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Adom Philogene Heron

COMING TO TERMS
WITH CARIBBEAN FAMILIES

In her essay 'We Kind of Family' (2002), Trinidadian author and activist Merle Hodge tells her audience[1] that 'we are a long way from coming to terms with what family means' in the Caribbean. Hodge's intervention is frank and thoroughgoing, taking issue with public commentators (e.g. pastors and politicians) who give 'pompous little speeches' about 'family values' and blame those living outside of nuclear marital households (the majority of Caribbean people) for 'the breakdown of family structure' (Hodge 2002: 476). Hodge reminds us that, in fact, there is no 'one family structure, here or anywhere else in the world for that matter. There are many' (Hodge 2002: 476). She then elaborates the diverse ways Caribbean people make family: via dynamic relational networks, varied household configurations, pragmatic sexual unions, and close consanguineal bonds. Informed by detailed (even ethnographic) observation of kinship throughout her life's work—as illustrated in her novels *Crick Crack Monkey* and *For the Life of Laetitia*[2]—and her feminist praxis (Balutansky and Hodge 1989), Hodge's call is urgent and unequivocal. She implores Caribbean peoples to transcend moralist preoccupations with narrow (Euro-centric) ideals and accept their family realities, on their own wide-ranging terms.

In 2018, when a twitter-storm was sparked by a poorly written (reductive, generalizing) and researched (unevidenced, outdated) British GCSE Sociology textbook entry on Caribbean families (Owens and Woodfield 2017; see Härkönen [this special forum] for a direct quote), I sought guidance in Hodge's essay.

In the meditations that follow, I ask what the moral melee surrounding the textbook might tell us about how families are, and could be, understood in the 21st century Caribbean/diaspora. First, I interpret the indignation the textbook provoked amongst British-Caribbeans. Second, I trace some of the historic echoes that repeat within the textbook passage, recalling a persistent myth that follows Caribbean kinship from plantation to present. Finally, I initiate an ethnographic excavation, locating evidence in the earliest anthropological monograph of Caribbean kinship to unsettle received popular wisdom about Caribbean families. In what follows I think with Hodge, to encourage a rereading of Caribbean kinship—not as it should be (according to inaccessible abstract ideals), but *as it is lived*.

DIASPORIC INDIGNATION

October 2018. Britain stands at a tense post-imperial juncture. It is a year of anniversaries. 70 years since the arrival of that infamous ship, the Empire Windrush, beginning the movement of some 304,000 'British subjects' from the West Indies to the 'motherland' (1948–1971, see Murdoch 2018; Perry 2015)—the figurative birth of Britain's multicultural project. 60 years since the 'race riots', of Notting Hill and Nottingham, where 'Teddy Boys' and far right activist violently attacked Caribbean residents (Hall 1978; Travis 2002). And 50 years since Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech, which incited white British panic about 'swarms' of black immigrants prophesying a racialized civil

war (Murdoch 2018). Throughout this 70-year history, the resident Caribbean social body has been, as Stuart Hall astutely notes, the site on which Britain has projected its (post)colonial 'quarrel with itself' (cited in Gilroy 2002 [1987]: xxvi)—over imperial decline, post-industrial national belonging, economic opportunity, and the meaning of citizenship. In 2018 this quarrel was reignited. Now, in the context of Brexit and the British government's 'hostile environment' immigration policy, hundreds of elderly West Indians—resident in a post-WWII Britain they had been invited to rebuild and where they had built lives—were being deported or threatened with deportation en mass. Throughout the first half of 2018 such events became a national scandal, separating families, forcing people to leave jobs, and sending them to natal lands they had not seen for decades (Wardle and Obermuller 2018; Cheddie 2018). It is in October of this year of anniversary and scandal, and during Black history month of all months (that quota-moment of establishment recognition of Caribbean contributions to Britain), that the GCSC textbook extract was discovered and circulated on Twitter. It depicted Caribbean families in simplistic, ever-othering terms. And hence, it represented yet another affront to an already weary and scarred British Caribbean social body.

Second and third generation Caribbeans were angered by the textbook's reproduction of such tropes as 'absent' fatherhood, single motherhood, and child shifting to 'acquaintances' casually charged with childrearing (Owens and Woodfield 2017). This reductive rendering was a familiar one to the children and grandchildren of the 'Windrush generation', confronted throughout their lives by stereotypes about their families, narrated in pathologizing and deficit terms (Ochieng and Hylton 2010). And

not only did such caricatures contradict or obscure their own complex and varied familial experiences, the idea that such accounts now potentially confronted their children at school was deeply offending. MP for Tottenham (an area of London with a sizeable Caribbean population) David Lammy asked, 'Why are sweeping generalizations (…) in your GCSE sociology textbook? Sometimes it feels like little has changed since I was at school in the 80s.' (Badshah 2018). Lammy's generation recall how members of the British media, politicians and social scientists framed their families as 'fragmented' (Pryce 1979: 119) or 'broken' (The Telegraph 2007), citing 'the family' as the cause of various social ills: from youth 'deviance' (Pryce 1979: 119) and rioting (House of Commons 1981: 1067) to educational exclusion (Sewell 2010).

Likewise, this group was all too aware of the coloniality of Caribbean family moralities. Moralities their parents were expected to aspire to in accordance with the British West Indian ideals (of austere female sexuality, marriage, 'legitimate' procreation, and patriarchal nuclear households) that circulate in their homelands and were carried with them (back) to Britain. This elder generation often came to espouse such values (see Bauer 2011: 60–61), where commensurate with their seniority, middle class standing, or Christian orientation, and advocated such for their children growing up in Britain. Hence, for second and third generation Caribbeans still reckoning with the events of a turbulent year, confronting racist deficit models of black families that persist in British society, and reconciling the respectable ideals of their parents, the textbook passage trod callously on sensitive ground.

KINSHIP MYTH

> I accept this archipelago of the Americas. I say to the ancestors who sold me, and to the ancestors who bought me, I have no father, I want no such father, although I understand you black ghost, white ghost, when you both whisper 'history'. (Walcott 1974: 27)

The weight of history bears heavily on kinship in the Caribbean and her diaspora. Most notably, this happens through recurring (post) colonial anxieties concerning 'illegitimacy', mother centred families and the 'missing men' (Blackwood 2005). I shall focus here on the latter. When the textbook passage concluded that 'In Caribbean families, the fathers and husbands are largely absent and women assume the most responsibility in childrearing' (Owens and Woodfield 2017) it invoked a longstanding myth that echoes from plantation to present—what I call *the myth³ of the dead father*. The myth circulates within many common sense accounts of Caribbean kinship (including the 'pompous' speeches mentioned by Hodge, above) and the early scholarship of the region. It can be summarized as such: plantation slavery signalled the social death of the black father, reducing black males to chattel studs, separating them from children (Goveia 1965), undermining their conjugal unions (Frazier 1939: 24), and investing 'paternal' power in white overseers and masters (Patterson 1982: 65; Simey 1946: 48–49). The myth emerges from historic actuality, yet it transcends the originary plantation (much like the plantation metaphor itself), to structure the social realities that succeed it. The myth is a patriarchal one, figuring supposedly fatherless families as aberrant: 'denuded' (Clarke 1999 [1957]), 'loose', 'disintegrated' (Simey 1946) and 'matrifocal'⁴ (R. T. Smith 1956). In sum,

the myth has become doxa, leading observers to imagine the Caribbean as a fatherless place composed of unstable families.

Moreover, the myth, taken on by many Caribbeans and early scholars of the region, contends that this pattern persisted after enslavement—becoming a question of personal choice and 'responsibility'. In 1941 (103 years post-emancipation), Jamaican social worker Amy Bailey penned a public letter about her island entitled 'The Land of Dead fathers'. She explained,

> By 'dead' I do not just mean literally dead (…) [but] dead in spirit, dead to moral or practical responsibility for their children (…) There are large numbers of men in this country (…) who answer to the above description; who have children for whom they assume no responsibility; who have children whom they refuse to recognise, who have children of whom they are unaware (Bailey 1941: 10).

Such concerns recur into the present and throughout the post-plantation Americas. In a campaign speech to a black Chicago church Obama famously stated,

> Too many fathers are (…) missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it. (Bosman 2008)

And in Dominica (where I work) Prime Minister Skerrit recently promised,

> The issue of delinquent fathers is one that I will address (…) I hereby give early warning to those men who are able, but

who are not taking proper care of their children, that their happy-go-lucky days are coming to an end, very soon. (Dominica News Online 2016)

Thus, the image of the dead black father haunts the Antilles, its hemispheric neighbours and the post-plantation Americas more broadly, stubbornly persisting as a matter of public concern. The textbook unknowingly reproduced this myth, leaving little room for counter-narrative.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXCAVATION

Contrary to the myth, examples of families (re)figuring fatherhood beyond absence can be increasingly found in anthropological (Anderson et al. 1993; Fox 1999; Chevannes 2006; Olwig 2007: 93-117; Philogene Heron 2017), sociological (Reynolds 2009), and historio-graphical accounts (Browne and Burnard 2017) of Afro-Caribbean kinship. And beyond simply assessing fatherly absence/presence vís-a-vís the paternal norms of providing, guiding, protecting, and correcting, emerging studies are developing increasingly nuanced considerations of fathering/grandfathering across the lifecourse (Härkönen 2016; Philogene Heron 2016), the emergence of more hands-on paternal practice (Fox 1999; Philogene Heron 2019) and fathers' embodied participation in pregnancy (Philogene Heron 2018). However, to find such qualitatively rich and nuanced examples we need not simply look to the present, but can return to the first anthropological account of British West Indian kinship.

In Fernando Henriques' *Family and Colour in Jamaica* (1953) we can excavate realities slighted by the myth of the dead father. By all intents and purposes the monograph offers a fairly standard overview of the 'social organi-sation' of kinship across the class-colour strata of 1940s Jamaican society and reproduces the myth ('The father generally plays a minor role in the life of his children. In many cases he is entirely absent from the household' [Henriques 1953: 131].) However, hidden in Appendix III of the book, entitled 'Fragment of a Lower Class Autobiography', we find an altogether different picture of paternal relatedness. What made Henriques resist removing this close-grained and person-centred section from his dispassionate overview will remain unclear, but its presence seems telling. It gestures towards a lived-complexity and processual appreciation of 'kinning' (as everyday practice) that would not be centred in anthropology until the 1990s (see Carsten 1995).

The autobiography is that of a 34-year-old woman from Port Antonio, Jamaica, who recollects her rural childhood and the relationships that populated it. Central to her kinship world is her father. The woman describes his patient parenting style ('he takes time with me') and patriarchal defence of her chastity. She recalls him encouraging her to be hardy and stand up to older children who teased her for having a speech impediment ('my father laugh it off (…) [saying,] "You are learning to defend yourself"'). She recalls his and her tears when she learned that he was not her biological father. And yet, as she describes the quotidian intimacies of him sharing food with her, her sleeping patterns in his and her mothers bed, their playful observation of his provisioning banana trees through the window, and a traumatic episode of being separated during a hurricane as he walked her to school—she is reminded that 'he is just as much our father as he is our mother's husband' (Henriques 1953: 199). In short, such intimate everyday practices evince a paternal closeness that is far

from anomalous to the narrator. Hence, the man who becomes her father is far from socially dead or absent.

We may read this retrieval from the interstices of a Caribbean kinship classic not as an isolated counterpoint, but a hint. An indication of rich, lesser-acknowledged realities that sit beyond popular and dominant scholarly perceptions. Such excavation is not only empirically significant for filling gaps in the anthropological/historical record (as I have suggested with an ethnographic resurrection of the dead father). It is also of urgency for (diasporic) Caribbean publics, to reconcile disjunctures between pragmatic kinship realities and remote family ideals. Perhaps such work bears healing potential for those whose family forms have been pathologized, affording the possibility of transcending kinship myths. And maybe it can remind us all to accept Caribbean kinship on its own lived-terms, thus supporting 'the creation of conditions in which good family life can flourish, in all kinds off family' (Hodge 2002).

NOTES

1 'We Kind of Family' is an adaptation of the 9th anniversary lecture of the Women Working for Social Progress organisation on 26th February 1994 in Port of Spain, Trinidad.
2 Both featuring intimate interpersonal portraits of young female protagonists' complex relationships with aunts, fathers, (step)mothers, siblings, uncles and cousins.
3 I mean myth not in the sense of a fiction, but a narrative that orders the present, transcending 'both historical successions and contemporary correlations' (Lévi-Strauss 1969 [1949]: 491). The myth of the dead father is born of the primal scene of Caribbean societies, the plantation, and repeats thereafter.
4 Note, by contrast, how nobody speaks of the normative male-centred nuclear family as 'patrifocal' (Strathern 2005).

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ADOM PHILOGENE HERON
LECTURER
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
GOLDSMITHS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
a.heron@gold.ac.uk