**Racialized citizenship, respectability and mothering among Caribbean mothers in Britain**

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**Abstract**

Holy matrimony, nuclear family, attending church, education and good manners are typical markers of respectability. These Victorian middle-class ideological values were transported to the British Caribbean region after emancipation of slavery by missionaries and priests aiming to “civilize” the ex-slaves. As social values they were often transformed or met in opposition with a more complex set of cultural and social values within Caribbean creole communities. Overtime, however, some individuals adopted these Euro-centric values, thus prescribing to a form of racialized citizenship. Upon migration to Britain in the 1960s, some migrant mothers endeavoured to transmit these values among their children, in an effort to integrate and develop a sense of identity and belonging, but also as modes of resistance to experiences of racism and discrimination. This paper illustrates the tensions experienced by two migrant Caribbean mothers, and their concerns that the social values of respectability are being lost among their offspring.

**Keywords**

Caribbean migrant mothers; serial migration; “normativity”; racialized citizenship; social values; respectability and class

**Introduction**

For some contemporary Caribbean women, respectability is a prime form wherein they conceive of citizenship. The basic principle of respectability concerns legal marriage, attending church and having legitimate children, and the chief ways in which respectability is affirmed. These are Victorian middle-class ideological values which derived from the perspectives of white European culture, and defined as “appropriate between status equal”. Thus, “concubinage and ‘outside’ children were associated with those who were socially unequal” (Barrow 1996, 177). These ideologies were transported to the region during slavery by the planter class, and later became firmly established by missionaries from slavery to the post-emancipation period. However, historically, social values have been practised in very complex ways in Caribbean societies among all races and classes. Among the European planter class, marriage was not necessarily associated with nuclear family household formations. Most white men in plantation societies did not live with their wives and children in nuclear family households, and within many planter households were extended families which included blood – concubines and their illegitimate children – and house slaves and servants (Barrow 1996, 178). Among the slaves, legal marriage and Christianity were prohibited. As a consequence, they developed common-law unions and other informal relationships and family patterns (see Manyoni 1977 cited in Barrow 1996).

The various household formations and family practices which were common among and between slaves and planter class continued to some degree after emancipation (see Alexander 1984 and Manyoni 1977 cited in Barrow 1996). However, the post-emancipation period also evinced a change in the rise in middle-class status for some coloured and black women in the Caribbean. With this rise came a change in attitude and behaviour towards Christianity, education and marriage, thus renouncing concubinage. For these women, “marriage and legitimacy became an obsession as they sought respectability for their families” (Barow 1996, 181). As Barrow notes:

They vociferously denounced what they saw as the promiscuity and immorality of the lower classes and promoted proper family life increasingly based on western patterns of faithful marriage, legitimate children and nuclear family households. But they were faced with their own husbands, fathers and sons, firmly embedded in Caribbean culture, for whom peer group popularity, non-domestic activity, marital segregation, concubinage and outside children had become a way of life (181).

Upon migration, some migrant mothers, although coming from communities with complex cultural values and social norms, faced with the complicated hierarchies of “race” and class in their host countries, they prescribe to forms of racialized citizenship as modes of survival for themselves and for their children.

This paper recounts the experiences of two Caribbean migrant mothers to the UK during the 1960’s, followed by their children in a process of serial migration – a process that occurs when parents migrate singly or together and send for other family members at a later date (Crawford-Brown and Rattray 2002; Jokhan 2007; Pottinger and Brown 2006). Thus, the first stage in serial migration is the separation of children from their parents who migrate, and the second stage is their reunification in the new country (Smith, Lalonde, and Johnson 2004, 109).

The paper traces the mothers’ experiences of parenting in the Caribbean, and the ways in which they tried to encourage the values of education, work, home ownership and good manners as important aspects of achievement, pride and identity, and important markers of being a respectable citizen in their parenting practices in Britain. In many ways, through some of their practices, the identities they try to instil are racialized forms of citizenship. The paper also illustrates these mothers’ awareness of the tensions involved in bringing up their children in British society as British citizens, and their concerns that what they perceive as key values of respectable citizenship are being lost among the younger generation.

I have used individual cases to avoid broad over-generalizations. Although some themes and patterns are typical across most of the participants’ narratives, there is considerable variety among the mothers’ experiences, and how their particular family lives were negotiated and practiced. Hence, each case highlights the different ways in which these migrant mothers experienced and performed respectable citizenship in different contexts and under different circumstances. What follows is a brief review of the concepts of “citizenship”, “racialized citizenship” and “respectability” in order to gain some understanding into the parenting practices and identities of these mothers. But first, a note on the study which informs this paper.

**The study**

The study from which this paper is drawn was part of an ESRC Professorial Fellowship Research Programme on “*Transforming Experience:* *Re-conceptualising identities and ‘non-normative childhoods*”.[[1]](#endnote-1) The programme addressed the ways in which adults from different family backgrounds reflect on their childhood experiences of growing up in contexts that some might consider “non-normative”. This particular strand of the research looked at adults who experienced the process of serial family migration in childhoodbycoming from the Caribbean to rejoin their parent(s) who were already in Britain. They moved from societies where it is not uncommon for children to live for some time with extended family members and relatives other than their birth parents, to one where this is less common and considered undesirable (although attendance at boarding school away from home and parents, or while parents are abroad has frequently been normalized in Britain). As a result, they have to deal with living in migration-extended families, separating from, and rejoining with their parents (and sometimes siblings with different birth places). They also have to learn how to deal with racisms in various contexts, including racism at school from teachers and education professionals who were there to help them. Their racialized visibility has, over the years, produced both ascribed identities and politically-forged group identities in the process of social change (for example through black consciousness movements).

All the parents migrated from the Caribbean between the early 1950s and mid 1960s at a crucial period in Britain’s labour shortage. They left their children in care of extended families in the Caribbean, and hoped to establish “a better life” for their families. This was a common practice at the time, and was therefore ***not*** considered “non-normative” in the Caribbean societies from which they came.

Fifty five qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted with thirty eight women (two of whom were mothers of the migrant children we interviewed) and seventeen men. Two focus group interviews were also conducted with eight adults each. Participants’ mean age at the time of interview was fifty years old. The age at which children were left behind ranged between eight months and seven years, and the age at which they reunited with their parents ranged between fifteen months and seventeen years. The number of years of separation ranged between six months and fourteen years, and they rejoined their parents in the UK between the early 1960s and mid-1970s. In the extracts presented below, participants are given pseudonyms when their individual interviews are quoted, and ‘Woman’ and ‘Man’ when quoted from group discussions.

***Racialized Citizenship***

Citizenship is a broad and much contested concept (Sandel 1998; Jones and Gaventa 2002; Holston 2008; Pell 2008; Yuval-Davis 1999) without a consensual framework. In western societies, citizenship is commonly conceptualized as belonging to a political community, typically a nation-state, and having the civil, political and social rights, privileges and responsibilities as members of that community. Marshall (cited in Reiter 2013, 24) views citizenship is “a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. [Everyone] who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed.” However, as Pell (2008, 143) notes, this conventional notion of citizenship within a nation-state is automatically a political status, while the social, economic, or private character is often ignored, thus undermining the concept (see also Bauer 2010; Yuval-Davis 1999; Plummer 2003).

Conceptualizing the nation-state as the basis of citizenship also discounts people’s experiences – often resulting from migration – of pluralism, multi-nationalism and multiculturalism within communities (Pell 2008, 144). It is for these reasons that Reiter (2013) argues for citizenship as “a positional good as well as a social role” (xviii-xix), and considers the process, inequality, negotiation and tensions that result between extreme and ideal types of citizenships (34). For Reiter, citizenship is best thought of as “constantly negotiated and heavily embedded in social interactions, and as a privilege and entitlement, it is not equally distributed and not easily socialized” (36).

Related to the citizenship debate is the notion of racialization and racialized citizenship. In sociological terms, racialization is the process of ascribing ethnic or racial identities to a social practice or group that did not previously identify itself as such (Omi and Winant 1986). It results from the interaction between a dominant and a less dominant group, whereby the less dominant group incorporates the values and ascribed identities of the dominant group (Chaudhary 2015). These values and identities form the basis of “good citizenship”, and become self-ascribed identities among the less dominant group.

In her effort to conceptualize citizenship, Reiter (2013) very thoughtfully illustrates the ways in which citizenship is denied to some individuals and groups through racism. For many minorities, the experience of racism translates into second class citizenship, because it undermines trust in public institutions and exposes those stigmatized to the discriminatory practices of their fellow citizens (36-37). In societies structured by European colonialism, and under conditions where citizenship is expressed in terms of rights and entitlements, whiteness functions as a symbolic capital which marks one’s belonging to the group of the historically privileged. Under these conditions, whiteness is not a biological reality, but a negotiated symbolic good and capital. Thus, “to those who are able to claim it successfully, it offers important tools with which to uphold and defend privilege” (Reiter 2013, 37). These tools, I would argue, fall under the concept of respectability – to be respectable. Simply defined, to be respectable is to have socially or conventionally acceptable morals and standards in order to gain virtuous social standing and reputation in society. Respectability, therefore, is conforming to and identifying with what is deemed as the social ideals of the total or legal society (Wilson 1969, 78).

***Respectability as a social value***

Respectability as a social value is a middle-class phenomenon with its roots going back to eighteenth century British society, “concerned with the establishment of ‘decent and correct’ manners and morals, as well as the proper attitude toward sexuality” (Olwig 1990, 95). The notions of respectability crystallized during the period of 1830 to 1870, the period of international economic dominance by Britain. It was the period when “self-satisfaction and pride” (Smelser 1982, 59) became the most dominant public attitude towards most British institutions, but it was also a period of “familial correctness and solidarity” (Laslett 1982, xiii). The middle-class Victorian family was one of those institutions, having converged and consolidated during those years (Davidoff and Hall 1987; Smelser 1982, 59). Thus, respectability as a social value “became an important means by which the middle classes first legitimized and demarcated themselves, and later upheld their special status vis-à-vis the lower and upper classes” (Olwig 1990, 95, citing Mosse 1985). Essentially the middle classes viewed themselves as the ideal image of the family and society.

Respectability, as a class phenomenon, was also concerned with varying degrees of conformity to social norms within classes. While middle-class families and individuals were under constant scrutiny from the public with regards to their “conformity to the norms of gentility in their breeding, cultivation and general demeanour” (Smelser 1982, 61), distinctions were also made “between the respectable (steadily employed, church-attending, and non-drinking) and non-respectable poor” (ibid). The paradox of Victorian respectability, however, as Laslett (1982) reminds us, is that the “Christian” marriage rule - which forbade sexual relationship outside marriage - was never universally obeyed, and that “traditional, even respectable sexual conduct was never quite what the morally minded have supposed” (Laslett 1982, xiii). In fact, during the early Victorian period, the illegitimacy level was the highest it had been for three hundred years, and the highest ever recorded until the late twentieth century. However, although the later Victorian years experienced declining fertility, and the spread of mass primary education which generated both important changes in family structure across class, family values and models up until the mid-twentieth century continued to be measured according to the standards of the earlier years. And more than a century after the disappearance of the Victorian family, its model and values remain “as a kind of ghost whose influence we have not really shaken to this day” (Smelser 1982, 72).

***Racialized respectability in Caribbean societies***

Caribbean scholars argue that “respectability”, which originated from outside the region, and is oriented towards middle-class Eurocentric culture, lifestyle and education was transmitted and maintained primarily by the Christian, *white* churches in the Caribbean (Wilson 1969; 1973). Historically, the white missionaries and priests preached about moral superiority and social respect based on holy matrimony, in a home with husband and father as family provider and head of household, and wife and mother as nurturer and moral guardian of the family and home (Olwig 2007, 29). Hence, the “home was an important symbol of the unity - and respectability - of the married couple and their children in the local society” (Olwig 2007, 172). These British middle-class moral values which already existed in theory among the planter class during slavery, were promoted among the freed slaves upon emancipation as the means by which they would become “civilized” (Hall 2002), and “proper members of society” (Olwig 2007, 29). Essentially, the missionaries aimed to establish a model of “proper citizenship” among the freed slaves.

However, these “respectable” values advocated by the white European Church were often in opposition with a more complex set of cultural and social values and norms within the local Caribbean creole communities (see Besson 2002; Burton 1997; Littlewood 1993; Wilson 1973). Moreover, as Olwig notes, the complex value system found in Caribbean communities “developed in close association with colonial and neo-colonial power structures over which the Afro-Caribbean population has had little control” (Olwig 1990, 96 citing Sutton 1974). Regarding marriage and family, the abolition of slavery removed legal distinctions on the basis of race and colour, and although the ex-slaves were pressured into legal marriage and monogamy by missionaries and priests, upon emancipation, incidents of “outside” unions and illegitimate children occurred on similar scale as before (Barrow 1996, 180).

Some scholars argue that in the British Caribbean context, these values appealed primarily to women (Wilson 1973; Foner 1973, 102; Smith 1988, 116), but others counter this argument. In her study of Martha Brae, a free “peasant” village founded over 150 years ago , in Trelawny, Jamaica, Besson (1993; 2002) for example, found that the cultural values among women “are not a mirror image of the Eurocentric value system of respectability, but a transformation of this system within the Afro-Caribbean peasant culture of resistance” (Besson 1993, 19). Regarding religion and the church for example, Besson shows that although women in Martha Brae play a significant part in the Christian Church, theirs is the Nonconformist Baptist Church, and a symbol of resistance to the Established Anglican Church of the plantation system. Hence, the women of Martha Brae continued to remain resistant against colonial Christianity (Besson 1993, 20). Moreover, based on their own cultural values, through their own leadership as “Mothers” and “Queens”, some women in Martha Brae have challenged “white male control of religion” (Besson 2002, 15). Regarding the values of holy matrimony and the male-headed nuclear family households, Besson observed that although the Baptist Church in Martha Brae condemns “sinful living” and baptized illegitimate children, the women are not committed to European legal marriage, and “along with their men, have forged a creole family system grounded in protopeasant adaptation” (Besson 2002, 16).

In her work on the Leeward island of Nevis, Olwig (1990) also notes that despite the Methodist missionaries’ efforts to Christianize the slaves, they were met with resistance, because the slaves had developed their own cultural system with a different religious understanding and practice (99). Records show that the slaves perceived man as essentially “good” and not as “a sinful creature in need of salvation by God” (Olwig 1990, 100 citing Turner 1982, 71). Regarding marriage, records from Nevis also showed that the missionaries failed to establish a “proper” marriage even among some slaves who were members of the Methodist church, because they had also developed a different family system which was based on the wider consanguineal family as opposed to marital union. Hence, their loyalty to the family took precedence over the Methodist church and legal marriage (Olwig 1990, 104).

Social values in contemporary Caribbean societies continue to be complex and fluid, and marriage and family patterns continue to show different features among the different classes. Among the lower class there is a higher percentage of visiting relationships, common-law unions and matrifocality, and if marriage occurs it is usually at a later stage, often after children are grown (Besson 1993; Clark 1999 [1957]; Smith 1988). Among the middle classes, marriage occurs with status equals, but as Barrow notes, it contrasts with concubinage relationships with the lower classes (Barrow 1996, 180). Over time, some individuals across class, gender and age have begun to view marriage, infidelity, illegitimacy and outside children differently. And even among those of similar status, family lives may be differentially structured such that while common-law unions are a socially acceptable alternative to legal marriage, for others it is not acceptable, and “condemned as ‘living in sin’” (Barrow 1996, 180-181).

For some contemporary Caribbean women, respectability is a prime form wherein they conceive of citizenship. Some middle class black and coloured women in the post-emancipation period have “subjected themselves to the civilising forces of Christianity and education and renounced concubinage. For them marriage and legitimacy became an obsession as they sought respectability for their families” (Barrow 1996, 181**).** Given the complex value system from which many Caribbean migrants came, upon migration and settlement in Britain, how then did the mothers in our study performmothering? The following illustrates their various mothering practices as they negotiate a sense of belonging and citizenship for themselves and for their children, in a context of “power inequalities and normative reconfigurations of race, class and culture” (Fumanti and Werbner 2010, 5).

**Gaining respectability through the church: narratives of Caribbean migrant mothers**

Leaving the Caribbean and settling into a new society void of their familiar network of family and friends, and feeling scrutinized into “behaving properly”, some first generation Caribbean migrants subscribed to racialized aspects of respectable citizenship within the now white majority culture. Religious spaces offer meaningful support and can provide a sense of belonging for new migrants. The church is the primary advocate of respectability, to which the Eurocentric institution of marriage and educational systems are closely aligned (Wilson 1973, 104). Therefore, going to church is a key mark of being respectable (Wilson 1973, 100). Subscribing to the moral values and virtues of the dominant British churches facilitated social integration, but also positions them as “good citizens” with loyalty towards their new society (Schinkel 2008, 19). These values were adopted by some migrants. However, for many, they were merely practised to a certain level in theory. For in practice, while adopting some British values, the migrants also maintained some traditions from the Caribbean, resulting in a kind of “transformation” of a new value system (Besson 1993; 2002), or a “creole” value system (Foner 1979).

Thus, we find that while many migrant mothers’ behaviour affirmed the values of respectability through legal marriage and the church, they also continued to participate in activities outside the church, such as attending house parties which involved drinking and seductive dancing. These activities contradict the values of respectability. Therefore, it could be argued that attending church while also going to house parties demonstrate a struggle between gaining reputation among their local African-Caribbean counterparts, and gaining respectability in the wider society (see Barrow 1996; Olwig 1990). Additionally, while some gained respectability through the dominant church, others did so by attending the Caribbean and African churches which were established against the discrimination many faced as migrants in Britain (indeed some also faced blatant rejection from clergymen (see Bauer and Thompson 2006; Patterson 1965). Within these churches they gain the freedom to worship according to the conventions and traditions they brought over with them from the Caribbean.

In the stories told by some of the mothers in our study, the church becomes a major channel through which they earn respectability, and in their parenting practices, they encouraged respectable values among their children. The following illustrates how in their own words, two women, Bertha and Bella gained respectability, sense of belonging and citizenship through their church.

**Bertha**

*Bertha is a seventy-nine year old woman from the Caribbean who migrated to join her husband in England 1964, leaving her five children behind in the care of extended family. Bertha’s children followed to join her and her husband in England within a period of three years. She is now retired from her job as an auxiliary nurse, and lives with her ninety-two year-old husband – father of her children. She has remained a Christian and is very active in her Baptist church.*

Bertha met her husband through the Baptist church where she was “very active”. She refers often to the church and couches her story in religious terms, sometimes using phrases such as “thank God”, “but God also good, he helps me out”. She makes distinctions between “the full Christian” (like herself), and others such as her husband's uncle who was a “bad uncle-in-law”, who “was not a Christian” and who did not like her because of her “Christian upbringing”. She aligns herself with “godly people” such as the missionary who became a family friend, and a landlady who was “very godly, lovely people”. Other aspects of Christian respectability which were important to Bertha were having a “good husband” and a responsible father, a “decent life” (as in legal, monogamous marriage and having a nuclear family - “we had a nice family union”), visiting and praying for the sick. These features are for Bertha, markers of a “good” citizen and which is further affirmed by her friends, members of her community and her church.

**Bella**

*Bella is a seventy year old woman who migrated from the Caribbean to England to join her husband in the mid-1960s, leaving three children behind in the care of her aunt and other extended family. She had three additional children in England, separated from her husband when the children were still growing, and raised her 6 children on her own. Bella remained single and is now president of an African-Caribbean and African Children’s charities.*

Initially,the church was not significant in Bella’s life. However, the church later became an important avenue for giving meaning to relationships in her life, while also providing her with a sense of belonging. Through the church she was able to redeem and liberate herself from her past failings as a mother and divorced woman and gain spirituality (Davis-Palmer 2005, 55). Bella is a member of a local charity where she contributes to fund-raising activities to help the homeless in the Caribbean. In her youth she sympathized with the poor and people in difficulties. She recalled thinking and saying as a young girl, “When I grow up I’m going to build me a big house and I’m going to take all the blind people off the street to live with me”. However, as an adult she has come to realize that, “I can’t have anybody living with me (laughs) but this is the nearest I can get to it by collecting, and I raise funds and take things like last year we went to Jamaica with a forty foot container”. Now retired, she works “harder than ever” in a local charity sending clothes and other items to the poor in the Caribbean.

At age seventy, Bella returned to college to “learn again… to try and improve [her] Maths and English”. She now views education as an important step to gaining the knowledge required for her charity work, but her improved English and reading abilities also mean that she is now able to communicate on a “more educated level”, thus gaining additional respect within her community. The significance of the church, her charity work and her new found education brought Bella back into the wider society and gained her even more respectability. Such respectability was further affirmed at her seventieth birthday party, organized by her church, and attended by over 150 people including the local MP, acknowledging her sense of belonging as a respectable person in the local community. Essentially, Bella now has a realization of worth: “I am a very interesting person you know” - proud of what she has done, and what she has become.

For both women, the arena of the church gives them greater possibility to re-present themselves on moral grounds (see Fumanti and Werbner 2010), and to reconstruct their social positions in their new British communities as respectable citizens according to British normative modes of conduct. The following illustrates the different approaches these mothers used in bringing up their children, to encourage and to instil religious and moral values so that they too may become respectable citizens.

***Children, religion and respectability***

**Bertha:**

Bertha views parenting in England as different from how she was brought up in the Caribbean. She relates differences particularly with regard to religion. For example, her parents brought her up in the church, and to pray three times a day. She wanted the same for her children but according to her, England “is like a different country”. Bertha worked very hard and for long hours, and outside of work she spent most of her leisure time involved in church activities, taking the children along, despite their protesting. In retrospect, she believes that religion became a contentious issue rather than a unifying factor in her parenting practices. Most of her children rejected religion, and she now feels great remorse about forcing the issue on them. Her poor relationship with her daughter resulted as a consequence, with her daughter now resenting her on religious grounds.

Bertha fasted and prayed to God for solutions to repair her relationship with her daughter. When her children reached their mid to late teens, she decided that the best solution was to allow them to make their own religious choices. She told them that “everyone have to give an account for their own sin”. Moreover, although Bertha wished all her children to live in holy matrimony as respectable adults, respectable in the eyes of the church, one of her daughters has two children out of wedlock. She takes pride, however, in the educational and occupational achievements of her grandchildren. Their social positions arguably raise the respectability of their mother.

**Bella**

As with Bertha, Bella’s family became divisive. However, not as a consequence of imposed religious values, but according to her,due to the lack of religious encouragement from her while they were growing up. She enrolled her children in other social organizations such as the Brownies, Girl Guides and Boys Scouts, organizations which also cultivated ideas of respectability. And although she couldn’t afford holidays away with her children, during the school breaks, she sent her daughter “away with the Guides”, and her son “away with the Scout”. However, in retrospect, she feels she “hadn’t the sense to know” the value of taking the children to church. She now encourages other parents to “go with the children to church…Get up and go to Sunday school”. Effectively, Bella has come to view the values of religion and morality as symbols of respectable citizenship.

***The home as the locus of respectability***

Many Caribbean scholars write about the home as the central domain where respectability is performed and gained in the local community, and primarily through women, as opposed to the male public sphere of reputation outside the home and often in the rum bars. (Olwig 2005, 196-197). However, for many of the families in our study, their performance of respectability does not fully reflect British respectability as illustrated above, but continues to display a more complex value system, which combines both British and Caribbean values – a kind of creole value system (see Bauer 2010; Besson 2002; Foner 1979) whereby they earn respectability both locally in Britain and back in their home countries. Sending money and parcels home to children left behind and other family members is a way of claiming respectability both locally and transnationally for these mothers. They are asserting their sense of belonging and respectable citizenship both at home and in their new society (Olwig 2007, 239). Many migrant fathers also become involved with the activities of the home and the family network, which according to the principles of respectability, are the domain of women. Conversely, women also participate in aspects of “reputation” (such as socializing in rum bars), which Wilson (1969; 1973) argued as primarily male domain. And with more economic security women are also able to compete for status (Besson 1993). Moreover, although many parents in our study came from common law unions in their Caribbean communities, upon migrating they became legally married, because for some unmarried mothers, dealing with doctors and schools for their children posed many challenges in British society at the time. Becoming married families therefore made their lives much easier. Thus, for many first generation African-Caribbean people in the study, respectability has a double value: it is a claim to respectability within their local communities, but is also practiced as a mode of survival.

**Respectability, education and status**

Respectability is also related to education and schooling, with education seen as a major avenue to upward social mobility - occupation and income (Wilson 1973; Foner 1979). A good education implies that one has acquired certain manners, good taste and moral sensibility, values that are characteristic of respectability. The schools are historically aligned with the churches, which therefore, became the vehicle of values taught in schools. Not sending a child to school was “a mark of ignorance and lack of respectability” (Wilson 1973, 104). In Victorian Britain, middle-class education reflected a segregation of the sexes. Among the upper classes, girls were generally excluded from formal education, and for the most part, those who received education were taught by governesses, the content of which focused primarily on preparing them for becoming a “middle-class wife” (Smelser 1982, 62-63). The upper-classes sent their sons to non-local boarding schools while middle-classes sons were sent to a range of private and grammar schools of similar status.

Unlike the families in Victorian Britain, in Caribbean societies, families across class encourage education among their male and female children to enhance their mobility (see Foner 1973, 75-76 on Jamaica). Wilson (1973) observed that women were more interested than men in educating their children, and girls are given equal educational opportunities as boys (104). He also argues that ambitious women encourage their social standing through their children by encouraging economic careers for their sons, and enhancing the respectability of their daughters. Therefore, “a girl who becomes pregnant before marriage destroys the chances of a shortcut to an improved social position” (Wilson 1973, 103). The following illustrates the mothers’ educational experiences and their ambitions for their children.

**The mother’s own education and aspirations for her children**

For Bertha and Bella’s husbands, migration implied adventure, opportunity and distance from family left behind. For these mothers, it meant opportunity but also social mobility for their families. From the Jamaican context, Foner (1973) writes that “an individual’s prestige in the local status system is related to his children’s educational attainments” (60). Because of her family’s working-class background in the Caribbean, Berthalacked the opportunity for “proper” education before migrating to Britain. However, she was always aware of the importance of education as key to upward social mobility. Berthaleft school at age fourteen in the Caribbean in order to earn money to contribute to the support of bringing up her brothers and sisters. She said that upon leaving school, “I take an oath to God that what I don’t get, I’m going to give them [her children], Proper education!”

I didn’t get proper schooling because my mum didn’t marry my father, and I didn’t get a proper education…. I remember one time … the teacher come to my mum home and said they haven’t seen me in school for two months. [I was] looking after my sister then… my mum was so scared, she didn’t want no problem between my step-father.

While separated from her children, she sent money to provide for their education in the Caribbean. When they rejoined her in Britain, she said “I worked like a slave round the clock me and my husband” to ensure her children had a “proper education”. Bertha aspired to be a nurse, but realized that she would not be able to afford “proper training” for herself as well as “good education” for her children. Therefore, she studied at night school and became an auxiliary nurse instead. She also spoke of making sacrifices to afford private lessons in typing, guitar and piano for her children. Bertha attributes her “rough” childhood in the Caribbean and her lack of “proper schooling” to being born out of wedlock:

Bertha encouraged her children away from her own path, and explained to them her reason for migrating: “to work hard and give them education”. She took great pride in speaking about her educated children, most of whom have college or university education, and some are continuing to study. When one daughter dropped out of college and settled for “little office work”, Bertha was disappointed and encouraged her to “go back to college and pick yourself up”. Which her daughter did, and now has “a good job”.

In British society access to material and symbolic resources is, in addition to social class and education, structured according to ethnicity, culture or “race” (Erel 2011, 705). Therefore Bertha’s parenting efforts were arguably geared at providing her children with the social resources, to secure their places as future citizens who also belong in their local context despite their ethnicity. Regarding her own sense of respectability, she associates herself with people who are “educated”, have “good” jobs and live “decent” lives. She believes the main path to upward social mobility is having “God” and “getting education”. She is satisfied with her life as a Christian woman, and with a dependable husband with whom she could provide good education for their children so they could become respectable citizens themselves. Through her children’s social statuses (education and occupation), she gained further respectability in her church and in her community, where she is admired and respected partly on the basis of her ability to educate her children beyond secondary school.

**Bella**

Unlike Bertha, for Bella education was not a clear dynamic in her family life before migration, but became one upon migration. However, as with her lack of religious encouragement among her children, she felt she also lacked the tools to instil the values of education in them. Bella’s children rejoined her when they were between the ages of four and a half and nine years old. While she was separated from them she had no clear knowledge of how regularly they were attending school in the Caribbean. By the time the children rejoined her in England, based upon her own experience, Bella viewed having a job as more significant than education, and instilled in her children the value of work:

I don’t care if you clean the street, as long as you’re working. I know education is important but to me it wasn’t … to me you get a job, that’s all I did. I didn’t want to be a layabout.

Bella’s children left school with secondary education, and as they got older, she began to realize the value of education for social mobility, and encouraged her adult children to become educated beyond secondary school.

Effectively, both Bertha and Bella’s desire to educate their children – whether as children or as adults could be seen as a way of transferring their own unfilled aspirations for social mobility to their children (see Foner 1973, 63). Although Bella had not instilled the values of education in her children, as a child in the Caribbean she understood the social respectability which came from being a Christian and doing charitable work. Thus, she admired Mrs Harrold, an educated Christian woman who did charitable work in the community where she was highly respected. Mrs Harrold for Bella, was an exemplar of someone to emulate when she became an adult. Consequently, once her children grew up and left home, she returned to college in her later life to gain an education and improve her Maths and English. This raised her status, and carved out respectability for herself in her community where she is involved in the local church and charity work. Thus, Bella’s active engagement in her community could be seen as an extension of her identity as a respectable citizen, but also as an exemplar to her adult children and grandchildren in her role as a mother and grandmother (see Reynolds 2005).

Both Bertha and Bella’s narratives show a clear link between mothering and racialized citizenship, though in complex ways, and illustrate the different ways they conceive of and practice respectable citizenship for themselves and for their children, in the process of negotiating racialized ideals, and identities and sense of belonging.

**Conclusion**

This paper reports the accounts of two Caribbean mothers who migrated to Britain leaving their children behind in the care of extended family members, and who were later joined by their children in the process of serial migration. It highlights the origin of the concept of respectability – a British middle-class concept of “the ideal citizen”, which found foothold in the British Caribbean regions after slavery. The paper illustrates the significance of the notion of respectable citizenship for each of the mothers, though perceived differently by each at different points in their lives. Some scholars argue that within the ethnic community, mothers construct a set of values which are beneficial for the well-being and self-respect of their children, “whose experiences of racism in mainstream society can undermine this sense of self-respect” (Erel 2011, 698; see also Hill Collins 1990; Kershaw 2005). While Bertha and Bella’s parenting approaches may appear in accordance with the “normative” notions of British respectability, their values and practices should not be seen strictly as eagerness to integrate, but also as modes of resistance to racism and discrimination in the local context. In their narratives of parenting in Britain, there is no clear understanding of the differences between Caribbean and British parenting cultures for Bella and Bertha. This is so, possibly because their mothering practices were already embedded in their countries of origin. As such, perceptions of “normal” mothering becomes somewhat blurred overtime between home of origin and context of settlement.

Normativity as a concept is contextual. Practices which are considered normal without compromising respectability in one context might be seen as non-normative and not respectable in another context. A crucial feature of respectability regards the nuclear family, moral superiority and social respect based on holy matrimony, in a home with husband and father as family provider and head of household, and wife and mother as nurturer and moral guardian of the family and home (Olwig 2007, 29). A fundamental paradox to these values, however, lies between the ideal and what is actually practised, even within the context where the concept was born.

Finally, the paper adds to the debate on citizenship by demonstrating how racialized subjects are often excluded or marginalized in definitions of respectable citizenship. It shows the different strategies these mothers used in their mothering practices in their new context, to claim for themselves a self-representation as respectable citizens.

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