An African Child Becomes
Oscillating Identities

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Cet article examine la mouvance et la réinstallation dans une nouvelle localité qui débouchent sur une forme nouvelle et unique de conscience politique centrale dans les discussions chez des Africaines de la diaspora canadienne noire. A la fois économiquement et politiquement parlant, la diaspora a un rôle important à jouer dans le processus social contemporain qui travaille de plus en plus à l'échelle mondiale et toute discussion qui reflète les réalités des peuples de la diaspora doit prendre en considération les identités changeantes et les géographies dynamiques et complexes qui se superposent.

The Black Diaspora is a place where the points of departure and the points of arrival are constantly shifting and the search for certainty, stability, and fixidity are overshadowed by the dynamic nature of transnational flows. Diasporas have come to be associated with resistance to the nation-state within which they are located, and in this vein, transnationalism and Diaspora are best discussed through the politics of culture, identity, and subjectivity (Grewal and Kaplan). Where transnationalism and Diaspora often become interchangeable, referencing the cross-border migration and flows of capital, the Black Diaspora is an environment that fosters the invention of tradition, ethnicity, kinship, and other identity markers. It is a place where multiple African communities become a monolithic entity and ethnic differences are replaced with national pride. It is also a place where it becomes more advantageous to identify with the homogenous group, "Black people," as opposed to ethnic or national identities; and regional differences become less important than our shared experience of immigration, racism, and search for belonging in Canadian society.

As African women living in the Diaspora, we are not only sustaining the Canadian nation, we are supporting a nation we left behind. We are also part of creating new nationalities and identities. This paper situates a discussion of the rearticulation and reinventing of African identities diasporically and the impact of transnational factors on gendered African identities as they appear globally. My personal project has been to make sense of

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my own lived experience as an African woman with multiple identities living in Canada through the exploration of a collective past and lived experiences of others who both reflect and contradict me. Through this process I have come to understand that academic engagement and theoretical analysis are necessary exercises in the exploration of the varied experiences of African women in Canada. This exploration needs to be framed in the concepts of otherness, resistance, reclamation, and reconstitution of identity, all while exploring concepts and language which do not always support and in fact frequently oppress (Massaquoi). The lived experiences of African women are highly complex and require analytic strategies that take into account their experiences with multiple oppressions. A discussion which reflects the realities of African women in Canada must be grounded in the specific materiality of African women's lives while acknowledging placement, displacement, and movement and while interrogating the dominant racialized and gendered discourse of the Canadian nation.

The nature of our arrival in Canada clearly articulates many things about how we will be perceived to be, our place in the nation-state, and our entitlement to what the nation state has to offer. For those of us arriving in Canada as African people from former British, French, and Portuguese colonies, the very concepts of identity, sovereignty, and entitlement were already eroded and our cultural traditions as colonized people have created and maintained the ideal situation of otherness prior to and upon arrival at Canadian borders. Without the concept of the "other" the Canada we know would not exist, nor would Canadian concepts of self- image be shaped, mirroring the imperialistic thoughts that shaped the self-image of Europe and Europeans (Said 1993).

Our identity as African people in Canada is predominantly one of oscillation. To be African is to be in a state of constant negotiation between our minority status in the nation state and our majority status in the country of origin; and, to complicate matters even further, our affiliation with African-American culture which is just south of

a Black Canadian Feminist
in the Black Diaspora

our border (Hess; Gilroy1993). For many of us, our identity is based on a constant longing for the imagined home, the one that no longer exists, that many of us were too young to remember, that we have infrequently visited, and the one which became frozen in time and romanticized at the moment of arrival in Canada.

The understanding of transnational identity cannot be separated from the way selves are narrated. Every self is a storied self and every story is grouped within the realities of others so that each subject consists of both the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories told by others. Theories that support the subjectivity of African women in Canada need to interrogate responses to racialized and gendered discourses of nation, movement, and democratic citizenship (Spivak) There needs to be an amplification of how African gendered bodies negotiate their identities and politics across dynamic spaces. This, for me, translates into how we begin to understand transnational identities as reconstructed subjectivities that have been altered by the external forces associated with migration and reconstitution in new locales.

Subjectivity is constituted by reference to discursive practices and shaped by the effects of power operating through individuals. The relation between the marginalized subject and the other is framed in terms of oppositions and exclusions (Venn). It is not sufficient to note that the subject emerges in relation to an "other;" rather, the marginalized subject is necessary since her or his narrative becomes a measure of power. The theorization of resistance, revolution, and change cannot be separated from the theorization of the formation of subjects and selves.

The transformation of subjectivity is a combination of the cognitive, affective, and embodied experiences and none of these dimensions can be privileged. However, there also needs to be an engagement in geographically bound self-discovery which involves the conventional understanding of what it means to be an individual whose identity has been created by acts of refusal, imposed upon as a subordinate other, or premised on exclusion. I am

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originally from the south currently living in the north. I immigrated to Canada as a child with my parents which reduces my "authenticity" in either locale significantly. My parents are African immigrants and I am their diasporic child. Let's see: if I scan the "Are you an authentic African immigrant?" checklist, I fail miserably. English is my first language and my authentic African accent is long gone. I did not flee war. I did not need to be saved by feminist advocates from the horrible knife of FGM practices. I do not need assistance navigating the Canadian system by well-meaning social workers. I have a Canadian education and, most importantly, a Canadian passport. I am not considered African by most and, ironically, I amviewed by few as Canadian.

Identity, I believe, becomes a necessary component of agency, resistance, and survival in the Black Diaspora and for me has been attained through an ongoing process of self-analysis and interpretation of social position and the meanings given to those positions through discourse. Who are we as African women? What is written about us? What is our experience in Canada? Identity can also be viewed as the folding of the outside inside oneself (Venn), a folding that changes the aesthetic of the self. The Black Diaspora is both a contested space where identities are being constructed, and a subversive space where we are free to explore our multiple identities as African women as opposed to those imposed upon us by the dominant culture. It is also a space that brings different groups in direct contact with one another both materially and symbolically and pulls competing and conflicting discourses onto a shared terrain for examination.

These sites of recognition in the formation of identity acquires its specific content from the transnational narratives of belonging and ancestry (Gilroy 1995). It is the route to our roots, the understanding of identity which cannot be separated from the conceptualization of who we are as narrated identities dependent on geographical location. I remember vividly being pinched in a department store by my mother for being rude to a stranger. A

woman had asked me what my name was. I responded and then proceeded to spell it for her. She was astounded that a five-year-old could spell such a long and unusual name. I asked her if she couldn't spell hers and hence the pinch. I remembered this story as I stood in front of a bank teller some 30 years later in Sierra Leone. "What is your name?" she asked me as I was attempting to make a bank transaction. "M-A-S-S-A-Q-U-O-I," I replied. "I can spell!" the bank teller snapped. I was very embarrassed. Of course she could spell Massaquoi. It is a common name in Sierra Leone.

Upon reflection, I can say in my defence that I have spent most of my life in Canada having to spell my name, spell out my identity, so that when asked I don't even say it, I automatically spell, clarify it, so we can end the interaction as quickly as possible instead of listening to the poor attempts at pronunciation and misspelling; and fielding responses such as "very unusual, where are you from?" Then explaining where Sierra Leone—not Surinam, not Senegal, not Sri Lanka—is in the world. This is usually followed by a 15-minute discussion of how and when I got here, the last five minutes of which I am praised for my wonderful English. Learning to navigate these diasporic transactions is also what creates distance and disconnection from my imagined "home." Upon reflection, these very geographically-based experiences confirm for me the notion that the validation of cultural identification in one context and the negation in another is what contributes to the oscillation of identities in the Diaspora. Our immovable and relatively unchanging characteristics such as racial identity, physical attributes, and our names continue to connect us to an African identity while we experience life in a locale which can not fully validate this identity. We move between the space of identity validation and the space of identity negation with the Diaspora and country of origin oscillating in between, acting as sites of endorsement and sites of exclusion.

Imagined Homelands and Frozen Recollections

Due to physical distance we are often removed from the natural evolution of our countries of origin—the culture, the struggles of the people, the country's interplay with development and modernity—making it impossible to maintain cultural authenticity in the new home where we are now located. What we develop is cultural hybridity which is a combination of the frozen recollection of the home we left behind and our interac-

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tions with the one within which we currently exist. Journeys across the borders of regions and nations create concepts of home, community, and identity shaped by histories and memories we often inherit, and the political choices we make.

My parents, despite their choice to raise their children in Canada, were intent on raising us within an African context and with an African sensibility. The values, traditions, customs, and practices that were bestowed upon us were those that my parents had personally experienced up until the point of departure from Sierra Leone. What they did not factor into this upbringing was that culture is dynamic and ever changing and as a result of this innocent oversight we were raised more traditionally and less progressively than our counterparts in Sierra Leone. We were also in constant conflict with our adopted Canadian culture which often expressed itself as contrary to the beliefs within the walls of my home. And, we had to contend with the fact that as children we were quicker to adapt to and understand the new cultural context than our parents who were still in that state of frozenness. That is the cold space upon arrival in our new home where we are suspended in uncertainty, caught between the culture we left behind and the new one we don't quite yet understand, and the transgenerational stability of knowledge that can no longer be assumed (Appadurai). It is in this state that home as we remember it becomes that ideal place, a warm place, the romanticized place. Home for me became the imagined home of my parents, the romanticized home I had created from vague memories and vivid stories of our past. The past being not a land which I can authentically return to but essentially a mental warehouse of memories framed within the collective historical imaginations of individuals and communities distributed globally throughout the Black Diaspora.

As groups migrate and regroup in new locations and reconstruct their narratives, claiming identities based on history, social location, and experience is always a matter of collective analysis and politics. "Home" becomes a crucial concept for immigrants and how one understands home, community, belonging, and citizenship is profoundly complex and personally political. The concept of home is intrinsically tied to identity, which is something we hold dear in the Diaspora. The way in which home is often experienced is tied to loss (of what has been) and to the imagination of what is to come. It is the thing that connects us to something larger than ourselves. It is a space that can embrace us when this Diasporic space fails. What

does it mean to connect psychologically to the majority in Africa while physically being the minority and racialized other in Canada? What does it mean to be an African living in Canada? As groups migrate across borders they collectively reconstruct their homes and histories and fine tune their identity politics which no longer have the same meaning in these different geographical and political contexts.

Exploration of traditional African Diasporic notions of flight to an imagined homeland have been less often geographic than psychological and introspective. From the perspective of many of us currently living in the Black Diaspora, this notion is literal and based on physical geographic movement and locality shifting. Halie Gerima visually and metaphorically captures the essence of this concept in his prolific film *Sankofa*, named for a philosophical, mythological bird found in the folklore of the Akan people of Ghana. It means to move forward, and reclaim the past. In the past, we find the future and understand the present. The film deals with the contemporary reality of the Diaspora and how we as Diasporic Africans harness our collective memory and learn from our collective experience. From a Foucauldian perspective, we are looking at the notion of time-span, space and histories. We are living in the now as a movement from the past and coming towards the consciousness of the present. It is a combination of the memory of having been and an anticipation of what is to come, the loss of what has been and the imagination of what is to come. This leads to the question: Who are we at the present (Foucault)? Imagined homelands become homes only in memory, homes that we cannot return to. They become homes that are historically situated in the imaginations and cultural storage rooms within the imaginations of individuals spread out over the world.

For some, home is an idealized womb of nurturance and safety; for the realist, the imagined home is a dynamic, persistently changing entity which is impossible return to in any authentic sense (Said; Gilroy 2000); and for others, home is the Canadian context in which we currently exist despite the inhospitable climate we must often navigate as African women. What we essentially have are multiple imaginings of home which influence and are influenced by identity, perceived freedom, and the political strength to affect change. If we are to say that geographic space provides historical and cultural anchors, I must analyze how my Africaness becomes embedded in me and how racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism are involved in my relationship with the Canadian nation.

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African Roots + Live Aid = Feminist Development

As an African woman living in the Diaspora, I am fighting a different kind of gendered and racialized struggle, but one which is very much tied to the struggles of women on the African continent. I feel that having such a voice is not only a bridging mechanism but one which provides the grounds for the amplification of a unified experience of Black Women globally. We must encompass new definitions, paradigms, and understandings of political, cultural, and ethical issues of the Black Diaspora (Mohan and Williams; Gilroy 2000). We must also interrogate the experiences of women of the south living in the north who meaningfully oppose roles imposed on them by white feminist movements, such as third world models, or cultural interpreters, or poster children for the benevolency of the Canadian state. I don't quite cut it as an African woman in mainstream Canadian feminist circles. I am far from the model native informant or an authentic third world subject. I spend far too much time supporting, engaging and researching Black women in Canada, particularly considering how race, class, and gender intersect to impact their current existence in the Canadian context, as opposed to focusing my efforts on the impact of imperialism, colonization, and globalization which have been the burden of my sisters in Africa.

For those of us raised in North America during what I term the Live AID[1] era, the images of Africa, poverty, and its starving, primitive people are etched in our psyche with no other images to replace the carefully constructed media view of the Continent and its people for the past 18 years. This has become how Africa is imagined and constructed in western discourse and intellectual spheres. What we have is a modern version of the us/not us, west vs. the rest polarization that followed colonization and the foundation for contemporary biases of academic readings of gender, race, class, and identity in the west (Razack). Identifying myself as being a woman of African origin had a profound effect on the formation of a Feminist consciousness while growing up in a Canadian context.

In this imagining of Africa, my role as African Woman then comes to serve as a point of contrast between definition of modernity and primitivism (Mohanty). With further interrogation, we understand that the dominance of the west in the global system, the legacy of colonialism and imperialism all imagine African Women as passive victims, as being unable to escape traditional practices which are harmful or unhealthy, unable to care for their children, uneducated, and pawns of war (Agger;

Amadiume; Byrne). For many of us living in Canada at this time, the ability to facilitate movement toward the so-called advanced west symbolized passage from this "primitive" image to one of "civilization." Those that we left behind subconsciously, or even consciously, were viewed as being in a state of inferiority (Brennan).

I truly became a feminist when I was able to look at those negative, racist images of African women and identify myself within them, despite my overwhelming desire to distance myself from any connection; when I was able to interrogate what was real and what was a controlling image (Collins), and what was an empowering symbol; when I was able to hold my head up and say that those women are me, my aunties, and my grandmother and that I will create my own version of their story, contrary to what the west believes us to be.

Through this exercise of articulating who I am as an African women living in the Black Diaspora, I have come to understand that, possibly more than any other grouping, we are very much an imagined community and in effect foster complex imagined identities. Both politically and economically, Diasporic people have an important role to play in contemporary social processes operating at an increasingly global scale, and any theory which reflects the realities of Diasporic people must account for complex, dynamic, overlapping geographies and oscillating identities while interrogating the relations between Diasporic subjects, nation-states and and cultural dynamics. The process of displacement, movement, and replacement to a new locality fosters a unique form of political consciousness which has been central to my development as an African Woman and as a Black Canadian feminist.

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[1]A Global musical benefit organized by Bob Geldof, held on July 13, 1985, to raise funds, aid relief and awareness to support the victims of the Ethiopian famine.

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