

# “Our life is a struggle”: Respectable Gender Norms and Black Resistance to Policing

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the role of women in anti-racist campaigns against policing in post-2011 England. It argues that imperial discourses about gender norms and respectability have helped to shape how race and crime are constituted in the contemporary period. Women's resistance to police racism has received scholarly attention from black feminists in North America; such attention has been less in Britain, particularly since the 1990s. While influential analyses of policing in Britain have deployed a post-colonial lens, gender and women's resistance are rarely the primary focus. This paper significantly develops debates on gender, race and policing, by arguing that the colonial roots of race and gender norms are fundamental to conceptualising one of the key findings of the field research which informs this paper: that women lead almost every campaign against a black death in police custody in post-2011 England. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with activists, ethnographic observations at protests and scholar-activist participation in campaigns against black deaths in custody, this paper demonstrates how 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century imperial discourses on respectability and nation do not simply contextualise racialised policing in the contemporary period, but expose the racialised and gendered norms that legitimise racist policing in modern Britain.

**Keywords:** racism, policing, post-colonialism, resistance, gender, respectability

Thou wouldst quench the pure light of chivalry, which alone distinguishes the noble from the base, the gentle knight from the churl and the savage. (Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 1820)

We are strong, or people *perceive us as strong*, but we are no different from any other human being. (Marcia Rigg, interview with author, 2018)

## Introduction

Women lead almost every campaign against a black death in police custody in post-2011 England. Most of the existing literature on black women's resistance to policing in Britain focuses on the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Adams 1998; Carby 1982; Mama 1993a; Sudbury 1998). This paper seeks to connect this history to the development of racialised patriarchy throughout the British Empire, and to resistance to racist criminalisation in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. Specifically, this paper traces the routes between imperialist discourses of respectability and nation in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, and my field research detailing the role of

women campaigning against black deaths in police custody in post-2011 England. In what follows, I argue that these imperial discourses do not simply provide historical context, but are fundamental to our conceptualisation of how and why women lead almost every black death in custody campaign in post-2011 England. Specifically, poor women and those living under colonial rule, in geographically and temporally specific ways, fell outside the gendered norms established in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Women in black death in custody campaigns in post-2011 England deploy a variety of concepts and tactics which disrupt assumptions that frame the black family as deviant. These norms, which ascribe order to the private sphere, the family, are considered the prerequisite to the reproduction of the dominant order of the public sphere, the nation. In other words, these campaigns use the family to resist the national order, in this case, state racisms.

Resistance to police violence is one of the defining features of black and anti-colonial activism, in the history of Britain's former colonies (Thomas 2012), such as Trinidad (Johnson 2014), Kenya (Branch 2009), India (Yang 1985) and Ireland, and in that of the mainland, as colonial subjects began to migrate to the centre of Empire in significant numbers during the post-war period (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982). Racist discourses are used to shape criminalisation through a number of different images and tropes. The mugger (Hall et al. 1976), gang member (Williams and Clarke 2016) or black superwoman (Reynolds 1997; Wallace 1979), like other black folk-devils (Gilroy 1982), are rooted in colonial discourses. These discourses serve to legitimise white supremacy by reaffirming colonised peoples as morally and intellectually undeveloped. It was in the development of a colonial Other that imperial Britain constructed gendered, classed and racialised notions of respectability at home (Hall 2002). But if the colonies and their peoples are the spaces upon which deficit traits are projected, how are these legacies challenged by black struggles against police violence in post-2011 England? This paper begins to answer this question by using a post-colonial feminist framework to analyse campaigns against violent police racism in London.

This paper draws on ethnographic observations and newspaper coverage, and on interviews carried out through geographic activist scholarship, whereby geographers actively contribute to and reflect on the issues under consideration, in this case black struggles against state violence (Gilmore 2008). This type of action research uses the practitioner's interactions within a community or social movement to stimulate learning and activism, with the goal of improving not only its collective knowledge but also its political demands. I have adopted this approach as scholars have found that attempts at value-free social science fail, since all researchers bring their own personal biases into their analysis (Greenwood and Levin 2005), whether or not they are actively involved in campaigns being researched. While this paper does not have the scope to offer a detailed reflection of my positionality, it should be mentioned that as a young black person I feared for my own safety at protests in which those in attendance were kettled, detained, arrested or assaulted.

Between 2011 and 2018, I carried out over 20 semi-structured interviews with campaigners, in addition to observations at over 50 protests and public meetings

in London. I volunteered with a number of different groups both before and during my time in the field, and all the activists and organisations investigated in this research identify as being anti-racist and black-led. Informed consent was gained from all interviewees, but all are anonymised except Marcia Rigg, who explicitly requested to have her identity included in the research.

As a researcher with a background in anti-racist organising, I intend for the findings of this investigation to contribute in two ways. First, I aim for this research to contribute to the scholarship of activists engaged in anti-racism. This includes both those employed in academia and researchers who are not formally affiliated to an academic institution. Second, this research will be driven towards the strengthening of activism currently challenging state power. It is vital that academic research is able to collaborate with the individuals and groups from which it extracts knowledge. I was an active participant in the campaigns and protests investigated in this paper, and have working relationships with many of the people involved. Local knowledge is a central component of scholar activist research, and even as I write this, I am pulled between the academic and local discourses which shape my thinking in differing ways.

This paper seeks to make two key contributions to the existing literature on race and policing in Britain. First, it is the first article to use a post-colonial feminist framework to analyse the role of women in black resistance to policing in post-2011 Britain. The year 2011 saw a renewed interest in black campaigns against policing, owing to three high-profile deaths at the hands of police: reggae artist Smiley Culture, leading to the largest black protest against policing since Stephen Lawrence; Kingsley Burrell, which saw mass mobilisations in Birmingham; and then Mark Duggan, which sparked the most widespread civil unrest in England for over 25 years. Furthermore, this topic is particularly urgent, as at the time of writing, deaths in police custody in England and Wales are at a 10-year high (IOPC 2018), and black people are more likely to be killed by police than their white counterparts (Inquest 2018). Second, this research will bring a geographical analysis to the existing literature on resistance to state racism in post-2011 Britain. Both of these contributions are indebted to the pioneering work of black feminist and critical race geographers which draws on settler colonialism, enslavement, Jim Crow and their legacies in North America (Browne 2015; Derickson 2016; Gilmore 2007; hooks 2004; McKittrick 2000; Richie 2012; Shabazz 2015). But this paper will focus on the work of feminists which theorises the British colonial and post-colonial context from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the contemporary moment.

The distinction between black feminisms on either side of the Atlantic is important as, unlike the US, there is a geographical disjuncture between Britain, where imperial discourses and racist ideas were developed, and its colonies, where they were implemented and practised. Furthermore, as the British black feminist theories outlined in this paper argue, these racist practices were deployed in the centre of Empire when significant numbers of migrants from the colonies arrived in Britain in the post-war period. The unevenness of the racisms between different colonies, as well as between the colonies and the imperial centre, make for a specific history and raciality which black feminism in Britain has to contend with. Black British feminism has therefore historically incorporated all women from

Britain's colonies, principally those from the Caribbean, Africa and South Asia (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992).<sup>1</sup> Navigating the unevenness of the colonial histories and racisms different women face is a complex undertaking, often beset by disagreement among attempts at broad-based solidarities (Sudbury 1998). Focusing on the specificities of gendered racisms in Britain has been particularly influential in fields such as, but not limited to, education (Phoenix 2009), social care (Lewis and Gunaratnam 2001), identity (Reynolds 2005; Tate 2005), queer theory (Ahmed 2006) and cultural studies (Carby 2005). This paper focuses on black British feminism which analyses colonialism, policing and activism.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section provides an outline of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century European imperial discourses of respectability and nationalism which helped shape racial and gendered norms in Britain and its colonies. The second section summarises the post-colonial material on police racism in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. This includes work about policing generally, as well as that which engages the topic through the lens of black British feminism. The third section presents and analyses the findings from my field research on post-2011 Britain. This empirical material is based on ethnographic field notes, active participation in campaigns against police violence, and semi-structured interviews. It explores the experiences of women leading campaigns, including media representations of Carol Duggan (Justice for Mark Duggan) and an in-depth interview with Marcia Rigg (Justice for Sean Rigg), ethnographic observations from protests challenging deaths in police custody, and anonymised interview data with women campaigning against police racism.

My intention is not to provide a definitive answer as to why women lead almost every black death in custody campaign, but to contextualise this pattern of resistance by tracing the roots of British racism through imperial discourses of respectability. I argue that, by tracing the colonial routes of respectability, gender norms and racism, we can better understand police racism and resistance to it. In other words, policing reflects a pervasive colonial norm that reproduces cultures of both racism and patriarchy; tracing racialised and gendered norms through discourses of respectability is fundamental to understanding contemporary cultures of racism and anti-racism. Importantly, the research reveals no uniformity among women activists with regard to the significance of women in black deaths in custody campaigns. This is a reminder that while they reject the problematic tropes of respectability and nationalism that inform racism and essentialise working-class and black women, their resistance to contemporary racisms also challenges essentialism, exhibiting uneven perspectives, experiences and political goals.

## **Gendering Respectability and Savagery**

The racialised tropes which shape popular perceptions of criminality in contemporary Britain can be linked back to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of respectability, established through emergent discourses in fields such as literature, philosophy and theology (Bhabha 1983). European imperial discourses of respectability and nation reorganised social life in the imperial centres and the colonies (Hall 2002). While some approaches to imperial discourses focus on state actors, an analysis of

gender provides a more complex picture, demonstrating how colonial constructs shape the private, domestic sphere, as well as the public terrain of the nation (Blunt and Rose 1994; Hall 2002; Skeggs 1994). This historical moment saw gendered, sexual and abled norms become hegemonic, in contrast to both the British mainland’s poor *and* its colonised Others.

Eighteenth and 19<sup>th</sup> century writers such as Sir Walter Scott contributed to cultures of respectability through a sense of nationhood which harked back to the noble knights of a bygone era (Moss 1985). Simultaneously, Britain’s imperial expansion, in the Americas, Australasia, Africa and India, provided a racialised Other, with which its own genteel and honourable men and women (for these were the only two acceptable genders in any “civilised” society) were contrasted. The honourable, white, heteronormative nuclear family stood at the top of this hierarchy of respectability, and this cult of domesticity dictated clearly defined roles for man, woman and child (McClintock 1995). It was argued that the commitment to respectability in the private sphere would ensure stability of the national order outside the home. The public sphere was dominated by respectable men: courageous, well mannered and morally righteous gentlemen, defending the sacred institution of marriage, performing a hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The public spheres, in both the domestic class system and the international racialised order, were defined by the nation: “Nationalism and respectability assigned everyone his place in life, man and woman, normal and abnormal, native and foreigner; any confusion between these categories threatened chaos and loss of control” (Moss 1985:16). This potential for chaos exhibited itself in the lower classes and racialised Others. For instance, Jewish men were framed as behaving like women and unable to practice sexual restraint, justifying their subjugated social position. The British working class were considered morally undeveloped—poor women could not represent virtue like their wealthier counterparts—and it was the middle classes which reflected the national stereotype (Moss 1985). Racialised and classed tropes which project deviance were also extended to Europe’s colonies. It is important to note that respectability is not a binary, but slippery, context specific and broadly defined. The British poor were thus considered more respectable than the colonised, exhibited through both the development of Britain’s Poor Laws which provided aid to the destitute, and the whitening of Britain’s working classes on the frontiers of settler colonies (Shilliam 2018).

Imperial constructs framed colonised subjects as essentially violent, hypersexual and criminal. In India, one of Britain’s most profitable non-slave colonies, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1924 saw sections of society (labelled “Tribes”) undergo mass searches, imprisonment and surveillance through the tattooing of foreheads. At the time of Indian Independence in 1947, an estimated 60 million people had been subjected to the punitive measures of this act. These measures were imposed to protect the colony against particular ethno-racial groups that the colonial administration considered to be predisposed to petty crimes such as theft (Yang 1985). In colonial Kenya, the prison system evolved into labour camps in the 1950s. An estimated 160,000 Kenyans were imprisoned and tortured; others were subjected to “attacks that included wiping out an entire village of men,

women, and elderly (the children were spared) using bayonets, rifles, machine guns, and fire" (Elkins 2005:3). Such policies and practices were implemented in response to anti-colonial resistance, which was framed as a sexualised and animalistic attack on whites, particularly white women.

Gender relations among the colonised were considered to be uniquely repressive (owing to the essentialised violence of such societies) and promiscuous (owing to unrigid gender, sexual and familial norms). In the context of the Caribbean, for example, black women were framed as sexually deviant, and therefore suitable for both the reproduction of enslaved labour and the sexual desires of their owner (Beckles 1999; Marshall 2005; Morgan 2004; Morrissey 1989). These women were also framed as possessing animalistic strength, legitimising the labour conditions and national order in the Caribbean during the period of enslavement. In other words, black people falling outside the normative gender roles shaped by discourses of respectability, helped to justify the violence of colonialism.

## Post-Colonial Policing and Black British Feminism

The racist trope of black criminality presents migration from the colonies as symptomatic of an alien invasion, disrupting an imagined, premigration, culturally homogenous, respectable Britain. These stereotypes are also gendered, framing black women as sexually promiscuous with chaotic familial relations. It is within this context that women resisting police racism contest these uneven, overlapping racisms in which they, and the people they are defending, are pathologised as essentially criminal, violent and socially deviant. Black feminism is a huge body of work, which has influenced a range of concepts such as anti-carceral feminism (Richie 2012), queer theory (Lorde 1984), social movement theory (Davis 1971) and prison abolition (Gilmore 2007), but this paper will focus on the literature analysing black women's resistance to policing in Britain. This section provides both a theoretical and historical link between the imperial discourses outlined in the previous section, and the post-2011 empirical material presented in the section which follows.

Racist criminalisation has resulted in policing being a consistent issue for black communities in post-war Britain (Hunte 1966; Macpherson 2000; Scarman 1982; Scott 2018). One racial trope is that of the mugger, projected onto young black men by police, media and party-political campaigns in the 1970s. Hall et al. (1976:45) identified "areas of above-average crime rates, even though at the time black immigrants were under-represented in the crime rates of these 'criminal areas'". These moral panics around black criminality also reproduced animalistic images from the colonial era, using phrases such "wild killer ape" and a "dreadful Black visage" to describe black suspects (Adams 1998). Thus, while this alleged black violence was presented as animalistic, "[c]rime is summoned ... as the 'evil' which is the reverse of the 'normality' of 'Englishness'" (Hall et al. 1976:150), demonstrating the mutual reinforcement of both the racialised discourses that shape criminalisation and the racist manner in which law and order are enforced.

More recently, "gangs" have become the black folk-devil used to justify racist state violence. For example, the majority of the people identified as gang members

by police in London and Manchester are black, despite white people constituting the majority of “serious youth violence” offenders, the police’s given criterion for identifying gang members (Williams and Clarke 2016). Black people in Britain are disproportionately stopped, searched, arrested, taken into immediate custody and charged by police for suspected drug offences (Eastwood et al. 2013). Black people make up 2.8% of the UK population, but 10% of its prison population (EHRC 2010). One ethnically minoritised person dies in the care of, custody of, or following contact with police, prisons, immigration services or mental health institutions every two weeks (Athwal and Bourne 2014)—this figure is particularly significant, given that over 80% of the British population are white, and police do not routinely carry firearms: the most common cause of death is asphyxiation. The racist imagery reproduced by politicians and the press in previous decades thus continues to reinforce this pattern of racist policing (Elliott-Cooper 2014). Such an overview provides useful context, but an analysis which incorporates the work of black feminist theorists, and goes beyond the statistical analysis, can better aid our understanding of how gender shapes racial violence in Britain.

While the popular image of the criminalised “black folk-devil” is often a man, black British feminists have also discussed how these traits are projected onto women (Phoenix 1997; Reynolds 1997). Discourses framing black women in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain reflected colonial discourses, communicating excessive fertility, sexual deviance and “dysfunctional” familial relations (Marshall 2005). Encapsulated by the critique “Ain’t I a Woman?”, different categories of women are essentialised as respectable or deviant through classed and racialised discourses (Brah and Phoenix 2004; hooks 1992). Building on the work of black feminists in North America, black feminists in Britain have analysed the intersections of race, gender and class, in addition to multiple sites of oppression and resistance, including the family, the workplace and interactions with state actors (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Bryan et al. 1992; Emejulu 2017; Lewis and Gunaratnam 2001). Following World War II, black people—women and men—in the colonies were identified by the UK government to fill gaps in the British labour market. While there was widespread concern among policy-makers about encouraging white British women into full-time employment, and its possible repercussions on the sanctity of the nuclear family, such considerations did not extend to black women (Carby 1982). This reflects the racial tropes projected onto black women, as being promiscuous, uncaring and physically strong, in stark contrast to their white, more genteel, family-oriented counterparts.

While work is considered a disciplinary force for the morally deviant, black women are also subjected to more overt violence from state actors (Mama 1993a, 1993b). One of the most high-profile cases was that of Joy Gardner, whose home was raided on immigration charges in 1993. Officers described her as being in a “fury” and exhibiting superhuman strength, so that it took one officer to hold her arm, others using belts to bind her waist, wrists, ankles and thighs before binding her face with elastic adhesive bandage (Amnesty International 1995). The officers implicated in this death testified that Gardner’s supernormal strength justified this use of force resulting in Joy Gardner’s asphyxiation, leading to their acquittal by a judge.

The burdens of patriarchal racial capitalism make black women among the most marginalised in British society (Mirza 1997). Some black feminists argue that this positionality makes them uniquely situated to construct a truly liberatory politics (Hill Collins 1998). Many of the black women's activist groups in England during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s identified policing as one of their primary concerns. Sudbury's (1998) extensive interviews with black women activists in the UK found that women often associated sexism with institutions such as the police. The Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD)'s newsletter FOWAAD documented cases of police racism, and Brixton Black Women's Group organised marches against police brutality. The International Black Women for Wages for Housework supported the Tottenham Three, wrongfully accused of killing a police officer during the Broadwater Farm disturbances in 1985 (Adams 1998). Other examples include United Black Women's Action Group (UBWAG) and Paddington Black Women's Group in 1979, both outlining police mistreatment of black youth as an impetus for mobilisation (Thomlinson 2016).

### **“Our life is a struggle”: Women and Resistance to Police Racism**

Almost every black death in custody campaign in post-2011 England is led by a woman, generally a relative of the deceased. What are the responses of the state and media to these activists, and what do the activists themselves make of women leading these campaigns? Investigating these questions provides the empirical material to which the concepts in the previous sections can be applied. This section presents and analyses women's voices detailing why women lead campaigns against black deaths in custody, and how they are treated by police and the press. The racist discourses which essentialise black women as deviant, and the black family as consequently dysfunctional, have been summarised in the previous sections. This section begins by presenting evidence which reinforces the argument made by black feminists such as Carby (1982) that the black family, rather than being a site of oppression as white feminism asserts, can also be a site of resistance against racism.

Following this, a post-colonial analysis of the data is presented, drawing on the historical and theoretical arguments in the previous two sections. It details the conceptual and ideological routes, from colony to metropole, of the racisms that these women face and against which they struggle. This conceptualisation is illustrated in two ways: the first is through the continuities between cultures of respectability and nationalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and 21<sup>st</sup> century racisms. Leading on from this, the second outlines how women campaigning against police racism draw on a range of conceptual tools and political strategies which challenge the imperial discourses that essentialise categories of poor and colonised women.

Relatives—mothers, daughters, sisters—are often the most vocal, high-profile organisers in campaigns against black deaths in custody in England. These include the sisters of Sean Rigg (Marcia Rigg), Leon Patterson (Stephanie Lightfoot-Bennett), Brian Douglas (Brenda Weinberg) and Christopher Alder (Janet Alder); and



the mothers of Ricky Bishop (Doreen Jjuuko), Roger Sylvester (Sheila Sylvester), Joy Gardner (Myrna Simpson), Azelle Rodney (Susan Rodney) and Stephen Lawrence (Doreen Lawrence). While civil unrest, mass protests and inquiries dominate many of the discussions on resistance to racist policing in Britain, an analysis of the smaller-scale organising, often led by women, can also provide useful evidence for analysing gendered forms of racism and anti-racist struggle.

An in-depth interview with Marcia Rigg, campaigner against deaths in custody and sister of Sean Rigg who died in Brixton Police Station in 2008, discussed women’s activism extensively. She began by talking about a coalition of campaigners against deaths in police custody called UFFC (United Family and Friends Campaign), which was founded by a group of black families in 1997:

Brenda [Weinberg] was the main campaigner for Brian [Douglas] who was his sister, and the mother of Joy Gardner, Myrna Simpson, was carrying the campaign for her daughter. And the Sylvesters was actually the husband and wife, that is Roger Sylvester’s parents ... it was the women, it usually is. And that I think is because mostly they kill our brothers and our sons and our fathers and so it’s the women that are the ones that have to take up the baton and the fight for justice for them. (Marcia Rigg, interview, 8 July 2018)

When Rigg expanded on her reflections as to why it was usually women who organised the campaigns, she ranged from post-colonial perspectives to care work and familial relationships:

Our life is a struggle, it’s just because that is just the way it is, which dates back from slavery ... and I think it is because of the struggle and the times that we go through, that is what makes you strong, when you have to fight against injustice, what else should you do? There is no other option but to fight and so we have to find that strength. Any woman, black, white or Asian, it doesn’t matter, when it is your children you go to the ends of the earth, you do anything, you would die for them. (Marcia Rigg, interview, 8 July 2018)

Referencing slavery and its legacies exemplifies a radical analysis of state racism in contemporary Britain, going beyond the death of a family member or the issue of black deaths in custody, reaffirming the argument that racism is systemic and requires fundamental societal change. Rigg also discussed black women as leaders:

I think people see that we are women of strength, particularly because we are black and the struggles that we have been through. They admire us because we don’t give up, we cannot afford to give up, because of our future generations. If in slavery women didn’t fight for our freedom, we would still be enslaved. So they have passed the baton on to women like me. (Marcia Rigg, interview, 8 July 2018)

A maternal connection to black struggle was voiced by other activists, such as a founding member of the London Campaign Against Police and State Violence (LCAPSV), who explained the circumstances from which the group emerged:

It was my son, my eldest son actually. He was using a public phone box in the area that he lives in Camberwell, and the police felt like they had the right to go and

search him ... So they keep doing this to him and they beat him up over at Borough High Street before. He has had a lot of problems with the police. And when I heard what they did to him ... and [he] says, "Mum, this is going to be my life from now on", I really got mad. I got mad. (LCAPSV, interview, 30 March 2014)

The same activist went on to reflect Marcia Rigg's perspective on the strength that is developed by women engaged in black struggle:

But you see, the women, when their children, or their husbands are in this situation, then really and truly who else is left? They have got to stand up because if they don't then no one else will. And there is one thing with women, that it doesn't matter how old your children become they are still your children. And you just cannot sit back and see the wrong that is being done to them and ignore it, you just cannot do that. And it is not that we are more passionate, but we are more durable. And we endure a lot. (LCAPSV, interview, 30 March 2014)

Black women who hadn't lost a loved one, but campaigned in solidarity with those who had, also drew on motherhood:

This kid was one of our kids, and it doesn't matter where we are, it just seems like the black male is [treated like] a threat across the world, and I'm just fed up with it ... I felt very strongly about ... just something about his face because it reminded me of family members. He didn't look too dissimilar from my children. (Trayvon Martin Solidarity, interview, 17 May 2016)<sup>2</sup>

Other women confirmed the leadership of black women, again focusing on mothers:

If you look at the family campaigns, I think the vast majority of them are led by black women and a lot of the time it is black mothers. (BARAC, interview, 7 October 2013)<sup>3</sup>

[Police violence] predominantly happens to our men, although it does happen to our women and we know it is also [racially] disproportionate, and it is women who are often left holding the pieces together, and they are the ones left having to maintain the families and communities and homes and having to bring up the children, with minimal resources, oftentimes with broken family networks themselves. (iNAPP, interview, 26 November 2014)<sup>4</sup>

These assertions reproduce black feminist concepts which identify the black family as a possible site of radical resistance. By challenging the legitimacy of the existing national order, this approach disrupts norms of respectability that frame the family as an institution which should reproduce order in the public sphere. The same activist drew on black feminism to explain this pattern of resistance:

By virtue of being black women, we have had to reckon with various forms of oppression at one time. And not only in terms of oppression against us and our own people, but in terms of our family members who often are also men, and so we had to learn how to straddle various levels. So we couldn't just be a woman. We couldn't just be black. We couldn't just be poor. We couldn't just be any one thing, we had to develop a methodology, an organising methodology and we have had to develop an

analysis which takes into consideration multiple sites of oppression. (iNAPP, interview, 26 November 2014)

However, another female activist argued:

There is a role for black feminist analysis. The issue being though, is if people within communities, black and white, would actually listen to that analysis. Because feminism is deeply marked as something that is negative. Black feminists here are a very small group. (TDC, interview, 14 November 2014)<sup>5</sup>

This quote exemplifies the unevenness among campaigners as to how women leading black deaths in custody campaigns are conceptualised. The women interviewed reaffirm arguments made by black feminists that critiques of patriarchy are often absent from analyses of state racism. This is due to the dominance of patriarchal thinking among black men, as well as in wider society (Phoenix 1997; Reynolds 1997). One woman from an activist group in Ladbrooke Grove (west London) provided a different explanation for why she thought women played such an important role in black community struggles against police violence:

I think that, you know, maybe that has got something to do with it, the sense that we haven't been profiled as our men are being profiled. We have been able to walk relatively safely without being watched, without being profiled, without being harassed, without being stalked [by the police]. (One Voice, interview, 5 March 2014)<sup>6</sup>

While Marcia Rigg added:

Women perhaps come with a softer approach ... we may be listened to more ... And the black man is [considered] a threat to the judicial system. (Marcia Rigg, interview, 9 July 2018)

These perspectives underline a view that black men are subject to state violence and harassment which is more violent, from a form of policing which reproduces notions of black men as criminal, aggressive or political militants (Alexander 2008; Gilroy 1982; hooks 2004; Shabazz 2015). This is contrasted with a degree of agency and freedom to protest among black women who, while subjected to racialised stereotypes framing them as deviant, are not as frequently detained or killed by the police.

It should not, however, be assumed that the police, press or wider society is generally restrained when dealing with women, including relatives of those killed at the hands of the state. In 2011, the annual March Against Deaths in Custody, organised by UFFC, demonstrated outside Downing Street. Every year, the families of those killed hand-deliver a letter to the prime minister at the gates of Downing Street, with a list of demands. On this occasion, protesters were refused access to the gates—this may have been linked to the killing of Mark Duggan earlier that year and the resulting civil unrest and police repression. In response to this refusal by police, some demonstrators sat down in front of the Downing Street gates in protest. Without warning, hundreds of police officers emerged from surrounding buildings, and began to close in on the protest, forming a “kettle”. Marcia Rigg recalled: “I just remember a sea of police officers surrounding

Downing Street ... that could have kicked off a riot in itself". The mother of Ricky Bishop, a young man who died in Brixton police station (south London) in 2008, was dragged across the pavement by police in front of me. Marcia Rigg confirmed that at least one protester was arrested, and two black mothers made formal complaints to police after being assaulted by officers.

In interview, Marcia Rigg said that she could not think of any other context in which a women-led march would be subjected to that kind of police violence. In isolation, the incident could be seen as an ill-thought-out decision by officers. But in the historical context of colonial discourses and practices, as well as black people being disproportionately subjected to criminalization and over-policing in Britain, it is likely that a protest led by black women would be pathologised as violent. This association between black campaigns and violence was reproduced after these protests, as police and the media questioned the efficacy of slogans such as "No Justice, No Peace", with one commentator claiming that it "sounded more like a threat than a prediction" (Wordsworth 2014). Here, we see campaigns against police violence being framed as violent themselves, with the words being used at protests used to pathologise black women as threatening. Marcia Rigg proclaimed at a demonstration: "How *can* there be peace, when there is no justice?" Indeed, while Marcia Rigg does not advocate violent resistance, she rejects the term "riot", asserting that "[p]eople call it riots but I call it an uprising, and my community calls it an uprising" (Marcia Rigg, interview, 9 July 2018).

In the months and years following Mark Duggan's death and the resulting protests, he was described by police as one of the 48 most violent criminals in Europe (BBC News 2013), and by much of the mainstream press as a gangster (Littlejohn 2014; Martin 2014)—a label which remains both unsubstantiated (Elliott-Cooper 2011) and racially charged (Williams and Clarke 2016). The child of a black father and a white mother, Duggan received all the stereotypes that a black man with two black parents could have expected. Mark Duggan's father died in the months following Mark's death, and Mark's white aunt, Carol Duggan, became the primary spokesperson for his justice campaign. A newspaper editorial described her as "a cross between Ali G and Liam Gallagher of Oasis. Manc meets Jafaican" (Littlejohn 2014). Invocations of Ali G, a character invented by Sacha Baron Cohen, a Jewish comedian who parodies working-class British-Caribbean culture, and Liam Gallagher, a popular singer from Manchester ("Manc"), a city characterised as violent and working class, constitutes a racialised, classist denigration of Mark Duggan's aunt. Owing to her being part of a black family as well as a black community campaign, she is described as "Jafaican" (a fake Jamaican). The attack on Carol Duggan thus deploys crude class stereotypes and slurs, and deepens this non-respectable imagery by affirming her proximity to an imagined blackness.

These examples demonstrate how women engaged in campaigns against black deaths in police custody are not afforded the respect of a caring family member grieving for their lost loved one. Rather, these campaigns are read as threats to civility and public order, by both state actors that violently repress protest, and newspapers that deploy racialised tropes to frame activists as deviant. Importantly, however, women campaigning against black deaths in custody challenge

respectability and its norms on their own terms. While the norm of the caring mother reflects the hegemonic order of the private sphere, these campaigners use the family to resist the order of the public sphere and the institutions which reproduce it. Engaging in acts of civil resistance through the occupation of roads, questioning the state’s expectation of peaceful protest and declaring the police and judicial system racist, they resist the norms of civic order and challenge its legitimacy. This radical approach is reaffirmed through activists’ analyses which draw explicitly on Empire and its legacies, identifying their campaigns with resistance to the injustices of enslavement in the colonial period.

Norms which essentialise poor and black women were also implicitly challenged through the ideas, as well as the actions, of the women involved in these campaigns. In the above interviews, activists articulated a range of perspectives, political goals and explanations of why and how women lead these campaigns. This diversity negates attempts to essentialise women engaged in resistance to police racism as uniform in their action and thought. Some women engaged in resistance to policing employed a black feminist analysis of work and care, reaffirming the concepts outlined in the previous section. They identified multiple sites of oppression (gender, race and class) and resistance across waged labour, domestic work and activism, a common observation made in black British feminism. Other women echoed the black feminist notion that all forms of mothering and care in black communities should be considered important components of anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles (Anim-Addo 2014). This highlights the ways in which the black feminist thought often associated with the academy continues to be bound up with the material struggles of grassroots campaigners. However, while the women interviewed considered care work to be an asset to their activism, feminists have also highlighted the additional burdens that the emotional labour of this kind of work can impose on women (Comfort 2003; Condry 2006; Lewis and Gunaratnam 2001; Reynolds 1997).

Post-colonial perspectives drew on the historical memory of enslavement, considering the continuities between the racial violence and women’s resistance in Britain’s slave colonies in the Caribbean on the one hand, and racial violence and women’s resistance on the British mainland in the 21<sup>st</sup> century on the other. Drawing these connections does not simply provide historical context, but illustrates a radical critique of racism as historically constituted, structural and intrinsically bound up with both imperial and patriarchal power. These articulations thus reaffirm the necessity of centring colonial histories in order to expose how police racism is enacted and challenged in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain.

While some activists maintain that women’s resistance against racial violence is also a struggle against patriarchy, this does not necessarily mean that campaigns against black deaths in custody are politically uniform in their analysis of, and commitment to, women’s liberation. Some activists said that patriarchy meant that there was still little space provided for feminist politics in black struggles against policing. Other women resolutely focused on the violence experienced by black men as the primary impetus for black women’s leadership in these campaigns. Thus, despite the significant number of women leading campaigns

against violent police racism, there is not a politically homogenous position among them on the role of women's liberation.

Scholars have acknowledged the colonial roots of contemporary tropes of black women as sexually deviant (Carby 1982), superwomen (Reynolds 1997) and animalistic (Mama 1993b). However, a more detailed recovery of imperial discourses of respectability alongside 21<sup>st</sup> century campaigns against black deaths in custody, exposes how these racisms are rooted in the norms entrenched through enslavement, colonialism and imperial culture. The degradation of Carol Duggan as an unfit carer has its roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century discourses framing the poor or colonised family as dysfunctional. The violence inflicted on black mothers during anti-police violence protests is linked to colonial cultures of respectability. While some of the women interviewed acknowledged the ways in which black men are racialised as violent and dangerous, Marcia Rigg said that she could not envisage any other protest led by women involving the intimidation, violence and arrests that these black death in custody campaigns featured. Contrasting white bourgeois respectable women with the deviant and animalistic black is thus an imperial discourse which continues to fundamentally inform the logic of police violence and how it is deployed.

The approach taken by this paper has demonstrated how colonial-derived cultures reproduce not only racism but also patriarchy, norms imposed on both poor and colonised women two centuries ago, and those engaged in black struggles against policing in post-2011 Britain. Rather than being incorporated into hegemonic norms of respectable gender and civic relations, black and working-class women involved in campaigns against black deaths in custody use the family as a site of radical struggle, engage in civil disobedience, reject state demands for "peace" and challenge the legitimacy of the existing political order itself. Furthermore, this rejection of the order of the nation by many women campaigning against policing speaks to both contemporary injustices and their roots in Britain's imperial cultures. Finally, imperial discourses of respectability and nationalism sought to keep women and men, rich and poor, white and colonised, distinct, with defined intellectual capacity, moral worth and social positions. Yet these gendered, sexual and racialised categories are disrupted by both the radical activism of women in black death in custody campaigns, and the unevenness with which notions such as family, feminism and political strategy are articulated by these campaigners. In other words, while imperial cultures and contemporary racisms essentialise black women, these essentialisms are challenged in the interviews cited, affirming multiple perspectives, experiences and interpretations of how and why women lead campaigns against black deaths in custody.

## Conclusion

Historians have recounted, in great detail, how imperial cultures in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries helped shape sexual and gendered norms through racialised discourses of respectability and nation. This vital historical context has been acknowledged by contemporary black British feminist analyses of policing. But this paper has gone further, arguing that colonial history must be central to our

understanding of police racism, and resistance to it, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This focus on colonial history goes further than simply providing context for contemporary racisms. Such historical discourses expose the hegemonic discourses through which racism is articulated by the press and politicians, enacted by state actors such as the police and legitimised through popular images and stereotypes. Specifically, by analysing how campaigners are viewed and treated by the press and state actors, this paper has demonstrated how hegemonic discourses essentialise black people as violent, sexually deviant and criminal, providing a framework through which racist policing can function. Importantly, these discourses also frame the women who lead campaigns against fatal police racisms as deviant rather than caring family members, threats to civic order rather than active citizens, and provocateurs of violence despite their commitment to peaceful protest.

As black British feminists have long attested, contemporary struggle against police racism illustrates how the black family can be a space of resistance. This is exemplified in this paper through a range of different actions and explanations, which have included demanding justice for lost loved ones in the face of state racism, media representations that frame black familial relations as deviant and dysfunctional, and a police force that violently suppresses peaceful protest.

All of this has been explained by a legacy of slavery and ongoing racisms, the love and care for a family member subjected to police violence, and the multiple sites of labour and oppression navigated by the women engaged in black struggles against policing. Thus these campaigns can disrupt racist cultures of respectability by demonstrating the radical potential of black familial relations, rejecting a national order which demands civil obedience from citizens fighting for justice.

The variety of perspectives, articulations and actions of women engaged in black struggles against policing, as well as in the given explanations why women lead almost every black death in custody campaign in Britain, also speaks to the essentialisms inherent in racist discourses. Indeed, it simultaneously pushes back against discourses which essentialise black women through the aforementioned racial tropes and against reductionist conceptions of resistance that homogenise the black experience or black political action and thought. The responses from activists interviewed through field research thus reaffirm that there is no single explanation why women lead almost every campaign against a black death in custody, and explain why there should not be a single, straightforward explanation.

The imperial cultures of respectability and nation in which racism and gendered norms became entrenched are fundamental to our understanding of black activism and racism in post-2011 Britain. The violence of colonial settlement, enslavement, order and decolonisation deployed racisms which framed colonised societies as deviant and as unable or unwilling to adhere to the norms of respectable gender relations. Framing the black family as dysfunctional or abnormal has contributed to racist discourses which criminalise black people, while at the same time stimulating radical black familial relations which challenge the civic order. By disrupting norms of respectability and the national order, women's leadership in campaigns against black deaths in custody goes beyond attaining justice for a

loved one or a community member. These activists challenge us to radically rethink gender, race and class relations in light of their global, historical constitution, while remaining grounded in material struggles against state power.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Chapter 5, "Racism and the Colour 'Black'", provides a useful history and theorisation of this usage.

<sup>2</sup> Trayvon Martin was an African-American teenager killed in the United States, resulting in a campaign to hold the police and his killer to account, including a solidarity campaign in England.

<sup>3</sup> Black Activists Rising Against Cuts (BARAC) is a national organisation addressing economic injustice, which also supports anti-police violence campaigns.

<sup>4</sup> The interim National Afrikan People's Parliament (iNAPP) is a grass-roots pan-African community organisation.

<sup>5</sup> The Tottenham Defence Campaign is a grassroots community organisation challenging policing in north London.

<sup>6</sup> One Voice is a black community organisation based in West London. They established a West London Community Monitoring Project in 2014 to challenge police racism.

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