

Studies in the Maternal

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Studies of the Maternal: Black Mothering 10 Years On

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In this article, I reflect that 10 years on the study of the maternal continues to offer a critical space in to centre black mothering in the UK. Not only does it provide an analytical lens in which to document and reflect on black women's daily lived encounters, but it also provides a framework in which to assert the validity of black mothers' knowledge. This is particularly necessary for countering cultural messages that seek to deny their knowledge or tell black women that they are inadequate mothers. In the ensuing years, since the publication of my article in the inaugural collection, my research has continued to focus on black mothers, always with the intention to move them from the margins to the centre of maternal studies. Indeed, my central message is unchanging: for black mothers, operating at the intersections of race, class and gender; black women, inhabit and navigate different understanding of motherhood. I similar highlight ways that the practice of Black mothering signifies a political act of resistance against intersecting inequalities.

Studies in the maternal have long recognised that mothers' lived experiences are rooted in maternal identities, practices, and social locations. Writing 10 years ago in the inaugural volume of *MaMSIE* (Reynolds, 2009), I reflected on how contemporary critical debates on the maternal were keen to understand the multi-faceted ways that motherhood is embedded within patriarchal systems of control and dominance. Yet, within the maternal scholarship, there was a general reticence in exploring how 'race' and racism intersect with patriarchy in the social construction of motherhood. In the article, I highlighted the important work of black feminist scholarship in the UK in contesting debates on the maternal, which privilege white, hegemonic, Western, middle-class experiences of motherhood, while at the same time marginalising the voices of mothers belonging to other racial and class locations. To this end, my article 'what is maternal studies' expressed caution about the extent to which this publication could fully speak to, and represent, the diversity of maternal experiences that exist outside of these 'normative' constructions. My main concern was that black mothers and the study of their maternal practices would once again occupy a marginal position, and our mothering practices and identity considered inferior when compared to white women. I recall that my article, in framing an analysis of black motherhood, called for a 'study *of* the maternal' as opposed to the 'study *in* the maternal'. For me, this change of preposition would be a way of understanding mothering as an active place involving as a 'set of socially constructed activities and relationships which are positioned and contextualised within social, historical and cultural frameworks' (Reynolds, 2009: 2).

Crucially, the study of the maternal offered a critical space in which I could centre black mothering in the UK (Reynolds 1997 and 2005). Not only did it provide an analytical lens in which to document and reflect on their daily lived encounters, but it also provided a framework in which to assert the validity of black mothers' knowledge. This was particularly necessary for countering cultural messages that seek to deny their knowledge or tell black women that they are inadequate mothers. In the ensuing years, since the publication of my article in the inaugural collection, my research has continued to focus on black mothers, always with the intention to move them from the margins to the centre of maternal studies. Indeed, my central message

is unchanging: for black mothers, operating at the intersections of race, class and gender; black women, inhabit and navigate different understanding of motherhood. The practice of Black mothering signifies a political act of resistance against intersecting inequalities. To this end, black mothers' care of their children and families is not confined to the domestic sphere of the household and family unit. Rather, black mothering operates at the borders of public/private boundaries. Black mothering represents a site of struggle and survival. Yet, it is also a collective and connective space where we, as black women, can thrive and accomplish great acts of achievements in our individual lives and those of our children.

Today, I continue to stand by my earlier assertion that black motherhood and black womanhood are inextricably interlinked. Black mothering exists outside of biological function and instead encompasses a collective acts of community activism. These acts go beyond the narrow realms of the domestic sphere/household to provide care for and about children these women may or may not be biologically related too. It was U.S black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill-Collins (1990), who first highlighted the practice of 'other mothering' to demonstrate a system of care through which black women provide care for children in the community. Pivotal to black mothers' community engagement is their kin-work—black women's operating as teachers, community volunteers, health care workers—within their local neighbourhoods and community organisations. Crucially, this kin-work invests in, supports and nurtures black children in society that position these children as second-class citizens (Reynolds 2003; 2006 and Reynolds et al. 2018).

If anything, over the intervening 10 years since I wrote this first article, I would argue that we need critical analysis of maternal studies – now more than ever – to contextualise and understand black mothers' lived experiences in contemporary Britain. We are witnessing a period of political and cultural history in the UK whereby right-wing populism and fear of the 'racial other' is on the rise. Commentators have suggested that with the 2016 Brexit Referendum, it was largely fears about rising immigration that drove the vote to leave the European Union (National Centre for Social Research 2017). This has coincided with the UK government economic programme, which has brought deepening poverty and social inequality due to

reductions in public spending on welfare provision and benefits. Austerity policies have also encouraged moral discourses around parenting, whereby those categorised as 'undeserving' or 'deserving' poor are a result of 'good' versus 'bad' parenting (Gillies, 2005; Jensen and Tyler 2012). Motherhood for black women remains embedded within these intersecting processes. Moreover, the racialisation of black mothering and their 'kinwork' positions these mothers as 'undeserving' and 'bad parents' in policy debates (Reynolds et al. 2018). Black mothers and their lived experiences is both a product of and response to this racialisation process. Consequently, any analysis of their experiences must be understood in this context.

Indeed, I would go as far as arguing that there is a moral panic about black mothers and their families. Stereotypes and pathologized ideologies have always existed. But within this populist period, it is now commonplace for public denouncements about black mothers' family life and parenting practices to go unchallenged in public and media debates.

This has left black mothers today increasingly vulnerable on multiple fronts. For instance, as shown by recent studies, black mothers are more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth compared to women of other ethnicities (BBC News 2019). Similarly, black mothers are also facing increasing barriers in navigating their carer/worker status (Reynolds 2009). Black women have historically earned less salary compared to men and White women in similar professions and occupations (Reynolds 2017). However, as part of the Conservative Government's programme of austerity measures, there has been a rapid escalation of job losses in areas and employment levels of the public sector where black and Asian women are overwhelming largely concentrated (Reynolds, 2017 and Runnymede and Women's Budget Group, 2018). Increased unemployment in this sector creates a negative impact on the family income of black families where black mothers are the sole or primary economic provider. And the cuts to public sector services, welfare services and housing benefits only deepen this crisis for black mothers.

As black mothers, we are more likely to work full-time to make up this economic shortfall, which emerges out of black women's subordinate structural location (Reynolds 2017; Runnymede/Women's Budget Group, 2018). Yet, persistent cultural

messages tell us that the maternal ideal is still that of the stay-at-home/part-time worker mother whose primary role is domestic home care provider. This had led to moralising discourses that suggest mothers who work long hours outside the home negatively impact the educational outcomes and resulting life chances of their children. There was some evidence of this in the aftermath of the 2011 London riots. David Cameron, who was prime minister at the time, gave a speech blaming the riots on 'poor' parenting: the absence of parental supervision and a lack of adequate family structure. Although Cameron did not explicitly refer to black families and maternal practices, Lewis (2011) notes that the racialisation process was implied through the coded use of terms such as 'feral youths', 'single mothers' and 'absent fathers'.

Such debates individualise parenting and create a victim-blaming approach at the level of individual mothers, rather than address the structural factors that give rise to social inequality and social exclusion. Policy debates show that black children are disproportionately more likely to underachieve in schools and be incarcerated in prisons and psychiatric hospitals. They also show that black children (specifically black boys) are more likely to end up as the victims and perpetrators of the rising knife crime epidemic in UK towns and cities. Unfortunately, these statistics are attributed to the individual and cultural failings of black mothers, particularly single-parent mothers. Such moral panic fuelling further fears around black mothers and their families perpetuate the narrative that black mothers and parenting practices are designed to fail our children.

As black mothers, it is not surprising, then, that the care and nurturing we provide our children are underpinned by a deep-seated fear that we are raising children in a society that seeks to denigrate them, fails to protect them, and that does not recognise their worth or contribution to society. A central component of black mothering is, therefore, adopting strategies to challenge racism in their own and their children's lives. This includes, for example, talking to black children from an early age about the impact of racist oppression and identity politics so that they can successfully navigate the environment and institutions that place them at a disadvantage.

As noted above, Black mothers are caring for their children in a period when right-wing populism is on the rise across many English towns and cities, and their

membership to the nation-state is becoming increasingly tenuous. Across many immigrant communities that are deemed to be 'racial other' (e.g. Caribbeans, Africans, Middle Eastern, Muslim Eastern Europeans), and irrespective of having a British citizenship status, these communities are positioned as the antithesis to claims of national identity and UK sovereignty. The recent Windrush scandal, which presented a deliberate and calculated attempt to deny the citizenship rights of Britain's Caribbean communities, has torn apart many black families and, in certain instances, taken away from mothers the family members who were previously available to provide practical childcare and support (Runnymede 2018). It could be argued that the Brexit vote and Windrush scandal policy are rooted in a deep-seated and nostalgic yearning for a return to the British Empire and a racist colonial past (Younge 2018). These policies deny the rights of black mothers to be full and active citizens in society. The Conservative Government has stoked public anxiety about black families by explicitly defining a 'hostile environment' policy (Price and Spencer 2015). This stringent immigration legislation as introduced in 2012 by former prime minister, Theresa May, who was then Home Secretary. It is a further example of how notions of the 'good migrant/'bad migrant' are reproduced and used to justify and sanction the abuse, deportation and detention of those individuals deemed 'bad migrants' (those unskilled, black migrants) (Erel et al. 2017b).

Perhaps the most pernicious example of hostile environment policy is the denial of citizenship rights for black families living under the No Recourse to Public Funding condition. My current research is a collaborative project with a team of feminist scholars interested in exploring the lived experiences of migrant mothers. For this project, we use participatory action research and engage with these mothers as co-producers of knowledge (<http://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/pasar>). This project, which started in 2016, and is ongoing, continues to demonstrate the devastating impact of this policy on the lived experiences of low-income mothers living with a No Recourse for Public Funding (NRPF) status. This is a condition imposed on grants of limited leave to enter or remain in Britain. NRPF has the effect of prohibiting individuals holding that leave condition from being able to access certain defined public funds (Children's Society 2016). This means that they

are denied basic citizenship rights in terms of accessing particular types of social welfare benefits and health care. What is particularly striking about this group of mothers is that all of them are black women who have migrated from Caribbean and West African territories to the UK. Moreover, this migration has been due to Britain's historical connections to these countries as a result of the British Empire, colonialism and the Commonwealth. All these mothers have lived in the UK for 10 years or longer, and they have children born and raised here. Furthermore, in many circumstances, they have contributed to the UK economy through paid employment prior to being granted NPRF status. The children of NPRF mothers are also denied basic rights, such as the right to free school meals for families on limited incomes. However, local authorities must make housing provision for their children under Section 17 of the Children's Act. The mothers and their children are forced to live on a minimal income (which can be as little as £40 a week), which is primarily provided by charitable donations. This denial of these citizenship lead to homelessness and poverty, (including food poverty) for these women and their children (Erel et al. 2017b). Using participatory theatre and walking methods, our project creates a creative space for mothers to share their subjugated knowledge with each other, and also with policymakers and practitioners. The black mothers' role as mothers as co-producers of knowledge represents another example of 'community mothering', that I highlight earlier. And it is another example of the strategies black mothers engage with to challenge racial inequalities at individual and collective levels. The mothers' engagement with the project may not directly transform their material and economic circumstances. However, it does reflect an important strategy for civic engagement. The process of sharing and documenting their individual and collective stories to a range of audiences and stakeholders, as well as mothers encountering similar situations of poverty and hardship, means that these mothers can directly intervene in public and policy discourses on black/migrant mothers. In this way, they can generate new knowledge that challenges stereotypical narratives, which pathologize these women and their families as 'other', 'deviant' and problematic to society (see also Erel et al. 2017a and b; Reynolds et al. 2018; O'Neill et al. 2019).

I end this discussion by reflecting on my personal journey to motherhood. When I contributed to the first edition, I had just started on my path to motherhood. Indeed, I was pregnant with my first child when writing the first draft. On the one hand, I was full of excitement and hope at what the future would bring. But on the other hand, I was also very conscious that as a black woman, like my own mother, I would have to navigate the tricky path of 'race' and gender intersectionality. The important contribution that black mothers make to society and our family lives are often invisible and overlooked in debates and the public sphere. At times, mothering can also feel like a futile act because we are constantly fed the image that we are lesser than and dysfunctional when compared to White (middle class) mothers. It is difficult to detach always and disconnect from these negative characterisations and pathologisation of black family life. As a mother to a black son who is son entering adolescence, I live in constant fear of rising knife crime and my son ending up a victim of this. Because, as we know from the statistical evidence, the victims and perpetrators of this crime are disproportionately young black men and/or from lower-income households. Public and media debate has racialised this violent crime epidemic, creating an underpinning inference that black males are culturally predisposed to violence and criminality, as a result of parenting (read mothering) and family structures. This speaks to a broader message: namely, that dysfunctionality exists at the core of black families, and that black mothers (in particular, black single mothers) are to blame for this. These pathologizing discourses also treat black mothering as an essentialised homogenous entity. This ignores the rich diversity of black mothers and our experiences. While there are factors that create a commonality in experience—collective action and community mothering in response to everyday lived encounters with racism—I am always mindful that one person's experiences do not represent the experience of all. Studies of the maternal need to highlight stories from a diverse range of black mothers. Otherwise, we end up running the risk of perpetuating these negative discourses of black motherhood, rather than challenging them.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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