slavery Barbados have as competent mothers.

Despite accounts to the contrary, the women participating in this research continued to insist that stories of young slave motherhood are fundamental to their fight for community well-being and their struggles against the "hurricane of health breakers." These stories not only provide individual inspiration and a way to live history; these stories also allow the women to resist the globalizing trends and to assert a localized identity that still very much upholds the principles of matrifocality. "Don't be telling me that we don't matter," Lainie explained, still responding in anger to her minister's comments. "Maybe we not be like them others, maybe we got the young slave mothers better than the rest of them do. But I be serious when I say, we be doing right by saying to the young ones: be strong, be mothers, be good."

Conclusion

In her account of becoming a young mother, Crystal'Aisha Perryman-Mark (2000) describes the challenges posed by the globalizing discourse that renders young motherhood as negative. And although there is no doubt, and it is certainly not my intent here to negate the fact that there are significant and age-specific challenges, difficulties and struggles associated with young motherhood, PerrymanMark (136) claims that to politicize motherhood is to give voice to a feeling of power that for many young women remains unattainable outside of more complex intergenerational ties. "A mother interviewed by Fiona Green states that 'to Mother is to have an entire generation in one's hand' (1999: 101). This is a power mothers and othermothers—aunts, friends, grandparents and caregivers—have had, and continue to have, and that is passed down to us" (PerrymanMark, 2000: 136). Memorializing the strength of young mothers may not alleviate the real life difficulties that teen mothers face, but it does help to maintain the cultural site where women claim a voice and a political place of power in matrifocal communities.

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[1]The topic of women and slavery in the Caribbean is an expansive one. Despite the many and exemplary works that present primary as well as secondary sources (Shepherd, 1999), that offer historical syntheses of the gendered aspects to slavery (Beckles, 1989; Bush, 1990; Morrissey, 1989) and that discuss the attention to the fertility and child mortality rates on slave plantations (Beckles, 1998: Kiple, 1981; Midgley, 1992), there is surprisingly little written on the experience of mothering under slavery.

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