



Belonging among diasporic African communities in the UK: Plurilocal homes and simultaneity of place attachments

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares the emotional attachments to place(s) of first and second generation African migrants in the UK. Qualitative studies from the field of migration studies have tended to examine generational cohorts in isolation from one another rather than alongside each other. This paper responds to this research gap by asserting the importance of an intergenerational lens in exploring generational differences and similarities in the shaping of post-migration lives. The practices and expressions of belonging in, and to, places of current residence are arguably of critical importance to the challenge of “living together” in ethno-culturally diverse contexts. Yet it is well established that members of diasporic communities often have complex relationships to their host societies and their feelings of belonging may be stretched and simultaneously “here and there”. Scholars often assume that a transnational optic is appropriate for the study of first generation migrants who frequently retain multifarious socio-cultural, economic and political links to their countries of origin, but less suitable for second generation individuals who are assumed to experience stronger emotional attachments and territorialised articulations of belonging to local place-based contexts. This paper troubles such an assumption. Through exploring the emotional attachments to place(s) of first and second generation Zimbabwean, Somali, Sudanese and Kenyan migrants, the paper interprets the emotions associated with senses of belonging through ideas of plurilocal homes and simultaneity of attachments to different places.

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1. Introduction

People are now living in times that are acutely shaped by the social, political, cultural and economic characteristics of globalisation. As has been widely documented, the movement of people around the world is an important constituent part of these sets of global flows and processes (King, 1995; Vertovec, 2009). Although the migration of people is far from being a new phenomena (e.g. Winder, 2004), the so-called “new mobilities paradigm” of the late 20th and early 21st century (Urry, 2000) has largely resulted from an increased amount and greater diversity of global migration. It is this differentiated growth of migration flows into destination societies that poses new questions and challenges for heterogeneous locales due to multiplicity and difference becoming routinely encountered (Massey, 2005; Simonsen, 2008a). Indeed, Hall (2000) has argued that the question of how we can “live together” in multicultural societies is a defining one in the first decades of this century. Such concern has led to much literature around the politics and practices of living together in diverse multicultural cities and

speculation abounds as to how encounters can enhance understanding of difference, promote harmonious juxtaposed lives and generally be constitutive of “good relations” (Amin, 2002, 2004, 2006; Keith, 2005; Simonsen, 2008b; Valentine, 2008).

Rather than addressing issues of “encounters” between people marked by difference (quite often, although not exclusively, encounters between diasporic groups and non-diasporic groups), this paper focuses on a part of the migration experience that may contribute to the shaping of eventual relations between newcomers and established community members; that of migrants’ complex emotions associated with belonging to different locales. These emotions can be regarded as powerful processes which enable people to situate themselves in the world through meaning and feeling (Svašek, 2008). A focus on belonging has arguably acquired enhanced political salience in contemporary times, as Anthias (2006: 17) suggests; “[c]urrent debates around borders, security and social cohesion have reinforced the importance of engaging critically with the notion of belonging and its centrality to people’s lives as well as political practice”. The instrumentalist impulse of policy makers’ current preoccupation with fostering a sense of belonging (for example, by encouraging ascription to a shared unitary national identity through “progressive” policies such as

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citizenship ceremonies in Canada, USA, Australia and the UK) should not detract from Anthias' above observation that belonging is also of central importance to people's sense of their own identities, their multi-positioned subjectivities and often to their very well-being.

So what is meant by "belonging" and is there something about being a migrant or child of a migrant that might shape feelings of belonging in particular ways? Yuval-Davis et al. (2006) have argued that belonging revolves around *emotional*¹ investments and desire for attachments. In the same edited collection Anthias (2006: 21) adds that belonging is about the ways in which, "social place has resonances with stability of the self, or with feelings of being part of a larger whole and with the emotional and social bonds that are related to such places". The emotional aspects of belonging are placed centre-stage by these writers, and similarly Ho (2009: 791) draws on the burgeoning area of emotional geographies (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Davidson et al., 2005; Thien, 2005) to suggest that "[b]elonging should thus be examined as an emotionally constructed category". In focusing on the emotions associated with senses of belonging, these authors argue that belonging can only be fully understood through an appreciation of the *felt* realm. Feelings of belonging may be powerful or subtle, clear or nuanced, straightforward or complex; but they are unequivocally *not* accessed and understood only through a set of dispassionate "rules" of citizenship or group membership (e.g. a Kenyan woman being perceived to automatically belong to an African women's group in the UK; she may or may not feel like she belongs to this group based on the intersection of other positionalities such as class, age, ethnicity, sexuality and so on).

It is often the case that migrants have multi-positioned relationships to different locales on account of their migratory journeys from a source to a destination area, the likely network of social, symbolic and material ties retained to their homelands, and the newer sets of social relations formed in host communities. Migrants are therefore observed to experience *simultaneity* in their attachment to different places (Wilson and Peters, 2005) as a result of being "here and there" and "straddling worlds" (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 2003). In recognition of these complex sets of relationships across at least two locales and the accompanying heightened emotions experienced (Skrbiš, 2008), it is suggested that diasporic groups embody a "shifting landscape of belonging and identity" that is, "tied to a globalised and transnational social fabric rather than one bounded by the nation-state form" (Anthias, 2006: 25, see also Massey and Jess, 1995). This perspective on fluid belongings is also often closely related to migrants' articulations and understandings of "home" and the emotional connections that flow from feelings of belonging to particular home(s) (Evans, 2009; Mallett, 2004). Blunt and Dowling (2006) suggest that diasporic groups have complex relations with home which links to Staeheli and Nagel's (2006: 1601) description of home as "plurilocal and multiscalar" for many migrants and their descendents. By this, these writers mean that there is something inherent within mobility and transnationality that leaves migrants very likely to feel home is a variously located place (for example, attachments could be concurrently felt to present residence, the place that close family/kin reside, and country of origin).

Migrants and their descendents as categories are of course differentiated, and both policy makers and academics often emphasise "generations". Such descriptors are frequently imbued with explanatory significance when investigating migrant lives. Within

North American contexts in particular there is debate around generational differences and the nature and definitions of cohort group boundaries (e.g. Orepesa and Landale, 1997; Warner and Srole, 1945). Generations are most commonly associated with the "family generation" whereby generation is seen as succession; a familial generation is defined as the average time between a mother's first child and this next generation's first child.² Within migration studies, this definition gives rise to different "migrant generations". First generation migrants are defined as people born outside the country to non-host country parents. From there on the definitional clarity of migrant generations becomes somewhat muddled. The second generation is generally defined as children born in the host country of one or more immigrant parents or those who arrived before primary-school age (Thomson and Cruil, 2007). Yet a further category has also been discerned; that of the 1.5 or midway generation, to recognise the different experiences of those who arrive after primary school but before later teenage/early adulthood years (after around age 13) which enables them to be somewhat socialised into host country life through educational experiences and youth culture (Rumbaut, 2004).

Explorations of the experiences of second and 1.5 generations has become more commonplace in light of a general discrediting of the classical, linear theory of integration into mainstream society (i.e. the longer a person resides in a host country, the more integrated and unproblematically settled they will become). Both Gans' (1992) idea of "second-generation decline" and Portes and Zhou's (1993) theory of "segmented assimilation" indicate this shift in thinking. The suggestion is that downward social mobility may occur for second (and third) generation children of migrants due to racial and ethnic discrimination combined with a narrowing of labour-market opportunities. This work must, however, be balanced by acknowledging research which indicates the variable and differentiated experiences of settlement and integration across racial and ethnic groups.³

Alongside this focus on second and 1.5 generation migrants' lives in countries of residence, there has also been a growing amount of research on the *transnational* experiences of such groups and how they relate to parental homelands (see for example, Christou and King, 2006; Levitt and Waters, 2002; Phillips and Potter, 2009; Smith, 2006). In a recent paper, Levitt (2009) points out that most scholars assume a transnational optic is suitable to study first generation migrants, but less suitable for second generation migrants. We would agree with Levitt in arguing against this assumption and endorse her suggestion that, "when children are brought up in households that are regularly influenced by people, objects, practices and know-how from their ancestral homes, they are socialised into its norms and values and they learn how to negotiate its institutions." (Levitt, 2009: 1225). This transnational optic for second generations therefore brings into focus the broader role of relations/ships to the homelands of parents, and the impact that these relations have upon how belonging is experienced emotionally. As Thomson and Cruil (2007) point out, the character of homeland relations for descendents of migrants may depend on contextual factors such as parental socio-economic status, transmission of cultural knowledge of homelands and pressures on/opportunities for children to retain country of origin links and/or integrate in host country; all of which are likely to emplace individuals in particular ways and shape their emotional belongings to various places.

¹ In this paper we are using Svasek's (2008: 218) broad definition of emotions which regards, "emotions as processes in which individuals experience, shape and interpret the world around them, anticipate future action and shape their subjectivities". It is an approach which acknowledges that emotions are shaped not only by direct social interaction with other people but also by imagination and memories and further by multi-sensorial engagement with non-human objects, images and landscapes.

² There is additionally the concept of social or historical generation (Mannheim, 1952; Pilcher, 1995) that veers away from a familial notion of a generation and instead defines a generation as cohorts of people who were born within a certain date range and share general cultural experiences of the world.

³ Writers like Modood (2004) have importantly pointed out that not all ethnic minority children/second and third generation individuals are reacting to racial discrimination in the same way; for example in the case of the UK British-Indian pupils often out-perform comparative cohort groups of ethnic minority children.

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