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## **Extended Symposium Abstract: African-Caribbean Women's Mobility and Self Fashioning in Post-Diaspora Contexts**

### **Cartographies of the Self: British Caribbean Women's Migratory Navigations With Freedom.**

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#### **Introduction**

The AHRC –funded Network entitled African-Caribbean Women's Mobility and Self Fashioning in Post-Diaspora Contexts offers me the opportunity to engage both with how other Caribbean scholars are responding to the concept of post-diaspora and to evaluate its usefulness and limitations in relation to my own work. I intend to use this forum to focus on two key questions.

- i. What forms of emancipatory subjectivity are imagined and enabled by African Caribbean women in various forms of journeying between multiple registers of 'home', and 'foreign', especially where these produce discrepant affective registers of 'grounding', familiarity, identification, and orientation, but also, potential unsettlement, foreignness, disidentification and disorientation?
- ii. How can the concept of post-diaspora contribute to an analysis of these processes and help to explain the cultural politics of new postcolonial ethnicities and their diasporas?

These questions will be pursued through drawing on and extending work on the cultural politics of freedom addressed in my book *Decolonizing and Feminizing Freedom: a Caribbean Genealogy* (2017). This work explores the discourses of freedom shaping British African Caribbean women's narratives of Black womanhood and argues that gendered and racialised understandings of freedom are powerful quotidian preoccupations shaping African Caribbean women's routine strategies of self-determination and agency. For this current research project, I intend to examine how British African Caribbean women use various mobilities - spatial, discursive and categorical - in the pursuit of personal fulfilment, social agency and freedom. This research centrally asks, *how do these mobilities enact complex practices of women's freedom and what do they reveal about the contemporary diasporas?*

*Decolonizing and Feminizing Freedom* argued that for the first and second generation women of post-war immigrants to Britain, the transnational, the diasporic and the local are mutually informing lived everyday sensibilities as well as cultural and political orientations shaping the lived geo-temporal co-ordinates through which the women I researched understood themselves, interpreted their lived conditions and negotiated the perceived possibilities open to them. The focus of the current study is British-born African Caribbean women who have migrated *away from* the UK. This will take the form of at least one in depth interviews with one of the women who featured in my earlier research project and whose life in the more than ten years since I last interviewed her has involved multiple moves between Britain and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. In addition to exploring her account of these movements and I may bring them into conversation

with my own experiences of secondary migration to the USA to work as an academic and my subsequent recent return to the UK. As a Black British woman, whose disciplinary 'home' in Britain is sociology, but who has never felt *at home* in the discipline or in the UK academy, I found myself for several years feeling more professionally 'at home' in a department of African American and African Studies in a US university than I ever had in the UK. However, while feeling more at home *professionally* I also found myself positioned as an alien Other and unevenly accepted into the community of Blackness in the USA; alienated and reconfigured as both Black British and Caribbean in ways that were different to how I lived those identities in the UK. This project potentially affords an opportunity to explore these two experience and to experiment with other forms of scholarly writing, moving between personal narratives in which memory and affect are deployed as archival sources that can supplement more conventional forms of scholarly writing in the social sciences and humanities.

Identity as an *embodied located state of being* reflects a situated perspective that structures the interpretations of reality at the same time as our interpretive frames are given to us by our shifting social contexts and social positionings, and by the diverse and discrepant regimes of power and meaning-making through which we make sense of reflexively lived experiences. This produces *ambivalent hermeneutics* (Gallagher, 1992, 4) in which context and perspectives are "interdependent structural features of our experience" (Weiss cited in Gallagher, 1992, 4). In other words, our perspective is always shaped by a social context, which in turn is constituted by temporally changing perspectives" (ibid). This new research will examine women's interpretations of their contextualized realities and how various forms of mobility are deployed to escape, manage or negotiate them. This work focuses on geographic travel and migrations *from* the UK to other countries, as well discursive migrations across hegemonic identity and spatial categories and boundaries. The aim is to map and analyse these diverse mobilities and the negotiations with freedom. Finally, I am interested in what new mappings of freedom, the transnational and the diasporic emerge.

### **Black British Women's Migratory Subjectivities**

The research for *Decolonizing and feminizing Freedom* revealed how some British African Caribbean women retain both a very powerful and active awareness of the Caribbean as a central element in their identities and lived cultures as well as a complex diasporic construction of Black Britishness simultaneously traced through the Caribbean, Africa and the USA. As the following examples show, for these women born or growing up as African Caribbean in England in the period between the 1960s and mid-1980s, 'home' was defined principally by two points of identification: (1) complex and shifting identifications with various regional and local British locations, and (2), the *back-home* cultures of their home life in England, reflecting the culture of their parents' Caribbean islands of origin. In this way, their narratives of identity moved seamlessly between the local, the regional, the transnational and the diasporic in ways that both troubled the status of the nation, yet which were largely taken for granted.

The first can be seen vividly where very local identities were attached with ease to other British regional, transnational Caribbean and African diasporic locations. For example, Linette in her thirties, described herself as African, of Grenadian parents, born in Moss Side, Manchester, who grew up in Birmingham. Linette recounted arriving in London from Manchester in her early twenties. Despite Manchester being a major city, Black Londoners regarded her as a "country-bumpkin" and Linette accepted this ascription because she too viewed 'Black London' as more 'advanced' than the regions. For Linette, London's advancement over regional Black life, both politically and culturally was signalled by the existence of what she experienced as a more vibrant Black public culture and a larger Black public sphere, made up of the variety of Black pirate radio stations, Reggae music programmes on the legal local radio stations, Caribbean nightclubs and businesses such as record shops and hairdressers catering to Black communities. In the 1970s and 1980s, the density of diverse Black populations in the national capital and the development of a Caribbean public sphere of economic and cultural activity helped to establish African-Caribbean culture as hegemonic in both constructing *Black London*, and in the development of a postcolonial Black British ethnicity. Thus, coming to

London enabled her to experience and inhabit forms of selfhood, Black identity, Caribbeaness and freedom denied to her in a regional city.

In terms of their relationship to the Caribbean, the first visit to their parental home islands was significant and powerful in its impact on women sense of self and identity. All the women interviewed who had been born in Britain had visited their parents' birth islands. The impact of going "back home" was different for each person, yet for many it was an emotionally demanding experience that led to profound shifts in their self-identity and sense of relationship to Britain and Britishness. This is perhaps best illustrated by Melissa born in Birmingham of Jamaican parents.

*I have been to Jamaica. It was a culture shock at first. I remember a feeling of disappointment that I hadn't come home, because my parents had always talked of going 'back home' and that's how I thought as well; "I'm going home." And then suddenly being in this place where you weren't at home where you were an outsider yet again. I think that caused some feelings of displacement because you started to wonder 'well where I fit in? Where do I fit? I was about eighteen or nineteen. I remember coming back and feeling [said in a whisper] "Oh! I'm coming home" And that was the first time I can recollect having those thoughts. The first time I'd thought 'going back to England – home'; because it was almost you're searching for somewhere else. (Melissa)*

Melissa's feelings of belonging, orientation and identification are self-consciously invested in being simultaneously but discrepantly British, and Jamaican, and as she revealed later in the interview, Black British. This was achieved neither by a simple identification or disidentification with Britishness, nor an absolute difference from white Britishness, (Hall 1996, 116); rather through all three together in combination with coming to understand herself as not being fully Jamaican and Jamaica not being home in the way it was for her parents. In this way, Jamaica and the wider Caribbean generally come to represent cultural sites of identification and belonging but also to provide a psychic space of recompense for the ways that racist constructions of Britishness as a white nation denied her full inclusion and belonging. In the discourse of Black British Caribbean identity that emerged from the women in the research, a variety of transnational and diasporic identities and spaces were resourced as spaces where they could gain or at least hope for, the mutual recognition and existential validation that they all felt were precariously available in Britain. These narratives point to a form of fugitivity in which one can detect a "clandestine series of hidden transcripts" (Roberts, 2015, 156) of opposition to, or negotiation with "the multiple zones and domains of governance" constraining them. I want to explore these fugitive practices and their hidden transcripts through Boyce-Davies' concepts of "migratory subjectivity" and "visitor theory" (Boyce Davies, 1994) and bringing them into discussion with Avtar Brah's concept of 'diaspora space' (Brah, 1996).

Carole Boyce Davies has spoken of the precariousness of theorising as a Black woman academic, where one is caught between functioning as handmaiden producing theories that others with greater legitimacy within the academy appropriate, or having one's ideas distorted (Boyce Davies, 43). This has required a practice of *visitor theorizing* that involves being a visitor in territories occupied by legitimated theorists and theories; deploying them for part of one's journey but having to abandon them when *going all the way home with them*, would place one as a Black woman functioning "either as maid or exotic, silenced courtesan, but definitely not as a theoretical equal" and being "installed in a distant place from my communities" (ibid, 46). Thus, for Black women, *travelling theory* or *travelling theorizing* involves going a piece of the way, but not all the way home with theories that might take you far from both your own home, and your own desired destination. It also involves returning 'home', with 'home' being invariably an unfixed dispersed site of *grounding* and identification, but also a problematic site of potential domination and conflict for women (ibid., 49). Thus, as Boyce Davies makes clear Black women's migratory subjectivities mean that 'home' within visitor theory can be a multi-axial point of orientation, settlement, grounding and identification, *but also* of disorientation, unsettlement, ungrounding and disidentification. This study will consider the implications of these ideas for both describing and theorizing contemporary African Caribbean diasporic formations.

Distinguishing between diaspora as historical *experience* and diaspora as concept has been a focus of British Indian scholar Avtar Brah. Brah argues that experientially diaspora denotes different historical diaspora mobilities and formations as well as the *new ethnicities* (Hall, 1996) and transnational encounters that postcolonial migrations produce. As such, diaspora experiences require attention to the different kinds of journeying that have propelled their emergence, and to regimes of power that inscribe the formation of any specific diaspora. The question 'is not simply about who travels, but when, how and under what circumstances? What socioeconomic, political conditions mark the trajectory of these journeys? Conceptually, diaspora enables the analysis of the historically variable forms of relationality and configurations of power within and between diasporic formations (Brah 1997, 183). Brah coins the term 'diaspora-space' to refer to the sites of emergence from which new postcolonial ethnicities emerge, and that implicate not only the former colonized and their descendants but also the representationally indigenous inhabitants. Brah's conceptualization of diaspora-space as the *unsettled and unsettling* space of identifications and identities focuses on 'the multi-axiality of power in which diasporas exist, enabling she says a *cartography* of the politics of intersectionality (Brah 1996, 16).

The works of Boyce Davies and Brah are useful for describing and analysing the tropes of migrancy and fugitivity in African Caribbean women's narratives and experiences of self-fashioning mobilities. Thus, they provide a means of constructing a cartography of the forms of migratory subjectivity through which African Caribbean women seek to fashion their lives in pursuit of self-determination and freedom. Both Boyce Davies' concept of *migratory subjectivity* and Brah's of *diaspora-space* emphasise the *critical relationalities* that both involve. As Boyce Davies explains, critical relationality involves "negotiating, articulating and interrogating simultaneously a variety of resistant discourses relationally and depending on context, historical and political circumstances" (Boyce Davies, *ibid*, 47). In this analysis, I want to evaluate the critical relationalities emerging from the experiences and narratives of mobilities emerging in this study.

### **Diaspora and Post-Diaspora**

The concept of post-diaspora has been advanced as a solution to the alleged essentialisms of the African Diaspora that stand accused of privileging a single historical moment of trauma and displacement and reproducing various forms of biological and cultural essentialism. However, as Toh emphasises, to understand post diasporas, one must understand diasporas and their deep political connotations.

Robyn Cohen in *Global Diasporas* (2008) has advanced a typology of diasporas – victim (Jewish and enslaved African and Jewish), economic labour diasporas (indentured Indians); trading mercantile diasporas (Chinese business class, Cultural diasporas (Caribbean migrants). The concept of a post-diaspora, which foregrounds syncretic processes of cultural mixture and adaptation, seems to potentially provide a framework for working across multiple concepts of diaspora. To what extent might the idea of post-diaspora offer a conceptually or experientially helpful way of talking about the collisions, elisions and mutations interdiscursivity within and across diaspora formations? When considering the structuring conditions and power relations that form and sustain diasporas and diaspora consciousness, it seems important to resist the lure of neoliberalism's privileging of individualism and an apolitical postmodernist opportunism that embraces difference and hybridity by evacuating questions of power. As Toh notes, 'diasporic sensibilities come as a response to social-cultural and political exigencies in which the group or individuals finds self' (Toh, 2014, 53) and they "rely on past trauma and that justifies a present affiliation and solidarity" (Prabha, cited in Toh, *ibid*). Yet, despite this recognition, Toh goes on to say that the concept of post diaspora must contend with the importance for the Caribbean of not forgetting about Africa, Asia and Europe, which constitute the homelands of many Caribbean peoples. Although the "intimacies of four continents" (Lowe, 2015) in which the modern Caribbean has been formed continue to be crucial to understanding the Caribbean, Toh's conflation of Europe with African and Asian diasporas exposes the political danger of approaches to the concept of post diaspora as spaces of hybridity, which too readily reinvest in the very binary logics that such approaches claim to critique and which obfuscate the uneven power relations underwriting the relationalities they seek to elevate. The

concept of *critical* relationality rejects this in favour of an attention to the uneven yet mutually constitutive power relations structuring identities and articulating diverse agonistic relations stretched across a continuum from harmony and conviviality to antagonism and resistance.

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