

“These people have seen this in our cultures back home”: Black mothers in Canada and the UK reclaim attachment parenting

Abstract

Attachment parenting (AP), coined by American paediatrician William Sears and his wife Martha, claims inspiration from the practices of ‘traditional’ and ‘primitive’ peoples, whose instinctive parenting behaviour forms the basis for AP’s seven tools, including breastfeeding, babywearing and bedsharing. As the AP phenomenon gathers momentum in the US, UK and Canada, this paper examines the raced, gendered and classed dimensions of its rise to popularity. Who is AP for? And to whom does it belong? Drawing from interviews with 19 black mothers living in Canada and the UK, this paper captures efforts to ‘reclaim’ attachment parenting, both against the Sears and for black communities.

Keywords

Attachment parenting, black motherhood, reclaiming, resistance, parenting, intensive mothering

Introduction

TIME magazine’s May 2012 cover story on attachment parenting offers an insightful introduction to the philosophy. To illustrate attachment parenting (or AP), the magazine photographed numerous AP-following mothers in the midst of one of the most quintessential (and controversial) practices of early childcare: breastfeeding. For its cover, *TIME* chose an image of 26-year-old Jamie Lyn Grumet breastfeeding her three-year-old son Aram. The unusual nursing position (both mother and son are standing) seems to emphasize Aram’s distinctly un-baby like size, picking up on and extending American society’s discomfort with breastfeeding in general (Carter 2017), let alone the practice of breastfeeding an older child such as Aram. The challenging headline, “are you mom enough?”, extends this discomfort and recalls the so-called Mommy Wars (Douglas and Michaels 2004) that have consumed American society for the past thirty years or more, articulating the debate about what is best for babies, best for mothers and best for society; mothers staying at home or working outside it. In the context in which *TIME* releases this cover, neither choice is universally accepted and the debate itself is entangled with raced, gendered and classed ideas about which citizens are deemed valuable and worthy of support.

Debates about appropriate and ideal motherhood are shaped by the broader ideology of ‘good’ childrearing that enables the emergence and popularity of attachment parenting. Despite its name, AP is expressly interested in producing good *mothers*, assuming women’s biological responsibility for the work of caring for an infant and policing their maternal practice. The philosophy emerges in the context of intensive mothering, described by American sociologist Sharon Hays as the defining feature of contemporary parenting culture that requires childrearing to be “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive” (1996, 8). Intensive mothering identifies mothers as individually responsible for this kind of emotionally demanding and laborious childrearing practice and points to a central contradiction at the heart of such an intensive parenting ideology; between expectations of

economic productivity and the kind of sustained attention young children apparently need to develop optimally, a project all parents and society as a whole is assumed to be invested in. In this paper, I examine attachment parenting's emergence from the perspective of black mothers. Drawing from a wider study, I focus on the experiences of black mothers who use attachment parenting to claim good mothering in a policy and discursive context that frames black motherhood as inadequate and pathological. In its complex rendering of science, nature and Africa, attachment parenting offers a unique opportunity to black mothers to both conform to and challenge dominant ideas about good motherhood and good citizenship.

Race and attachment parenting

There is a small but growing body of scholarship that has examined the rise of attachment parenting, the most substantial of which is Charlotte Faircloth's (2013) ethnography of La Leche League members in Britain and France. Faircloth's innovative study captures the identity work contemporary mothers engage in, particularly in response to an increasingly risk-conscious, responsabilized context (Wolf 2011) in which childrearing decisions are invested with a great deal of significance (Lee 2014). That the mothers Faircloth spoke to chose to practice "full-term breastfeeding" (2013, 215) reflects the dominance of breastfeeding promotion and the central role it plays in contemporary constructions of good motherhood, particularly as expressed in the ideology of intensive mothering. Most significantly, Faircloth outlines mothers' "accountability strategies" (2013, 2017), noting the emphasis they place on 'nature' and "evolutionary narratives" (2013, 125) that deploy a narrow view of the practices of 'primitive' cultures and societies, particularly in Africa, to justify the superiority of AP.

A homogenized image of primitive parenting, often practiced by 'tribes' in Africa, is an enduring feature of attachment parenting discourse. Such an image emerges in Green and Groves' (2008) survey of 275 self-identified attachment parenting mothers. Green and Groves describe attachment parenting as a philosophy that resists the cultural norm of individualism that promotes parenting practices which facilitate separation between parent and child. Instead, the mostly white women who responded to their survey are framed as defying the Western "cultural script" in favour of a parenting style that is more suited to "traditional" societies in "non-western" settings (Green and Groves 2008, 523). American women's favouring of AP is contrasted with mothers in said "non-Western" settings, who Green and Groves suggest are more likely to be adhering to a "traditional" cultural script, while American women "purposefully" choose.

While the precise details of this instinctive figure against whom white 'Western' mothers may construct their parenting (Shome 2011) are missing from Green and Groves' study, the particulars might be found in the work of leading AP advocate, William Sears. In his career-launching *Baby Book* (1993), Sears reports a transformative interaction with two Zambian women at a parenting conference. The women he meets are carrying their babies in slings that "match their native dress" and Sears, inspired by their babywearing practice, reflects that these women carry their infants in this manner not because they have thoughtfully considered various infant carrying options but because of something more innate and for Sears, worthy of respect and emulation. He tells the reader that African women "don't have the benefits of books and

studies about mothering hormones”, they choose to parent as they do because of “centuries of tradition” (Sears and Sears 1993, 263-264).

In each of these three examples, it is evident that racial politics play a clear and fundamental role in how attachment parenting is constructed, understood and deployed by mothers in the US, Britain and France. These raced politics are generally understudied in analyses of attachment parenting, even as the spectre of the innately superior African woman haunts the narratives that surround the philosophy. To better understand these politics that so definitively underpin the philosophy, I conducted a qualitative study of black mothers’ engagements with attachment parenting, using a black feminist theoretical framework. In this way, both the (raced, gendered and classed) appeal it holds for white, middle-class mothers *and* the meanings that black mothers assign to the philosophy are foregrounded. The parenting culture studies framework through which Faircloth (2013) and others (including Bobel 2002 and Carter 2017) have examined attachment parenting is crucial for revealing the parental determinism, individualized responsibility and classed and gendered effects of the philosophy’s rising popularity. Building on these insights, I attend to the raced effects of AP as it both reinforces a white, middle-class model of motherhood and presents an opportunity for black mothers to reclaim a sense of ownership and expertise. Given the dominant construction of black motherhood as pathological and burdensome (Collins 2000; Reynolds 2016; Roberts 1997), this opportunity challenges black women’s exclusion from contemporary mothering ideologies (Bloch and Taylor 2014; Elliot, Powell and Brenton 2013). In particular, I argue that, in its emphasis on individual responsibility, the AP-orientated model of good parenting articulated by mothers in this study proposes a new vision of good black motherhood that departs from traditional understandings of community mothering (Collins 2000; Forna 2000; Reynolds 2001).

Methods

To understand the relationship between this unknowingly superior African woman and black mothers living in North America and Europe, I interviewed nineteen black mothers living in Britain and Canada. These two research sites offer unique insight into experiences of blackness and motherhood with comparable size black populations and histories of migration, as well as a shared construction of non-racist nationhood (Bannerji 2000; Perry 2015). There were only three criteria for participation in the study; self-identification as a black woman, a child under the age of five (and therefore, recent experience with the work of early childrearing that attachment parenting and broader discourses of early intervention prioritize [Gillies, Edwards and Horsley 2017]) and awareness of the philosophy of attachment parenting. I concentrated on ‘awareness’ rather than ‘practice’ of AP to collect a wide range of experiences with the philosophy and better account for the diverse ways that black mothers engage with attachment parenting in the contemporary moment. The wider study addresses the perspectives and experiences of black mothers who rejected AP, those who mixed the philosophy with other ideas about appropriate childrearing and those who claimed AP as an instinctive practice. This article deals with the latter group, detailing the strategies and narratives they employed to recast attachment parenting as their own.

Interviews took place between June 2015 and May 2016. The first ten interviews were conducted in the UK, during a ten week research trip as a visiting PhD student at the University of Bristol.

The remaining nine were conducted in Canada. After some initial difficulties, recruitment took place largely online, particularly through social media and forums. I specifically targeted sites and pages for parents and for neighbourhoods with a higher than average black population, as identified through census data. I posted a call for participants detailing criteria for participation, seeking the permission of online gatekeepers where necessary, and asked potential interviewees to contact me for further information. Participants received an information sheet and consent form before interviews were scheduled. Interviews were held in cafes, libraries, offices and the mothers' homes and often featured illuminating interruptions from nursing babies and talkative spouses. I asked participants about their attitudes and experiences of attachment parenting, particularly breastfeeding, babywearing and bedsharing, as well as broader conversations about motherhood. All interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 45 minutes and just shy of two hours. With the exception of one interview that was conducted in a busy library, each interview was audio-recorded with the permission of the participant.

I transcribed all interviews and employed a two-step coding process, managed with NVivo software and influenced by thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). First, interviews in the UK and Canada were coded separately, line by line, and the resulting codes were compared for consistency and relevance. During the second, more interpretive step of the coding process, themes were developed from existing codes, representing both themes that appeared repeatedly in a single interview and themes that appeared across multiple interviews. Drawing from a black feminist theoretical framework that requires attending to the contextual politics that shape individuals' lives and shared experiences, this second stage of the process captured unique and sometimes country-specific experiences (such as conversations sparked by the shortage of midwives in Ontario) as well as stories that transcended geographical borders (such as themes of 'home' and belonging) and pointed to wider themes of black motherhood (Collins, 2000). Whether invested in attachment parenting or not, the women I interviewed found different ways to articulate themselves as good mothers. In this article, I focus on these shared experiences as they signal an attempt to reject dominant representations of black motherhood and develop a diasporic, ancestral claim to attachment parenting.

At the time of the interview, ten women were living in the UK and nine in Canada. Eleven of the nineteen participants were born in the UK and Canada while the remainder named countries in North America, Africa, Asia and the Caribbean as their countries of birth, each expressing varying levels of attachment to the two research sites. All but three women were married or living with a partner and every interviewee had participated in some level of post-compulsory school education. The women were aged between 24 and 44 with a median age of 34. Between them, the women had thirty children and two women were pregnant at the time of the interview. While the children ranged from newborn to 12 years old, the vast majority (25 of 30) of the children were aged 4 or under when their mothers were interviewed, as aligned with the key criterion for participation in the research which was having a child aged five or under:

Participant	Age	Relationship status	Age of youngest child	Country interviewed
Angela	35	Married	2 years old	UK
Barbara	38	Married	12 months old	
Claudia	40	Living with partner	20 months old	

Demita	26	Single	3 years old	
Eleanor	33	Married	4 years old	
Florynce	29	Married	6 months old	
Gloria	34	Married	8 month old	
Harriet	34	Married	1 month old	
Ida	41	Married	8 months old	
Jayaben	44	Married	3 years old	
Kimberlé	24	Single	3 years old	
Lorde	33	Married	2 years old	
Margaret	28	Married	16 months old	
Notisha	34	Married	12 months old	
Olive	28	Common law	2 months old	
Patricia	41	Common law	3 years old	
Rebecca	38	Married	13 months old	
Stella	37	Single	4 years old	
Tracey	31	Married	5 months old	

As a black childless woman, I was concerned with how my positionality might influence the research (Hamilton 2020). Much of my assumptions about what similarities and differences would impact the research relationship were upended by the interviewees who both revelled in our shared blackness (with references to ‘our people’) and identified my childlessness as an opportunity to assert themselves and their expertise about parenting during the interviews. This negotiated insider-outsider status (Beoku-Betts 1994; Collins 1989) informs the analysis.

While the broader study examines the experiences of mothers who reject or are indifferent to AP, for the purposes of this paper, I concentrate on a smaller group of women, those mothers who called themselves attachment parents or in other ways embraced the philosophy. In particular, I am interested in the ways that these women described their AP-style maternal practice, accepting and re-working the homogenized African earth mother so beloved by the likes of William Sears and other professional AP experts and so in contrast with the predominant image of black motherhood in the West.

To whom does attachment parenting belong?

What is this image of black motherhood in the West? Recent news stories provide some indication, such as the case of Shanesha Taylor, charged with felony child abuse for leaving her two children in her car while she attended a job interview. Or the vitriol directed at the mother of a four-year-old boy who fell into a gorilla enclosure at Cincinnati Zoo, matched only by the outpouring of grief in response to the zoo’s decision to shoot the gorilla who threatened the boy’s life. The enduring power of this image of black motherhood is present in the blame levelled at enslaved women for being unable to keep their children alive (Roberts 1997) to recent attempts to profit from low breastfeeding rates in African American communities (Morrissey and Kimball 2017). It appears in immigration policies that identify racialized pregnant women as a threat to the whiteness of the nation in the UK (Tyler 2013) and bar black domestic workers, recruited for their housekeeping and childcare skills, from bringing their own children to Canada (Lawson

2013). It manifests as controlling images such as the “welfare mother” (Collins 2000) and the “baby mother” (Reynolds 2005) that imagine black mothers as incapable of raising their children appropriately, without exploiting the state or their partners. This image of black motherhood is in stark contrast to the vision offered by the Sears.

On the other hand, how is attachment parenting portrayed? As the philosophy moves from derided practice on the margins (Green and Groves 2008) to increasingly popular style of parenting, aligned with a broader, state-endorsed focus on the importance of secure attachment and bonding (Freeman 2016; Hamilton 2016), it is the Sears who are poised to capitalize, both in their recognition as quintessential AP experts and in the industry of baby paraphernalia, parenting literature and “wellness” they have built on such a status. The Sears’ attachment parenting expertise is articulated through a complex hybrid of scientific evidence and the nebulous, enduring power of nature, with Africa sometimes standing in as a familiar example of this nature, this superior ancestral and traditional practice. Despite describing attachment parenting as the instinctive parenting style of Africa’s peoples and indeed, of all parents, if only they were given the “confidence” to reject “detachment advice” and “follow their own intuitions” (Sears and Sears 2001, ix), the Sears carve out an authoritative position from which they can bestow their advice. “Instinctual” parenting practice is possible, already exists within parents, but requires work, “time and energy” to bring forth, a project the Sears are especially able to facilitate with their “thirty-plus years of parenting [their] own eight children and observing moms and dads whose parenting choices seemed to make sense and whose children [they] liked” (2001, ix). In their introduction to their bible on attachment parenting, the Sears affirm their role in the communication and construction of AP as good parenting; it is through their eyes and their judgement that the appropriate tools and results of attachment parenting are determined and it is children *they* liked that are deemed worthy examples of the powerful effects of AP practice. Women in Zambia, Uganda, China, Bali, of ‘ancient times’ similarly serve as useful examples of the positive consequences of attachment parenting but not as experts in their own right; as women merely following a “cultural script” (Green and Groves 2008, 523), they are not pictured as capable of choosing AP, that choice is only available to Western mothers.

The fixation with choice not only distinguishes between Western mothers and the mothers in “traditional societies” (Green and Groves 2008, 518) from which they draw inspiration but also reflects a wider contradiction at the heart of contemporary parenting culture, between rigid beliefs about the wide-reaching effects of childrearing choices made in the early years of a child’s life and the proliferation of options now available to parents and by which they will be judged. The thousands of parenting books, forums and websites (Lee 2014) require careful deliberation and consideration. The Sears and other experts appear to guide parents through such treacherous terrain, where choices and their life-long consequences are recast through a lens of self-responsibility and discipline, with inevitably raced, gendered and classed consequences.

Choosing nature and instinct

It is in response to this fetishization of choice and its disparate consequences for racialized citizens that the experiences of black women in Britain and Canada offer an insightful intervention. Their claims on attachment parenting (and other ideas of good parenting more generally) are framed in response to and against both a cultural image of black motherhood as

inferior, neglectful and pathological (Reynolds 1997; Roberts 1991, 1997) and a Sears-led depiction of AP as the innate practice of naturally adept Africans. There are connections between these two images, particularly in the ways that both strip black mothers of agency and autonomy in their mothering practices and isolate their experiences from the wider context (neoliberal, globalized, arranged in gender, race and class hierarchies) which informs them. The complexities of black maternal practice (that such images elide) are the central concern of this project. This paper reveals the different mechanisms the mothers I interviewed used to cement their claim on attachment parenting and consequent status as good mothers, from statements that AP is “just parenting” to a more forceful declaration that retrieves the philosophy from the Sears’ homogenising hands, albeit in not always progressive ways.

Indeed, the claim that AP is “just parenting” was a common refrain among the AP-following portion of my sample. Consider the following statements from interviews with women in Canada and Britain:

Margaret (CA), who was keen to talk about and confirm her AP practice:

“I would say that I’m an attachment parent but I can’t imagine any other way to parent!”

Tracey (CA), who was on maternity leave with her five-month-old daughter when we met:

“...we don’t use that word, we don’t use ‘attachment parenting’, we call it ‘parenting’...”

Stella (CA), who told me that her four-year-old was about to start her own business:

“I know it’s called attachment parenting but...it’s not really *attachment* to me it’s just what I’ve felt was natural, you know?”

Harriet (UK), who attended the interview wearing her newborn daughter in a fabric sling:

I hadn’t heard about it until I got pregnant with my first son but I remember reading the kind of principles behind it and thinking that they just seem like the obvious, for me...that was, like, natural to me.

Demita (UK), who was among the most committed champions of AP:

But really I’m just parenting, I’m just doing what’s natural to me or what my mother had done and you know, what my friends who had children before me had done. And I identified with...like this is something I want to do. If it’s called attachment parenting then [that’s] it’s title, then yes [...] I didn’t set out saying ‘okay, I’m gonna look up what this is and do it that way,’ I actually just did what I thought was best or what I felt was natural and would help him grow.

Eleanor (UK), a mother of three whose commitment to AP extended to homeschooling her twelve-, six- and four-year olds:

and then, you think, attachment parenting, but I've been doing this all along so I dunno...it's a weird concept to me. And a lot of, I find a lot of other black mums say the same thing like it should be just parenting 'cause that's what we just do but then I guess you have to find, define a title between that method and the method that's more mainstream such as bottle feeding and formula feeding and all that kind of thing.

The women's claims on AP as what they "just do" are entangled with and justified through specific ideas about what attachment parenting is and where it comes from. One interpretation of their assertion that AP is "just parenting" is to read it as aligned with the Sears' and other AP experts' imagined instinctive traditional (or African) mother, who merely follows a "cultural script" (Green and Groves 2008, 523) in contrast with her discerning counterpart in the West. To deploy the language of nature to describe their parenting choices, as Stella, Harriet and Demita do, risks reinforcing such an image, of African women displaced in Britain and Canada who through parenting invoke their *natural* inclinations unthinkingly. But their parenting is *not* without thought; Harriet tells me that she read about the "principles" of AP when she was pregnant and she is not alone, despite the women's assertions that it is "just parenting" and "natural", most of the mothers reported reading some parenting books, while a few also attended classes or reported an educational or professional background that involved or required expertise in child development. At the same time as attachment parenting was 'just natural' and what friends and family did, it was also the subject of research and thoughtful deliberation. Demita (UK), who called herself a "researcher", later elaborated on her mother's AP practice:

You know, when I think about it, you would say my mother was an attachment parent though she never would have heard that term and she wouldn't have said 'I'm an attachment parent.' She's not alive now but you know, the same thing, I was breastfed until I was two years old [...] I was in the bed until I was like five and six [...] she would have done a lot of these things, she was a babywearing person, she was an exclusive breastfeeder, she had all natural births though they were in hospital, they were all natural and *that was her decision.* (emphasis mine)

Even as they framed their attachment parenting practice as a "natural" consequence of their instinct or family backgrounds, choice featured strongly in the women's narratives. Like the Sears, they used the instinctive framing of AP as a protective strategy, justifying their decisions, especially against what they saw as more "mainstream" parenting practices. As the vociferous response to the *TIME* magazine cover's depiction of extended breastfeeding shows, attachment parenting's status as an example of good motherhood is precarious, the philosophy encompasses the norms of good parenting but risks pushing them 'too far' (Hamilton 2016), to the 'extremes' of breastfeeding a three-year-old and bedsharing with a five-year-old. To describe AP as natural then, as instinctive and "just parenting", is to redeem its position; it cannot be 'extreme' if it is the "natural" way humans are 'meant' to parent. The choice to be natural, then, is a complex dance between stereotypical representations of Africanness, tradition and black motherhood, and a critique of such ideas in favour of black women's complex and deliberate ownership of AP practice. The story of Demita's mother is noteworthy because she *chose* to parent in this manner, her natural births were no accident but pointed decisions that formed part of a larger, and implicitly superior, practice.

Similarly, Eleanor recognizes the utility of the title ‘attachment parenting’, even as such a title diminishes the naturalness, the “just parenting” image of her own AP practice she wishes to conjure. This title can be useful in articulating what attachment parenting is *not*, it is not using formula or otherwise distancing yourself from your child through the use of prams or cribs. And this distinction is important for delineating the superiority of attachment parenting which for Eleanor (UK), cannot be separated from the philosophy’s naturalness nor from its Africanness:

it was a bit of a weird one for me, with my first child, I knew I was gonna breastfeed, I knew I was gonna use a sling, carry them in a sling or a carrier or whatever not. But it was like, my family background, being West Indian, there’s only so much they kind of identify with it...like, it was a fad to use a sling but it’s more so the mainstream, commercial, like Baby Bjorn kind of slings that you click in place and those kind of things and you only breastfed your children for three months, that’s seen as all you need and then it’s formula fed after that. So all the kinds of things that I *chose* to do which I knew and saw that other...I think it’s more the thing that I saw more culturally aware people did what they felt necessary in terms of breastfeeding for longer periods of time or carrying their children. Being in [a large city in the UK], I grew up watching African mums carry their children, it’s something that always stood out to me like it does with everyone else. It’s like something I always thought that was a normal and most natural thing to do and detaching yourself from your child just didn’t seem normal to me, if I can put it into words. (emphasis mine)

The inspiration of “African mums” is inseparable, for Eleanor, from the inherently “natural” and “normal” qualities of attachment parenting. Here, Eleanor also begins to craft a particular image of this superior style of mothering, distancing it from her own “West Indian” background and family, indeed, outrightly rejecting their failure to “identify with it”, in favour of “culturally aware” (read African) mothers. Eleanor’s description of her journey towards attachment parenting is much more complex than the image offered by the Sears. The “centuries of tradition” the Sears imagine African women accessing is absent in Eleanor’s narrative; she bypasses family traditions in favour of self-constructed community ones, developing an affinity for what she calls African practices and approaches to parenting. Her parenting is both instinctive (“I knew I was gonna breastfeed, I knew I was gonna use a sling”) and the product of a deliberate choice, shifting beyond enduring stereotypes of black motherhood whether created by the Sears or perpetuated by policies that pathologize black women’s mothering.

These people have seen this in our cultures back home

As Eleanor’s inspirational African mums suggest, the mothers’ *choice* to parent in an attached manner cannot be understood independently of a construction of attachment parenting as originating in Africa. While identifying African mothers as the archetypal attachment parent, much as the Sears do, Eleanor (UK) details a rift, a cultural loss that has severed the connection between Africa and its diaspora, between African mothers and black folk in the UK and Canada:

I feel like a lot of the information about attachment parenting is obviously there but because we don’t see ourselves in it...we don’t necessarily take it on and we assume that it’s a white thing not realising that these people have seen this in our cultures back home, whether it’s in Africa or the Carib-, well, not so much the Caribbean ‘cause like the

Caribbean have been indoctrinated in a certain way because of slavery and stuff but I feel like...and other countries like, and I don't know, the Mediterranean or South America and those kinds of places. When they go to these places – and Asia – when they go to these places and see these things and then they think 'oh, that's a good idea!' and then they take it on themselves and yet...we've been doing it for long, longer.

Eleanor categorically locates the philosophy's origin in Africa (as well South America, Asia and "those kinds of places"); AP is a practice the indigenous populations of such places have been engaged in for "long", echoing the "centuries of tradition" the Sears identify but also, crucially, distinguishing it from white AP practice. Such a distinction is not for the benefit of those white mothers who *choose* to attachment parent but instead undermines such a choice, recasting it as a form of theft. This complex rendering of attachment parenting disrupts the Sears' narrative work to establish their ownership of attachment parenting, their own reference to inspiring African mothers is now enmeshed with a distasteful cultural appropriation, remaking AP as a "white thing". Eleanor claims ownership of attachment parenting and offers this whitening of the philosophy as an explanation for how and why black communities in the UK (and elsewhere) do not parent in this way.

The language of 'home' that Eleanor uses draws on and challenges dominant narratives about where black people (and therefore, attachment parenting, perhaps) belong. In both the UK and Canada, blackness marks a lack of belonging and indicates true affiliation with some other place, to which black people are meant to 'return' especially when they try to claim the benefits of citizenship. In postracial Britain and Canada, the spectacle of celebrating 'diversity' and inclusion is eclipsed only by a hostile environment that undercuts black communities' entitlements, legal and otherwise (Bannerji 2000; Lentin and Titley 2011; Patel and Connelly 2019). I suggest that attachment parenting, or at least the Sears' version of it, does similar work, respecting and appropriating AP practice as it exists 'elsewhere' in order to best transform it into good parenting for the white, middle-class British or Canadian mother. To describe AP as originating in Africa (and other 'traditional' places) does not undermine the Sears' ownership of it in the United States, where such ownership matters, indeed, it bolsters it; they have "seen this" practice and "take[n] it on themselves".

On first reading, Eleanor merely echoes this description. Attachment parenting has been taken from "our cultures back home"; black people, having recently arrived, have experienced a rupture with "home" hence their failure to attachment parent in their 'new' context. But when put into conversation with other interviewees' reflections on home, Eleanor's "back home" is far more complex than such an interpretation suggests. First, Eleanor's "back home" is not the Caribbean island from which her parents emigrated; it cannot be, the Caribbean has produced "indoctrinated" black people whose cultural practices must be distinguished from Africa's (Hamilton in press). Barbara's (UK) retelling of an incident with her mother, who does not approve of Barbara's attachment style parenting, suggests something similar:

I was at my parents' house and [...] I think I was washing up and I had [my daughter] on my back and [my mother] was in the next room and mum kind of said something like 'Oh, these two, my daughter and her husband, they're always carrying this child around, I don't know if it's back to Africa or what it is...' you know...so it's almost like she kind of

found it humorous and a bit sort of like, maybe a bit baffling. And there's a slight notion of the child has too much hand, like she's gonna be too used to being held.

Barbara's mother, who also claims Caribbean heritage, offers an astute example of Eleanor's indoctrinated black Caribbean; she rejects babywearing and the AP it represents as "a bit baffling" and even possibly harmful and Barbara explains this rejection as a result of missing "heritage", there is (apparently) no tradition of babywearing and attachment parenting in the Caribbean that Barbara can rely upon to guide her childrearing. Like some of the other mothers, Barbara relies on books, research and her own professional expertise on optimal child development to root her parenting *choices* while often alluding to an imagined Africa where AP is practiced because "that's what they've always done." Unlike Eleanor, however, Barbara does not describe Africa as "back home" and instead, identifies a "split" between what African mothers do and its absence in the Caribbean: "my family are from [the Caribbean], they don't have that heritage, I don't have an auntie or someone to teach me how to do it". Missing family "heritage" of AP practice means that Barbara turns to, for example, sling libraries rather than an instinctively knowledgeable auntie who can draw on "centuries of tradition" (Hamilton in press). Barbara's embrace of attachment parenting is more clearly linked to the UK, where her middle-class position, much worked for and only recently attained, affords her the opportunity to purchase a variety of slings to determine which style is the best, choose an AP-friendly nursery school and otherwise engage in what she calls the "luxury of defining your style of parenting". As Demita (UK), who had only recently arrived in the UK with her three-year-old son, explained:

I didn't even know I was missing anything until I got here and I was kinda like, 'okay, why haven't I been here his whole life?' It really made think...why haven't I been here his whole life? I could've been getting all this help for him [...] you get free kid multivitamins and that type of thing and especially for me, who hasn't been working since I've been here [...] that type of thing is really helpful. And in fact, it makes me sit and think oh my gosh, if we just had this in [the Caribbean] how different it would be for mothers out there, how the children would be better off, you know? Coming up, they would have such a much better start in life than kind of everything stuck on the parents and the mothers who don't have it, to be honest. Growing up in depravity.

The kind of parenting choices that living in the UK enables, this "much better start", is not taken for granted by Eleanor, Barbara or Demita. Just as they accept individualized parental responsibility for their children's well-being they also name the state's share of the burden. This tightrope between dominant narratives (black people do not belong, individual parents are wholly responsible, AP belongs to the Sears) and resistance to them is walked through the deployment of attachment parenting, as both instinctive and a choice, as both African and made possible in a policy context that provides for paid time off and other benefits, as both belonging to black peoples but popularized through white experts like the Sears.

Not just good but better

An African AP provides a vehicle for navigating the space between a policy context that facilitates attentive, intensive mothering and the racialized nature of such policies that construct

black women as unsuited and incapable of this kind of mothering. From the concurrent emergence of the first federal family leave act and wide-ranging welfare reform in the United States (Manuel and Zambrana, 2009) to the expansion of parental leave enabled by cuts to unemployment insurance eligibility in Canada (Evans 2007), the development of policies such as paid parental leave and subsidized childcare rest on raced, classed and gendered ideas about appropriate parenthood. Certain kinds of mothers are understood as deserving support to stay at home with their children while others, particularly black mothers, are encouraged to return to work as soon as possible (or penalized, as in the case of Shaneshia Taylor; Harris 2004). AP's 'attachment' to Africa and blackness presents a unique opportunity to black mothers to resist this pathologising of their motherhood by reframing themselves not just as good mothers, but *better* mothers, superior to their white counterparts. Drawing on a language of 'instinct' or 'nature' and strategically deploying essentialist ideas about African motherhood in the service of this project, may lead to the elevating of black women's mothering. This was attempted by building on their construction of AP as both instinctive *and* a choice and by outlining the superiority of AP practice. This is evident in Margaret's (CA) description of her parenting:

'Cause it seems like attachment parenting is conscious parenting, that's the way I would describe it and that's the way I probably would describe myself, everything I do for her or with her in mind is deliberate. Everything has been very carefully researched.

And later:

With more research available to people about the benefits of bonding with your child and really being in tune to their needs, I think the research shows that it's important to do and that you'll be investing in your child's health and wellness and future, the way they feel, emotional well-being and things by being a parent who is attached.

Attachment parenting brings together both natural or instinctive inclinations and the contemporary pressure to carry out careful research, as described by Margaret here. Judged by either the standards of science or nature, attachment parenting is a successful parenting philosophy because it facilitates this optimal development that all modern parents are assumed to be invested in. Given this claim, that attachment parenting enables a child's "health and wellness and future", there is little room for choice to *not* parent in this way and, for the participants in this project, the opportunity to define their own superior parenting against that of others (Hoffman, 2013). This is true for Olive (CA), who described the difficulties associated with parenting in this manner:

It's hard...it's hard not having so many rules and schedules because then it's like maybe he's not that mature to make the right decisions. But at the same time I don't wanna be that person that dictates "'cause I'm your mother you have to do this.'" I wanna treat him more like an equal kind of thing. But then when he's not listening it's hard. It's hard.

Other mothers described attachment parenting as "all-consuming", involving wearing your baby on your body at all times, sleeping in the same bed as them, responding to their every cry, breastfeeding on demand, remaining ever "conscious" and alert to their needs. While they acknowledged and sometimes even complained a little about the engrossing nature of this

parenting style, ultimately they believed that such a sacrifice was worthwhile for the benefits AP could generate for their children. Such themes of sacrifice are common both within mainstream ideologies of good motherhood (Baker 2010) and ideas of ideal black motherhood (Collins 2000; Elliott, Powell and Brenton 2013; Hill 2004) but I suggest that they take on new meaning when deployed in the contemporary context. While attachment parenting seems to draw on communal traditions of families living together, sharing the burden of childrearing among many adults, its recent popularity, or at least the version popularized by the Sears, is framed through an individualist lens; it demands that individual mothers consider giving up paid work outside the home to better enable compliance with its edicts, rather than state investment in childcare provision and recognition.

For the women I interviewed, the individual responsibility to, for example, breastfeed for at least two years or share your bed with your child until they are ready to leave, remained an important element of attachment parenting practice and therefore good mothering however, they suggested that individual commitment to AP could still be cast as a form of community activism or uplift. Working within the tradition of motherwork that characterizes black motherhood in the United States, Canada, the UK and other parts of the 'West' (Kershaw 2005), these women engage in a style of parenting that not only prepare children for future citizenship but performs "political projects of resistance and cultural survival" (2005, 119). This was enacted by, for example, working to promote attachment parenting in their black communities. Eleanor's complaint that "these people have seen in our cultures back home" was both an objection to the appropriation of AP-style parenting by white experts such as the Sears and to the wider consequences such an appropriation wrought on the black diaspora's contemporary interest in such parenting. Eleanor hoped to redress this rupture between black people in the UK (in her case) and the superior practices of African ancestors by explicitly working to promote AP among her friends and networks. For example, Eleanor made and sold baby slings (a key marker of AP practice) but chose to utilize "African prints" in an attempt to both acknowledge and celebrate the 'origin' of babywearing but also to appeal to black communities. However, as Barbara's mother's response to this very same practice suggests, the appeal of 'Africa' is not equally distributed among black diasporic communities. Nevertheless, Eleanor's sling-making and broader work to promote AP can be understood as a contemporary form of motherwork, employing what she believes is the most appropriate strategy for raising her children to be "well disciplined...bright and successful" and working to promote such a strategy in her community. That AP as a parenting strategy is constructed as culturally significant makes the philosophy all the more appealing. It also offers resistance both to dominant ideas about what black children are capable of (an idea Eleanor specifically rejected) and the role black mothers can play in ensuring that their children reach their "fullest potential" (Sears and Sears 2001, 16).

Conclusion

The limits of AP as a form of motherwork rest largely on the ways the philosophy reinforces individual responsibility for childrearing work. While Eleanor's strategy of working as a "parenting lifestyle consultant", promoting AP among her networks, reclaiming AP from the Sears and reaffirming its African origin, together make for a compelling political project of the kind black feminists describe as characteristic of black women's mothering (Collins 2000), that the philosophy relies not only on individual mothers *choosing* to breastfeed for extended periods,

share their beds with their babies (often relegating fathers to separate bedrooms altogether and absolving them of the exhausting work of night time parenting) and wear their babies at all times overlooks the significant amount of resources, both social and economic, required to enact such practices. The Sears advise giving up paid work and hiring a housekeeper without much consideration of the material costs of such advice.

The women I interviewed were more open about the economic consequences of this parenting style and described the sacrifices they made to allow, for example, staying out of the paid workforce in the early years of their children's lives. Crucially, these explanations were offered by self-identified working-class mothers which suggests the classed work that AP performs *and* the opportunities it offers to parents with limited resources to prepare their children for an economically precarious, competitive future. That such opportunities rely on mothers accepting individual responsibility is a consequence of both the ubiquity of neoliberal ideas about good citizenship but also reflects the long history of black mothers taking on a greater burden to ensure the success of their families and communities (Collins 2000; Hill 2004). Attachment parenting offers an interesting bringing together of these two traditions as well as a chance to suggest the need for more structural support for parenting. Demita, quoted earlier, provides an example of this as she imagines what kind of attachment parenting might be possible for mothers in other parts of the world, with the 'right' amount of information and, crucially, economic support.

By drawing on narratives of nature, instinct *and* choice (and Africa), the mothers I interviewed resist the Sears' stereotypical construction of them as unthinking captives to a monolithic idea of culture and tradition. Their complex negotiation of their position, as black women in Britain and Canada (and thus, framed as not quite belonging), as women with Caribbean heritage and mixed feelings about the implications of that heritage, as women grasping for a connection to Africa and a sense of pan-African belonging, and as racialized mothers who must manage widening and ever more specific responsibilities for the optimal development of their children, these women explode any simplistic rendering of their maternal practices. Their work to 'take back' attachment parenting suggests a re-fashioning of dominant images of black womanhood and motherhood, especially as they are located in the West. This is not to overlook the ways that their narratives uncritically accept homogenized and romanticized notions of Africa or reinforce racialized responsabilization of citizens, particularly mothers, in a postracial neoliberal parenting culture; my aim is to avoid an analysis of these women's lives as either 'revolutionaries or dupes' (Davids and Willemsse 2014; Sa'ar 2005), rather to draw attention to the ways that their particular location engenders certain kinds of maternal practice, how it makes room for the development of a style of parenting that draws on contradictory narratives of belonging, choice, nature, and parenting and emerges in direct response to a context in which individual responsibility eclipses and modifies community. For these black mothers, to reclaim attachment parenting is to both accept its primitive origin story as African and deny it, complicating its imprecise explanations for their own practice and the philosophy's value in black communities.

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