

The David Nicholls Memorial Lecture: 2007

Suffer the Little Children: Slavery and its Legacies for Caribbean Children in the Diaspora

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Introduction

This lecture originates from a research project entitled 'African Children in the British Atlantic World' that I've been developing over the course of the past year. For some time now, I've become increasingly aware of just how little attention historical and sociological scholarship accords to the experiences and concerns of children of African descent. True, children in general have historically not been accorded significance as historical and social actors. Although the emergence of the field of childhood studies has been highly influential in bringing the social lives of young people to the fore, and has made important contributions to our understanding of children as social agents shaping their daily lives in various contexts and situations. Yet, Caribbean children of African descent are notably absent from mainstream research agendas.

This is in no way intended to suggest that children of African descent are entirely ignored. In the UK for decades, there have been numerous debates over their educational underachievement, their over-representation among children in the care of the state, etc. In recent years, a spate of child welfare cases involving black children, [debates around trans-racial adoption, the Victoria Climbié case, and the murders of Stephen Lawrence and Damilola Taylor] have also resulted in profound transformations of social welfare policy and the criminal justice system. So it is not that Black children are absent without public discourse. Rather, my point is that black children engage our attentions largely as a problematic category - rarely are their perspectives on the social world, their hopes, fears, their triumphs and successes, made the focus of scholarship on childhood.

More recently, children of African descent have come to occupy the national consciousness for reasons and in ways that are deeply troubling to me. I want to address some of these themes in the course of this lecture.

Professor of Caribbean History Mary Chamberlain made the persuasive argument that although Caribbean childhood has long engaged the literary imagination, historians have yet to bring their attentions to bear on the childhood worlds of Caribbean children.¹ This inattention to enslaved childhood pervades academic scholarship generally. As instance, while acknowledging the historical construction of childhood, especially in the context of colonialism, empire and imperialism, the field of Childhood Studies has had little to say about enslaved children, though it has quite a lot to say about children of the colonising white group. Quite why enslaved children have yet to capture the imaginations of scholars is mystifying. That few enslaved children left behind first person accounts of enslaved experience does pose a problem for scholars, but this does not mean that their experiences are beyond our reach. In plantation journals and accounts, as instance, the figures of enslaved children represent constant but shadowy presences on slavery's landscapes. Without question, enslaved children were vital components to the reproduction of slavery; certainly, in the early years at least, traders and slave – owners apparently preferred to invest in adult Africans.² As the abolitionist groundswell grew in strength from the late decades of the 18th century, planters and traders became increasingly aware of the significance of children in the reproduction and maintenance of slavery, and power struggles between planters and enslaved parent intensified as each strove to assert their rights to control the body of the enslaved child. Enslaved children, and their childhood, then represented a critical site over which represented

¹ Mary Chamberlain, "Small Worlds: Childhood and Empire", *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 186-200 (2002)

² Audra Diptee, "Children in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade to Jamaica in the Late Eighteenth Century", Paper presented to the *70th Annual Meeting of the Southern Historical Association*, Memphis, 2004

contestations of authority and power between slave-holders and the enslaved community. Yet, enslaved children remain one of the most marginalized and unanalysed of colonial subjects.

So, my research project is an attempt to recover the silenced voices of children of African descent in slavery and freedom, bringing to light some elements of their lived situations from the colonial period to contemporary times. My talk today attempts to draw some connections between the worlds of enslaved children of African descent and their modern day counterparts.

I'm going to start with a general discussion of the status of children of African descent today, especially in the UK. I'm going to suggest that our society is currently gripped by fear of black children and youth, a fear that has to large extent been orchestrated by government and media both, resulting in what many regard as the demonisation of black children, youth and their families. This phenomena however is not a product of modern society; its roots are deeply embedded within the historical racialised 'othering' and subsequent devaluation of enslaved children and their families. So I want to try to say something about how enslaved children and their childhoods were reconfigured within colonial discourse and discursive practice, and how the colonially grounded model of the enslaved child as beyond or outside of humanity and hence of 'normal' childhood led inexorably to the devaluation of black youth.

This year has marked the bicentennial anniversary of the abolition of the British slave trade when on 27th March 1807, an Act of Parliament finally brought to an end one of the most iniquitous historical acts against humanity. Of course, 1807 did not represent immediate freedom for the enslaved, or an end to the transatlantic trade. Over the next sixty years, an estimated 2-3 million Africans were borne into New World slavery. And it would take a further sixty years, until the 1926 League of Nations Slavery Convention, before slavery itself was formally prohibited in international law. Yet even conceding these limitations, 1807 represents a watershed in human history, a germinal moment in the

continuing struggle to create and enforce international norms of humanitarian conduct.

Throughout the nation this year – and across the Caribbean, Africa, and the USA, - individuals, community organisations, religious groups, and other public bodies have come together to commemorate one of the most monumental moments in modern history, but at the same time to reflect critically on the lessons learned from the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, to reflect on the meaning of this history in the present, on the complex historical, political, legal and moral questions posed by any present day confrontation with past injustices.

The celebratory tone of many of the bicentennial events was however starkly undermined by persistent reminders of the legacies of slavery, which continues to manifest itself in many forms through neo-colonialism, racism, poverty, economic and social deprivation, and unfair trading practices that continue to hinder the socio-economic development and political independence of the former colonies.

And I think it is no exaggeration to suggest that it is children and young people on whom the legacies have fallen hardest. Children of African descent continue to experience some of the worse abuses of their human rights. Throughout the African Diaspora children's lives continue to be shaped by cultures of poverty, racism, ill-health, poor education, and unstable family life. Even as preparations for commemoration of the bicentennial anniversary got underway, reports from NGOs were highlighting the appalling conditions of African children globally; unacceptably high mortality rates of millions of African infants and children dying each year from diseases related to inadequate food, water and sanitation, dying and orphaned by the ravages of HIV/AIDS, war, violence, famine, and environmental destruction, while hundreds of millions suffered illness, pain, neglect, homelessness, and discomfort. In the Caribbean, other studies were highlighting worrying trends pointing to an escalation of child-trafficking, with children as young as six being forced into exploitative forms of child-labour and

the sex tourism industry – and with these developments a corresponding rise in documented cases of violence against children. In Haiti, to take one example, thousands of children as young as four years of age are forced to eke out mean existences on the streets, to compete with marauding bands of rats for food, to sleep in tunnels out of fear of being murdered by those who should be their protectors - these children represent the most visible indictment of Haiti's failure to protect its most vulnerable citizens.

Abuses of human rights of young children of African descent however, are not confined to 'out there' in the developing world. The charities AFRUCA and Anti-Slavery International estimate that hundreds of West African children have been brought illegally into Britain and other European countries in a modern-day form of slavery, and many are forced to work in the sex trade. Unknown numbers of African girls and women are currently enslaved in homes as maids and nannies for diplomats, foreign nationals, and British people alike. Reports of children being held against their will, made to work around the clock for little or no money are becoming increasingly common.

Paradoxically, perhaps, the bicentenary commemorations took place against the backdrop of stinging [and at times overtly racist] critiques of the failures of multiculturalism, while neatly sidestepping the historical contributions of Black peoples in shaping our nation. Such critiques did little by way of improving the lot of impoverished black children in our society, though notably, they did have the effect of increasing support for far-right anti-immigration policies. These debates served to obscure the dire realities of black families and their children in the U.K. For example, the continued underachievement of black boys in our schools, discrimination throughout the education system including higher exclusion and drop out rates, high black unemployment [especially for males], increasing numbers of young people being diagnosed as schizophrenic and detained in mental institutions, and disproportionately high arrest rates of young people, again especially males. Almost half of all Black children in the UK

exist in conditions of poverty - their lives blighted by family instability, social exclusion, institutionalised racism, and racially aggravated crimes.

It would seem now in every way, black children and their families and communities are facing new challenges. Recently, we have witnessed with equal measures of perplexity and dismay a spate of violence that has taken the lives of many black youth, in what the media has dubbed 'black-on-black' crime. Each tragic loss is invariably accompanied by media and government denunciations of the pathological black family – largely headed by black women - unwilling or incapable of controlling their violent sons, conjuring up nightmarish images of an underclass of thuggish youth, hell-bent on destroying the 'decent' law-abiding values of our society. Just before leaving office, outgoing P.M. Tony Blair "valiantly" broke ranks with the PC brigade in a frank speech in which he firmly affixed the blame for this 'epidemic' onto black families. In April 2007, Blair argued that the 'crime epidemic' has

“to do with the fact that particular youngsters are being brought up in a setting that has no rules, no discipline, no proper framework around them.”

In 'daring to buck the trend', and taking stand against 'political correctness', Blair, perhaps unwittingly, laid bare the persistence of colonial and imperialist discourses that served to pathologise black families and their children as inherently immoral, lawless, and unable or unwilling to conform to dominant familial and social values. Of course, Blair did not bother to reflect on how the exigencies of colonial slavery *demand*ed the destruction of African families in the service of empire.

Undeniably, the recent spate of murders represents a very real problem, for black families, but also for the wider community. But the government and media fuelled demonisation of black families and their children has merely served to inflame public fears of black youth who are invariably represented as the innately callous, violent, and morally impoverished progeny of dysfunctional black families.

The rebellious lawlessness of Black youth represents for many the root causes of all that is wrong with Britain today. As one black newspaper journalist opined, **“Black youth have become part of the axis of evil that threatens to destroy the British way of life”**. An article in the *Spectator* magazine, edited by London Mayoral hopeful Boris Johnson, about the January 2003 tragic shooting deaths of two young black women caught up in an exchange of gunfire between rival gangs in Birmingham – exploited a horrific tragedy to berate and denigrate black youth. He argued that: the article’s author Taki Theodoracopoulos defended Enoch Powell’s infamous ‘rivers of blood’ speech, before going onto suggest that:

“..., only a moron would not surmise that what the politically correct newspapers refer to as 'disaffected young people' are black thugs, sons of black thugs and grandsons of black thugs, in it for the money”.

Moreover, the columnist continued,

“West Indians were allowed to immigrate after the war, multiply like flies, and then the great state apparatus took over the care of their multiplications [by which I presume he meant our children]. The Rivers of Blood speech by Enoch Powell was prophetic as well as true... and look what the bullshitters of the time did to that great man. Britain is being mugged by black hoodlums”³.

It is not surprising that such offensive and inflammatory views such as this – which draw on animalistic tropes - lead many among the Black community to feel

³ Columnist Taki Theodoracopoulos, *Spectator*, January 2003

that what we are currently witnessing is a war against black youth in particular and black families in general.

Should we be surprised by the strength of the current demonisation of black youth? Actually, I think that this demonisation which goes hand in hand with their devaluation is not a new phenomena. We've seen it many times before. Since colonialism, black children and youth have been thought and spoken about in ways that are antithetical to our notions of what constitutes the 'good' child. Colonial slavery rendered Africans to a position of otherness, and African childhood itself came to be reconfigured by slavery in ways that left young Africans cast out of the category of childhood. As African American scholar and jurist Kenneth J. Nunn has argued, African children continue to be viewed as children of "the other," and as "others," they may be treated, represented and talked about in ways that would be unthinkable if white children were involved. Nunn continues: "African kids are the bearers of a dual otherness. They are others both due to their Africanness and their status as dependent, wild, and uncontrollable youth. As children of the other, they gain none of the positive benefits of childhood. They are viewed as threats, burdens, and competitors to deserving children. As children, they gain no protection from the ravages of racist oppression. They still carry the stigma associated with Blackness in [American] culture"⁴.

Nunn's words resonate with immediate potency in the wake of the recent 2007 controversies surrounding the 'Jena 6' in which six black teenagers from the town of Jena, Louisiana, were charged with attempted second-degree murder for beating a white student unconscious. This assault took place following months of mounting racial tensions at Jena School. The trouble started when a group of black male students asked school officials for permission to sit under what was known as "The White Tree." The boys were told to sit anywhere they wanted.

⁴ Kenneth J. Nunn, "The Child as Other: Race and Differential Treatment in the Juvenile Justice System", *De Paul Law Review*, Vol. 51, pp.679-714, 2002

However the next day, they met three nooses hanging from the tree. Physical violence erupted some time after, and resulted in three black boys being arrested, and subsequently tried by an all white jury, in front of a white judge. The boys received the harshest punishment possible, with at least one, a 16 year old, being charged as an adult. The procesutor allegedly remarked in interviews with the accused " I can take away your lives with the stroke of a pen". What is significant is the ways in which these young black students were charged with aggravated murder while those who hung the nooses were described as merely indulging in a "youthful stunt."

Both the Jena 6 controversy in the USA and the 1993 murder of Stephen Lawrence in the UK stand as metaphors of the legacy of slavery inherited by the great-great grandchildren of formerly enslaved Africans globally. For black children, their families and communities, the promises of abolition and emancipation – economic, social, political, cultural and psychological freedom, equality and justice - have yet to fully materialize.

This bicentennial year has stimulated a great deal of spirited debate about the nature and the extent of the 'legacy' bequeathed by slavery and colonialism. For many, perhaps the most abiding colonial legacy is the persistence of a deep-rooted racism, initially harnessed to justify colonialism and slavery. Racism continues to be deeply embedded within the social, political, cultural and economic structures of contemporary western societies, and pervades nearly every aspect of the lives of the descendants of the formerly enslaved. And it is the case that the lives of children of African heritage within racially ordered societies are as much defined and brutalized by racism as are adult lives.

Children of African heritage have never been immune to the ravages waged by colonialism, enslavement and racism on their families and communities. Colonial slavery represented a system of social control as much as it was a system of economic production, and the control of African children was as much a component of the regime of terror deployed by the plantocracy in their quest to

subdue and reduce enslaved adults to mere passive units of labour. Biological immaturity did not exempt African children from the rancour of colonial slavery, and enslaved children experienced the full totalising brutal and repressive forces of colonialism.⁵ Like adults, children were abducted, sold into slavery, subjected to brutal painful denigrating punishments, they were inadequately nourished, clothed and sheltered. Unknown numbers were made orphans, forcibly separated from parents, brothers and sisters and their entire community of relations. Yet still, enslaved children survived, though the extent of psychological trauma suffered by children caught up within the machinery of colonialism is incalculable.

American scholar Willie Rose Lee suggests that existing historiographies of colonialism and slavery rarely privilege enslaved children as the subjects of analysis. Willie Rose Lee stressed as far back as the 1970s,

“The disturbing truth...is that we know less than we ought to know about childhood in slavery...despite the significance psychologists attribute to experiences of infancy and youth in the development of personality”...⁶

We know a great deal about enslaved family life, but actually we know very little about enslavement *from the perspectives of young people*, and certainly we don't know how children thought about themselves as enslaved people, how they made sense of slavery, how they made sense of their own and their parents subordination to white authority, the strategies by which they adjusted themselves to enslavement, the resources they drew on to ensure their

⁵ Cecily Jones, “If this be living, I'd rather be dead”: Enslaved youth, agency and resistance to slavery on an eighteenth century Jamaican estate” Special issue on ‘Plantations and the Family’, *History of the Family*, Vol 12/2 pp 92-103, Dec 2007. See also Cecily Jones, “Suffer the Little Children’: Setting a research agenda for the study of enslaved children in the Caribbean colonial world”, *Wadabagei: a journal of the Caribbean and it's Diasporas*, (vol.9, issue 3, 2006)

⁶ Willie Lee Rose in King, Wilma. 1995. *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

survival, how they imagined freedom, or how they responded to freedom when it came. How did colonial slavery transform African notions of childhood? How was the childhood world of enslaved Africans transformed once in the Caribbean colonial world? How did parents and enslaved children themselves manage and negotiate those transformations? These are some of the questions I'm currently grappling with. I tend to agree with Willie Lee Rose then that the devaluation of enslaved children is reinforced within contemporary scholarship within which they are marginalised – unless they are being defined as a 'problem' - African children simply appear to be unworthy of special attention or treatment. Their exclusion from historiographies of slavery and childhood studies merely reproduces the negation of enslaved children's value and worth as human beings.

Slavery and Childhood

In *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth Century America*, Wilma King's 1995 seminal study of enslaved childhood in the American south, King described colonial slavery as akin to a war between colonisers and the enslaved. And, she argues, as is the general case in war, it is usually the most vulnerable who suffer the worse ravages of war – the elderly, the infirm, women, but most of all, the young. As King states,

“Children and young people, because of their inability to protect themselves from devastation, suffer intensely from both slavery and war. Enslaved youth's experiences of separations, terror, misery, and despair reduced them to being children and young people without childhoods”⁷.

King's pioneering work *Stolen Childhood* is a moving testimony to the hardships enslaved children endured on the rice, cotton and tobacco plantations of the slaveholding south, and the heroic efforts of parents to provide not only survival but a sense of childhood. King argues that enslaved children had their childhood

⁷ King, Wilma. 1995. *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

stolen from them by being born into slavery and that during slavery, if childhood was to be enjoyed it was because of extraordinary efforts, even sacrifices made by the parents (or related caregivers). Not only did parents provide for their enslaved children, at a time when their life meant so little that they endured constant deprivation as well as physical and mental abuse – but often parents stood as a gateway, offering insight, praise or love where no other shelter could be sought. As King argues, Indeed the very act of loving an enslaved as a human being, was in itself tantamount to rebellion; to their owners enslaved children were no more than property, and good only as long as they held their value.

The devaluation of enslaved children

King's analysis would suggest that one of the most devastating effects of colonialism was the devaluation of understood as a specific and special stage in the life course. Alvin O. Thompson argues that “[children] were the embodiments of human wealth, the hope of better things. They were both the symbols and embodiment of new life out of the decaying bodies and minds of the elders, and were also the strength and vitality of the community”.⁸ Children and childhood then held a special place in pre-colonial African communities. An outcome of colonial slavery however, was the colonialists' negation of the worth and human value of African children, whether enslaved or free.

Colonial expansion during the seventeenth century occurred at the moment when Europeans were beginning to redefine their understandings of childhood. Though children of the poorer white classes were often kidnapped and sold into servitude in the Caribbean, colonists could defend the use of white children as servants as part of an English tradition of childhood apprenticeship. Hence, Europeans in the colonies had no difficulty in coming to terms with the use of enslaved children as Africans for most children in English society were incorporated into labour

⁸ Thompson, Alvin O. 2002. Enslaved Children in Berbice, with special Reference to the Government Slaves, 1803-1831. *In the Shadow of the Plantation: Caribbean History and Legacy*, ed. Alvin O. Thompson Kingston: Ian Randle Publications.

through apprenticeships at an early age. The crucial difference however was that white children did not remain in servitude for life. Moreover, as the institution of slavery evolved, apprenticeship became less common for children of elite white families, though it remained in common practice for poorer white children well into the 18th century. Hence, as slavery evolved, white childhood in the colonies gradually transformed, resembling closer the model of childhood taking hold in Europe.

In the New World, then, different understandings of childhood existed, though these were subject to temporal transformation. Africans arrived into a society which held for them unfamiliar conceptualisations of the child and childhood, and within which they were denied parental rights over their children. Slave-owners required the submission of all enslaved peoples, children and adult alike, and of necessity therefore had to subvert African understandings of childhood in order to justify their exploitation and abuse of enslaved children. That Europeans refused to recognise the specialness of African children whom they constructed first and foremost as labourers made enslaved childhood a contested terrain, as planters not only strove to assert their ownership and control over the bodies of enslaved youth, but also refused to acknowledge enslaved children as worthy of special care and attention. Enslaved parents sought to attempt to retain African understandings of childhood, imputing to their children African folklore, culture, belief systems but the extent to which they were able to retain their traditional understandings and practices of childhood is debatable.

For enslaved children, European constructions of childhood as a special period had little meaning. Enslaved children clearly did not benefit from these new modes of thought. As Wilma King has argued, enslaved children in the antebellum south virtually had no childhood. They were incorporated into the structures of plantation production at an early age, and their youth made them

more susceptible than adults to the exercise of arbitrary authority, punishments and enforced separation. King's argument, when examined in the light of social and historical writings theories of childhood, certainly appears to have validity. Slave-owners certainly recognised the biological immaturity of young enslaved children, but clearly did not regard enslaved childhood as a special period that merited particular care, attention or protection. Enslaved children were simply adult-labourers-in waiting.

Enslaved children then, did not benefit from the revised European ideals of childhood. Despite their young age, enslaved children were often exposed to the full horror and brutality that was slavery, as attested to by the narratives of Mary Prince⁹ and Olaudah Equiano.¹⁰ And like adults, enslaved children strenuously resisted efforts by their owners to reduce their personhoods to mere units of property. In a previous paper, I have explored the very contentious master-slave relationship between Thomas Thistlewood, that infamous eighteenth century Jamaican pen-keeper and Jimmy, his young personal attendant, purchased by Thistlewood, fresh from guinea-ship at the age of ten. In his determination to survive Jimmy's innate desire for survival and to assert his self-hood potentially undermined Thistlewood's belief in the malleability of adolescents as pliable worker. Jimmy's struggles, negotiations with, manipulations of, and resistance to Thistlewood clearly reveal that far from being the passive objects of planter mastery, enslaved youth were active agents shaping their own histories.

Neither the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade or emancipation wrought immediate transformations in the lives of ex-enslaved parents or their children, though it did signal new contestations between the formerly enslaved and colonial authorities as each group struggled to redefine, in their own ways, the

⁹ Ferguson, M. ed. 1997. *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave, related by herself*. Rev. ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

¹⁰ Edwards. Paul, ed. 1967. *Equiano's Travels: His Autobiography – The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavas Vassa The African, Written by Himself*. London: Heinemann.

meanings of childhood for African children. As Colleen Vasconcellos argues, in the immediate post emancipation period, young children in Jamaica bore the brunt of planters efforts to maximise profits through the exploitation of free labour. Vasconcellos points to the continued devaluation of African children in this period, arguing that “With apprenticeship, the nature of childhood in Jamaica changed overnight. Suddenly, planters differentiated between children who were below the age of six and left to the responsibility of their parents and children above the age of six who were still part of the labor regime. Under this new system, apprenticed children were thrust immediately into a premature adulthood, more so than they were under slavery. Planters worked them harder than ever before, while trying to devise ways to get free Afro-Jamaican children into the fields as well. As apprenticed children entered adulthood at an even earlier age than before, free children suffered as well as their living conditions sunk to a new level”¹¹.

Emancipation offered rich promises of equality, freedom, and self-determination to the freed peoples; and children represented the embodiment of these hopes for the future. However, as Vasconcellos cogently demonstrates, emancipation wrought further havoc on the lives of freed children and their families throughout the diaspora. My argument is not that slavery and the processes of emancipation destroyed the black family – far from it. However, it cannot be disputed that centuries of colonialism continue to shape contemporary realities of African families and their children throughout the diaspora – certainly the promises offered by emancipation remain elusive, as a consequence of the persistent racism that informs the everyday realities of black children and their families. One of the most vicious legacies of colonialism and slavery has been the enduring devaluation of young people of African heritage, and this continues to inform the social discourses that currently demonise a generation of youth whose lives continue to be blighted by the legacies of slavery.

¹¹ Colleen Vasconcellos, “To Fit you All for Freedom”: Jamaican Planters, Afro-Jamaican Mothers and the Struggle to Control Afro-Jamaican Children during Apprenticeship, 1833–40, *Citizenship Studies*, Volume 10, Number 1, February 2006 , pp. 55-75(21)

