Stigma, Penalty and Black British Young Women: Historicizing Child Q

Abstract

The Child Q case resounds a history rife with intersecting, hidden gendered stigma and penalty for Black, racialized young British women. Child Q’s experience offers an opportunity to explore critical race theorist (CRT) Kimberlé Crenshaw’s logic of the unique deficit positioning, where race and gender coincide, overlap, and compound the pains of historic inequality. The case offers an opportunity to expand the customary contemporary focus on the racialization of punishment beyond concerns with disproportionate criminality to explore logics concerned with youth’s entrenched, disproportionately inequal positioning. The case exemplifies how racial stigma sutures penalty, instead of care and lenience, into racialized young women’s lives.

Keywords

Penalty, Gender, Race, History, Intersectionality

Introduction

The [Child Q](https://chscp.org.uk/case-reviews/) case resounds a history rife with hidden intersections of gendered stigma and penalty for Black, racialized young British women. The case illustrates  [ongoing concerns, within contemporary British criminology, regarding the paucity of knowledge on Black young women’s lived experiences.](http://oro.open.ac.uk/78294/1/Decolonising%20British%20Criminology.pdf) Concerns about gender’s hiddenness are legitimized against a deepening criminogenic youth justice backdrop, where deviance and punishment are racialized. [The rich field of research on Black young men confirms the racialization of youth crime](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1748895811398458?casa_token=uR-BU4mnQPEAAAAA:10ff5AlHLnmAPVF25t_1g6H6Rq5U_-bpTJQrNtrZN0u-HF-R567WMUynNi5XIaAzuqZnrJve9-Ce) and reinforces the need for greater knowledge about young women’s experiences. This need is heightened given racialized young women and men’s coexistence; and given further [scholarship adducing a gendering of crime and penalty](https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780367823368-6/black-girls-london-comprehensive-school-fuller). Child Q’s experience offers an opportunity to explore critical race theorist (CRT) [Kimberlé Crenshaw’s logic of the unique deficit positioning](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4181947/), where race and gender coincide, overlap, and compound the pains of historic inequality. [The case offers an opportunity to expand the customary contemporary focus on the racialization of punishment beyond concerns with disproportionate criminality to explore logics concerned with youth’s entrenched, disproportionately inequal positioning.](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360654774_Moving_Beyond_Crime_and_Punishment_Narratives_and_Analyses_Critical_Race_Theory_and_Racial_Specificity_in_Youth_Justice) The case exemplifies how racial stigma sutures penalty, instead of care and lenience, into racialized young women’s lives.

Child Q was a Black female secondary aged student, when strip searched by two female Metropolitan Police Officers (MPO) on school premises in 2020. The [story](https://chscp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Child-Q-PUBLISHED-14-March-22.pdf) is told that teachers alerted law enforcement, upon observing a strong cannabis smell purportedly emanating from the young woman. Suspicious, teachers and two MPOs took several actions. Initially, they questioned her about drug use and drug possession, accusations Child Q denied. A subsequent search of her bag, blazer, scarf, and shoes revealed no drugs. Finding nothing to substantiate their suspicion, MPOs escalated their actions, culminating with strip searching Child Q. The MPOs acted without her teachers present and without parental approval. Child Q was then sent home, in a taxi, alone. In her own account:

Someone walked into the school, where I was supposed to feel safe, took me away from the people who were supposed to protect me and stripped me naked, while on my period.

I don’t know if I’m going to feel normal again.

I was held responsible for a smell, ([Child Q, 2022](https://chscp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Child-Q-PUBLISHED-14-March-22.pdf)).

Her distress informed her mother’s decision to see the family’s GP, who authorized a psychological referral. This triggered another series of events, including contact with the [Hackney Children and Families Services (Hackney CFS),](https://hackney.gov.uk/children-and-families) and the Rapid Review response, occasioned in school incidents. Among the case’s remarkable aspects is the recommendation by Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (CSPRP) that no further action was necessary, indicating satisfaction with Child Q’s wellbeing. However, disregarding CSPRP’s recommendation, a [Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review](https://chscp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Child-Q-PUBLISHED-14-March-22.pdf) determined Child Q’s experience, indeed, a traumatic one.

Child Q’s experience is important for understanding hidden intersections between gender, race, youth, and penalty in British institutions. This case reflects a historic denial of lenience and care and Black youth’s sustained vulnerability, to the penalizing cadence of racial stigma. This corresponds with [my recent argument that racialized youth in Britain have been historically placed at a transformative impasse, as intractably deviant outsiders.](https://www.routledge.com/Race-Recognition-and-Retribution-in-Contemporary-Youth-Justice-The-Intractability/Miller/p/book/9781138488793)  This is an oppositional positioning antithetical to the malleability attributed youth for whom lenience is normal. The intractable youth are those for whom lenience and care can be denied at ever increasing disproportionate levels. Starting in the interwar period, for instance, youth categorized as [Anglo-Negroid](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2844357?seq=1) (White mothers, Black fathers from the colonies who demobilised in Britain after fighting in the First World War) endured a range of stigmatizing labels including [troublesome, pesky, social time bombs](https://www.amazon.com/Palgrave-Handbook-Youth-Gangs-UK/dp/3030996573). Though not yet categorized risks, they did not fit the purportedly progressive vision for modern Britain. This, despite rationalities of treatment and care driving a nascent rehabilitative youth justice regime, to support the development of youth’s potential as future citizens. Later, when generation Windrush arrived, the children were deemed [educational subnormal (ESN)](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-57099654) following from eugenics informed pseudoscientific I.Q. testing. This ESN designation embodied the intractable impasse at which Blackness was already positioned. Indeed, these youth’s relegation to special schools was not aimed to get them up to speed, but to diminish their impact on so-called normal standards. Latterly, under a contemporary youth justice rationalizing punishment, stigmatizing criminal labels disproportionately reinforces these youth’s historic deficit positioning.

Against this backdrop, Child Q’s experience gives concrete critical scope to the [hidden gendered character of the paucity of knowledge on Black British young women’s lived realities](https://shadesofnoir.org.uk/the-silent-twins-crime-and-punishment-of-black-girls/). This starts with young women’s invisibility within criminological histories and their [continued relative absence from contemporary research.](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/978-1-137-52911-4_10) Here [Crenshaw’s intersectional logic](https://www.berkeleycitycollege.edu/slo/files/2021/05/Crenshaw-Mapping-the-Margins-Intersectionality-and-Vioence-against-WOC.pdf)  enables insight into the unique ways gender overlaps with race to heighten racialized young women historic exposure to the penalizing continuities of racial stigma. Observe the normalization of the necessarily traumatic strip search, for a young person. The subsequent determination of no further action, by the CSPRP, resounds the reckless indifference rationalized for historically categorized intractable deviants, whose transformative potential has been long repudiated. A [developing interdisciplinary British scholarship](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09612020200200326) resonates established [American scholarship](http://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f20d90e4b0b80451158d8c/t/54d2d22ae4b00c506cffe978/1423102506084/BlackGirlsMatter_Report.pdf)  lamenting a gender, race intersectional deficit: while, young Black women are invisible in knowledge production, they are exposed to the deepening penality observed in both a racialization and gendering of scrutiny and penalty. Considered according to Crenshaw’s intersectional logic, Child Q’s experience within British education brings concrete, critical currency to the school to prison pipeline narrative, for instance, which indicates how schools disavow Black youth’s transformative potential, preparing them for future carceral control, instead of citizenship. Crenshaw’s logic exhorts expansion of the typical focus on youth as disproportionately criminal to observe a lesser explored status of disproportionate inequality. This approach aligns with youth justice itself, including the range of [protective instruments disseminated from the international level, avowing child friendly justice](https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/childrens-rights/united-nations-convention-of-the-rights-of-the-child).

Thus, Child Q’s experience demonstrates how the intersection of youth with gender and race contributes to the historic corrosive cadence of stigma and penalty, in young Black women’s lives. This is a key starting point for comprehending the suffocating unease resulting when reading the young woman’s account of her experience, of having adults remove her clothes, determined to confirm confounded suspicions.

Bibliography

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