

## **Taxonomies of conjugality: a Caribbean grammar book**

Conjugality—the idea of the sexual couple—has endured as an organizing concept in family law and family studies and persisted as the key mode of understanding human closeness. Potent arguments provided against it notwithstanding, conjugality as a concept has not been abandoned but rather expanded beyond marriage over time.

Broadly, I am fascinated by how *taxonomy* has been used as a vehicle for expanding notions of conjugality. My interest is in the conventional categorization of conjugality in the Commonwealth Caribbean—of *marriage*, *common law marriage* and *visiting relationships*—which I suggest has become something of a Caribbean grammar book. By that I mean the categorization is now treated as setting out pre-eminent facts about the Caribbean and providing a way of understanding the region. I argue that both law and social science discourse have helped to craft and settle these categories as ‘social truths’.

I argue that the introduction of ‘coherence’ to the ‘welter of disorganized social life’ in the Caribbean by the taxonomic turn was, among other things, a methodological move used by colonials and intellectual nationalists to respond to anxieties about ‘missing black men’ and over-fruitful black women. In my view, taxonomy’s aura of rationality has obscured the narratives of gender, class, race and sexuality embedded in the *marriage/common law marriage/visiting relationships* categorization. That presumed rationality, and the authenticity taxonomy gives to the observable, have also dampened apprehensions about conceptual imprecision in the categorization of conjugality.

The paper you will read is an outline of some of my early thoughts on this new project, and I am aware that I have not fully made my arguments yet, considered all their permutations or provided all the required detail. The paper will take up what I think of as my points *in limine*; they are tentative first steps to broadly sketch the *technology* of the categorization and how it emerges as a text of the Caribbean. I examine the identification of the *problem*, the discernment of a *structure* to conjugality, the naming of *commensurabilities* that serve as guiding principles in developing the structure, the introduction of new *terminology* and the process of *signification* for the categorization. I should add that I expect to say much more especially about ‘signification’, and law’s role in it, than I do in the paper.

I am interested in what all of this might mean for family law reform in the Caribbean, although I have not completely convinced myself that this should be part of the same paper. At a minimum, I feel certain that it is not an adequate answer to tell lawyers, judges and lawmakers to simply take their cues as to what family, kinship and intimacy mean from social facts as they are revealed in taxonomies like the one I consider. The more substantial implications beyond this, I expect to discern as this project develops.