

# Black Women, Writing and Identity

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## Review Article

*Black Women, Writing and Identity.*

*Migrations of the Subject.*

by Carole Boyce Davies

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[P]ostmodernist positions or feminist positions are always already articulated by Black women because we experience, ahead of the general populations, many of the multiple struggles that subsequently become popularly expressed (for example, drugs in communities, teen pregnancies, struggle for control of one's body, one's labor, etc.) Black feminist criticisms, then, perhaps more than many of the other feminisms, can be a praxis where theoretical positions and the criticism interact with the lived experience (p. 55).

Central to the modernist colonising arsenal was the hegemonic and coercive use of travel, map/boundary making, practices of naming and the extraction of slave labour/use- or exchange-value. Together with the (re)presentation of Empire as being racially superior, as civilised and having a civilising mission in the colonies, these instances effected the forced displacement/removal of indigenous people(s). In this context, 'theory' served to articulate the colonial order(s), bolstering the European political, economic and cultural identities. After the protracted liberation struggles, 'post-coloniality' inaugurated the era of the developing of neocolonial and neonation arsenals, which, in the alternated forms of global capitalism and western cultural hegemonies, continue to serve the same identities and regulate migrancy.

In the context of 'gender politics' (p. 61), these mutating identities can be seen to emanate from male dominance/domination and power. Since

nobody has experienced the real effects of male(d) force and authority like Black women, *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (1994) consciously unthreads some of these interrelated experiences, theorises Black women's identities, researches African, Caribbean, U.S. and British Black women's writing crossculturally and deconstructs feminist, postcolonial and post-modern theories.

Prominent in Boyce Davies's argument is the well-known position that male dominance has resulted in Black women's 'homelessness' and a sense of 'unbelongingness' (cf. pp. 84,87; Jeyifo 1990:33-47; Parry 1987:34; Mukherjee 1990:6; Riley 1985). The 'contradictory contested spaces' which function as 'principal sites of domination and conflict' (p. 49) of Black women's 'misrecognition and alienation' (p. 113) generating 'homelessness' and 'unbelongingness' are: the 'compulsory domesticity and the enforcement of specific gendered relations' in the male-dominated home space (e.g. in the family/house/village) (p. 65); experiences of (physical and psychic) abuse and injury (homelessness) in one's own home (and we may add, workplace); male(d) theoretical constructs of heritage, 'self, ... community, nation' (p. 49); deportations from imperial countries (pp. 96f); the migrant's fallacy of idealising and romanticising home<sup>1</sup> (Grewal et al. 1980); practices which relegate women to the (same) status of slaves<sup>2</sup> (pp. 75f). 'Home' as space of harmony is here—see especially Black women's autobiography—deconstructed in experience.

Homelessness, resulting from the enforced displacement of women through indenturing and/or their migrancy through choice leaves (especially first generation migrant) Black women to live as uprooted 'stranger-outsider[s]' in the contradictory spaces of 'nowhereness and everywhere', between 'back home' (the country of origin) and 'home'<sup>3</sup> (the imperial country) (pp. 98,1,100-107; Bridglal 1988:88). In this context, 'patriarchal immigration legislation' benefiting racist, patriarchal and class structures across boundaries, exploits women's labour, adding to their homelessness (p. 97; Amos & Parmar 1984). Even though some writings espouse home in cultural geographical links (the heritage/ancestry relationship) between Afro-Americans or Afro-Caribbean people and Africa (p. 115; cf. Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* 1959 and *Praisesong*

<sup>1</sup> Black British women writers have importantly contributed to the anti-imperialist critique of the meanings of empire, post-coloniality as project and the various nationalistic identifications of home (p. 96ff)

<sup>2</sup> Like slavery in history, Black women's homelessness primarily results from the capitalist induced circulation of labour (workers), goods, services and information

<sup>3</sup> Similar experiences are present in *Waiting in the Twilight* (Riley 1987), *Going Back Home* (Fuller 1992) and *Boy-Sandwich* (Gilroy 1989)

for the Widow 1983; Audrey Lorde's *Zami* 1982 which articulates her lesbian identity with Grenada's experience of U.S. hegemony), homelessness is also encountered here. This is due to the experiencing of Pan-Africanist, Black/African nationalist, Afrocentric and even Africa-diaspora discourses as being 'totalizing [in] nature' and functioning like homelands or reservations similar to that under apartheid (p. 50; cf. Enloe 1990)<sup>4</sup>. Each functions as a

singularly monolithic construction of an African theoretical homeland which asks for submergence or silencing of gender, sexuality or any other ideological stance or identity position which is not subsumed under Black/African nationalism (p. 49f)

One could, if your normative context is that of male(d) identity, conclude that the tragedy of Black women's lives and experience is that they do not have (an) identity. Wrong, says Boyce Davies. Since Black women do not have only one identity—coerced by patriarchy—but multiple identities, theorisings appropriate to their variable experiences and identities must be developed rather than the other way round.

Boyce Davies faces up to this challenge by reviewing the validity of the 'visitor theory', theorising 'migrancy' as the dominant experience of Black women and developing her own notion of 'critical relationality' in terms of 'migrancy'.

The 'visitor theory' (p. 46ff) articulates the way in which Black women have used and negotiated other established theories (e.g. feminism, postmodernism, nationalism, Afrocentrism, Marxism, etc.) in mapping their experiences, identities and critique. Drawing on the common practice of accompanying a visitor when leaving, 'a piece of the way'—the quality of the relationship determines the distance—Black women use other theories eclectically. The reason is that with all of them, their routes are 'cluttered with skeletons, enslavements, new dominations, unresolved tensions and

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<sup>4</sup> Even though Africa serves as 'imaginary/historical basis of identity or self-assertion' for the multi-ethnic imagined community of the Black diaspora 'cut off from their past', for Black women, it cannot pose as an 'unproblematic, sacred homeland' devoid of oppressing nationalist discourses. Black women cannot respond positively when these Black nationalist discourses require that they 'accept their own oppressions as given', 'accept commodification', abuse, death, silencing, rape, to allow race-based discourses, i.e. Black/male discourses, to exist. Moreover, even though women have historically expressed nationalist zeal and patriotism as well as played significant roles in nationalist struggles, often, they have been dispossessed in the documenting of these nationalist struggles, the shaping and reconstructing of new societies and/or the construction of (Black) nationalist discourses (p. 51). If they were included, it is quite certain that post-colonial nationalist constructions would have been quite different—especially since it would have included some of the issues (like critical relationality) Boyce Davies deals with.

contradictions' (p. 46). Moreover, going 'all the way home' with 'theories/theorists',

inevitably places me in the 'homes' of people where I, as Black woman, will have to function either as maid or exotic, silenced courtesan, but definitively not as a theoretical equal. Going all the way home with them means being installed in a distant place from my communities' (p. 46).

It seems to me that Boyce Davies's underlying argument is that it is precisely for these reasons that a theorising different from the 'visitor theory' and more akin to Black women's experiences (and identities) be developed. She does this by theorising from within the dominant governing Black women's experience: 'migrancy'. 'Migrancy' (or 'diaspora') is preferred above Deleuze's (1977; cf. also Grossberg 1988 and Radway 1988) 'nomadism', Hall's (1985) 'arbitrary' and 'articulation', Said's (1991) 'travelling' and Bhabha's (1990; 1994) 'hybridity' theories, because these are still implicated by male(d) sites of 'speech, language and authority', serve as male and/or racial (white) prerogatives (e.g. 'travel'), operate through hierarchical interpellations or because they do not treat agency in its senses of opposition and action (pp. 43f,46; cf. Wolff 1993). 'Migrancy', however, does not only account for the fact that '[m]igration and exile are fundamental to human experience' to various degrees (pp. 4,128). Arising from the 'transnational dimension to black identity', spun by the 'slave trade' which had 'little regard for national boundaries' (p. 13; Hanchard 1990:99), Boyce Davies's choice (following Hanchard) in theorising 'migrancy' signifies a 'symbolic revolt against the nation-state', and for that matter, any homogeneity or homologicity.

In this context, she expands her notion of migrancy with Anzaldua's of 'borderlands'. Anzaldua's (1987:49) theorising of 'borderlands', articulates those incidences where 'two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races, sexualities, classes, genders occupy the same territory' or 'where multiple identities collide and/or renegotiate space .... boundaries [are] the sites of constant transition' (p. 16). Epistemologically, this means that knowledge is always 'situated' in boundary circumstances, is itself a 'boundary project' and subject to 'mapping practices'. Moreover, since boundaries are themselves unstable in migrant experience—they 'shift from within'—the knowledge they contain 'remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies' (p. 66; cf. Haraway 1991:230). As such, they both articulate 'the multiple discursive and political positions that subjects occupy or resist in a variety of given situations' and the 'myriad possibilities and conflicted spaces that are expressed in ... text[s]' (pp. 63,66).

As each (Black woman) is displaced or migrates through choice, she leaves situations and moves to new circumstances for particular reasons—for liberatory reasons or in search of opportunity. Since she establishes new *relations* in each different situation, she negotiates and renegotiates her identities in terms of available subject positionings (pp. 13,18,49,50f). Her identity is therefore always 'multiply', determined by all the past, present and future migratory experiences and relations and never closed. Finding representation in Black women's writing, these must equally be read as 'a series of boundary crossings' in crosscultural, transnational, translocal and diaspora frameworks<sup>5</sup> (p. 4).

Articulating both the critical/resistance and constructive/creative aspects of Black women's identity, Boyce Davies's theorising of 'critical relationality' then

means negotiating, articulating and interrogating simultaneously a variety of resistant discourses relationally and depending on context, historical and political circumstances . . . [which is] progressively multiply articulated in the face of a variety of dominant discourses (p. 47)

In order to explain more comprehensively how 'critical relationality' accounts for migrant Black women's experiences and activities, Boyce Davies relates it to Becquer and Gatti's (1991) 'voguing' and Haraway's 'situated knowledges'. 'Voguing' functions through 'syncretic articulation' or as a

"syncretism", [which is inherently] "antagonistic", i.e. in relations which are animated by the partial presence of the other within the self, such that the differential identity of each term is at once enabled and prevented from full constitution (p. 48)

'Voguing' constitutes 'those articulatory discourses which "traverse sexualities, genders, races, and classes in performance" in multiple ways' (p.48). In these complexes, all is repetition, which, in its poststructuralist sense, means that meaning is always unsettled, always open to new analyses as 'repetition brings necessarily a difference and deferral' and is never the repetition of the same (cf. Rojo 1984:431f).

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<sup>5</sup> Ranging from more general accounts to studies focused more on Black women, contributions to the understanding of migratory consciousness concerning education, family life, history, migration, social and economic conditions, urban conditions, struggle, resistance, organisation, policing, agency, postures of servility, institutionalised prejudices ranging from racism, through sexism to intolerance towards aliens can be found in Bryan, Dadzie & Scafe (1985), Dabydeen & Tagoe (1988), Gilroy (1976), Hiro (1992), James (1985), Mirza (1992), Ngcobo (1988), Saakana (1987), Wilson (1978)

That the critical and creative processes of 'critical relationality' never stop, is evident in the way Boyce Davies critically analyses, deconstructs and identifies new relations in the 'migration horror stories' (pp. 5, 14, 23f, 27, 30), language/the tongue and signs/labels like Black, African, African-American, Black British, Minority, Latina/o, West Indian, Carribean, Third World, alien, immigrant, etc. The 'migration horror stories' provide the possibility of showing how women traverse ideologies in re-mapping and re-naming, how they redefine geography<sup>6</sup> in crossings making possible re-connections and invasions, how black women's migratory experiences permanently displace the tourist ideology of 'playful world travelling', how migrancy serves as creative impetus behind Black women's writing and critical movements and how they, through writing their migrancy and lives, move out of a culture of silence and being silenced<sup>7</sup>. *Language* and the *tongue* are deconstructed to show that it is always open to women's articulation of their own experiences ('It's not everything you can talk, but ...'), how writing and the black female body is related and how lesbian sexuality deconstructs the tongue (pp. 152-165). The precariousness of the various *signs* are shown to be not only negative, degrading labels but can be used positively as they strategically affirm various identities. They should, however, be analysed and interrogated on a continuous basis (pp. 5-14).

On the question, then, where are women (or Boyce Davies's theorising) in *postcoloniality* and *postmodernity*? Boyce Davies says they are 'elsewhere doing something else'. The type of postcoloniality and postmodernism (and postmodern feminism) mobilised in *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, is neither a de-politicised multiplicity or hybridity, nor an African/Black nationalism. As subjects who

are/were exploring their myriad identities outside of these discursive fields [they] have produced/are producing a different range of wonderfully textured articulations ... They participate as pieces in a growing collage of textualities. Their works exist more in the realm of the 'elsewhere' of diasporic imaginings

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<sup>6</sup> Redefined geography is viewed as 'spaces [functioning as] locations or sites of contest, of flux, of change' [which] engender a 'consciousness' of 'crossing over', "perpetual transition", plural personality which resists unitary paradigms and dualistic thinking ... [and] borders [as] those places where different cultures, identities, sexualities, classes, geographies, races, genders and so on collide or interchange' (p. 15f).

<sup>7</sup> *Negatively*, the migration horror stories reveal foreign countries's insensitivity and unsupportive attitude toward the writings by women of African descent and the publishing of such writings, governments's inflexible attitude toward the family life of migrants, western holiday makers's insensitivity to histories of colonialism and their exploitive attitude towards Other cultures, African-Americans's predicament of fighting their own kin when joining the U S army and patriarchy's silencing of women.

than the precisely locatable. Much of it is therefore orientated to articulating presences and histories across a variety of boundaries imposed by colonizers, but also by men, the elders and other authorized figures in their various societies (p. 88)

Politicised, Black women's migrancy facilitates the displacing of patriarchal systems and the creation of 'uprising textualities'.

'Uprising textualities' (pp. 107-112) indicates that Black women's multiple identities articulated in webs of significance are and ought to be produced to challenge, displace and ultimately replace patriarchy's authority, power and domination. Black women caught up in closed systems of 'imperialism which eschews colonial borders, systems, separations, ideologies, structures of domination' must here, as part of their 'uprising' realise the 'politics of the possible' (Sangari 1987), assertively represent themselves and empower one another to realise the liberating potential of a theorised 'migrancy' beyond the 'constraints of circumscribing definitions' (pp. 108, 112)

On her own position on postcoloniality, Boyce Davies says that for her,

postcoloniality represents a misnaming of current realities, it is too premature a formulation, it is too totalizing, it erroneously contains decolonizing discourses, it re-males and re-centers resistant discourses by women and attempts to submerge a host of uprising textualities, it has to be historicized and placed in the context of a variety of historical resistances to colonialism, it reveals the malaise of some Western intellectuals caught behind the posts and unable to move to new and/or more promising re-articulations (p. 81)

Central to *Black Women, Writing and Identity's* postmodernism, is the articulation of 'agency' as constitutive of their 'uprising textualities'. Boyce Davies refers to Susan Hekman (1991: 51; p. 41) who argues that:

Postmodernism articulates a subject that is subjected to multiple discursive formations. But elements of the postmodern critique address the ethical issue that feminism raises: the need to retain agency. They thus posit a subject that is capable of resistance and political action. This conception of the subject is articulated not by retaining a Cartesian concept of agency but by emphasizing that subjects who are subjected to multiple discursive influences create modes of resistance to those discourses out of the elements of the very discourses that shape them.

She also quotes Teresa Ebert (1991: 115) with approval who refers to this as 'resistance postmodernism', which

is not a 'logic' but a *critique* of late capitalism based on a social and historical rather than a textual theory of difference as the site of social conflict and struggle.

Here, 'resistance postmodernism' is an 'oppositional political practice: an interventionist and transformative critique of ... culture under the sign of late capitalism' (Ebert 1991:115; p. 42).

Boyce Davies also replaces the refracted decentred/postmodern subject (arising from radical diasporic elsewhere(s)), here, with 'agent'/'agency'. Social agency allows for the re-connection of threads of refractedness to political, meaning and ethical realities in which people actually live and actually experience things (cf. Smith 1988). Such re-connections, again, allow for performances of resistance, traversal, the challenging of repressive political, denominational subjectivities and a view of the 'radical Black [female] diasporic subjectivity' or agency as always being in process (hooks 1990:15-22; Hekman 1991:44-63). 'As "elsewheres denotes movement", Black female subjectivity asserts agency as it crosses the borders, journeys, migrates and so re-claims as it re-asserts' (p. 37; Hanchard 1991:101).

In the context of postmodernism's pessimism and inability to name the current theoretical or academic conditions (pp. 107f), Black women not only name oppressions but also find voices in the "elsewhere" of rearticulated worlds, operating on the same poles as "maroon societies", "slave rebellions", "underground railroads". It also links up with the language, innovation and energy of Rastafari and certain strands of rap music (pp. 108f). The 'uprising' consciousness 'moves us out of postcoloniality and the state of "postness" or "afterness" and into a more radical consciousness of our creativity' (p. 110). Such creativity is present in real resistance led by black women (in contexts of sexuality, politics, culture, etc.), those writing or using photography, film, art, performance to convey their multiple journeys (from the Caribbean to England for example), their sojourns (in England) and how these experiences refract and belie the well-defined imperial identity (cf. p. 111).

The performative/activist basis of much of the creativity of Black British women writers frees the creative to exist outside of the academy and in the practical, pedagogic and experiential community contexts. Thus a great deal of the work is produced in workshops, small groups and community organizations, and as such constantly escapes institutional and publication-oriented identifications (p. 111).

Writing out of their current experience of the former colonial 'homeland' (Britain), Black British women rebelliously 'articulate temporalities and locations outside the paradigms set by men, white society, British literary establishments'. These 'different spaces' are the sites where women are encouraged to continue developing and to work, write and speak here, outside the dominant 'master discourses' (pp. 122;89).



'Black feminist politics' can become a truly 'oppositional, transformational, revolutionary discourse' if it 1) makes sharper distinctions within systems of domination and activates its principles practically; 2) consciously focuses its creative energies on 'sites of resistance' to liberate from 'multiple oppression: whiteness, maleness, bourgeois culture, heterosexuality, Anglo-centeredness'; 3) displaces dominant 'social conditions and processes' with social constructs currently rendered 'silent or invisible'; 4) distinguishes between 'activist Black feminists and conservative Black women scholars' and supports 'those who are committed to social change and [not] those who want fuller participation in systems as they exist'; 5) makes sharper distinctions between Black feminist scholars of different alliances and locations (social position, class-position, privilege, etc.) (p. 27f).

Dialectical journeys 'for long distances' and 'through homes', returns and 're-departures' (to one's heritage for example) enable the development of various new identities/subjectivities and homes<sup>8</sup> (p. 107; Trinh Minh-ha 1990). These complexes of critical resistance to patriarchy and creative theorisings of identities of self, home, community, nation (transnationally, transhistorically and crossculturally) are present in Black women's writings (drama, poetry and narrative). Apart from briefer readings of numerous other writings by Black women, Boyce Davies illustrates it in her thorough (re-) reading of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* (1970) and her intertextual tracings of representations of experiences in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), *Daughters* (1991), Jamaica Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), *Annie John* (1985) *Lucy* (1991), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Marita Golden's *Migrations of the Heart* (1983), *Long Distance Life* (1990) and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979).

In the southern African experience of migratory moves to the cities (to provide labour for the mining industry/because of natural disaster/in search of opportunity) or elsewhere (past forceful removals/evictions), the various forms of mobility/constraint which accompanied it impacted on Black women, men as well as families/groups of people. The constructive possibilities which these migratory pasts had/have for the creation of webs of significance, 'uprising textualities' in the female as well as the male contexts

<sup>8</sup> bell hooks (1984.19) says in this regard that the 'meaning of "home" changes with the experience of decolonization, of radicalization. At times home is nowhere. At times one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal, fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting (p. 49)

and more importantly for the migrant family/group, cannot be ignored. In her rereading of *Anowa*, Boyce Davies had the opportunity to expand her theorising to include such relationships.

Closely related to this issue is Boyce Davies's strategy of positively articulating 'migrancy'. At base arising from slave labour, and the various forms of patriarchal oppression inducing 'homelessness' and 'unbelongingness' she turns 'migrancy' inside out, developing it positively as providing the avenues for the mobility through which critical relationality can in various situations develop in a web-like manner. Similar in strategy to Irigaray's (*Speculum*) of parasitic and ironic analogic mimicry, the question is whether this is politically effective: whether it does not, in its reproduction of the effects of male power and domination in 'migrancy'—even in its developing of 'uprising textualities'—leave the space open for male power to continue its domination in effecting migrancy in theory as well as in the material effects of male discourse for women<sup>9</sup>.

The latter point raises the question whether Boyce Davies's critical theorising of the multiple identities/subjectivities of Black women has liberating potential in real terms for Black women in African contexts. I suggest that the challenge which her theory in our contexts has to address, is best formulated by Rose Waruhiu (1995:140):

They [Black women] have been brought up to exhibit the perceived feminine qualities of compliance and harmony. If they shed these attributes, and step out of prescribed roles, they find themselves undermined and continually on the defensive. This impairs their ability to communicate their case. They are diverted from 'concrete' issues; they cannot act decisively and forcefully without criticism. While they may deal with personal and emotional conflict privately, displaying such ability in public is seen as aggressive

The assumption of Waruhiu's question is that for many Black women in African contexts/cultures/households, their attempt (individually but arguably more importantly collectively) at opposing and displacing patriarchal culture(s) may meet with various fates. The only option remaining, then, is to continue in situations of 'homelessness' and 'unbelongingness' without positive results generated by 'uprising textualities'. It seems to me that here, Waruhiu is too pessimistic. As African Black women become more vocal in their writing/articulation of their experiences of colonialism, apartheid, various forms of patriarchy, we may find that much of what they have

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<sup>9</sup> In this context, 'the object (of speculation) would lose its stability and thus unsettle the subject itself'. If the woman cannot represent the ground, the earth, the inert or opaque matter to be appropriated or repressed, how can the subject be secure in its status as a subject?' (Moi 1988:136)

already been doing during times of extreme duress, have created important alternative social bondings, economic strategies and structures, practices in fields of education, their families/group(s) (which may be quite different from western/white feminist theorisings of female identity).

Boyce Davies's theorisings provides important insights in how to articulate these alternatives constructively. In southern African academia, such approaches, as processes, may amount to more than yet another 'cultural dogma' (Said 1991:247). Important, however, is to trace particular resistances of uprising textualities as it impact(ed) on class and race systems. Here, hegemonic practices underlying society can constructively be replaced with strands resonating with many of Boyce Davies's views.

If the future was in the past the prerogative of men (Obbo 1981:143), the positionality of Black women's identities in Boyce Davies's theorising importantly suggests that it is now available for Black women writing their lives and speaking their identities. 'it is not everything you can say, but ...'.

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