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**Title**: No raggedy black child: Attachment parenting, black motherhood and the politics of respectability

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**Abstract**: First described by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, the politics of respectability captures the both 'conservative and radical' approach of black Baptist women of the early twentieth century in their efforts to address racism in the United States. Respectability politics focuses on altering individual behaviour as a strategy for achieving social change and brought into the present, reflects our contemporary neoliberal moment. In this article, I use the frame of respectability politics to examine the experiences of contemporary black mothers, particularly drawing a comparison between the politics of respectability and attachment parenting, a popular childrearing philosophy. I argue that the appeal of respectability flows along classed lines with middle-class black mothers developing an AP-informed parenting practice that deploys respectability as a protective shield for their children. This finding suggests the importance of attending to intraracial class politics as we practice intersectionality and theorise about the new realities of black motherhood.

**Keywords**: Respectability politics, black motherhood, attachment parenting, intersectionality, neoliberalism

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## Introduction

As the endurance of stereotypes about 'emasculating black mothers' (Reynolds, 1997), racialised vilification of "poor, disenfranchised, failing" mothers (Orgad & Baldwin, 2021: 180) and the media frenzy that has scrutinised Meghan Markle's mothering (Ward, 2021) suggests, black motherhood has been subject to widespread derision and state-sanctioned discipline (Collins, 2000; Reynolds, 2005; Roberts, 1997). In this article, I examine the experiences of modern black mothers in the UK and Canada as they negotiate a revived politics of respectability in our neoliberal present. I begin with a discussion of the politics of respectability as defined and described by American historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. I trace a line from this historically, politically and geographically situated response to early twentieth century American race relations to contemporary evocations of respectability as anti-racist strategies change and the new demands of dominant parenting ideologies reframe black mothering. Though it emerges from a unique moment in the history of African American community activism, respectability politics provides a productive lens through which to examine how black women mother in a global context, shaped by neoliberal governmentality and renewed calls for respectability expressed through parenting.

## Background: the politics of respectability

In her historiography of African-American women's church activism in turn-of-the-century America, Higginbotham (1993) details the influential role played by the Baptist church in black communities. Higginbotham argues that women's community activities, in particular, were driven by what she terms 'the politics of respectability', which "emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations" (1993: 187). Inspired by Victorian notions of respectable behaviour and appearance, the politics of respectability called for "sexual purity…habits of cleanliness and order, and overall self-improvement" (1993: 198).

Such a strategy could be (and often was and is) criticised as "assimilationist"; it attributes systemic racism to deficiencies in black communities which can be rectified by conforming with 'mainstream' (white) norms. However, this strategy might also be understood as what Higginbotham calls a "deliberate, highly self-conscious concession to hegemonic values" (193). In other words, the black Baptist women who articulated this politics were keenly aware that, for African Americans, individual behaviour determined collective representation and that white allies were more responsive to initiatives that concentrated on altering individual behaviour rather than 'radical' structural change. Higginbotham also situates respectability politics in a wider range of black resistance. Black Baptist women emphasised respectable behaviour *alongside* more traditional forms of protest such as boycotts and their embodiment of these respectable characteristics itself served as a challenge to "the cultural logic of white superiority" (Higginbotham, 1993: 222).

In short, the politics of respectability describes a complex mix of radical and conservative political impulses that on the one hand, emphasised individual black folk's responsibility to present themselves in a way that adhered to the norms of white, middle-class American society and on the other, challenged that same society for failing to live up to the promises of equality it championed (Higginbotham, 1993: 222). For the purposes of this article, I focus on two features that are particularly relevant and provide insight into how these politics of respectability endure into the present moment: first, respectability politics are explicitly gendered and classed with black women particularly responsible for maintaining (white, middle-class) standards of childrearing and cleanliness lest any failings reflect poorly on their families and therefore the entire black community. Second, building from Higginbotham's analysis, I dwell on the extent to which the politics of respectability rest on "negative black Others" who are identified as (partly) responsible for lack of progress in the fight for racial equality and justice (Higginbotham, 1993: 204) and serve as an effective contrast against whom respectable African Americans could define themselves.

***Neoliberal rationality, intersectionality and respectability politics***

Though Higginbotham coined the term to articulate the simultaneously radical and conservative motivations of a unique movement of women in a very specific period of American history, 'the politics of respectability' has since been deployed in numerous other contexts (see Dazey, 2020 for an incomplete list). The concept powerfully encapsulates the strategies that marginalised peoples sometimes adopt to navigate

their oppression and seems especially relevant in a neoliberal context that emphasises individual responsibility and self-discipline (Brown, 2006, 2015; Rose, 1999; Power, 2005). Discussions about the viability of respectability politics are particularly urgent at this socio-economic moment. On the one hand, there is the resurfacing of austerity as an appropriate strategy to prepare for the impending economic crisis in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic *and* a re-invigorated and *global* Black Lives Matter movement that explicitly challenges the idea that black people ought to behave in particular, respectable ways to avoid state violence.

In such a context, and echoing Higginbotham's analysis of early twentieth century America, "technical and actionable" strategies to overcome poverty, inequality and racism are favoured over attending to the systemic and structural nature of racial and economic oppression (Spence, 2012: 140). In the econocentric present (Brown, 2006), entrepreneurialism and economic growth are presented as key interventions to tackle inequality. Indeed, celebrations of the 'entrepreneurial spirit' in black communities (Spence, 2012) function to distinguish between the better-able-to-conform middle classes and the poor and working-class populations to whom these technical solutions must be applied.

The 'resurgence' of a Black Lives Matter movement, particularly as it has emerged as a global phenomenon, is exemplified in slogans such as 'the UK is not innocent' (Joseph-Salisbury, Connelly and Wangari-Jones, 2021). The movement has sparked debates about the merits of respectability politics and their relevance in the contemporary moment, both in the US and beyond. Intra-community debates about the most appropriate advice for *individuals* to navigate interactions with the police and other representatives of the state have highlighted the long history of identifying clothing and musical tastes as a marker of inappropriate and potentially criminal behaviour and the inherent class implications of such markers (Rollock et al, 2011).

While the global Black Lives Matter movement vocally opposes this version of respectability politics and has argued that the appearance or behaviour of victims such as Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown should not be license for their murders (Morgan, 2018), political discourse about the murders of Martin, Brown and others often highlights the victims' mothers as particularly responsible for and representative of not only their children's choices but the protest movements founded in the wake of their deaths (Lawson, 2018; Morgan, 2018). For example, Michael Brown's mother has described a pressure to look "presentable" and fulfil a "model of good motherhood" to counter racist justifications of her son's murder (Morgan, 2018: 870). Organising against police deaths in Britain is similarly contextualised by a raced, classed and gendered framing of black working-class women as violent (Elliott-Cooper, 2019). As Higginbotham's work attests, measures of compliance with respectability politics are inherently gendered and so too are its contemporary invocations, with mothers framed as particularly responsible for the purported failures of their children to perform perfect respectability.

In addition to its inherently racial politics, the gendered and classed dynamics of respectability politics offer an invitation to draw on intersectionality as a conceptual

tool for attending to the complex and shifting dynamics of power that may help to explain why such a strategy might gain popularity at different historical moments. Here it is useful to draw on Patricia Hill Collins' matrix of domination (2000) to highlight the dialectical relationship between power and oppression and to explain the allure of altering individual behaviour in pursuit of structural change.

**Black mothers and attachment parenting**

The entanglement of respectability politics with (classed) ideals of home and family-making (Higginbotham, 1993) informs its appearance in contemporary parenting culture. The intensification of parenting that marks modern childrearing norms reflects an explicitly classed and gendered transformation in what is deemed 'good', or respectable, parenting (Fox, 2006; Hays, 1996; Lee et al, 2014). Attachment parenting, which takes the norms of good mothering to their logical conclusion and pushes the boundaries of what may be deemed respectable parenting, may be a particularly fruitful site of analysis. This paper draws from an intersectional analysis of black mothers' engagements with a new and popular parenting philosophy called attachment parenting (Hamilton, 2020). Attachment parenting (or AP) is an increasingly popular parenting philosophy that equates good parenting with 'secure' attachment and bonding between parent and child. Though the name suggests an equitable sharing of childrearing responsibilities between mothers and fathers, attachment parenting advocates identify mothers as particularly responsible for ensuring attachment (Carter, 2017; Faircloth, 2013). Promoters of AP encourage what they call 'extended' breastfeeding, defined as breastfeeding for at least the "two to three years" they suggest is the "norm" outside of the West (Sears, 2020), sharing the bed with one's baby and 'wearing' the baby in a fabric sling, and maintaining close physical contact to ensure the establishment of a suitable bond.

Perhaps the most famous advocates of this style of parenting are Midwestern couple, William and Martha Sears. William, a paediatrician and Martha, a registered nurse, have written dozens of books about parenting and coined 'attachment parenting' in the late 1980s to promote the philosophy. Previous studies of attachment parenting have examined the influence of the Sears (Carter, 2017), focused on the philosophy's alignment with contemporary feminism (Liss and Erchull, 2012) and the crucial role it plays in adherents' identity work (Faircloth, 2013) but beyond acknowledging that the AP community appears to be white and middle-class, few studies have explicitly addressed its racial politics. This is striking, given that 'race' plays a prominent role in attachment parenting's promotional narrative. In one of their influential 'parenting guides' (2001), for example, the Sears argue that attachment parenting is the 'natural' and 'instinctive' way to raise children, inspired by the practices of our ancestors and the current activities of 'traditional' societies in Africa, Asia and the Americas (Hamilton, 2021).

My previous work (Hamilton, 2020, 2021) examines what black mothers make of these ideas, specifically examining the contradiction between what appears to be an instinctively *African* and superior way of parenting and the dismissal and pathologization of black mothers in the West (Reynolds, 1997; Roberts, 1997). I have

previously shown that black mothers may deploy attachment parenting to frame themselves as 'good' mothers, whether rejecting the bodily demands of the philosophy or embracing and transforming its celebration of the mother-child bond. As an example of the dominant ideology of intensive mothering (Hamilton, 2016; Faircloth, 2014), attachment parenting highlights the contradictions at the heart of contemporary parenting culture. On the one hand, parents (mothers) are expected to invest significant amounts of time, energy and resources into the work of raising children but at the same time, the demands of economic productivity central to ideals of good citizenship, make meeting the requirements of good parenthood difficult. Despite the raced and classed barriers that prevent most mothers from successfully meeting its requirements (Elliott, Powell and Brenton, 2013; Fox, 2006), intensive mothering continues to shape the everyday childrearing experiences of modern parents.

**Methodology**

This article draws on interviews with 19 black mothers living in the UK and Canada, conducted between 2015 and 2016. These two countries were chosen in an attempt to contribute to black feminist theorising and black motherhood scholarship beyond the United States and because their comparable histories of Caribbean migration (and contrast with the United States' history of racism) made them unique sites of analysis. Ethics approval for the project was granted by the University of Western Ontario in 2015. Black women whose youngest child was aged five or under at the time of the research and who had some awareness of attachment parenting were invited to participate in the research through flyers, internet posts and calls for participants posted in nursery schools, churches, community centres as well as a targeted online recruitment strategy that focused on parenting groups in areas of the UK and Canada with higher than average black populations. I chose awareness rather than practice of attachment parenting to attract a wide variety of responses to the philosophy, ranging from those who rejected AP to those who enthusiastically embraced it.

As an exploratory project and given the limited existing research on attachment parenting, especially among black families, I conducted in-depth interviews with the mothers. On average, each interview lasted nearly 90 minutes and were conducted in a variety of locations including cafes, restaurants, libraries and participants' homes. I developed an intersectional feminist methodological approach that centred participants' experiences and viewed "lived experience as a criterion for credibility" (Collins, 2000: 257). Analysis and meaning-making began from participants' narratives while also critically interrogating shifting power dynamics in the field (Hamilton, 2020) and in knowledge-making. As a black woman interviewing black mothers, I negotiated an insider-outsider status (Beoku-Betts, 1994) that generated rich but also complex rapport and data. Critical reflection on this and other dynamics between researcher and participants is one strategy by which the rigour and reliability of the study may be measured (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002); others include member checking (following the interview, participants were sent copies of their transcript for feedback) and "methodological and analytic 'decision trails'" (Hall and Stevens, 1991: 19). This intersectional methodology also informed the data analysis strategy which began with

line-by-line coding, followed by an interpretative thematic analysis that was influenced by a black feminist commitment to co-construction (Collins, 2000).

The resulting sample (10 of whom were interviewed in the UK, 9 interviewed in Canada) had an average age of 34. The table below provides more basic demographic information. All names are pseudonyms:

| Name | Age | Number of children | Age of youngest child | Self-described social class | Location |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Angela | 35 | 1 | 2 years | Middle-class | UK |
| Barbara | 38 | 1 | 12 months | Working-class background, middle-class education | |
| Claudia | 40 | 3 (including pregnancy) | 20 months | Middle-class | |
| Demita | 26 | 1 | 3 years | Middle-class | |
| Eleanor | 33 | 3 | 4 years | Working-class | |
| Florynce | 29 | 2 | 6 months | Working-class | |
| Gloria | 34 | 1 | 8 months | Middle-class | |
| Harriet | 34 | 2 | 1 month | Born working-class, now middle-class | |
| Ida | 41 | 2 | 8 months | Middle-class | |
| Jayaben | 44 | 2 | 3 years | Middle-class | |
| Kimberlé | 24 | 1 | 3 years | Working-class | Canada |
| Lorde | 33 | 3 (including pregnancy) | 2 years | Upper middle-class | |
| Margaret | 28 | 1 | 16 months | Middle-class | |
| Notisha | 34 | 2 | 12 months | Middle-class | |
| Olive | 28 | 2 | 2 months | Working-class | |
| Patricia | 41 | 2 | 3 years | Working-class | |
| Rebecca | 38 | 1 | 12 months | Middle-class | |
| Stella | 37 | 1 | 4 years | Mid-high class | |
| Tracey | 31 | 1 | 5 months | Middle-class | |

As the fourth column in the participant demographic table indicates and as a reflection of wider debates about definitions, experiences and the importance of social class (Friedman, 2021; Tyler, 2013), the mothers reported a range of class positions that nevertheless suggests that the sample is disproportionately middle class. In this article, I draw on mothers' own definitions of themselves as belonging to a particular class while at the same time acknowledging the complexity of these ideas, particularly when considered from an intersectional perspective. This means drawing attention to the ways that dominant parenting ideologies identify women as particularly responsible for raising children (Hays, 1996), determine the norms of good parenting from the practices of the middle-classes (Lareau, 2011) and position black mothers as

pathological burdens rather than capable of raising productive future citizens (Hamilton, 2020). It means highlighting the strategies that black mothers adopt to resist and sometimes perpetuate these same ideologies both in the ways that they reject or embrace attachment parenting. However, it also means attending to the class politics of such decisions, how the women's claims to good motherhood illustrate not only how access to material resources shape the experience of mothering (Fox, 2006) but also the wider work of identity-making as middle-class black women raising middle-class black children (Lawson, 2018; Vincent et al., 2012).

Focusing on the experiences of three mothers, Demita, Lorde and Notisha, I explore how respectability politics might explain the ways that these women navigate mothering. While I would categorise each of these women as attachment parents, they often preferred another descriptor, such as 'gentle parenting', to describe their style of childrearing, already suggesting some distance from the homogenised and white-dominated vision of attachment parenting sketched by the Sears. All three women also named themselves as at least "middle class" (one described herself as upper middle class) and I use this self-identification as a lens through which to understand their approach to and perspectives on parenting. The wider sample is disproportionately middle class (14 of the 19 women described themselves as at least middle class) and while there does not seem to be data on the popularity of attachment parenting in black communities in the UK and Canada, I would suggest that the sample is also skewed in favour of those who embrace the practice (11 out of 19). I focus on these three women because in their interviews, they explicitly drew on the politics of respectability, each in different ways citing physical appearance as a crucial site at which protection from racism could be developed. Highlighting the value of a theoretical framework that confronts the intersection of gender, class and race in black mothering, the women's reflections articulate a complex relationship between adherence to dominant ideologies of childrearing, class status *and* racial identity. It is through their status as middle-class attachment parents that they illustrate the enduring currency of respectability politics.

## Findings

The following section focuses on Demita, Lorde and Notisha's narratives. Demita's narrative captures the possibilities and limits of attachment parenting, specifically highlighting how social class shapes the philosophy's potential to 'uplift' black communities by its celebration of particular parenting practices. Attachment parenting's potential for black communities is less convincing when the philosophy is stretched beyond its usual focus on the baby Bs of breastfeeding, babywearing and bedsharing. Lorde and Notisha's attempts to combine AP with multicultural values and diverse education intensify the classed limitations of philosophy, especially when they intersect with racial and gendered politics.

### *The possibilities and limits of attachment parenting: Demita's narrative*

I start with Demita, a 26-year-old mother of one son, who was aged three at the time of the interview. I met Demita only a few months after she had returned to the UK after

several years spent living in southern Africa and the Caribbean. Demita was a British citizen but had spent much of her life outside of the country. She was very excited to have returned to the UK and raved about the state support network that the country offered, especially when contrasted with the lack of support she had experienced elsewhere. At the time of the interview, Demita was unemployed and was actively seeking work, filling her time with volunteering and preparing applications for postgraduate study. She was deeply committed to attachment parenting, though that was not her preferred name for her practice. As well as detailing the benefits that this AP-style of childrearing had afforded her son, during the interview, Demita also talked about the potential benefits it could offer to wider black communities, specifically linking AP to developing "self-image" and "collective confidence" in black children growing up in societies that portray them as threats. At the end of our interview, I asked her if there was anything more that she wanted to say. She answered:

> I mean I would just say…I would love to see a lot more black women doing this also, you know. Not necessarily because it has a name…and not necessarily because we're trying to set ourselves apart but I am thinking about the future and I'm thinking about the future of black youths and having one good, good mothers, good examples to look up to […] I just want some company, I just want some other mother, black mothers' company that know that them youths can be turned into special things. I just want company like I'm not trying to be the only one with a brilliant black child, you know? I'm not the only one…I need hundreds of women, many thousands of women there with me… (Demita, interviewed in the UK)

Having spent the interview describing her efforts to ensure that her son would grow up to be a "brilliant black child" and the essential role that an AP-style approach had played in this process, it was clear that the "this" that Demita wanted more black women to do was attachment parenting. Demita's definition of attachment parenting included activities like extended breastfeeding, bedsharing and generally allowing the child to lead in activities such as weaning. She also described the practice as something that "very many black people" had been doing for "very long" "naturally". She was cautious about the philosophy's recent popularity and was concerned that AP had become associated with white families and crucially, a particular class of people. Demita was concerned that, because attachment parenting was now an activity associated with the middle classes, poor and working-class women might dismiss it as "hoity toity", as she explained:

> 'Cause right now, I would think attachment parenting is a middle-class kind of, bo-ho type thing, you know, it's us women who are kinda natural and bohemian and you know, that's a middle-class thing, that's a thing for people who have grown up in a certain way. Like myself, I'm not saying I haven't 'cause I definitely am, you know. But I also recognise this for many women…like I have friends from [the Caribbean], who are from the country and stuff, they wouldn't necessarily identify themselves as that because for them it's something that's kind of hoity toity…

As she articulated in the previous quote, the middle-classness and exclusionary framing of AP could have ramifications for the wider black community if attachment parenting is accepted as an important strategy in the work of creating brilliant black children and yet, working-class women believe that it is a practice with which they do not and cannot identify. While admirable, there are limits to Demita's efforts to use attachment parenting to create brilliant black children. For example, one might point to the dangers of deploying a 'natural' philosophy among black women for whom nature has been a site through which their reproduction has been disciplined. Black women's 'nature' has been used as an excuse to deny them pain relief during labour and the resources required for early infant care such as lactation support (Bridges, 2011; Phoenix, 1990).

Another concern is the emphasis that AP places on *individual* parents to fulfil an intensive range of childrearing behaviours as a tool for addressing inequalities rather than the structural changes required to enable extended breastfeeding and well-paid parental leaves, reflecting the neoliberal context in which the philosophy has become popular. But in particular, the question of *how* brilliant black children are defined, or more precisely, *against whom* they are defined is worthy of examination. After Demita described her desire to get many more black women on board the attachment parenting train, she explained her reasoning:

> why I do it also is about self-image. It's about self-confidence and collective black people, collective confidence in theirselves [...] [my son's] cousin at home right now is mixed race but...he hates [himself] and it's not his fault, it's just what he's been exposed to. He does not identify with the black [side of his identity], he would prefer not to 'cause as far as he's concerned it's boisterous, it's loud, it's ghetto, it's, you know, not positive, it's people on the corner, it's drugs, it's loud, you know. It's not positive. And you know my aunt keeps saying, 'you guys [should] come and change that, he actually respects you guys now, you've shown him another way, you've shown him that you're educated and you're not just here trying to do nothing.'

Demita, who described herself as both "assimilated"[i] and yet "very much Afrocentric", is perhaps an apt modern day representation of the simultaneously radical and conservative impulses that drove black Baptist women in the early twentieth century United States. On the one hand, she strongly objected to the homogenous and detrimental portrayal of black youths in the media, even restricting her son's access to television to ensure that he is not bombarded with these images. But on the other, Demita also represents an educated, middle-class *respectable* motherhood (Rollock et al, 2011) made possible because attachment parenting is also represented as educated, middle-class and respectable. Attachment parenting's journey from instinctive practice of 'primitive' societies to a scientifically rationalised marker of white middle-class motherhood by its very design precludes certain groups of women (including African women, working-class women and so on) from claiming any ownership of the philosophy (Hamilton, 2020). Demita's claim on AP challenges this process but only insofar as it rests on an intraracial and class-inflected hierarchy of

what constitutes a brilliant black child. This is especially evident when we turn to Lorde and Notisha's narratives.

***Stretching attachment parenting beyond the home: Lorde and Notisha's narratives***

Lorde and Notisha were both interviewed in Canada and both focused on appearance as a strategy for maintaining respectability in a racially hostile world. The first to be interviewed was Lorde, a 33-year-old American who had been living in Canada for over a decade. She had two sons, aged four and two and was expecting her third child. Lorde squeezed our interview into a very busy day and our time together was policed by an alarm to ensure that she left on time to attend to her next responsibility. Unsurprisingly, she described a typical day in her life as "chaos!" but pleasurably so. Her husband's work required a significant amount of travel which meant that "house duties are all mom" and involved homeschooling, volunteering, freelance work and other activities Lorde did not have time to mention in detail. Lorde was very vocal about her passion for attachment parenting though, like others in this category, she preferred another term, calling herself a "hands on parent". She breastfed both her sons until they were two, practiced babywearing and had only recently moved both children out of the family bed. As her children got older, Lorde translated her enthusiasm for attachment parenting into the search for an appropriate school for her eldest. Lorde wanted a school that both respected her attachment-style approach and was diverse, offering her child exposure to the different kinds of people and cultures of the world. Lorde described coming to attachment parenting not through family experience (either her own or that of her husband's) but through "instinct".

The second mother was Notisha, who, when we met for our interview, was about to return to work after a 12-month-long maternity leave with her second daughter. Notisha was 34 at the time of the interview and defined attachment parenting as "closeness with your child" that began with birth and extended even into adulthood. She was one of the few participants to describe her parenting style as inherited from her parents, whom she called "very cuddly people" and who, though they might not have heard of or used the term 'attachment parenting', would fit its parameters. In terms of her own practice, Notisha reported breastfeeding her first daughter until she became pregnant with her second and hoped to continue breastfeeding for a while longer yet, though her second child had experienced some issues with weight gain that meant she had to supplement with formula. Demonstrating her commitment to breastfeeding (and aligning with both AP and public health messages that 'breast is best'), Notisha was not happy about this but reasoned that her daughter was "healthy" and "thriving", receiving a "majority" of breast milk. She was also keen on babywearing but did not bedshare, largely, it seemed, due to her husband's opposition to the practice. Like Lorde, Notisha's attachment parenting practice extended into concern with the wider environment her children would be raised in, explicitly opting to live in a "multicultural" neighbourhood and send her children to a "multicultural" school.

Between the two and in the larger sample, Lorde was among the most enthusiastic proponents of AP, which informed her own parenting as well as her freelance work, which involved helping pregnant women to prepare for motherhood. Lorde was keen to

promote ‘natural’ birth, breastfeeding and the use of cloth nappies, among other parenting activities, because she believed that such practices were best for both babies and mothers. Lorde noted the importance of these insights for black mothers who she argued were less likely to, for example, have access to larger, baby-friendly certified hospitals where such practices are encouraged. During our conversation, Lorde commented on how race impacted her parenting:

> unfortunately for me, both of my pregnancies [happened at the same time as] a lot of that mess was going on in the States, like with Trayvon Martin. And it made me painfully aware that I was birthing black men. It made me painfully, painfully aware [...] When I was pregnant with my sons it made me painfully aware that this is my baby, this is my world, this is my joy but to someone else, it is their nightmare...it is their fear, so...when it comes to parenting and I think most black people have always heard the same, you know, you have to be twice as good...to get half of what they have...it affects my parenting, whether I want it to or not. I think that’s why...*the things that I teach my son beyond what he learns in books and what he learns at school,* it has no choice but whether I want it to, it is second nature to teach these things to my son. Something as simple as always carrying lotion and lip balm in his backpack at school and you know. Why he can’t do this or why he can’t put this in his hair, it’s very simple, it’s a very, it’s something that you do without even thinking. (Lorde, emphasis mine)

Lorde’s awareness of the violence of racism, both past and present, determined, at an ‘unthinking’, instinctive level, how she experienced the birth of her sons and her approach to raising them. Such an awareness has clear and significant emotional dimensions and suggests the significance of parenting philosophy for black mothers as a means of not just raising their children ‘well’ but ensuring their survival (Collins, 2000). Indeed, as Demita’s wish for more “brilliant black children” signifies, the meaning of a well-raised child is inseparable from that child’s survival, as the modern politics of respectability encapsulate. The additional labour, the ‘things’ she teaches ‘beyond’ books and school, that Lorde’s style of parenting required was inspired both by her ‘hands on’ approach, reflecting the intensive nature of attachment parenting practice, and by the realities of raising black children in a society that repeatedly framed black children as threats.

One of the strategies that Lorde employed for helping her sons avoid racist violence was ensuring that they always looked their best; no “chapped lips,” “ashy” skin or un-brushed, uncut hair. The discourse of respectability politics suggests that black people looking their best works to counter racist stereotypes of them as lazy and feckless but Lorde explained this focus on appearance as a means of keeping her children “safe,” presumably from the violence enacted on Trayvon Martin and others whose deaths are justified by reference to unrespectable appearance and behaviour such as wearing a hoodie or saggy trousers (Obasogie and Newman, 2016).

This claim of individual protection is what makes the analysis of the politics of respectability complex; suggesting that moisturised lips and skin can prevent a child from being unjustly assaulted or killed places the onus on members of marginalised

groups to comport themselves "respectably" to avoid racist violence. However, one cannot merely dismiss the individual decisions that parents make to keep their children safe (Reynolds, 2005) nor separate those decisions from their wider parenting practices. The claim that racist violence is solely the responsibility of the perpetrator is not sufficient protection for children who may be the victim of that violence. Parents seek to provide a shield where few exist and in this case, Lorde selected appearance as one method by which she could protect her children from violence. This focus on appearance can result in the displacement of the goals of community uplift and protection in favour of ensuring the safety of her particular children and thus, reveals the individualist limitations of respectability politics, a revelation realised by attending to the intersection of race, gender *and* class.

This distinction between the safety of one's own children versus the well-being of the entire community is brought to bear by Notisha, mother of two daughters. While she believed that her children's gender was at least one form of protection against the kind of police violence Lorde described, she also cited appearance as another method:

> I always wanna make sure that the children look put together, that they don't look, you know, rough, I guess, and I think that's kinda where it's come from, my parents, you know…always wanna make sure that their hair's in place, braided up nice or put in a ponytail or whatever, it's nice, clean clothes, ironed, um, that type of thing, yeah. I think that's instilled from my parents but…I think it could be just in the back of my mind, I don't want people to make an assumption that there's a raggedy black child or something like that, you know what I mean? And like I said, I think I come from…my parents, you know, in the back "always look put together" you know, "you wanna make sure you look nice and clean and neat". Yeah. Always look your best. (Notisha)

Like Lorde, Notisha's narrative highlights the persistence of racism as she refers to advice that her own parents gave her during her childhood, linking it to the kind of childrearing she carries out today. This inter-generationally learned response to racism is a common feature of respectability politics narratives, often summed up as 'the talk' black parents must give to their children. However, in Notisha's words, the class implications of protecting one's child from racist stereotypes are laid bare. One purpose of these particular children's moisturised lips and ironed clothes is to distinguish them from their "raggedy" counterparts. This kind of distinction does not require that Notisha *believe* that "raggedy" black children are any less deserving of protection or safety for it to perform the work of suggesting that some lives, middle-class lives, are more worthy than others. The practice of dressing her children well only works if there are "raggedy" children in whose direction racist attention can be drawn instead. Some contemporary defenders of respectability politics have argued that adopting a respectable demeanour "may be the fastest way for some blacks to attain a semblance of the lives they want" (Kennedy, 2015: 28). However, such strategies are only successful for "some blacks" at the expense of 'Other' black people, who serve as storehouses for negative attention. If the history of the term tells us that respectability politics emerged to address the structural nature of antiblack racism (Higginbotham, 1993), these more individual expressions described by Lorde and Notisha result instead

in a maintenance of the status quo with poor black children bearing the brunt of racism. These individual strategies are also well-suited to the neoliberal context in which racism is presented as an obstacle one can choose, through "self-correction" (Harris, 2014: 36) or entrepreneurialism (Spence, 2012) to overcome.

**Discussion and conclusion**

There are important distinctions between the respectability politics articulated by black Baptist women in the last century and the motivations expressed by the three women I focus on in this article. One significant difference may lie in the ideal of respectability that the women in different ways aim to reach. For black Baptist women, respectable appearance and behaviour was strongly influenced by Christian and Victorian norms and required the explicit rejection of behaviours associated with other forms of blackness such as "rural folk ways" or what Higginbotham called "black working class cultural forms such as jazz and dance" (1993: 200). The assimilated, respectable form of blackness that black Baptist women promoted was specifically directed at poor and working-class black folk who, through lack of education may have been denied the opportunity to attain respectability through a middle-class education or profession, but could then embody it through class-inflected comportment, manners and morals.

The "nice, clean and neat" respectable appearance that Lorde and Notisha hope for their children is a layer upon and an expression of their middle-class status. For example, both Lorde and Notisha described their efforts to choose the right kind of school for their children that would not only provide a quality education but cultivate a multicultural outlook that would give their children a competitive edge in an increasingly tight labour market (Hamilton, 2020). Their desire to present their children as ideal middle-class subjects (Lawson, 2018) is inseparable from the harms that can be visited upon black people especially when that harm is explained through the lens of respectability. The purpose of lotion and lip balm is not to approximate whiteness but to avoid looking "ashy" which is associated with a lack of care for oneself and may too easily align with stereotypes of laziness. Like the black Baptist women, Notisha and Lorde's image of respectable blackness rests on a hierarchy that distinguishes respectability from a "raggedy" or "ashy" blackness.

On the other hand, Demita claims both an 'assimilated' and Afrocentric identity, embodied in her practice of attachment parenting. And it is through this practice that she aims to create brilliant black children. The respectable identity Demita promotes is directed at all types of women, especially, perhaps, those women "from the country" who might feel alienated by attachment parenting's recent popularity and its association with the "hoity toity". Her respectable blackness appears more fluid, more responsive to different women's resources, perhaps a reflection of her own precarity at the moment of interview, having just arrived in the UK and struggling to find a job but within the relative safety of her class background. And yet, Demita's aims remain tied to a single vision of brilliance and respectability that is not "boisterous" or "ghetto".

The three women reveal the complex contradictions at the heart of black mothers' attempts to prepare their children to succeed and resist in a racist society (Reynolds,

2005). Demita, Lorde and Notisha each realise their versions of attachment parenting through their class identities, whether marrying Afrocentrism or a corporatized diversity[ii] with attachment parenting practice. Their descriptions of their efforts to protect black children from harm are contextualised by their investment in attachment parenting, which constrains their ability to engage in a more community-oriented politics; AP's emphasis on maintaining the mother-child relationship through practices like bedsharing and extended breastfeeding tends to restrict women's interests to their own families (Bobel, 2002). However, in their expressed interest in promoting AP beyond their families, teaching more mothers about the benefits of AP practice, as Lorde and Demita suggest: "if more people saw it, you'd probably see lots of people breastfeeding, you'd see lots more people baby wearing if they saw it," the participants complicate this individualist construction of AP. In naming racism as a structural barrier that they must teach their children to manage, Demita, Notisha and Lorde each undermine the neoliberal claim that we are living in a postracial era. Further, in their gestures towards helping other black kids and their desires to make AP more "normal," especially among black mothers, the women signal the limitations of the individualist image of motherhood essential to our neoliberal context.

By some measures, each of the strategies that Demita, Lorde and Notisha describe are good examples of the technical and actionable solutions that neoliberal governmentality engenders. Unlike the theory from which it takes its name, attachment parenting narrowly focuses on specific childrearing *techniques* rather than a generic sense of bonding or attachment that may be achieved by any number of childrearing practices. One might argue that as Demita deploys it in favour of the "collective development" of black people, techniques of extended breastfeeding or bedsharing are promoted in place of political organising to address stereotypical media representation or discriminatory practices in education. Similarly, Lorde and Notisha's favouring of moisturised skin and ironed clothing are practical techniques that suggest no link with broader political activity. However, the mothers' actions cannot be examined in a vacuum, away from the other kinds of work they might be engaged in. More specifically, I do not want to dismiss the possibilities that such an approach might offer in a neoliberal context. Individual struggles are more palatable and perhaps more likely to succeed in a sociopolitical environment that emphasises individual responsibility (Duggan, 2003; Hamilton, 2020).

This tension between an approach that concedes to neoliberal reasoning and appears to challenge it is precisely what makes the study of parenting from the perspective of black mothers, and the adoption of an explicitly intersectional theoretical framework, so fruitful. It is an invitation to attend to the often obscured race and class politics of contemporary parenting and their impact on the lived reality of parenting for both racially minoritised and white parents. It also demonstrates the analytical value of an intersectional approach that attends not only to how gender, race and class shape institutions of motherhood but also how, in different ways, they inform black mothers' themselves understandings of parenting.

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[i] Demita's description of herself as "assimilated" came at the end of our interview and seemed to be her attempt to explain both her commitment to uplifting a raceless "everybody" and her specific interest in "building [black] communities".
[ii] A vision of diversity defined by its ability to generate or sustain profit rather than challenge the very structures that prevent equitable and inclusive participation of diverse groups.

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