



Decolonising Youth Justice, Rethinking Childhood: Caribbean Counterstories in Detention

Youth Justice

1–18

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DOI: 10.1177/14732254231156845

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Abstract

This article offers counterstories from a Caribbean youth detention centre in support of an agenda to decolonise youth justice and rethink childhood. It contrasts the youth's own 'ethics of illegality' centred on structural violence and inequality with institutional interventions revolving around individual remedies and risk factors as well as culturally specific but peculiarly Western conceptions of parenthood and childhood. Concerned about the exclusive ways of regulating and defining parenthood, childhood and safety that stem from a globalisation of youth crime control, the article calls for a *vernacularisation* that takes seriously the complexity and context-dependency of young people's lives.

Keywords

Caribbean, childhood, decolonisation, 'parentism', youth detention

Introduction: Postcolonial Discontents

Empty hotels, deserted beaches, food aid volunteers racing against the clock, hoping to keep the 150,000-something population above subsistence level. In the Dutch documentary *Rauw Curaçao* (Raw Curaçao) by Wensly Francisco, viewers get to see a Caribbean island ruined by the pandemic. Filming the islanders' scattershot approach to the crisis, Francisco and his crew produced footage of a country on a downward slope: interviews with laid-off hotel workers waiting to be reinstalled; shots of a clown-turned street vendor arriving at the wrong address for a children's party, missing minimal income; discussions on the lifesaving potentials of urban gardening in times of faltering imports; a portrayal of desperate and agitated youth in the streets quarrelling with a passerby. And yet, amid all this misery, the Caribbean smile is never really gone. Persistent cheerfulness in such times

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is not a sign of naivety; it shows the resilience of a people used to its share of the pain in the world.

The island had far from overcome its previous crisis before the pandemic broke out. Only months prior to the COVID-19 crisis, commodity dependence had wrought havoc on the island. The oil and only notable industry on Curaçao collapsed when the refining company *Refineria di Korsou* came to a grinding halt due to licencing problems with its southern neighbour, Venezuela. Only months later, its only considerable service industry, tourism, crashed due to the pandemic, leaving a Black precariat to its own devices after it had serviced mainly Western tourists for years on end. Social benefits are virtually non-existent in Curaçao.

In the first days of the pandemic, in March 2020, our research team was still on the island doing an ethnographic study at the youth detention centre, where we started doing fieldwork in 2019 (in this article I use the plural when describing fieldwork, which was a team effort; the singular is used to express my own authorial voice¹). We were disallowed to continue fieldwork, but we had managed to build relationships with a dozen young people in trouble with the law or in custody for child protection. Through participant observation in and outside the centre, document analysis and narrative interviews with both the young detainees and their kin, we gathered the data that form the empirical backbone of this article.

The research project was born out of discontent with two worrisome developments that we noticed in the literature and during exploratory site visits to the centre. The first one concerns the rise of an individualised risk-based logic that is dominant in youth justice systems and practices around the globe and that has also touched down in Curaçao. In a recent article in *Youth Justice*, Myers et al. (2021) accused such logic of being blind to the relational needs of young law-breakers, the structural inequalities they are facing and the political economy – or ‘root causes’ (cf. Reiner, 2021) – of their crimes.

I wholeheartedly agree with this critique and wish to present materials in this article that help to discover a nascent ‘ethics of illegality’ (Roitman, 2006) in the life stories of the Antillean youth we worked with. These stories go against institutionalised discourses of individual failure and risk, cognitive therapies and skills-based approaches as the alpha and omega of youth justice, and give us first-hand views on the social conditions of poverty and crime. These conditions, some youngsters felt, legitimised law-breaking. Rarely do we hear such ‘raw’ stories directly from detained or otherwise disadvantaged youth, because these stories are either blocked by adult gatekeepers (Canosa et al., 2018), their narrators are not taken seriously as research participants (Horgan, 2017) or their silences stripped of any meaning (Spyrou, 2016).

Second, many of the individualising risk instruments that land in postcolonial places like Curaçao originate from or pass through their former metropolises. Although the globalisation of juvenile crime control is well known (e.g. Muncie, 2005), our understanding of its *culturalising* effects is still underdeveloped. With this I do not mean the broader homogenisation of often peculiarly Western criminal justice policies across the globe as the upshot of neoliberal policy transfer and legal globalism. Although this is key as well, I am focusing on something much more specific: what ideas, theories and beliefs about parenthood, childhood, kinship structures, attachment, authority, socialisation, and so on,

travel along with globalised risk instruments, and what (cultural) normativities do they impose on people living in the localities to which these instruments travel?

This article draws on the *decolonising childhood* literature (e.g. Fay, 2019; Liebel, 2020) with a specific focus on youth justice and child protection as distinct policy fields and ethnographic objects, in which the enforcement of a ‘global childhood’ can be studied. The ethnographic materials presented do not only problematise the Eurocentric concepts of childhood and parenthood that are imposed through risk taxation instruments because of their cultural mismatch. They also link back to the first argument, in the sense that a new sort of ‘culture of poverty’ theory can be observed in which structural inequalities and conditions of poverty are indeed acknowledged, but only as the product of deviant family cultures and failing parenting styles, nowadays quantified as risk factors.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows: the second section of the article briefly provides information about Curaçao to contextualise the empirical setting; the third section offers a description of the study and its methods; the fourth section presents the ethnographic materials along the lines of the two discontents formulated above; and the fifth section concludes the article.

Curaçao: Ebbs and Flows

Curaçao is the largest of the Caribbean islands that form the Dutch Kingdom together with their ‘metropole country’, the Netherlands. It is located in the southern Caribbean, where it is sheltered from the vast ocean by the archipelago in the east. Travel 700 km in the northern direction and you arrive at what Columbus once called *Hispaniola*; embark southwards on one of the small boats that stock Willemstad’s floating market with Venezuelan fruit, and the Latin American mainland is reached within the hour.

Because it depends on a limited number of highly volatile industries at the mercy of global demand and development, the Curaçaoan economy itself is alarmingly volatile. In the pandemic year 2020 alone, the country lost nearly 20 per cent of its gross domestic product. The unemployment rate passed 19 per cent and is expected to remain at midterm double-digit levels (IMF, 2021).

This was certainly not the first period of economic malaise since the abolition of slavery in 1863. In the first decades after abolition, Curaçao went through a long period of economic stagnation, which only ended with the arrival of the Royal Dutch Petroleum Company in 1918. Although the oil sector steadily grew in the 1930s, it was WWII that brought real prosperity to Curaçao. The war was a huge stimulant to the refinery of Venezuelan oil due to the demand for fuel by the Allied Forces (Goede, 2008). Between the opening of the refinery in 1919 and 1950, the population of Curaçao tripled. However, employment opportunities quickly plummeted after the war ended and the refinery started automating its processes. By the end of the 1950s, the number of jobs had decreased drastically (Goede, 2008). This was one of the major factors behind the 1969 May revolt, which became an important catalyst for decolonisation (Oostindie and Klinkers, 2003).

Some relief came in the 1960s with the emergence of the international financial sector on the island, which flourished until the recession of the 1980s kicked in. The financial sector declined as an upshot of the fiscal measures taken by the Dutch and US

governments, the Shell refinery closed in 1985 and the island's ship repair business went into recession (Goede, 2008). Tourism revived in the 1980s and became the most important source of income for many islanders – until the pandemic broke out and left a large section of the population impoverished.

With the ebbs and flows of the economy, migrants came and left (Allen, 2006). In its heyday, the oil business mobilised workers from Venezuela, the Netherlands, Portugal, Madeira, Suriname, the English-speaking Caribbean, and the Middle East and Asia. Then again, the deteriorating economic situation in the 1980s drove an astonishing *third* of the island's young people to the Netherlands. Recovery after the 1980s recession started to attract immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, and Colombia. Curaçao is presently also receiving many displaced persons, a spill-over from the crisis in Venezuela. In March 2022, the island had already received more than 14,000 Venezuelans, which amounts to 9 per cent of its population (R4V, 2022). Relative to population size, this would equate 1.5 million refugees for the Netherlands.

Si bo no kana, bo atras no ta tembla is an age-old saying in the local creole language Papiamentu (Allen, 2006). 'If you don't walk, your buttock won't shake' reflects the normality of transnational mobility for Curaçaoans throughout history. As a colony in Dutch possession, Curaçao had atypical qualities because it had no plantations producing tropical export staples. Therefore, the island soon began to function as a commercial centre for a brutal slave trade across the region, after the Dutch conquered it from the Spanish in 1634 (Klooster, 2016; Rupert, 2012). Transformed into a major commercial centre, Curaçao became a hub in the Dutch Atlantic system that thrived because of the trade in (and smuggling of) goods and people.

Historians now widely acknowledge that the Dutch committed untold acts of violence (Klooster, 2016), in the plantation societies of Dutch Guiana (De Kom, 2020), but also in Curaçao (Oostindie, 2011), where people were mostly enslaved for domestic work. Domination was both physical and cultural, ranging from abuse and murder to paternalism. The latter entailed feelings of superiority about Dutch manners, beliefs and relations. Even after generations in the colony, Whites still preferred to see themselves as representing Dutch civilisation and saw 'their own institutions as extensions or copies of those in the mother country' (Hoetink, 1958: 71). Cultural imperialism worked in such a way that institutions such as non-European family patterns were considered aberrant, simple, even pathological.

African-Curaçaoan family patterns were as much a product of the conditions of slavery as they were retentions from Africa that had changed to different degrees during and after the Middle Passage. Similar to Mintz's (2010) famous theory of creolisation – centred on new social institutions born out of catastrophe and synthesised with reordered cultural content—Hoetink approached African-Curaçaoan kinship as both a retention of West African family patterns and a direct product of slavery. However, he gave priority to the latter and drew attention to the fact that the enslaved were prohibited to marry, for instance, which turned the relation between the (grand)mother and children into the stabilising core of an enslaved family and the man into a passing figure.

In addition, Hoetink wrote that the harsh conditions of slavery had turned sequential partnerships and mutual economic help into viable strategies for the enslaved to survive.

The same, he argued, held true for the caretaker-institution that is called *cria* in Curaçao or the *Kweki* custom in Suriname (Hoetink, 1958) and that is known region-wide as the ‘care chain’ (Olwig, 2012). Shared childcare, involving close and extended family or fictive kin, was and still is a way to cushion the blow of ‘absent’ parents devoured by a capitalist world system that incorporated the Caribbean in early modernity, only to push it to the periphery in late modernity.

Already in 1963, Smith feared that rather than thinking of collective childcare and extended family structures as adaptive mechanisms in response to exploitation, repression and poverty, the reverse theory would become more popular, which it did. It built on the assumption that one of the root causes of poverty and economic underdevelopment in the Caribbean is in fact ‘weak family structure’, which was famously said by Oscar Lewis and DP Moynihan to be part of a vicious cycle in which a culture of poverty becomes self-perpetuating (Smith, 1963). The judgement of ‘weak family structure’ sprang from Eurocentric normativities concerning the nuclear family, passive and nurtured childhood, and the two-parent household as *the* place for child-centric domestic relations.

The Study: Questioning ‘Parentism’

Mindful of this history and its long *durée* effects, we became concerned that the culture-of-poverty-and-crime ideologies continued or re-emerged in the Caribbean, this time not put into practice by colonial administrators but by a cadre of pedagogues, youth professionals and risk analysts. This concern was prompted by exploratory site visits to the island in 2018 – allowing us to witness the (Dutch) orthodoxy of Curaçaoan youth justice professionals preoccupied with family life as *the* explanation for criminality – as well as by reading critical literature on the tendency to explain the intergenerational transmission of deprivation, deviancy and delinquency in individual (family) terms only, rather than explore structural explanations of unequal life chances. Both tracks pointed at the culturalisation of parenthood and childhood and the sheer ignorance of structural factors and their impact on people’s lives.

Critical scholars had written extensively about the latter in the years preceding our study. Faircloth et al. (2013: 5) wrote about a new politics of parenting that takes child-rearing as an explanation for and solution to all kinds of social problems: ‘Where poverty, for example, once featured as a major policy concern in its own right, this problem is now often discussed in contrast as a “risk factor” for the real problem, “poor parenting”’. Such parenting, they argued, is once again believed to be the cause of all kinds of social problems being handed down in cycles through generations.

Similarly, Gillies et al. (2017: 3) lamented the politics of early intervention to ‘save the children’: ‘Rather than the spotlights alighting on the unequal material and social conditions in which children live and doing something about them, it [i.e. evidence-based intervention] is focused on parents and how they rear their children’. Replacing redistributive policies, targeted parenting intervention programmes now help to shape the model citizens of the future and prevent various social ills ranging from teenage pregnancy and low attainment to substance abuse and violent crime, they noted sarcastically.

It goes without saying that not just any style of parenting is accepted as the silver bullet here. Very specific ideas have developed about what counts as good parenting, ideas that are historically grounded in Western parenting and childhood models and have culminated in what we today call *intensive parenting*, or IP (Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011; Schenkels et al., 2021). In Hay's (1996) often-cited definition, IP is construed as 'child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive' (p. 8).

Following this definition, a child's life chances are maximised and its potential as future citizen optimised when both parents partake in its 'concerted cultivation', provide it with plenty of emotional, educative and financial support, and listen to the latest scientific expert advice about proper child-rearing while also following their instincts and natural interest in the child's well-being. The IP model positions parents as the foremost pedagogical agents, as 'givers' whose decisions and actions have decisive impact on the child ('the receiver') while downplaying the importance of others, such as extensive family members or institutional educators. This is something which Furedi (2002) called *parental determinism* and that we may abbreviate as 'parentism'. Logically, parentism sees the nuclear family as the principal site of child-rearing, the two-parent household as the preferred child caregiving arrangement, and multiple attachments as a risk for child development.

But it also goes without saying that IP is not the only parenting model in the world, despite being given universal status. Anthropologists and historians have long recorded the rich diversity of parenting cultures, documenting customs and practices starkly opposed to IP (Lancy, 2015; Liebel, 2020; Stearns, 2017). Grouping together different features, Lancy, for example, juxtaposed 'neontocratic' or child-centric societies in the Global North to 'gerontocratic' or adult-centric societies in the Global South, with the first representing children on top of the pyramid, while the second display them as subordinate to a lineage of adults, elders and ancestors. Refraining from any judgement, Lancy dedicates his entire book describing the immense diversity of adult-child relationships in the world and their adaptations to different circumstances. These descriptions render IP problematic in most places where expert advice, expensive tools, high-quality education and surplus time are unavailable, where children have to provide help and care rather than merely receive it, and where the assistance of extended family is much-needed and/or its warmth and support culturally valued.

The problem is that Global North parenting and childhood models are nonetheless imposed on communities across the globe, leading to a postcolonial constellation in which older ideas about 'weak family structures' mentioned earlier remain powerful. Liebel (2020) describes such a constellation as 'an unequal material and ideological or epistemic power relationship that leaves little space for childhoods that do not correspond to the pattern of childhood that dominates the Global North' (p. 2). He warns that in such a constellation, children in the Global South are easily labelled as children without a childhood, who are said to lack the intimate care, dependency, stability and the boundaries that keep them away from adult roles, that is, qualities that ought to be the standard for the 'global childhood' and should be available to children worldwide.

At the youth detention centre in Curaçao (the *Justitiële Jeugdinrichting Curaçao*, or JJIC), it soon became clear to us that IP discourses and notions of global childhood and parentism had settled in. Talk among the social professionals there centred on parental failures and the youth's files were filled with entries about the inadequacies of parents. Moreover, these discourses were anchored in individualised risk instruments in which family variables feature prominently. A good example is the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY), which contains items such as 'exposure to violence in the home', 'childhood history of maltreatment', 'parental criminality', 'early caregiver disruption' and 'poor parental management' (Lodewijks et al., 2008). At the curative end, we also encountered a dominant focus on parenting, with the positive parenting programme Triple-P functioning as the cornerstone. Such programmes are known for their individualised focus on the competency and skills of parents (Hopman et al., 2014).

After the exploratory site visits in late 2018, we returned to the JJIC in March 2019 to do fieldwork. Critically opposed to the reductionist risk-based approach and its individualising and culturalising effects, we answered to Case and Haines' (2014) call to move beyond the prevailing 'risk factorology' (Kemshall, 2008) and take the complexity, unpredictability, context-dependency and multidimensionality of young people's lives more seriously. Over the course of 4 months in 2019–2020, we shadowed 12 young detainees (5 male and 7 female, aged 13–17) one at a time, within *and* outside the centre when they were allowed to go home. Shadowing was more suitable than stationary participant observation in the centre, because it allowed us to observe the youth in different life spheres and in interaction with a wider group of people.

At the end of each shadow period, we conducted narrative life-history interviews with the shadowed youth to grasp their biographies prior to detention, from their point of view. We also asked them to forward us to significant others for follow-up interviews, which led to 36 interviews in total. Rather than simply serving to fact-check, triangulation helped us to understand the complexity of families and their situations. We were interested in questions such as: How do family members provide accounts of themselves and each other? What do they expose and what do they keep hidden? How do the stories they tell entangle what they have done with how they imagine themselves to be? How are events experienced and narrated in different ways?

Such questions, argues Fontes (2019: 334), 'hinge on the complex relationship between agency, event, and act of narration that materialize the events in the moment of its (re)telling'—a triangular relationship he calls a *narrative bloc*. This concept helped us understand that events are not locked in time and that in (re)telling them, people reinvent themselves and their own place in the world. Evidently, such reinvention is not boundless and we were particularly interested in how the youth justice system influenced the narrative blocs through the 'risk-factorology' mentioned above. To this end, whenever the youth gave us permission, we complemented our database with files kept by the JJIC, containing entries from the police, council for youth protection, victim support, custody office and the JJIC itself (more details on how we constructed narrative blocs and dealt with the research ethics involved, can be found in Mutsaers and Meijeren, 2023).

Positivo in the Face of Adversity

Walking around in the JJIC's run-down but colourful buildings or across its sun-blasted courtyard, the thought often occurred to me that I was observing the *parens patriae* doctrine in full swing. This legal doctrine stood at the cradle of child saving movements and juvenile courts and 'evolved into the practice of the state's assuming wardship over a minor child and, in effect, playing the role of parent if the child had no parent or if the existing parents were declared unfit' (Chesney-Lind and Shelden, 2014: 185). 'May not the natural parents, when unequal to the task of education, or unworthy of it, be superseded by the *parens patriae* or common guardian of the community', asked the justices of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 1838 (Chesney-Lind and Shelden, 2014: 187). Knowledgeable of the horrors that followed in youth reformatories in the ensuing decades, I was initially very happy to meet a group of high-spirited social workers, group leaders and case managers in the JJIC. They had visibly embraced the institution's imperative that was written on the courtyard benches and on the covers of parenting handbooks: *be positive*.

In the JJIC, *positivo* first meant getting up in time, keeping a tight day schedule and taking good care of oneself. A large chunk of the employees' working day as well as the dossiers they kept was dedicated to regulating the moral and hygienic behaviour of the youth, both in the locked ward where youth are detained for criminal acts and in the open section where supervision orders are carried out. Exemplary of the caring attitude of the centre's employees is this entry in Paulina's file: 'Paulina is a short and stout girl of 12 years old. If it was up to her, she would be sloppy and untidy. One always has to watch her. When it comes to hygiene and room cleaning, she requires constant help' (all names are pseudonyms). Proper self-care was considered an important first step in embracing positivity, the prerequisite of attaining a more positive life.

Second, in addition to taking good care of the body and physical surroundings, *positivo* meant cultivating a positive mindset and achieving personal change. Observing the youngsters in various settings, it was striking how much weight was given to SAVRY-like factors such as a resilient personality, prosocial involvement, a positive attitude, empathy or anger management.² In spite of the dehumanising poverty in which our young participants lived and the unimaginable adversity most of them had endured as African Curaçaoans (all youth in the centre were black), they were persistently encouraged to look at life on the bright side. We overheard positivity talk on many occasions and were often reminded of what Han (2015) called the *excess of positivity*, which he judged to be typical for our achievement societies today.

Third, *positivo* also extended into the parenting domain, most notably through the introduction of Triple-P. This originally Australian positive parenting programme is immensely popular in the Netherlands and has been embraced by both the JJIC and its non-residential sister organisation, the AJJC.³ Fostering positive parenting styles and strategies links to broader trends in government policy that transfer responsibility from the state to the 'parent-citizen' by introducing 'parenting pedagogies' (Schenkels et al., 2021). In the JJIC, parents were often reprimanded for what was considered suboptimal communication with their children and minimal presence in their lives. For example,

when reviewing the case of the young Alonzo with Jessely – the social worker who often joined us during interviews in the centre or in people’s homes to translate in superdiverse language situations—Jessely condemned the absence of Alonzo’s parents:

I have to check why mother went to Jamaica and left the children with the father and grandmother. The idea was that they would take care of the children but according to grandmother, the father didn’t do so. Grandmother had to take care of everything but she had a job, working all day, so the children were home alone all day, without supervision, and just loitered in the streets. . .

This checking of parents’ reasons to leave the island and ‘abandon’ their children, almost never happened. Most of the time it was flatly dismissed as a lack of interest or inadequate parenting competencies. In contrast to such individualisation, however, both the youth themselves and their kin did a much better job recognising the political economy and other contexts of their biographies. They explained to us in detail why employment opportunities often had to be sought overseas, how Curaçao’s deficient healthcare system forced people to look for medical treatment across the border, or that small island states offered no opportunities to walk away from troubled relationships. With regard to the latter, the words of Mirella, the mother of Michael and Michaela (siblings and both JJIC residents), are enlightening:

You know, if I really want to get out of it [the relationship with her abusive partner], I have to leave this island. If I stay here, I cannot. . . If I move to Bandabou [the island’s West], he’ll look for me. If I go all the way to Westpunt, we would still be together. It’s been like this for 13 years. We fight, make up again, and fight. If I really want it to stop, I just have to leave.

Sometimes children were sent abroad for better life chances while their parents stayed behind for often multiple jobs that could not be given up, for it would mean losing minimal income. Take 17-year-old Jackson, who was sent to the Dominican Republic as a toddler for lifesaving treatment unavailable in Curaçao. His life in Santo Domingo, however, became a disaster. The pathogens in his body were killed, but so were many people in the gang fights he was brought to by his uncle. In the diary *Jackson su vida* (Jackson’s life) that he shared with us, Jackson had written about Santo Domingo’s gang life and the dark side of kinship. The diary chronicled his impoverished and violent life with his ‘wicked uncle’ and grandmother, who often ‘chained him like a dog’, most likely to stop him from joining his uncle’s gang activities. The diary tells about multiple traumas after sexual abuse, neglect, murder scenes, domestic violence and an all too literal ‘care chain’ (Olwig, 2012) linking the Netherlands, Curaçao and the Dominican Republic.

The hardships that Jackson and the others had endured in their young lives made it very difficult for them to go along with the *positivo* creed. When we said to 16-year-old Malik that ‘in class, the same subjects come back over and over again, such as being positive in Curaçao, what it means to grow up in a positive way; what do you think about that?’, he answered that he didn’t know. ‘Does it matter to you, does it bother you?’, we asked. His answer: ‘I don’t know if I even care’. Similarly, Jackson did not dare to think about a brighter future. When he began to fantasise about his own role as a parent in the future, he suddenly stopped and this exchange followed:

- Interviewer: If you are getting a child, what. . . ?
- Jackson: I'm going to point him in the right direction. Helping to choose good friends.
- Interviewer: Que mas?
- Jackson: I don't want to say. I know what to do, to raise a kid in a proper way.
- Interviewer: And what stops you from telling me?
- Jackson: Because if I tell you now. . . and later, when I have a kid and it doesn't happen that way, I've done it all wrong.
- Interviewer: But it's not a promise.

In all its delicacy, this conversational fragment does not only reveal Jackson's awareness of the weight that society gives to parenting (which I coined 'parentism'); it also shows that a young teenager like him knows full well that the conditions of a childhood are often not of the parents' own choosing. He did not blame his mother for a thing in the world: 'What I really want is to live on my own and help mother. I want to help my mother, because I can't stand to see what is happening to her. I want a job to help her. . . and my little brother'. In fact, Jackson's first clash with the law happened for exactly this reason:

In those days, my mother and I went out to steal electricity, because my mother couldn't afford to pay the house, the water, and electricity. We lived without water and electricity and I didn't go to school. I couldn't go to school all dirty. I couldn't wash my clothes. (*Jackson su bida*)

Seeing such incidents in the round and not in the flat means recognising that some sort of ethics of illegality is at work here that helps people to account for their law-breaking behaviour and present it as licit. 'Licit', in this case, is not 'simply equated with what is taken to be legal or lawful; [it] has come to signify practices that are permissible or. . . even "legitimate", given the context in which they live' (Roitman, 2006: 249). Such an approach etches out a space of ethics that does not present Jackson and his mother as incorrigible delinquents, but explains their recidivism by pointing at the persistently harsh conditions of their existence that force them into marginality and 'outlawry' (Hobsbawm, 1969).

It is noteworthy that, in another study, we encountered a similar ethics of illegality in Suriname, a country that won independence in 1975 but still falls within the Dutch sphere of influence. In various focus group sessions with ex-detained youth in Paramaribo about the possibilities of restorative justice, it became clear that restoration and repair were hard to establish under circumstances in which the youth and their victims were both entangled in the same downward spiral. When asked whether restorative justice measures could stimulate the youth's desistance from crime, some of them hesitated, saying 'that my problems are worse than the victim's' (Mutsaers and de Vries, forthcoming), indicating that this was not about free will. *Real* restorative justice, many Black Surinamese people seemed to be thinking, is not about preventing petty crimes from happening or repositioning the victim in a conflict; it is about the long overdue reparation of the harms done by Dutch colonisers and their multinational successors (Fatah-Black, 2018; Price, 2011).

Silencing Childhoods

The advanced degree of ‘parentification’ in Jackson’s life is starkly opposed to one of the main currents in global but peculiarly Western paradigms on childhood: the assumption of a strict division between childhood and adulthood. In his book *Decolonizing Childhoods*, Liebel mentions a UNICEF publication called *Children in Adult Roles* as exemplary of such thinking, because it claims that when children have to take over the role of adults, they are de facto deprived of their childhoods. Flatly ignoring children’s realities in what Liebel calls the ‘majority world’, it is simply assumed that children everywhere are or *ought to be* dependent and all-round cared for beings.

They are said to deserve what Hecht (1998), in his seminal ethnography of Brazilian street children in Recife, called *nurtured* childhoods instead of *nurturing* childhoods. However, if we are to extract one take-home message from Hecht’s (1998) book, it is that in many places around the world, ‘children and adults are seen more as beings on a continuum than opposing elements of a dyad’ (p. 213). The reason for such a continuum to exist is obvious: ‘families whose survival requires continuous resourcefulness expect children to nurture the household and children take pride in doing so’ (Hecht, 1998: 193). That such resourcefulness and pride extend beyond Brazil becomes clear from Lancy’s (2015) impressive anthropology of childhoods across the world.

From this point of view, a concept like parentification proves to be peculiarly Western, and targeting it with interventions may come with the risk of imposing cultural concepts of childhood and parenthood upon people to whom such concepts may be utterly foreign. This risk also lurks behind the implementation of the Triple P programme in countries such as Curaçao. Such interventions are often presented as objective and neutral responses to problematic behaviour in children and families, but closer inspection helps to reveal a ‘hidden curriculum’, to speak with Hopman et al. (2014). Triple P’s hidden curriculum is clearly described by them: (1) it is a highly individualised programme in which the competencies, skills and confidence of parents are believed to prevent behavioural, emotional and developmental problems in children; (2) parental roles are strictly separated from children’s roles; and (3) ‘good parenting’ is connected to specific IP-like qualities that are highlighted in the programme.

That Triple P philosophies had trickled down into the daily work life of JJIC professionals is best illustrated by the case of Dwain. Like Jackson’s, 14-year-old Dwain’s life was on the fast lane as well. In his own words, he ‘had experienced it all: murder, shootings, you name it’. Born and raised in one of the poorest and most crime-ridden neighbourhoods of the island, Dwain challenged us to ask him anything, because he had already seen so much in his life. When we articulated the assumption that this must have been difficult for him, he replied, ‘no not at all, I’m used to these things’. Sadly enough, he was. When we accompanied him on parole, he showed us the bullet hole in the front door of the very small house, where he lived with his mother, grandmother, uncle, sister, niece and nephew.

Already at a very young age, Dwain was recruited as an errand boy by one of the most violent gangs on the island. Mindful of that fact, we had written in our notebook when observing Dwain in the JJIC that

Dwain is showing the others how to survive in [real] prison, eating without a spoon or turning other objects into a spoon. He tries to impress the others, boasting about the neighbourhood he comes from. . . . But in personal interactions with Jessely [the social worker] he is actually very shy and uncertain. *Then you see the 14-year old boy he actually is.*

The significance of this entry only occurred to us months later: we too had bought into Western definitions of childhood, that is, of children as innocent, passive and intensively cared-for beings. Despite our dedication to a decolonising childhood agenda, we could apparently only see a young boy when he was at his most vulnerable. Afterwards, we realised that this fallacy had impacted the course of the interviews with our young interlocutors. For example, when we asked them questions that framed them as *receivers* of care, they fell silent. Take as an example 15-year-old Michael and our elicitations to tell us about the care he had received from his father:

- Interviewer: Can you tell us about your father and how he took care of you?
 Michael: No. . . (long silence).
 The street is my father. I hope my father gets shot.
 Interviewer: Oh. . . You don't even want to see him again?
 Michael: I don't want to have anything to do with him. Don't even want to see a photo.

However, when Michael saw a possibility to break through our framing of him as a receiver of care, he became more talkative and spoke about his responsibilities in the family:

My stepfather was involved in a traffic accident. He broke his neck, couldn't turn his head. I was the oldest in the house, all my older brothers had already left, and I saw that my mother had problems. . . . uhm, financial problems. She had to do a lot of things to scrape together some money. So I had to help my mother and at some point, I quit school to work and earn some money.

We took to heart Spyrou's (2016) advice to study our ethnographic materials as wholes, rather than a series of 'dissected and coded fragments', in order to understand both the production of silences as well as their 'wavering' in our ethnography (p. 17). This made us aware that far from being absences or a lack of data, the youth's silences were 'pregnant with meaning and a constitutive feature of their voice' (p. 8).

Regarding Dwain, for instance, it stimulated the question if his sudden timidity and silence in Jessely's proximity were a sign of accommodation, resistance, or fear. Did her appearance frighten him? Did he try to match her image of a 'good child'? Or was his silence a sign of protest *against* that image? We agree with Scott (1990) that the public performance of subordinates will often be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful – out of prudence, fear, or the desire to curry favour – but that it may also contain small acts of resistance.

To be honest, Dwain had much to protest against. In his file, a rich description of all his alleged shortcomings – emotionally, behaviourally, developmentally – was preceded by a long list of patronising remarks on his upbringing and family situation: 'Mother does not control the youth, who is therefore loitering in the streets without supervision'. 'Mother adopts a permissive parenting style'. 'Mother is not a role model to Dwain and doesn't

teach him norms and values'. 'Mother has no authority over the minor'. That mother was the only one in the extended family with an income and thus had to support seven people with her job as a cleaner of rich folk's swimming pools, was indeed acknowledged in the file, albeit with the condescending footnote that one 'does not understand where mother gets the money from to rent a car. . . Or does she set the wrong priorities?'

It is superfluous to emphasise that such remarks and questions are prompted by an IP framework that takes concerted cultivation, child-centeredness, the nuclear family, educational investment, strict role divisions and small households as the building blocks of 'good parenting'. It also requires little imagination to see a complacent smile emerging among those who side with the prevailing risk factorology and claim the absence of such building blocks to be risk factors for youth crime. In mainstream risk theory, Dwain, Michael, Jackson, Malik and the others do not stand a chance. Their lives of multiple attachments, extended family networks, collective caregiving arrangements, shifting authorities, blurred family roles and parentification quickly fall within the gaze of the justice system. The fact that they committed crimes allegedly justifies the gaze and legitimises the system. Once again, risks materialised into actual danger.

Or, did they? Do such 'factors' have any predictive value on an island where the majority of the people can be characterised by them? And if so, what do we make of the fact that the small-scale and the island's only youth detention facility, with a capacity for 40 people, is almost never full? Would this be different if each nuclear family had to cushion the blow of economic collapse individually instead of collectively through extended family networks? If parents had no one to turn to when they work multiple jobs? If families had not spread internationally to generate family income? If sibling care or unrelated and unregistered foster parents were strictly policed? Are these questions not pointing at the sort of community resilience that risk scholars are talking so much about these days?

Discussion and Conclusion: Half a World Away

Such questions cannot and should not be answered from half a world away, where risk scholars from the Northern Hemisphere develop techniques modelled on normative perceptions of a global childhood and moulded by a parentism that does not only put parents at the centre of the universe but additionally renders some forms of parenting as the root cause of all kinds of social ills. Instead, these questions demand local perspectives that recognise the 'deviant' family roles, serial companionships, collective caretaking and the (law-breaking) struggles involved for what they are: historically rooted responses to the structural violence that Caribbean families have been facing for so long. This violence is intricately connected to a capitalist world system that has always left places like Curaçao to the whims of global industry, first in slavery, then in oil and other extractive businesses, and now in a neocolonial tourist sector that has semantically replaced *servitude* with *service*.

In anthropological terms, if we wish to decolonise the youth justice and child protection sectors, a *vernacularisation* is needed as a counterweight to the globalised control of youth crime (Muncie, 2005), which jettisons ostensibly universalised child-rearing values and takes seriously the complexity, unpredictability, context-dependency and

multidimensionality of young people's lives (Case and Haines, 2014). Such vernacularisation is not a single but a multilayered process, requiring change and reflection at different levels.

First, it asks for a different criminology. One that moves away from the preoccupation with 'order and homogeneity that has been a hallmark of Western social science [and] a reflection of dominant Euroamerican consciousness' to speak with the Caribbean anthropologist Trouillot (1992: 24). In the most general sense, this tendency to delineate, classify and default to whiteness as the reference category has turned *research* into one of the dirtiest words from the vantage point of the (formerly) colonised (cf. Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). Criminology in particular has become suspect, considering its history as a colonial science for the control of the Other (Agozino, 2004). Arguably, colonial tendencies continue in the 'risk factorology' described in this article, which is based on oversimplified but often peculiarly Western notions of risk factors and an obsession with reductionism, which together lead to a soundbite understanding of (the causes of) crime. In that light, a decolonised or southernised criminology has been called for (e.g. Blagg and Anthony, 2019: 6) that seeks 'a progressive alliance with Indigenous nations and [formerly] colonised peoples' to rid criminology of its 'control freak' tendencies and work towards local understandings of crime and deviance that go beyond Western concepts of individual wrongs.⁴

Second, southern criminologies need to be translated into youth justice and child protection policies and practices that stop criminalising the family life of non-Whites. From a Caribbean perspective, inspirations can be found across the Pacific, for instance in the work of Keddell (2018) on the construction of children in the Aotearoa New Zealand child protection reforms. Keddell (2018) points out that these reforms have been grounded in neoliberal ideas about parents as self-responsible beings and pay no attention at all to the vulnerabilities of parents themselves, nor 'to the structural, relational, community of personal causes of those vulnerabilities' (p. 99). Cultural tropes of individualisation are reinforced in New Zealand through the core focus on parental fault and at the expense of attention to structural inequalities in society, which conjures state intervention as the last resort to break the 'cultural transmission' of poverty and crime between parents and children.

In this article, I have offered local narratives from a Caribbean detention centre as counterstories to the same inclination to brush aside concerns about structural violence and inequality and to prioritise efforts that encourage 'positivity' in the lives of detained youth and their families. Such efforts are embedded in global discourses of childhood and parentism and focus on individual growth and a correction of 'weak family structures' at the expense of welfare policies aimed at structural improvements of the life chances of the people involved. Not only do such efforts undermine attempts to go beyond the individual (families), they also come with 'too exclusive ways of regulating and defining what childhood and safety ought to be' (Fay, 2019: 321). I agree with Fay (2019) that if youth justice and protection measures 'genuinely intend to improve children's well-being, they should take children's and adults' views in communities in which they operate seriously and as a point of departure for planning and implementation' (p. 325). At a minimum, this means getting the story right and telling it well to make social transformation possible (Tuhiwai

Smith, 2021). As an anthropologist, I prefer rich narrative blocs and whole-life approaches (cf. Mutsaers and Meijeren, 2023) to the soundbite risk factorology that further entrenches institutionalised habits to cut up people's lives into measurable and analysable 'factors'.

Finally, vernacularisation means that at the end of the day, decolonisation can only truly come from within – something which is also acknowledged by Fay (2019) in her work on child rights governance in Zanzibar. Corresponding with global trends to question international children's rights standards and to seek recognition for the rights of Indigenous children and for Indigenous ontology more generally (Blackstock et al., 2020), Fay found strong local resistance against universalised child rights approaches. However, unlike Fay, we generally encountered institutional enthusiasm about parentism and global childhood at the JJIC location and other agencies within the island's youth justice sector. At first, it felt uncomfortable to question such enthusiasm as three White males with professional and residential ties to the former coloniser (the Netherlands) – despite the long-term engagement with the island spanning almost two decades for one of us. Gradually, and with the help of local social scientists and social workers, we felt encouraged to put centre stage the Caribbean family patterns that emerged through the families' storytelling and to contrast these with the institutional narrative of 'weak family structure'. The task ahead of us all is to build trans-Atlantic alliances and to make these contrasts productive within the JJIC in order to genuinely rethink childhood and decolonise youth justice. The pandemic, with which I opened this article, had brought everything to a halt on the island, including the youth-led conference that we had planned, but now that everything is slowly turning back to normal in Curaçao, we must make sure that some things don't.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: funding by NWO, the Dutch Research Council (grant no. NWA.1228.191.044).

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Notes

1. I wish to thank Maikel Meijeren and Frank van de Schans for their invaluable efforts in the field. Judeska Pauletta and Charette Albertoe-Pinedo have been essential partners in the *Justitiële Jeugdrichting Curaçao* (JJIC) and I look forward to jointly taking the next steps towards *Caribbean* youth justice reforms.
2. While research had already shown years ago that most of these factors fail to predict recidivism in Caribbean youth, even when they reside in the Netherlands. Van der Put et al. (2013: 126), for instance, pointed at the weak predictive value of factors in the family domain for youth with Antillean or Surinamese backgrounds, arguing 'that the "extended family" might be a possible explanation for the fact that problems in the family domain are less predictive for recidivism' (suggesting that divorce, for example, may have less of an impact due to the existence of family support networks). They also referred to the so-called *number paradox*, which explains 'that if a certain risk factor [they mention broken families] is relatively common, it is not regarded as deviant and, therefore, there is no longer a relation with criminality' (Van der Put et al., 2013).
3. Again, instruments that land in postcolonial settings often come from or pass through former metropolises. Triple-P was first mentioned in 2016 in a policy document written by the Curaçaoan Law Enforcement

Council (*Raad voor de Rechtshandhaving*, 2016) that is full of references to the Netherlands, which is consistently put on a pedestal. The document addresses various youth risk and intervention programmes implemented on the island following Dutch ‘best practices’. Plans are made ‘conform Dutch methods’ (pp. 58 and 79), programmes ‘derive from Dutch assistance programs’ (p. 32), formats for treatment plans are ‘made by employees from the Dutch Custodial Institutions Agency’ (p. 58), and the Curaçaoan youth probation works with a scientific evidence-based method, ‘written down in a handbook made in the Netherlands, commissioned by the Ministry of Justice’ (p. 60). Reading this document, one gets the impression that everything that is ‘made in Holland’ must be good.

4. It deserves note that Blagg and Anthony are sceptical of the ‘southern turn’ in criminology, believing that the master’s tools cannot be used to dismantle the master’s house.

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