



Can There Be Love in the Caribbean?

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This paper explores heterosexual love, a neglected issue in Caribbean scholarship which has been preoccupied with the structure of family and conjugality and, more recently, focused on gender and sexuality. And yet, love is everywhere. In private and public spaces, it is celebrated as essential to human happiness – heterosexual romantic love that is, since homosexual love is still outlawed, condemned and clandestine. Paradoxically though, love is enacted within an Afro-Caribbean culture of matrifocality characterized by male ‘marginality’ and hyper-heterosexual performance, and female-centered family solidarity, features which appear to be inimical, if not disruptive, to heterosexual love scripted as monogamous, intimate and enduring. Against this background, this research posed the question: Can there be love in the Caribbean?

For the research, a total of nineteen women in Barbados shared their thoughts and experiences of heterosexual love during a series of focus group discussions.¹ Several considerations influenced the selection of informants. Foremost was research evidence indicating that it is women, not men, who are advocating for the transformation of conventional heterosexuality (Jackson 1999, 121). Age and generation were also significant. Since we, the researchers, were interested in how women sustain and reshape love as the foundation for enduring relationships with men, we sought as informants women who had experienced longer-term relationships. As it turned out, all were or had been married. They did, however, reflect on earlier phases of falling in love and forming relationships. At the same time, we were also concerned to explore intergenerational change as reflected in contrasts between their own experiences and those of their mothers and grandmothers, and so chose younger generation informants. All were under the age of thirty-five years. Eight of them had children thus enabling us to interrogate the impact of managing motherhood on relationships with men.

The selection of participants was also informed by local ideology and culture, specifically the principles and practices of matrifocality and ‘respectability’. The

scholarly spotlight has focused on both perspectives – on Afro-Caribbean matrifocal family structure centred on women's personal and economic autonomy, and on the ideology of feminine 'respectability' that privileges patriarchy, heterosexuality and marriage. But there has been little, if any, attention paid to the contradictions and tensions between them and how women navigate these. To explore this, we selected women who were black (Afro-Caribbean) and also middle class for whom marriage is a social norm. All had been educated to secondary or university level and all but one were employed. Occupations included secretary, store manager, accountant, pharmacist and medical doctor.

There are clear limitations to this research. Two require special mention, namely the narrow focus and the empirical approach. The research sample was small and confined to women who were black, employed as professionals and heterosexual. There is a clear need for a diversity of perspectives within and across class, race, ethnicity and nationality and for the inclusion of other voices – those of younger and older women, heterosexual men and LGBT persons in particular. As we listened to our informants relate their experiences, ideas and problems, we were less concerned with what romantic love is and more with how love is felt and enacted in a specific place and time (Johnson 2005, 1). We recognized, as others have, that heterosexual love is socially scripted and also relational – 'something one "does" and "feels" with others rather than a pre-existing emotion that one "has"' (Smart 2007, 59). Rather than focus on normative structures and instrumental gender roles as has traditionally been the case with Caribbean ethnography, we centred meanings and processes with love as rethought and reworked – for this study, by women as moral agents and reflexive social actors as they renegotiated their relationships with men towards love. This aligns with scholars who have called for research on love to be more grounded and to attend to real lives; as Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (2010, 36) emphasise, to 'address everyday, interpersonal interaction and the meanings negotiated within it – which are ... crucial to understanding sexual relations.' In the process, we may well have privileged empiricism at the expense of discursive analysis and, at the same time, neglected wider material and

structural inequalities and constraints that have shaped a distinct Caribbean heteronormativity and regulated heterosexual love across the region.² We hope, nevertheless, to have transcended the spoken word and contributed, at some level, to the evolving field of 'Love Studies' (Jónasdóttir 2014) and to contemporary debates on sexual politics, heterosexuality and love, and to have done so from a non-Western perspective. We begin with a brief overview of Caribbean matrifocality and heterosexual 'respectability'.

The Context of Love: Matrifocality and Heterosexuality

Matrifocality is socially and historically embedded Afro-Caribbean society. It signifies emotionally close, supportive and enduring blood (or consanguineal) ties and extended kinship networks centred on mother-child bonds (Smith 1996). Men play key roles in their families of origin, notably as sons to their mothers, but also as brothers, uncles (mother's brothers) and grandfathers – though there is evidence of strengthening fatherhood, both practically and emotionally (Barrow 1998, 349-351; Brown et al. 1993). In contrast, relationships with wives and female partners are depicted as fragile, conflictual and unstable (Handwerker 1989, 61). They are troubled by suspicion and stress and are often short-lived – frequently disrupted by male multi-partnering and intimate partner violence in particular. Stereotypes of the opposite sex abound in public discourse and popular culture. Women see men as 'irresponsible' and 'unfaithful' while, to men, women are avaricious, calculating and untrustworthy (Barrow 1985, 58; Handwerker 1989, 111), out to snare men with pregnancy and obeah tricks. Marriage is said to 'have teeth' and the local saying 'better a good living than a bad marriage' is often quoted, along with anecdotes of couples living in harmony until the day after they marry. Caribbean feminists have refocused matrifocality away from the structural-functional lens of mothers who father children and men who go missing, by highlighting women's personal and economic autonomy and, concomitantly, their relative lack of emotional, social and economic dependence on male partners.

It is perhaps not surprising that in the Barbados context of matrifocality, marriage rates have remained consistently low despite the valiant efforts of the Church and the State to steer people towards social propriety and moral sanctity. Indeed, motherhood is privileged over marriage – more often than not, it precedes marriage, if marriage occurs at all. From the 1930s to the mid-1980s, the marriage rate averaged only 4.8 per 1000 of the population. From then, the number of marriages trebled to reach 3676 in 1996, with the rate peaking at 13.9. Subsequently though, the total dropped to 1890 in 2016, giving a rate of 6.8. Only 23.8 percent of the adult population is married and the proportion of female-headed households stands at 47.5 percent (Barbados 2013), the fourth highest globally. Marriage may be the norm in the middle and upper classes but, to the chagrin of local moral authorities, most Barbadians seem to prefer to ‘live in sin’ in common law or visiting unions (Barrow 1995).

Meanwhile, divorces, though remaining below 100 per year up to 1970, jumped to 438 by 1996, giving a rate of 11.9 per 100 marriages. Since then, the number has fluctuated with the most recent figure, for 2016, showing 469 divorces – a rate of 24.8. The Barbados Family Law Act (1981) shifted the grounds for divorce from ‘fault’ to ‘mutual consent’ and ‘irretrievable breakdown’. While the new law did not prompt a spike in divorce, it coincided with a change in social perceptions of divorce as an indicator of marital dissolution rather than a cause. Indeed, as we suggest in this research, the rising divorce rate may also signify that love is becoming a vital ingredient in heterosexual relationships though remaining elusive. Importantly here, too, is the increase in divorce petitions instigated by wives rather than husbands – between the mid-1950s and mid-1990s, these rose from 44.3 percent to 53.2 percent. However, the latest figure of 53.5 percent for 2016 reveals little recent change.

Love is invisible in matrifocality studies, perhaps because Caribbean scholars like those elsewhere³ considered it too frivolous, too elusive, too difficult to express and observe. Or maybe it simply did not exist? Raymond Smith (1988, 142), one of the founding fathers of Caribbean kinship studies and the architect of

matrifocality, portrays the sexual relations of yesteryear as instrumental and claims that 'intense affect is not necessary', and Carla Freeman's informants refer to the 'emotional coldness' of conjugal (and parental) relationships in previous generations (Freeman 2014, 63). But although love may well have been less affective and romantic, it was also likely to have been an even more intensely private matter in earlier generations – perhaps, therefore, out of bounds for discussion with researchers. Whatever the case, Caribbean ethnography in tandem with data on marriage and divorce in Barbados gives the impression of heterosexual relationships without monogamy, without marriage and without stability until death do part – each of which is considered to be an essential component of love.

Despite this gloomy outlook, there can be no doubt that love is in the air. Across the world, as moral philosophers confirm, love with sexual desire is the most intense and pleasurable of all emotions – it makes us feel special, it is what we long for (Newton-Smith 1989, 204; Soble 2008, 6-11).⁴ We hear repeatedly that to love and be loved is a natural imperative over which we have little control; love is the key to human happiness. In Barbados as elsewhere, love is increasingly codified as romantic love and depicted in images of Hollywood-style passion that saturate television soap operas, films, songs and popular fiction. Modern love demands intimate dinners, Valentine's red roses and chocolates, and ever-more lavish weddings.⁵ A plethora of guidance counselors and advice columns spotlights romance to keep marriages alive and well.

As with love, research has also been silent on heterosexuality, but for different reasons. Heterosexuality is mundane, mainstream, taken for granted and, therefore, unexplored and unproblematized (Jackson 2014, 75; Johnson 2005). Research on intimacy, for example, assumed without question a heterosexual frame (Giddens 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995), as did studies of Caribbean matrifocality and 'respectability'. This normative power of heterosexuality is buttressed at multiple levels by biology, ideology and culture, social institutions and conventional gendered behaviour. Despite the reframing

of love as a social construct, the biological foundation persists and re-emerges – for example, in the notion that the intersections between love, sex and reproduction are underpinned by heterosexual love that is natural, essential and universal. At macro-social level, heterosexuality is sustained structurally and institutionally, at the same time as it is reaffirmed in private spaces in every day sexual and social practices (Jackson 1999, 181). The compulsion to perform heterosexuality co-opts women to be good wives, mothers and homemakers and to distance themselves from lesbianism, while men enact masculine sexual and social authority and, in doing so, separate themselves from the effeminacy associated with homosexuality. Romantic love works in tandem with sex to produce, normalize and legitimize heterosexuality and the concomitant life-cycle course that begins with falling in love and leads on monogamous sexual relationships, marriage and reproduction. As Johnson (2005, 3) puts it, ‘love and sexuality “work” together to authorize and naturalize the configuration of heterosexuality’. At the same time, privileged heterosexuality marginalizes and stigmatizes as transgressive those persons and practices outside its boundaries.

Despite this apparent hegemony, social and political modernization has, if anything, shaken the foundations of normative heterosexuality. In Barbados, as elsewhere, the lives of women in particular have been transformed by law reforms relating to the status of women, divorce and abortion; by enhanced social mobility as a result of participation in the formal economy and politics; by contraception that separates sex from reproduction and frees women from continuous childbearing and motherhood; and by changing patterns of family, parenting and sexuality. LGBT sexual identities and public advocacy have refocused attention from heterosexuality to sexual diversity, though not without strong resistance especially across the Caribbean (Carr 2003, Caribbean Development Research Services Incorporated 2013). As the power of conventional heterosexuality diminishes, the possibility of creating new meanings and realities of love opens up. Heterosexuality is not monolithic; it is fluid and ambivalent – there is nothing inevitable about it. Furthermore, the young women of today are less ideologically constrained than their mothers

and grandmothers – they have more leeway to renegotiate their relationships with men, or indeed to opt out of heterosexuality altogether.

The recent resurgence of studies on heterosexuality, while affirming women's subordination, also reveals evidence of change. Research in the Caribbean echoes that elsewhere in reporting that contemporary relationships are embracing intimacy and joint activity (Alexander 1978, Freeman 2014, Smith 1988, 134-48).⁶ It seems, not surprisingly, that it is women who are driving this trend; it is they, as Freeman (2014, 63) found in her research on middle-class women entrepreneurs in Barbados, 'who are now articulating desires for a new form of marriage that departs in both structural as well as emotional ways from the patriarchal relations of their parents' generation'. Our informants' testimonies resonated with these findings as they, too, sought to reshape their relationships.

It is important though, not to overestimate the transformation of heterosexuality or to underrate resistance from men, and women, too, along with institutional norms and social conventions of patriarchal power that reach into the private spaces of home, family, sexuality and love. As Stevi Jackson (1999, 121) has cautioned, 'claims that a more egalitarian form of love is emerging seem absurdly over optimistic and willfully neglectful of the continued patriarchal structuring of heterosexuality.' Neither should we forget the early feminist accounts that were overwhelmingly critical of romantic love and the marriage trap, or the contemporary discourses of heterosexual love that still carry warning signs for women. Among the first to raise the alarm was Simone de Beauvoir (1972) who warned that women's choice of romantic love represented enslavement. Adrienne Rich (1980) followed with her critique of 'compulsory heterosexuality' as a socially constructed and pervasive, yet silent, mode of ideological control over women's sexual expression, and her advocacy for lesbian relationships as a form of resistance and freedom. More recently, Anna Jónasdóttir (2011, 53-56) claims that women's 'love power', their erotic and caring labour, in heterosexual relationships is appropriated and exploited by

men. Eudine Barriteau (2012, 94. See also Barriteau 2013) is one of the few Caribbean scholars who has grappled with the issue. She states that, 'for women who prove powerful in other social, political and economic relations, there are continuous attempts to use their sexual relations with men to force them into powerless positions'. Add to this, the persistence of intimate partner violence against women and we can be in no doubt that heterosexual love continues to draw on traditional scripts of monogamy, marriage and feminine domesticity to affirm patriarchy.

Romance and marriage may well signify women's collusion in their own subordination. Indeed, Jónasdóttir (2011, 49) identifies the institution of marriage as 'a key regulator that keeps the process of male domination in action.' And yet, heterosexual love 'remains meaningful for, and highly valued by, many women', maybe because in their everyday lives, caring is integral to how they practice love and is, therefore, not seen as exploitative (Jackson 2014, 34, 43). But heterosexual love is also a site of women's agency and resistance and some feminists are now writing positively about love, even to be falling in love with love and 'willing to "come out" as secret fans of romance' (Jackson 1999, 120). In other words, for women, heterosexual love is not just about subjugation and exploitation.

Our informants' narratives echoed these themes of complicity and agency, tolerance and resistance. They cautioned against being deluded by best-loved romantic fantasies: "*Love blinds you to common sense. It's like I'm not falling for that thing again ... you need to be a little more realistic.*" It seems then, that we all want love, but it is women who pay the price. It is they who are motivated to reshape love in their relationships with men and they who confront the ideological and structural forces of patriarchy and heteronormativity, public and private condemnation for flouting feminine codes of respectability, and resistance – sometimes violent – from their menfolk. These themes on the intersection of love, sex and heterosexuality are central to the ethos and lived realities of our informants.

What Kind of Love do Women Want?

Our informants identified three main ingredients of heterosexual love: intimacy with communication and romance; equality in joint decision-making and the division of labour, and the absence of violence; and fidelity. In the discussion that follows, we interrogate their rich testimonies as they elaborated on these qualities, explained how their own relationships fell short more often than not and, in the process, contrasted their ideals, expectations, experiences and decisions with those of their mothers and grandmothers.

Intimacy, communication and romance

Informants were united in the view that topping the list of qualities essential to modern-day heterosexual love is intimacy⁷ with communication and romance:

"I know someone who got married to get a house.... But I don't look at marriage like that. Marriage to me is about love and commitment, not for materialistic things";

"For me, love dies because ... not being able to communicate with the other person. Communication has stopped. You've stopped doing romantic things like talking walks on the beach hand in hand, that sort of stuff. I think that's where like the love starts dying, when you stop being excited about each other."

But they also declared that love can survive in the absence of romance, at least for a while:

"But I think as far as commitment goes, if you cannot have that romance and all the frilly stuff for a period of time, that doesn't mean that the marriage is over and you're never going to get it again."

The centrality of intimacy and romance appears to represent a break with the past when, sexual relations were about "giving" one to the other' rather than intense affection (Smith 1988, 142), that is, the giving of material things and labour rather than love. Our informants reflected this: *"I think people in the generation before would have looked at love as more frivolous ... that when*

you marry somebody, you marry them for better or for worse.... It was all obligation, love didn't really factor in", whereas for them: "When love dies there's nothing left". In other words, what once was "frilly" and "frivolous" has assumed centre stage.

Informants also recognized women's role in initiating and sustaining romance:

"You can buy something that you know your husband is not expecting ... you see this nice negligee. Take it home, right. Just decide one night you're going to cook dinner just for the two of you. Candles on the table. You know ... make him feel special."

But they were adamant that nurturing love should be a dual and reciprocal responsibility:

"If you're the person who does it all the time and then you're not in a position to do it.... And if the person you're with is not the type of person to just pick up the baton and do it for you, you have a serious problem. What happens if you're pregnant? I can only talk about my experiences. If they don't do these things and make you feel special.... You can't really feel special at two hundred pounds."

On this note, several informants described their male partners as "detached emotionally", referring, as Jackson (1999, 117) put it, to their 'lack of emotional reciprocity' and 'incapacity to display love'. For men, love continues to be instrumental:

"He was very, very helpful in the home and he loved to do nice things for me. My friends used to get so jealous about me and this man, because he would do all these nice things, always buying me little things. He would buy flowers, he would cook, dish my food. But I wanted a man ... somebody I can talk to and relate to. But I couldn't communicate with him ... there was no communication. You can't talk about anything."

The cliché of men wanting sex: women love, also came up in their testimonies:

"That's the difference between men and women. Women like the hug up and the kiss up, while men are satisfied with only the actual intercourse";

“And I found that sex became the thing.... He was never really taught how to treat a woman. He just never understood. He just felt that when he leaned over and touched you, you must understand that he is ready. And that’s not how we function.... It’s going to feel like rape. We want to know that you treat us, you love us and you can hug us and don’t want to have sex”.

Male sex was also seen to be rooted in biology as a primordial urge:

“I find that men when they are 20 to 25 and their hormones are out of control, they have one definition of love.... I think the testosterone still drives them”.

Another challenge to intimacy is the matrifocal pillar of a man’s primary and life-long emotional attachment as a son to his mother and not to the mother of his children, whether wife or not. As Peter Wilson (1973, 135) put it, ‘There is only one relationship which is ideally sentimentalized – a man’s relation to his mother. Throughout his life he will maintain ... that he loves his mother above all else’. The mother-son bond has been described as ‘exclusive and often obsessive’ (Clarke 1957,164; see also Smith 1996, 56), tensions between a wife and her mother-in-law are legend, and men have been known to delay marriage until after their mothers have died (Barrow 1998, 344-6; Clarke 1957,162-4). As one informant stated: *“My husband now, from the time anything goes wrong, he went straight to his mother.”*

Equality

Equality in authority, decision-making and responsibility was also perceived as intrinsic to love in modern-day relationships – as Shulamith Firestone (1989, 37) states: ‘power and love don’t make it together’. But, Caribbean research reveals a persistent view of men as dominant. In Wilson’s gender binary model, male ‘reputation’ prescribes authority and control, while feminine ‘respectability’ encodes women’s submission within the patriarchal nuclear family. This image of women triggered a feminist tirade across the region that highlighted the long tradition of black women’s sexual, personal and economic autonomy, their involvement in the worlds of work and politics, and their

challenge to patriarchal authority (Besson 1993). In the lives of most Caribbean women, there is neither a sharp demarcation between private and public spheres, nor any confinement to the domestic domain. Women have always worked – they share or shoulder single-handedly the responsibilities of family support (Massiah 1983, Senior 1991). Providing child support is integral to motherhood and women continue to work rather than give up employment after childbirth.

But, matrifocality is not matriarchy; it signifies female-centredness, not female authority (Smith 1988, 7-8) and is not a model of women's strength, endurance and resilience despite the insistence of some feminist scholarship.⁸ Women who head households may experience greater personal freedom from male control, but often find themselves among the 'poorest of the poor' (Massiah 1983). And, while women's autonomy is central to matrifocality and may mitigate patriarchy, masculinity prescribes male heterosexual authority including control over women's sexuality – with violence when necessary. In Barbados, men are reported to choose as conjugal partners, women who are younger, of lower occupational status and docile in character (Dann 1987, 70,76). Women's demand for equality is seen to disrupt the natural asymmetry of male domination and female subordination and to provoke male resistance. As we shall see, there are alarming reports of the cultural normalcy of violence justified as the right of men to keep women in order.

Also debated in the Caribbean, is the comparative significance – symbolic and real – of motherhood and marriage in women's lives (Rowley 2002, 35-7). Matrifocality prizes motherhood, within marriage or not, as the primary signifier of womanhood (Senior 1991, 66) and stigmatizes childless women as barren 'mules' or 'graveyards'.⁹ Yet, at the heart of feminine decorum is marriage; it has the 'sanction of respectability' and is the 'hallmark of status', while men are reluctant, if not resistant (Clarke 1957, 47-59). Middle class femininity then, prescribes marriage and childbearing within marriage; motherhood outside of marriage represents a fall from grace, as did divorce. Though there are signs that this is less so, and that women's status is as much dependent on education and career, marriage continues to be desirable to women. Tracy Robinson

(2003, 248) cautions that we should not underestimate the power of marriage as an ideal for women that offers legal legitimacy and social acceptance. And one of our informants spoke for the others when she said, *"For me ... I've always liked marriage. I've always wanted to be in love and get married"*. Young single women 'without a man' and 'on the shelf' are pitied. In contemporary Caribbean romantic fiction, the portrayal of super-respectable women through a Victorian lens as 'restricted to the domestic sphere, virginal or maternal, nurturing, forbearing, submissive and pure' (Bryce 1998, 320-1) appeals to a female readership, even if only in their dreams. Wilson's ethnography thus continues to provide a reference point for the interrogation of Caribbean gender ideologies (DeShong 2011, Freeman 2014, Rowley 2002, 30-3), as it has for this research, though we avoid his homogenization of women and of men within a binary frame, opting instead to explore the fluidity of heterosexuality as a negotiated process.

Among our informants were those who had experienced extreme inequality in their relationships and colluded with the codes of respectability, at least for a while:

"He was head of house and lord and master. I was the child-bearer, cook and household keeper. I had to assess the situation. And thank God, I got married at 21 and divorced by 23. I got out early.... While we were married, my salary was much more than his. All of our expenses came out of my salary. And I had to ask him to spend my money. I did not have a cheque book, I did not have a credit card.... I had to ask for my money. I had no control over anything. I had to ask to buy a pair of shoes. I had to ask to get my hair done."

Another informant reported on her unwillingness to change her name after marriage:

"He was supportive of me not changing my name.... But, everything became an issue when he was leaving.... All this time he pretended that [it] was not an issue, but then it really was a problem. And he'd never said anything."

Informants were also intent on reshaping relationships towards equality in relation to joint decision-making and also male partners assuming their share of household chores and child care:

"I'm not dumb. You need to consult me when we make certain decisions";

"Why is it that the two of us bathe in this bathroom, explain to me why is it only one person that cleans it? What's wrong with your hands? I don't understand";

"For years I have been telling my husband.... He would come in take off his socks, put them in the shoes and they would leave in the cupboard for months. I would have to smell them and throw them in the wash."

Their words echo Barriteau's comment that 'women pursue erotic ecstasy and they end up with the care work' (Barriteau 2013, 17). It seems, too, that they may be prepared to put up with this. Despite the fact that none of our informants employed domestic help or nannies, no one emphasised her sole or major responsibility for household work as a cause of marital dissolution. Instead, they tended to relate how easily they slipped back into a feminine routine of caring labour:

"Just yesterday I was telling him how overworked I was because I have a four- month old daughter who is ill and I work 24-7, and I still feel obligated to come home and cook and clean and so on. I told him how overwhelmed I felt and he said that I didn't have to do all those things, but that I felt I had to do everything. He says he would clean on Saturdays, but by Thursdays the house is cleaned as my tolerance level for untidiness is lower than his."

Tolerance levels have changed over the last generation, however:

"My mother ... put up with all sorts of stuff. Like my father doesn't do anything";

"Read the newspaper, sit down in front of the television. They say, 'I want something to drink' and the wife comes or one of the children. And they feel they can do exactly that."

That said, the Caribbean construct of masculinity also embodies the notion of a turning point in a man's life when he will 'settle down' as a 'family man' – that is, marry, set up home and be faithful (Barrow 1998, 354, 356). Familial expectations have also evolved since the days when, to be a 'good family man', it was enough to provide economic support and child discipline. Some indication of these changes was reflected in the words of young (in their 30s), male informants in earlier research on masculinity and family in Barbados (Barrow 1998). As one of them said:

'Being a husband and father has changed from when I was a boy. Husbands should not just see themselves as providers but should take an active part in all the activities in the household ... cleaning and cooking, all that the wives do. The women of today are working, no nonsense women with a great sense of independence and no longer hold the view held long ago that the man is the boss. I am not a macho man. I can learn from experience and I am not too proud to say that I am sorry. Men still feel that they will be less of a man if they say sorry'.

According to another:

'My wife means the world to me. We met at a turning point in my life.... In marriage, you take things more seriously. It is more of a commitment' (Barrow 1998, 352. See also Freeman 2014, 81; Handwerker 1989, 109-12).

In general, though, the experiences of our informants portrayed an alternative image as they emphasized the inadequacies of their menfolk, their need to "grow up" and put wife and family first:

"That was my situation. You'd think he would say that I have been a boy all my life and now that I am married, I need to be a man now. I'm not saying don't have fun, but you must say, 'I'm ready to settle down now...'. If I talk about my husband, he was just plain not ready to grow up yet."

On this note, there were several references to men being spoilt by their mothers:

"They want a woman who will treat them like their mothers, in that they will pamper them and treat them like a child";

“He’s quite happy to sit at home by his mother ... watch TV, give a couple of instructions here and there, and do one or two favours for somebody.... Fine! So, I leave.... And he’s gone back now ... basically living by his grandmother and his mother... He’s gone back to comfort zone.”

Others, however, spoke of supportive husbands:

“I told D [husband] that there are certain things that I am willing to do and others that I am not, as I am not your mother and I am not a maid. I told him that I wanted to start my own business and he was very supportive. I said, ‘Listen on days when I am at meetings all day, so what do you want me to bring home’”.

Though she would not be cooking it, she still saw the responsibility of providing food as hers.

Violence against women (VAW) as a signifier of extreme inequality in heterosexuality, is endemic and epidemic across the Caribbean.¹⁰ Official figures underestimate the incidence since women are reluctant to make official reports due to fears of public shaming, further intensified violence and the forfeiture of male financial support. Also mentioned as a deterrent to reporting are the expectations that the police will trivialize incidents and that ‘the investigation would take too long and go nowhere’ (UNICEF 2014, 32). VAW is attributed, in the public mind, to men’s drive to reinforce power in response to female provocation and presumed infidelity, and the threat to masculinity of women’s social and occupational mobility and their push for gender equality (Chevannes 2001, 95-97; DeShong 2011, 80-84; Gopaul and Morgan 1998, 96). But the issue is complex in that we also hear that economically and emotionally dependent women are at greater risk (Gopaul and Morgan 1998,101-2).

¹¹Research from Jamaica shows that women avoid co-residential relationships, including marriage, to reduce the possibility of violence (Roberts and Sinclair 1978, 65-6, 249).

Several of our informants reported experiences of intimate partner violence, both physical and emotional. In one case, it triggered the need to obtain a

restraining order: *"I saw my husband laughing one day hysterically during a fight and I asked him why.... He said that if he didn't laugh, he would kill me."*

But their narratives also confirmed research indicating that such violence is becoming more culturally unacceptable and is no longer as silenced, privatized and invisible. According to one informant:

"My husband was physically and verbally abusive.... I remember calling my husband's mother and telling her, 'Your son is standing in front of me with a knife.' And I said 'somebody is going to die and it ain't going to be me'",

while another reported:

"And going through the daily emotional abuse was not something that I was willing to put up with. And if it means that I am happier by myself than when I am with him, then that is what I choose".

Here, too, they contrasted their own resistance with women's submission in previous generations:

"Before ... women used to get the crap beat out of them and they couldn't say a word.... I guess they didn't know any better... low education, they didn't know they had a choice. They figured that because they are married, well this is it".

Fidelity

For our informants, as for philosophers (Soble 2008, 162-66), true love must be monogamous. From Jamaica, too, we hear that love is exclusive – 'one can have several friends, but only one lover' (Alexander 1978, 7). One cannot love two persons, at least not simultaneously, and infidelity signifies the worst form of betrayal. And yet, it happens; monogamy is an ideal often unfulfilled (Jackson 2014, 42). Philosophers in Western thought have claimed that the demands of love for exclusivity and constancy are impossible to sustain – love promises heaven on earth, but fails to deliver (Sullivan 2001, Vannoy 1980).¹² Though our informants considered male concurrent multi-partnering to be unacceptable, it was seen as commonplace, overt and inevitable, even genetically programmed:

"I heard from a man that if any woman in Barbados thinks that she has a man for herself, then she is mistaken";

"And then he has his cake at home and he has another cake on the outside";

"You are actually inclined to believe that, as soon as you get married, this is exactly what is going to happen to you. Regardless if how good your marriage is, this is what is prescribed to happen";

"We should never have gotten married.... Women would be calling the house for him";

"In terms of marriage, more and more I see men would go outside, because they think it's a God-given right. That's the problem. And they would look at you and tell you, 'but you just need to accept it' And it's like, this is what Bajan men do";

"I trust him ... but being a realist, I think that men are inherently the African species where they need to have more than one woman".

Their responses echoed research on Caribbean masculinity. Wilson's construct of 'reputation' positions virility as 'the most highly valued quality a man can possess ... males are permitted and expected to be sexually active ... their virility is especially manifested by their sexual activities and their fathering of children' (Wilson 1969, 71; see also Chevannes 2001; Clarke 1957, 96; Smith 1988, 147). If anything, contemporary accounts have reinforced images of performative, predatory, hyper-sexual masculinity,¹³ though more nuanced versions tackle the complexities of race and sexual orientation (Lewis 2003, Reddock 2003). In sum, a sharp tension exists between the subaltern "*hard seed*" and the ideals of loving husband and family man. There are, however, signs that men of the younger generation acknowledge that fidelity is crucial to marriage and the process of 'settling down'. According to a male informant in earlier research: 'Since marriage, I have been tempted by other women, but I have resisted and kept myself under control.... It makes no sense jeopardizing what you have just for sex' (Barrow 1998, 353).

The so-called 'double standard of sexual morality' came up as informants reiterated the view that, while infidelity with 'outside women' is the norm and promotes masculine reputation, for women it spells downfall and disaster (Chevannes 2001, 217):

"Whereas the woman [to] have an affair with a male ... turned [her] into the worst harlot that ever descended from the heavens. Why? Because she's not supposed to have control of her sexuality. You get married, your sexual organs now belong to your husband. His still belong to him and anybody else he cares to share them with. But there's this perception that you are not to have that, you know. Marriage, I tend to think, is a way in which the sexuality of women is still controlled."

However, although informants were silent on any indiscretions of their own,¹⁴ their responses implied that women are challenging monogamous 'respectability':

"I know of women now who are keeping more than one man";

"I don't think you can sit down now and say that men are the only ones who cannot be monogamous any more. Women are following along the same lines."

However, for a woman to trespass into reputational behaviour incurs high risk. Her infidelity disrupts her partner's masculinity in the most fundamental way and, as mentioned, may justify his violent reaction.

Again, informants pointed to intergenerational change:

"For all those years, his father goes out. His mother does not question where he is going, because he always has another woman. His mother ... gets the big house, her own car, but she can't possibly feel like a whole person. Because there's this other woman for thirty-nuff years.... And that's how life has been and women are supposed to accept these things".

Today's women are less accommodating. As a betrayal of love, male infidelity upsets heterosexuality as never before. Resonating with philosophical notions of love as reciprocal dedication to the wellbeing of the beloved who must come first, before all others in attention and affection (Soble 2008, 162-87), an informant commented:

“Today we're putting our feet down and saying that this is not the way that it's supposed to be I'm supposed to be your wife. I'm supposed to be the only one that you have, that you spend your life with. Not that I have to accept that you are going to marry me and think it's okay to go outside and have whoever, have however many children because you pattern yourself after your forefathers. It's not the way. That's what I think”.

Modern-day considerations of HIV and AIDS and heightened embarrassment also factor in:

“You know, we have so many diseases around like AIDS and nobody wants to have their husband running around, where he can catch it and bring it home to you”;

“The whole thing is embarrassing for the wife, not the outside woman. It is the wife who falls three rungs down the ladder. Yes, she's got the ring, but she's the one that everyone laughs at”.

But, despite pronouncements that unlike their mothers, they would “*not stand for it*”, informants agreed that infidelity poses a dilemma – with no easy solution:

“And it is an extremely scary prospect, because you get married and you say, ‘this is not going to happen to me’. And then you also look at the reality of this can happen to me. What do I do if it happens? What is my reaction going to be? And do I love this person enough not to have the reaction of – fine, it's over.”

Love in Transition

The testimonies of women in Barbados revealed the complexities and tensions inherent in their quest to renegotiate heterosexual love. They expressed a desire for love and marriage and spoke of their “*romantic fantasies*”, yet were firmly grounded in reality:

"I guess that at first, when you're young, you look for fantasies, that you'd be cooking nice little food in a nice little pot, and that everything is looking nice. But that's not the reality".

Marriage, they argued, benefits men, not women:

"He looks good and stable. Um, financially, if he has a good woman who would help him build his financial ... right? In terms of the children thing, and not have to take care of them, but say, 'Oh, I am married and I have five kids'. You know? And he doesn't lose his freedom.... Whereas the female now, she has to work and come home ... after she has these kids, she has to stay home even more. But the men have all these wonderful benefits, you know? It's an insurance, an investment, and we kinda lose on our investment. It's like a liability in some cases".

Another informant summed up the experiences of those who gave up much in their lives to devote themselves to marriage¹⁵ – in her case, a post-graduate degree. In the process, she lost her own identity:

"So as far as I am concerned, there is one person that did a lot of sacrificing and that is me. Because I became something I wasn't ... and he will never find anybody else like me who is willing to love him that much. Because I lost myself trying to make my marriage work, which was the problem I completely ... aargh! I'm only now trying to find back who I was and remember the things I actually liked. You know, I am breathing again. I've taken back control of my life and he's not the central focus."

Contrasting herself with women of earlier times, she claimed that her instinct for "self-preservation" surfaced sooner. Her views echo those of feminist scholars who claim that love compromises the autonomy of women in marriage, they become 'private property' (Firestone 1989, 33). In 'union-love', according to Alan Soble (2008, 159-60), "women have merged into men, losing their identities in the relationship while men maintain a distance from it". Conversely and from the Caribbean, the voices of Afro-Tobagonian women in Michelle Rowley's research suggest that 'the very act of remaining single can possibly be seen as an attempt by women to hold on to their personal identities' (Rowley 2002, 35).

Today's women are reshaping love and doing so in an environment in which social pressure for conformity has been eased and their economic security

enhanced. Taking advantage of educational and occupational opportunities, they are making choices in their personal lives – including the choice to leave a broken relationship. For their mothers and grandmothers, marriage was permanent and divorce highly stigmatized:

“Our parent’s generation, they really bore the brunt of it. Typically, it was the wife who was not very well educated at all ... her destiny was to be his good little wife at home, bring up the children. You started out watching your mother stick it through so much crap, and you’re beginning to feel your freedom as society is beginning to allow a little more flexibility.... So, for us, the decision I don’t think is as difficult. I’m not sticking with the crap my mother stuck through.... And I admire my grandmother’s strength ... she stuck it out. But I don’t have to be strong that way. There are other ways that my strength can be used more productively and society has evolved sufficiently to let me be comfortable in it”.

With less social pressure to remain married, modern women are less tolerant of infidelity and violence, less inclined to remain in empty-shell marriages and are, as indicated, initiating a higher proportion of divorces than their husbands, albeit slightly. In the past, women *“got to put up with it ... either because of what other people would think ... or you letting down your family. Even if [he] turned out to be a real dog, you still stick with them.”* But today: *“Women who stay in marriages that are not working are not looked upon with any more respect.... Well, it is just said, ‘Well, why you don’t get outta it? I woun’ be teking dah so if I did you’”.*

Unlike before, when *“letting down your family”* was a consideration, little mention was made by informants of either family support or interference in their decisions to marry or remain married. This suggests a transition towards family modernity in which social pressure for conformity is giving way to individual autonomy (Giddens 1992). In the past, too, women *“stayed together because of the children”*, but are now more inclined to leave deteriorating marriages for the children’s sake:

“Well, I left him when my son was two years old. I could not see myself being married, raising my son in a household that was

constantly being torn apart.... I went through that. My parents were married for twenty years, never slept in the same room, never communicated, were always at each other's throats. I would not do that to my son. And I would rather pull out now that he's young and he's not at the age where he could understand, than to go down the road and be in this abusive marriage ... and then he grows up going through the same cycle again".

Opinions were divided on religious pressure. On the one hand:

"For years and years in that marriage I suffered because, according to the scripture, I didn't think I could get divorced. Eventually what I had to do, I had to leave. It was my only way out. I had to leave the Church, leave this person. I think the Church now is not so bad in terms of pressure. But as a Christian, you still keep feeling that you should keep trying.... I wanted to be a Christian and do what was right".

On the other:

"Right now, I think that, if a person is adamant that they're going to get divorced ... they'll go ahead and do it, regardless of what the Church is saying. Before perhaps, people paid a lot of attention to what the Church said".

For women also, as mentioned, the social status of marriage as the badge of respectability has diminished, though not entirely. While there are women who *"care about what persons think, so they put up with whatever in a marriage ... because they must look perfect"*, others *"don't necessarily think that marriage is the be all and end all"*. Concomitantly, the stigma of divorce has eased:

"Even though divorce is still very much out, it became something that actually was happening frequently. So that you weren't stressed with, 'I wonder if I should get divorced or not'. In our day and age, divorce is not that big a deal".

The ability of women to stand on their own two feet has also made separation and divorce more feasible. Having learnt from their mothers' experiences, informants emphasised economic autonomy as an essential prerequisite both to entering and leaving a marriage:

"I had to make sure that I was financially secure. I did not want to come into the relationship where he was the one making all of the

money and providing for me, because I didn't want to feel that dependent";

"I see my mother ... she is a housewife, totally dependent, could not get a job to save her life. She cannot afford to buy a house, doesn't have a driving license. All these things played on my decision to move on with my life".

However, a conservative morality persists in Barbados and 'the young women of today' are viewed as having 'gone too far'. While the finger of blame for marital failure still points to men's infidelity and 'irresponsibility', it now also turns towards women who, unlike their mothers, neglect the needs of husbands and children. Our informants were well aware of the public image of women like themselves who 'don't know their place' and selfishly give priority to their careers and their own wellbeing in gyms, beauty parlours and overseas trips; who are impatient and unforgiving of the waywardness of their menfolk, dissatisfied and unwilling to compromise; and who push for change and, when they don't get what they want, rush to the divorce court.

Responsibility for caring labour and the emotional well-being of families continues to fall on women as wives, conjugal partners and mothers – women care: men provide (Chevannes 2001, 222). It is women, according to our informants, who persevere, compromise and forgive – who do everything they can to keep their marriages together:

"I thought that his flaws were something that I could work with and I did want to try and bring back a family unit that was not broken";

"I always say about him, he's a man. He would always have an ego. But there are so few things that I don't like about him and there are so many things that I love about him, that I let whatever I love about him override the bad things. Because if you dwell on the things that you don't like, you would never see what you have".

"It's not that they [men] don't try But it's what they're trying to do. They're not trying to fix the marriage, they're trying to get you to accept certain things that come with what they call a marriage."

The choices that women make are not without frustration, guilt and risk. As indicated, several of our informants have survived physical and emotional violence or found themselves in financial straits as a result of their relationships with men. They have no blueprint and there are no clear signposts. Importantly here, was their uncertainty over how to reconcile the modern love they seek with conventional femininity:

"The struggle was how to I sit down and do the traditional thing of things, but still manage to keep an equal partnership";

"I do want to raise a family the old-fashioned way, which means I don't mind taking second fiddle to you to a certain extent".

When things went wrong, they questioned their own behaviour and searched for where they might be to blame. *"I think that women turn it on themselves and wonder, 'Oh God, what is wrong with me?'"*; *"What is it that I'm doing wrong?"*; *"Why is it that I cannot make this thing work?"* as they tried to put things right, often at considerable cost to themselves. According to one: *"Women hesitate to get out of a marriage. I guess feeling like you have failed at something, that you haven't tried enough.... That's basically what held it [her separation] up for two years"*. Women stayed in their marriages because their husbands were going through difficulties, such as the loss of a job:

"We went to a counsellor to see if it could work. It helped me to make up my mind that it was time to go. But he had just lost his job and I said, 'Well, let me not kick him when he is down. Let me see him back on his feet'. So, I stayed on, but..."

Another remained for a period of seven years because her husband was *"depressed and suicidal"*. Their responses reflect Firestone's comment: 'it is rare for women to leave men, and then it is usually for more than ample reason' (Firestone 1989, 33).

This is not to say that men find relationship conflict and termination any less traumatic and painful and while our informants appreciated the efforts of their partners, *"he really did try sometimes"*, they saw them as reluctant to accept that they might be at fault:

“The men see it as something wrong with the other person.... It's not because they don't hurt, but rather they do not take the blame”;
“He could never say sorry”.

Men are more likely to “walk out of the house”, if not the marriage:

“They don't have the responsibility of sticking around”;
“You have to be committed enough to get through ... and not at the first sign of trouble just take off. And that was the problem, because in that period of time he just decided to take off and find somebody else, rather than wait.... You're supposed to wait until things get back to normal. He just wasn't willing to accept that.”

Conclusion

As moral agents and reflexive actors, the women who participated in this research join their sisters worldwide in challenging and reshaping conventional heterosexuality. While their mothers and grandmothers “*stuck it out*” in marriage and avoided the disgrace of divorce, modern women are no longer willing to accept the respectability-sacrifice tradeoff or “*put up with*” partners who are emotionally distant, unfaithful, dominant and violent. Drawing on their matrifocal legacy of economic, social and sexual autonomy enhanced by law reform, economic and occupational mobility and diminishing social pressure to conform to normative femininity, they are choreographing a new heterosexuality away from female submission, domesticity and duty towards love. In the process, they confront resistance from male partners for whom this represents a threat to masculinity – based on ‘outside’ space, not housework; on familial authority and control over women, not equality; on sexual freedom and the conquest of ‘outside’ women, not fidelity. Love has different meanings for men and women in heterosexual relationships. For him, love is instrumental and emotional expression unmanly and unnecessary – it’s about “doing”, especially doing sex, rather than “feeling”. For her, intimacy is essential and undermined by his reluctance to “grow up”, “settle down” and “be a man” – and importantly, to

cut the cord that ties him to his mother. His identity of “hard seed” and “macho man”, though not representative of all Caribbean men, hardly fits her image of ideal soul-mate, lover, husband and ‘family man’ and his stereotype of women as manipulative, avaricious and ever-demanding does nothing to advance the quest for love.

Negotiating love against heterosexuality is a risky business, enshrined as it is in patriarchy, heteronormativity and the orthodoxy of marriage and domesticity. Normative heterosexuality may be less compulsory and less enforced today, but as our informants sought to challenge the prescribed script of respectable femininity, they faced losing social status, family support and financial security, and were exposed to marital conflict, disruption and violence. At the same time, negotiating love away from Afro-Caribbean matrifocality and towards intimacy and fidelity means contesting and reconstructing masculinity, a tall order in a context where male ‘reputation’ is buttressed by ideology and culture and still viewed, even by our informants, as programmed by nature – in his hormones and genes. Love and marriage, they concluded, benefits men; for women it represents a “*liability*” and a “*sacrifice*” with persistent expectations to tolerate, compromise and forgive, and to give up education and career, economic and sexual autonomy, even surname and identity. They spoke willingly, in detail, and with considerable self-doubt and self-questioning as they struggled to come to terms with broken dreams of romantic love and happy marriage, and, as emotional anchors and providers of caring labour, to hold their relationships together often at the expense of their own health and wellbeing.

And yet, even as they dealt with the challenges and traumas of everyday married life, none saw oppression or exploitation as inherent to heterosexual relationships, unlike much feminist scholarship. They also parted company with philosophers who view love as idealized and unsustainable. Despite their ambivalence over marriage and the announcement from one informant that a new-found sense of “*self-preservation*” enabled her to go it alone, the majority had not given up on love. For them, love and marriage remain meaningful,

fulfilling and highly valued. To return to the question with which we started, Can there be love in the Caribbean?, it seems that if their will and efforts find a way, heterosexual love will not merely continue to exist, but will thrive by embracing intimacy, equality and fidelity.

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¹ The sessions were timed to last for 2 hours but continued, in one case for over 3 hours. They were taped and transcribed verbatim. Gratitude goes to the research assistants, Marsha Branch and Monique Springer for their meticulous and inspired work and to the informants who generously shared their thoughts and experiences.

² In this regard, Barriteau (2013, 5) has led the way among Caribbean feminist researchers by expanding Jónasdóttir's concept of 'love power' and beginning her analysis 'at a point where politicized sexuality and political economy converge, that is, the point where state policies, bureaucratic practices, societal norms and views, interact with privatized and politicized sexual relations in women's lives.'

³ Love was seen as too complex for sociological analysis (Jackson 2014, 34-38). As Jónasdóttir (2014, 11) put it, love was of 'marginal interest or considered too "awkward" and "impossible" to approach'.

⁴ With appreciation and gratitude to Roxanne Burton for her introduction to philosophical perspectives on love and sex.

⁵ At the time of writing, the 'Ultimate Wedding Expo' was being held at the Barbados Hilton Hotel. Before a packed audience, couples vied to win the 'Forever I Do Dream Wedding Competition'.

⁶ Among the three models of conjugality that Smith identifies for the Caribbean is the modern 'joint conjugal role pattern' in which partners are intimate, take joint responsibility as breadwinners, home-makers and child-carers, pool income and share leisure activities.

⁷ Freeman's (2014, 65-7) informant also spells out the importance of intimacy.

⁸ For further discussion on this point, see Barrow 2015, 218-20.

⁹ The 'graveyard' label signifies that a woman has had an abortion.

¹⁰ Reports estimate the proportions of Caribbean women who have survived violence at the hands of their male partners at anywhere between 30 and 69 per cent (ECLAC/UNIFEM 2003).

¹¹ Among those at highest risk of sexual violence are adolescent girls in transactional liaisons with older men. Yet they, too, contest feminine sexual norms of passivity and submission – virgin or victim – by celebrating and promoting an active, assertive female sexuality and empowerment (Barrow 2008, 19-22).

¹² Firestone (1989, 30) is also pessimistic: 'For every successful contemporary love experience ... there are ten destructive love experiences, post love 'downs', of much longer duration – often resulting in the destruction of the individual, or at least an emotional cynicism that makes it difficult or impossible ever to love again'.

¹³ The converse is homophobia and, in Jamaica in particular, the 'revulsion' and 'hostility' towards gay men (Chevannes 2001, 144, 220).

¹⁴ This may be a reflection of their own buy in to 'respectability', especially within the semi-public context of the focus group.

¹⁵ A side issue here linked to the debate on motherhood and marriage, is the expectation and acceptance by women of 'self-sacrifice and self-denial' as mothers (Rowley 2002,39), but no longer as wives.