

Continental Shifts, Shifts in Perception

Continental Shifts, Shifts in Perception:

Black Cultures and Identities in Europe

Edited by

Sharmilla Beezmohun

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FOREWORD

AFROEUROPE@N(ING): A DECADE LATER

MARTA SOFÍA LÓPEZ

ON BEHALF OF THE AFROEUROPE@NS RESEARCH GROUP

The first volume to appear in this series, *Afroeuropa@ns: Cultures and Identities* (2008), was the inaugural printed publication of the Afroeuropa@s: Culturas e Identidades Negras en Europa research team, then financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education, and subsequently by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness until the end of 2015. (What will become of us in terms of funding in the near future still is a challenging incognita!). In any case, the project was born in 2004, and it has been going on with a stable core of international researchers, activists and artists since then. We have celebrated five international conferences, published four collections of essays (including the present one) and have become, hopefully, a reference group in the field of Afroeuropean Studies. We have established working partnerships with other groups functioning in the same arena, with individuals and institutions, associations, networks... Indeed we have become a network of networks, and surely our greatest achievement is to have opened up spaces of exchange, interaction and interconnection between peoples (black and white, men and women, academics and cultural/political activists) from the five continents.

The issue of legitimacy has been often at stake, particularly for the white members of the group. On several occasions we have been interpellated by black individuals on account of our “suspicious” interest in “ethnic minorities”, as if we had some hidden agenda aimed at infiltrating grassroots communities or co-opting the efforts and fights of those who can feel rightly discriminated against in an overwhelmingly racist environment (namely, the European academy). Many a time I’ve felt tempted to show a banner of the family portraits of the members of the

group. And then I have to remind myself that this project was, from the beginning, non-essentialist in its philosophy, ecumenical in its spirit, interdisciplinary in its methodology and absolutely anti-hierarchical in its functioning. We belong to a fluid and transnational nomadic tribe that refuses to pay homage to artificial frontiers and boundaries, although we are keenly aware of how privileged we are in being free to cross political, racial, cultural, legal or disciplinary borders. Conceited? Self-complacent? Gabriel Gbadamosi closes this book with the following remark:

AfroEuropeans feels like a network of people smugglers. I won't report them; they operate in broad daylight, or at least like a flotilla of lighted, bobbing signifiers of movement out at sea, at the tip of the signified iceberg. What is that iceberg—building critical mass, or dissolving steadily into the life (and death) that surrounds it? What is that movement—below the radar, but caught on sonar—an echo of something I already know? Perhaps it's what the Irish used to call *the music of what happens*. We already live, us AfroEuropeans, both sides of any border, and the counterpart of our invisibility is that stealth strategy of *silent translation*: you can't stop us.

This fourth collection of essays, a revised selection from the ninety-odd papers presented at our fourth international conference (held in London in 2013 and excellently organised by Sharmilla Beezmohun), attests to the dynamism of our particular field of enquiry. Geographically, the authors of these papers move not only across Europe, but also across the Atlantic, following in Paul Gilroy's steps: Sweden, Portugal, the UK, Germany, Spain, New York, Maputo, Johannesburg, Lagos and El Barrio (amongst other places) are summoned here. In terms of traditional disciplines, the approaches are multifarious and even hectic, as Stuart Hall taught us all: football, music, cinema and literature are all grist to our mill. Travel narratives, political events or sociological findings are equally valid tools to explore the nuances and complexities of AfroEuropean lives, communities, interactions—from Audre Lorde we learned how to use our differences creatively. Many words keep recurring throughout these texts: dislocation, displacement, discrimination; exile; racism; identity (crisis); diaspora. But also: coalition; strategy; survival; transgression; belonging; community; struggle; intersubjectivity, intersection, interdependence...

This volume is yet another profession of our faith in the capacity of human beings, even scholars, to create the conditions in which other human beings can live safer and richer lives; of our faith in knowledge, even theoretical knowledge, as a transformative tool; of our faith in communities who are vital, alive, enlivening. Communities which are,

happily, much, much larger and meaningful than a bunch of well-intentioned, wishful-thinking and privileged academics (and non-academics, *pace* the editor of this book!) who work to try and bequeath to their children—and to all children—a world in which to live peacefully together despite our many differences.

THE 7.30 TRAIN TO FRANKFURT: AN AFROPEAN AESTHETIC

JOHNY PITTS

A few years ago on a snowy January evening, a stranger mistook me for someone they had seen the previous week aboard an evening train heading to Frankfurt. The moment lasted seconds, but our brief encounter would serve as a catalyst for what became a lifelong journey of (self)discovery.

As a mixed-race teenager growing up on a council estate in the north of England, it was the first time I had contemplated a self-image tied to any sort of elegance. Who knows what this other mixed race guy with an afro was like, why he was going to Frankfurt or where he came from. Some may have been offended by the moment... perhaps the stranger who stopped me thought "They all look the same." For me, though, it was an odd enough mistake to feel wonderful. I wasn't being stopped (as I had on previous occasions) because I reminded someone of their drug dealer... or of that breakdancer they saw in the club that time... I had the notion that this stranger had stopped me on the street that day because they thought it was plausible I was this black European traveller they had seen. One minute racing through the wintry German evening on a train, the next walking down a street in England. It seemed to offer a glimmer of a new identity; and ever since I've been searching for that person on the 7.30 train to Frankfurt, within and without.

Until that point I'd spent much of my teens divided, existing in the strange liminal terrain between the parochial white, working-class north of England and ghettoised African American hip-hop culture.

Growing up in Sheffield, England's third largest urban sprawl, I got the sense that Britain had just about come to terms with calling black people British and a lot of the racism I witnessed was now being directed towards Asian communities. Inevitably, though, I knew I was always on the fringes of British national identity. If there was an argument or a fight, words like nigger or wog would rear their ugly heads again. Prejudice still seemed to lurk in the white British subconscious.

Nonetheless, things had become more subtle. I was sort of English, almost British, kind of European and, because of this, it became obvious that I would have to seek out answers about my European identity in relation to my black experience. The problem was that nothing around me resonated really. Black Britain was still largely seen as Caribbean, despite the fact that the mixed-race community was the fastest growing ethnic group in the country and African migrants had completed their steady rise to becoming the predominant black presence in Britain by 2011. More than that, though, where I grew up it seemed the black community used the aesthetics of gangster rap as a way of glamorising the destitution, the alienation and the ugliness of their reality.

I dabbled for a while too. I would dream of getting shot like 2pac and then surviving, wearing my bullet scars as a badge of honour. It was no surprise to me when Sheffield and other cities across the UK witnessed what became known as “postcode wars”, which seemed to mimic the geographic East coast/West coast hip-hop feud that would ultimately claim two of the genre’s biggest stars. My area, S5, was at war with the nearby S3 district, and a lot of my childhood friends got caught up in it; either murdered or put in jail for life. Very often these street wars started because somebody looked at someone else the wrong way and the situation would spiral out of control. It wasn’t even about drugs and yet it was very definitely a tribal issue of territory.

Long before this all happened I knew I wanted to transcend such territoriality and expand my horizons. Initially I thought a way to do this would be to get versed in civil rights literature and African American culture—I read Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and so on. It was an enriching experience, but at some point I started to realise that my reality wasn’t America of the 1960s, but Europe now. That’s why this imagery of the man with the afro on a train to Frankfurt was so powerful to me—it was the first time it had occurred to me to look for an identity outside the boundaries of my council estate, outside a Black Britain still so heavily geared towards its colonial Caribbean heritage and also notions of blackness that America was forcing down my neck. I wanted to be part of a network of individuals who, in the words of Caryl Phillips, felt of and not of Europe.

I hadn’t found a sense of self in my corner of Black Britain, so I started to wonder if there was a collective consciousness on the continent.

With the birth of the single currency and the Eurozone in the late 1990s, continental Black Europeans had very real economic reasons for understanding themselves as just that—Black *Europeans*, rather than simply Black French or Afro German. But as someone from the UK, a

small island both physically and spiritually adrift from mainland Europe, I simply found comfort in the idea of diasporic unity and being able to connect with other pockets of black communities facing similar issues of identity and alienation. I wondered if, perhaps, we might attempt to stamp out a unifying identity together on this old, stubborn continent.

I first started to search for the person on the 7.30 to Frankfurt in the arts, particularly music, and became a music journalist. It would be through music that I would have my first encounter with the word “Afropean”.

If you listen to black music emanating out of Europe in the 1990s and '00s, you can hear the sounds of the last wave of Generation X coming of age; of true multiculturalism. There was a subtle shift into an age of fusion, of acid jazz, jungle, drum'n'bass, trip-hop, UK garage and grime, of French hip-hop, Swedish soul and German reggae. These are styles that really are a musical melange of influences and experiences; that aren't merely referencing either black or white culture, but had been born out of an organic union of the two.

There were mixtures before, of course—mods found new meaning in ska, working-class northerners connected with soul. I myself am a “northern soul baby”; my mother, a white Sheffielder, met my African American father when he was on tour with his group The Fantastics. But these unions seemed to be about celebrating difference rather than being amalgamations.

That's why I chose to use this rather new word that was coined in the early '90s when these musical mixtures were being born. Afropean is a term that I felt reflected new identities on the continent and seemed appropriate for a number of reasons. Firstly, it hinted at cultural influence rather than simply racial identification; and secondly, for the first time in my life it was a word I was able to use to describe myself that sounded cohesive and whole— not mixed this or half that or hyphenated in any way. Instead, it's a portmanteau, something whole but born of duality.

Another reason the word interested me is that it wasn't invented on the desk of an anthropologist, but by the coming together of two brilliant artistic minds. The first time I know of it appearing was when David Byrne of The Talking Heads teamed with up with Marie Daulne (Zap Mama) to come up with a term to describe her music. Of Belgian and Congolese descent, Daulne grew up in what might be described as the Afropean capital of the world, Matonge in Brussels, and named her debut album *Adventures in Afropea*. This was on the verge of an explosion of Afropean music. IAM, the hip-hop crew from Marseille, were going platinum, Jamiroquai broke records off the back of the acid jazz scene and

multicultural Bristol gave birth to Massive Attack and Portishead which would ultimately spawn the trip-hop-inflected Afropean anthem “7 Seconds” by Neneh Cherry and Youssou N’Dour. An aesthetic was starting to develop too, which took sophisticated influences from black and European culture. Stephen Simmonds from Stockholm, Les Nubians from Paris, Tasha’s World from Amsterdam, Joy Denalane from Berlin, Lynden David Hall from London and of course Zap Mama from Belgium... the list goes on.

Similar to the cultural transactions that took place in the 1920s and 1930s of *négritude* Paris, some of these artists are also a direct product of liberal 1960s attitudes in Europe. There was a call for African and African American musicians across the continent during a postwar period when liberal intellectuals wanted to bring the world together. It was also a time of massive revolution and decolonisation. Neneh Cherry is the daughter of Sierra Leonian musician Ahmadu Jah and was raised by African American ex-pat trumpeter Don Cherry; Stephen Simmonds is the son of a Jamaican musician who was touring Sweden at the time. The influence of black musicians on tour in the 1960s and ’70s may explain why many of these artists who were embracing this word “Afropean” were also connected with a genre of music that record executive Kedar Massenburg named “neo soul”. There was an organic texture to the instrumentation, references to Pan-Africanism, head wraps, earthy colours, Rastafarian knitwear all mixed with European sensibilities, streamlined English tailoring, French berets, Italian suits.

In fact, I’d always perceived African American neo-soul artists like Maxwell, Erykah Badu, Amel Larrieux, Meshell Ndegeocello and so on as being very Afropean themselves; certainly what they were doing was very different from other African American styles at the time. This has, I think, something to do with the British soul revival scene of the late 1980s that included Omar, Soul 2 Soul, Sade and The Young Disciples, who took classic American soul, brought it to Europe and added their own colours to the mix; this then travelled back to America and became what we know as neo soul. With these musical migrations, fashion and lifestyle choices got picked up along the way too.

Nowhere was this Afropean and neo soul aesthetic explored more than in Claude Grunitsky’s *Trace Magazine*. “Transcultural styles and ideas” was its tagline. Grunitsky, its founder, was born in Togo, raised in Paris, lived in London and eventually moved to New York. The magazine reflected his own migratory path.

I started to see the term as not only speaking of an Afro-European experience, but of travel—of the *voluntary* movement and connection of

black people rather than the usual black travel narratives of uprootings, fleeing, survival and immigration.

It was in this spirit of travel, for travel's sake, that I decided it was time to experience some of this Afropean culture for myself. After being mistaken for the guy with an afro on the 7.30 to Frankfurt, I'd unveiled a whole Afropean world of possibility, but it was just that, *possibility*—stuff I'd seen in magazines, heard on the radio, caught a whiff of in music videos.

Finally, one cold October morning I left for Europe to embark on a five-month voyage, with the idea of writing about the people I met and my own experience of travelling through the “white continent” as a black backpacker. Initially I imagined myself heading to cool parties, checking out gigs, meeting fashionistas who'd managed to articulate their Afropean culture fluently. I wanted to provide a positive view of black people on the continent rather than the usual depictions of disenfranchised immigrants and gangsters or of a kind of mindless vibrancy and two-dimensional exoticism I feel white photographers so often search for in black communities.

Certainly, I tried to avoid clichés, but I was naïve to think Europe would show me only a convenient view that suited my hopes of what being Afro-European was about.

Europe, in the grip of its worst recession since World War II, was in a mess when I travelled around its major cities and during the period in which I wrote up my notes. The single currency was trembling, there were major budget cuts, increased student fees and only two of the thirteen cities I visited didn't have some sort of major protest going on whilst I was there. Anders Breivik murdered seventy-seven people in a bid to “annihilate multiculturalism” in Norway, the streets of Britain were being looted after Mark Duggan, a young black man, was shot and killed by police. For the first time in the country's history the nationalist Swedish democrat movement in Sweden got seats in parliament, Neo-Nazism was on the rise across Eastern Europe and the Neo-Fascist Golden Dawn Party acquired unprecedented national support in Greece. Paris banned the burkha and the city was reeling from recent comments by French perfumier Jean-Paul Guerlain who called black people niggers on national TV.

Though I met and photographed a lot of talented and fashionable Afropeans—success stories, so to speak—I realised, through chance encounters, that I would be doing a disservice to the black diaspora by presenting only a superficial view of their or, rather, *our* experience.

I found that, in search of Black Europe, I was often led to the periphery—Clichy Sous Bois in Paris, the Cape Verdean favela Cova Da Moura in Lisbon, the largely Muslim area of Rinkeby in Stockholm. Areas of Europe not presented in the tourist literature of its great cities. Here were communities living on the fringes of society, culturally and geographically, who had a very different story to share. Some of these areas were depressing and dangerous and spoke of failed integration. But there was also a different kind of dynamism to be found in what the author Doug Saunders calls “Arrival Cities”, where people, sometimes from African villages, begin to learn how to create a life as a European urbanite. These hinterlands were the first steps for the Afropean, where African traditions merged or sometimes clashed with big city Europe. Where the battle of transition was being fought and where the margins were edging their way into the pages of national narratives.

When I returned home I realised that the area I’m from—Firth Park in Sheffield—was one of these places; and I saw a fresh dynamism where before there was only death and stagnation.

Paul Theroux once said, after writing a kind of polarised book to my own about his travels as a white man in Africa, that “you go away for a long time and return a different person—you never come all the way back.”

When I returned home after travelling as a black man in Europe, I too had changed. I came back with thousands of photographs, over 150,000 words worth of tatty notebooks and a fuller idea of what it meant to juggle the “double consciousness” that W. E. B. DuBois spoke of.

So how did I feel about this term “Afropean” after my travels? I decided that it was the personal relationship I had with the word that had ultimately encouraged an existential experience of blackness. That had allowed me, to quote Michael Eric Dyson, “be rooted in, but not restricted by my Blackness.”

And so, whilst the word can’t be confined to the fashionable elite, I’m happy that the imagery it evokes for me is still one of optimism, of hybridity and integration, of newness and movement rather than the violence and destitution black communities seem so often to be paired with.

Perhaps, since the word was born in the realm of music and popular culture, that’s where the word can thrive—as a cultural movement and a platform to encourage dialogue amongst various black communities living in and influenced by Europe and also with white Europeans interested in black and African culture.

I finished my first draft this year and am currently knocking it into shape to be released as a book in 2014. But there was something that I didn't include in my notes that I felt was too random and opaque an idea for the narrative. Leaving Amsterdam on the way to Stockholm, I had to stop off in Cologne, where I'd catch an overnight sleeper train through Scandinavia. But I didn't get on that train. Instead I decided to make a quick detour and found myself in possession of a big smile as a mixed race guy with an afro who had finally boarded the 7.30 train to Frankfurt.

LONDON IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S FICTION

ÁGNES GYÖRKE

Buchi Emecheta is often called a realistic chronicler of London in the 1960s, hailed for being one of the first black female writers to depict the experience of migration and dislocation in the Western metropolis. Her fiction is regularly praised for its documentary aspects, yet the style of her novels is often called simple and artless. *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), Emecheta's early London novels, portray the experiences of Adah, the female protagonist, who is frequently read as the alter ego of the writer herself. *Gwendolen* (1989) and *Kehinde* (1994), published more than a decade after her autobiographical pieces and among a number of novels set in Africa, also explore the intersections between black female subjectivity and the city, though no longer from an autobiographical angle. While the main character of *Gwendolen* is Jamaican, Kehinde is depicted as a self-reliant Nigerian woman who, unlike Emecheta, leaves her children behind in order to live an independent life in London. Both novels are more imaginative and stylistically engaging than Adah's story and, despite the fact that they are set in London, offer a more positive vision of African culture than Emecheta's early novels. Nevertheless, it is my contention that *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen* depict a unique vision of the city in the late 1960s which is more innovative than the portrayal of London in her later works.

My paper focuses on the production of urban space in these texts as well as on narrative strategies that mediate between the characters' cultural heritage and the present moment in the global city. I also investigate the depiction of space and female subjectivity, exploring oppressive environments and empowering localities in London. I claim that Emecheta's early novels, despite their apparently simple narrative technique, are highly complex texts, and their complexity lies in the unresolved tension that characterises her portrayal of female subjectivity. Later, in the 1980s, Emecheta clearly defined her position as a "womanist" writer and attended black feminist events, where she openly articulated her views concerning feminism (Ojo-Ade 2004, 64). Her female characters have also become more empowered and conscious of their cultural

heritage; while *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen* depict the hardships of Adah who fails to find a permanent space of her own in London, Kehinde obtains a sense of stability in the city. Despite this agency, however, which is associated not only with permanence but also with the integration of Nigerian cultural heritage into a Western urban space, *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen* offer a more innovative, though less permanent, form of female empowerment, which is manifested in the affiliative groups Adah finds in the city.

Emecheta and Feminism

The reception of *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen* shows that the issues Emecheta addressed were of immense importance in the 1970s. She was praised for depicting the African diaspora after the Second World War from a gender-conscious perspective; Aurora G. Simms, for instance, points out that *Second-Class Citizen*, despite its minor flaws, offers “a rare portrayal of Nigerian life” (Simms 1975, 1570) in Britain. Ten years later Marilyn Richardson argued that Emecheta was able to nail “the system’s stupidities, blind spots, and cruelties as only a woman could who not only studied the system, but, at risk of life and sanity, survived it” (Richardson 1985, 6). Despite the fact that the novels are not innovative stylistically, Emecheta’s perspective was considered unique in Britain at the time her first novels were published.

A number of African critics, however, claimed that the portrayal of African characters and the Nigerian diaspora is too bleak in her early novels. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, for instance, argues that these texts, instead of empowering black people, “are deeply grounded in the British and Irish feminism in which she was nurtured” (Ogunyemi 1985, 66).¹ Though Emecheta has never considered herself a feminist writer,² *Second-Class Citizen* indeed offers a very critical account of Adah’s husband, Francis, who, like Emecheta’s spouse, burns the manuscript of her first novel. This autobiographical involvement, however, has been regarded as yet another reason why these novels, it is claimed, are unable to provide adequate ground to aid black people to struggle against neoimperialism; Nwankwo Chimalum, for instance, believes that they are nothing but “private crusades waged for the vicarious revenge for private hurt” (Chimalum 1988, 40). I think, however, that Emecheta’s early novels do not simply reproduce the truth claims of Western feminism; rather, they in fact pre-date concepts that take central place in the 1980s and 1990s.

More sympathetic to Emecheta’s novels than her early critics, Omar Sougou points out that any theory which aims to subvert hegemony and

recover the voice of the oppressed is an ally of the African critic. He believes, nevertheless, that only Emecheta's later novels "are oriented toward an interrogation of the centre and a re-evaluation of black culture (Sougou 2002, 218); her early autobiographical pieces betray "a blind acceptance of Englishness as flawless" (Sougou 2002, 46). However, neither *In the Ditch* nor *Second-Class Citizen* remain uncritical of British society; eg the portrayal of Trudy, the English childminder, Carol, the patronising social security worker, as well as the numerous encounters with officials of the welfare state suggest that the narrator is critical and aloof. I think these texts, then, instead of simply adopting metropolitan values, explore issues that become significant for Western critics in subsequent decades.

Katherine Fishburn, as opposed to Ogunyemi, argues that there is a positive sense of Africanness in Emecheta's novels, which is manifested in her portrayal of communities. She points out that Emecheta's depiction of communal existence reaffirms her received African concepts; in contrast to the experience of Western individuals, who define themselves in the binary terms of self and society, only occasionally seeing their lives as interrelated in morally meaningful ways (Fishburn 1995, 34), Emecheta's novels offer numerous instances of communal sensibility.³ The concept of individualism, as it is known to us in the West, is secondary or totally absent from this worldview which, as Fishburn claims, suggests that Emecheta's novels conceptualise the relationship between the individual and society in ways that are not familiar to the Western reader. The reader therefore needs to have particularly strong empathetic qualities to deal with the apparently "unintelligible" images in her texts.

Susanne Pichler and Christine W. Sizemore, however, believe Emecheta's London novels (*In the Ditch*, *Second-Class Citizen*, *Gwendolen* and *Kehinde*) reproduce a scenario that is well known to Western critics. Relying on Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural difference, they claim that these texts portray London as a hybrid location, while the writer inhabits a "liminal space" in the city (Pichler 2001, 24). Problematising the reception of Emecheta as an African writer, Pichler reads her novels in the context of postcolonial theories and claims that she is "a transcultural woman writer with postcolonial concerns" (Pichler 2001, 27). However, even though she explores Emecheta's novels which are set in London, the city does not really become the focus of Pichler's book; she reads her novels as reactions to (and reflections on) the cultural and political discourses on immigration and race relations, but does not particularly investigate the production of urban space as a textual practice in Emecheta's writings. Furthermore, both Sizemore and Pichler suggest that all of Emecheta's

characters inhabit “a liminal space between cultures where they search for a secure place for themselves and their families and freedom within the city” (Sizemore 1996, 369). Yet, though Adah, Gwendolen and Kehinde are all obviously in search of a place of their own in London, I think there are major differences between the trajectories of these characters.

It is John McLeod's chapter on Emecheta in *Postcolonial London* which first explores her early autobiographical novels from the perspective of urban studies. Instead of conceptualising “postcolonial London” as a concrete location on the map, McLeod claims that it “emerges at the intersection of the concrete and the noumenal, between the material conditions of metropolitan life and the imaginative representations made of it” (McLeod 2004, 7). Like Fishburn and Pichler, he also investigates the importance of communities in *Second-Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch*, but from a very different angle. While Fishburn looks at the African origin of the groups portrayed in Emecheta's writings and Pichler stresses the importance of sisterhood in her works, McLeod focuses on the role communities play in Adah's *bildung*, regardless of their composition; as he points out, in fact, the most significant groups Adah finds in the metropolis are outside her ethnic group. Despite the proliferation of black social networks in the 1960s which became active in resisting racial discrimination in housing and employment,⁴ Emecheta's heroine prefers to attach herself to no organised movement (McLeod 2004, 93). In *Second-Class Citizen*, for instance, the library functions as a space where she is initiated into meaningful human contact, whereas the African neighbourhood remains hostile and resentful (McLeod 2004, 107), while *In the Ditch* depicts the community of Adah's female neighbours as a supportive network, offering her the help that neither her own people nor welfare state institutions provide (McLeod 2004, 99-100). Therefore, McLeod claims that Emecheta's novels not only predate organised black female movements but also challenge the belief that the rejection of race as an emancipatory tactic for black women was the discovery of the 1980s (McLeod 2004, 95).

I argue that Emecheta's early novels also pre-date and, in a way, anticipate feminist theories of intersubjectivity which became dominant in the 1980s. Though Simone de Beauvoir had already investigated the notion of intersubjectivity in the context of existentialist theories, it is Jessica Benjamin's book entitled *The Bonds of Love*, published in 1988, which offers an extensive analysis of intersubjectivity vis-à-vis feminist criticism. In Benjamin's reading, intersubjectivity is a profoundly egalitarian, non-hierarchical and balanced mode of interaction, which presumes the existence of an “essential tension” between two subjects. The

images of interdependence that appear in Emecheta's early autobiographical works are akin to this concept; the groups she joins in London, unlike those she left behind in Nigeria, are profoundly non-hierarchical. Far from affirming Emecheta's received African concepts, these communities differ from the authoritarian groups who dominated Adah's childhood and offer a sense of solidarity in the Western metropolis.

This also suggests that it is not easy to put Emecheta's novels into clear-cut categories in terms of her involvement with feminism. Though she was familiar with the works of Kate Millet, I do not think that her early work *derives* from Western feminist beliefs;⁵ rather, her autobiographical novels anticipate concepts and arguments that come to dominate the last few decades of the century. No wonder that Donna Haraway became interested in *Second-Class Citizen* and its portrayal of female experience, her own primary interest in the early 1990s (see Haraway). Both the intersections of race and gender, which is probably the most important issue Emecheta's early novels address, and the intersubjective interaction that defines the communities Adah finds in London, are questions that were explored extensively by prominent scholars in the 1980s.⁶ Groundbreaking theoretical texts that redefined the paradigm of black studies and feminism also appeared in this period, such as Stuart Hall's "New Ethnicities" in 1989 and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* in 1991. Furthermore, the concept of intersubjectivity came to the fore; soon after Jessica Benjamin's *Bonds*, Rosi Braidotti's *Nomadic Subjects* was published, which opened a new dialogue between continental philosophy and feminist theories. As Braidotti claims, "each nomadic connection offers at least the possibility of an ethical relation of opening out toward an empowering connection to others" (Braidotti 2011, 3). It is this accidental opening out towards empowering connections that defines those communities who help Adah find her place in the city in Emecheta's early novels; instead of relying on the concept of race, gender or class, these temporary yet affirmative groups are open communities who depend on intersubjective interaction.

“Are we going to live here?” Empowering Localities in Adah's Story

In the Ditch (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), both later included in the single volume *Adah's Story* (1983), portray the gloomy housing conditions that awaited Adah, who followed her husband to Britain in the late 1960s. Though *In the Ditch* was published in 1972, two years earlier

than *Second-Class Citizen*, it is the latter novel which explores Adah's childhood in Nigeria and the story of her migration to Britain until her divorce. *In the Ditch*, the earlier piece, offers a detailed account of Adah's struggles after the end of her marriage and a bleak portrait of the welfare state in the late 1960s.⁷

Adah, like many other migrants, imagines England as a dreamland before she arrives in the country. Thus it is not surprising that she is shocked when Francis shows their new home to her:

The house was grey with green windows. She could not tell where the house began and where it ended, because it was joined to other houses in the street. She has never seen houses like that before, joined together like that. In Lagos houses were usually completely detached with the yards on both sides, the compound at the back and the verandas in front. These ones had none of those things. They were long solid blocks, with doors opening into the street. The windows were arranged in straight rows along the streets. On looking round, Adah noticed that one could tell which windows belonged to which door by the colour the frames were painted. Most of the houses seemed to have the same curtains for their windows.

'They all look like churches, you know; monasteries.' Adah remarked. (Emecheta 1976, 37)

Adah is not used to the sight of crowded streets; they are in sharp contrast with the roomy places she inhabited in Nigeria. There is no veranda, no room for communal life; those spaces that mediate between the swarming streets and the private flats and which play an important role in the everyday life of Nigerian communities have no place in the city. Instead, what we see is an endless row of solid blocks, with doors opening directly onto the street. Their serious, gloomy atmosphere reminds Adah of monasteries, suggesting the feeling of seclusion and indifference are the first emotions she experiences in Britain.⁸ The image also has religious connotations, which is not surprising, since Adah went to a Methodist Girls' High School in Lagos. However, the reference to religion is rather ironic; the inhabitants of the "monasteries" do not seem to have any ethical principles—her husband, for instance, employs Trudy as a childminder since she is almost certainly his lover, while Adah's flatmates are happy to see her family thrown into the street.

Adah feels she will never be able to find comfort and harmony in her new home:

[Francis] opened the door into what looked to Adah like a tunnel. But it was a hall; a hall with flowered walls! It was narrow and it seemed at first as if there were no windows. Adah clutched at Titi, and she in turn held her

mother in fear. They climbed stairs upon stairs until they seemed to be approaching the roof of the house. Then Francis opened one door and showed them into a room, or a half-room. It was very small, with a single bed at one end and a new settee which Francis bought with the money Adah sent him to buy her a top coat. The space between the settee and the bed was just enough for a formica-topped table, the type she had in her kitchen in Lagos. (Emecheta 1976, 38)

The categories that were clear to Adah in Lagos become blurred in London: houses look like monasteries, tunnels. Objects which should be in the kitchen or in the living room, such as the table and the settee, are in the bedroom, which is situated at the top of the house. It is not clear where the bedroom ends and the kitchen begins, what the difference between house and monastery is. Those reference points that were familiar to Adah are confused, making her feel not only the isolation that is prevalent in British society, but also the sense of displacement she is going to experience in London.

Adah is unable to put her thoughts into words: “‘Are we going to live here?’ she managed to ask” (Emecheta 1976, 38). When Francis explains that from now on she has to consider herself “coloured”, an unwelcome migrant, her only response is silence:

Well, what could she say? She simply stared. She said nothing, even when she learned that the toilet was outside, four flights of stairs down, in the yard; nor when she learned that there was no bath and no kitchen. (Emecheta 1976, 38)

Adah has to cope with the sense of displacement alone; Francis refuses to help, he is not even willing to listen to her. It is the very narrative that will act as the medium through which she overcomes this indescribable experience.

Adah is continuously in search of her place in the city; she tries to define herself as an African woman writer vis-à-vis her husband, their flatmates, the Nigerian diaspora and a number of other communities who she finds in the city. As McLeod points out, despite the fact that quite a few black organisations were formed in the 1960s and 1970s, the groups supporting Adah are not defined by categories such as race or ethnicity. Though gender and class play an important role in *In the Ditch* (the community formed at the Pussy Cat Mansions consists mainly of working-class mothers), the group which helps Adah gain self-confidence as a writer at Chalk Farm Library is not limited by gender, class or ethnicity. In fact, class, like ethnicity, is not an adequate term for Adah to delineate her sense of self. When she has to give up her job, for instance, since she is

unable to take care of her kids as a working mother, Adah perceives herself as a shifting, rootless and classless person:

Her socialisation was complete. She, an African woman with five children and no husband, no job, and no future, was just like most of her neighbours—shiftless, rootless, with no rightful claim to anything. Just cut off... [...] The museum was happy to get rid of her though too polite to say so. That closed her middle-class chapter. From then on, she belonged to no class at all. She couldn't claim to be working class, because the working class had a code for daily living. She had none. Hers was then a complete problem family. Joblessness baptised her into the Mansions society. (Emecheta 1979, 33-34)

This shifting, fluid, hybrid condition, associated with the migrant experience by Homi Bhabha as well as Emecheta's critics (eg Sizemore or Pichler), is not a positive trope in Emecheta's fiction; instead of subverting boundaries and culturally coded norms, it depicts Adah's experience of being deprived of any meaningful sense of place. The Pussy Cat Mansions, aka "the Mansions society", is the only location that provides a tangible point of reference for Adah, yet this affiliation does not reflect any clearly delineated place or class in society. Her sense of identity is constructed on the basis of the day-to-day interactions that take place at the Mansions,⁹ suggesting that, if there is a positive aspect of this rootless condition in the novel, it is associated with the language of the everyday.

In *Second-Class Citizen* this language and the everyday interactions of the city become the primary means of connection for Adah. Though the novel portrays her childhood and marriage before she finds herself in the ditch, *Second-Class Citizen* was written after Emecheta had already established herself as a writer; the communities it depicts also seem to offer a more feasible sense of identity than "the Mansions society". When Adah takes a job at Chalk Farm Library, she becomes part of a community which helps her develop as a black female writer. She reads the writings of Floral Nwapa, Chinua Achebe, James Baldwin and Marx among other black writers and social theorists. Her friends, who come from a wide variety of cultural or national backgrounds, share these texts, suggesting that it is neither gender, nor nationality or ethnicity that defines affiliative communities in this novel. Peggy, one of her colleagues, is a twenty-three year old Irish girl, while Bill, who tells her to read black writers, is a Canadian man. We also learn that there is another girl, a mixed race West Indian, "one of the people who found it difficult to claim to be black" (Emecheta 1976, 152). Bill orders the books they share:

He was an intelligent man, that Canadian, and Adah liked him a lot. During the staff break he would talk and expand about authors and their new books. He would then request it and the Camden Borough would buy it, and he would read it first; then he would pass it on to Adah and she would pass it to Peggy. Peggy would pass it to any other members of the staff who were in the mood to read books. (Emecheta 1976, 152)

The library is not a perfect subaltern space, as McLeod assumes;¹⁰ it is Bill who decides what to read and Adah learns to appreciate her own race and culture under his tutelage. Yet this group provides the support she needs to find her voice as a writer and overcome the trauma of displacement. She feels that her colleagues “made her forget her troubles” (Emecheta 1976, 152-153) and, as McLeod notes, discovers “a hidden talent which she did not know she had before—the uninhibited ability to make friends easily” (Emecheta 1976, 161). The library seems akin to that safe transitional space, which “allows us to feel that our impulses come from within and so are authentically our own” (Benjamin 1988, 128) and which provides the necessary background for intersubjective interactions. This environment enables Adah to experience the kind of fluidity that is no longer associated with the rootlessness of the Mansion’s society but instead, to use Braidotti’s phrase, offers the possibility of opening out towards empowering connections with others.

Africanness in Gwendolen

Gwendolen (1989) is an exception among Emecheta’s London novels—though the main character, like Adah, is a migrant in London, she arrives from the Caribbean. It is her consciousness that the narrator inhabits, though there are quite a few other African characters in the novel as well. At first sight, *Gwendolen* seems to celebrate the heterogeneity of Black British identity as opposed to a hegemonic concept of blackness that overshadows other ethnic and racial identities, yet at the very end the novel turns out to be a more “African” text than Emecheta’s early writings; the cruelty and misogyny of male characters which dominate her autobiographical novels are projected onto Jamaican men, including Gwendolen’s father, who rape and humiliate her repeatedly. African characters have a much more positive role in the novel; in fact, *Gwendolen* seems to suggest that Jamaicans have lost touch with their cultural heritage which Africans are more determined to keep.¹¹

The only similarity between *Gwendolen* and *Adah’s Story* is perhaps that women have a rather positive role in the narrative—Omar Sougou even calls it “a celebration of women’s bonding” (Sougou 2002, 216),

since Gwendolen's mother and an African woman called Gladys become intimate friends. However, I think it is not female bonding that is at the centre of this novel. Gwendolen's mother is unable to give her child the support she needs—she even wants to kill her at the very end of the book—and there are several instances of male bonding in the novel too (for instance, between her father and an African man called Gladys Odowis). In fact, it is not human bonding that the novel celebrates but, rather, a more abstract sense of emotional connection with the cultural heritage of Africa. Therefore, the novel foreshadows *Kehinde*, which offers a utopian reconciliation between life in the metropolitan city and African cultural traditions.

Gwendolen is abandoned by her parents at an early age. Relatives bring her up in Jamaica while she dreams of following her parents to England, yet they are unable to protect her; her uncle rapes her when she is eight years old and, unsurprisingly, she is not able to speak about the abuse, though her trauma is much more severe than Adah's culture shock in England. There is no secure space for her in Jamaica and even after she is reunited with her family in London, Gwendolen remains unprotected; when her mother leaves for Jamaica, her father rapes and impregnates her. Her sense of self is much weaker than Adah's and it is only her Greek boyfriend Emmanuel who, despite the fact that she deceives him about the paternity of her daughter, offers some kind of security to her. Gwendolen finds peace in a small council flat in London only after she is separated from her family, yet she is happy to keep her father's child, to whom she gives a Yoruba name, Iyamide. The name embodies the security Gwendolen is unable to find in real life: "Iyamide means 'My mother is here'. It is symbolic. [...] [I]t means everything I ever wanted, warmth, security, comfort, is all here in a female form" (Emecheta 1989, 237). Though Gwendolen is Jamaican, it is this African name that offers her a sense of stability in London, which again suggests that it is not the heterogeneity of Black British identity that this novel celebrates, but a pan-African vision of common descent.

There is a discrepancy between this idealised image of Africanness and the portrayal of African communities in *Head above Water* (1986), Emecheta's autobiography, which was published three years before *Gwendolen* and where Emecheta admitted that she finds it difficult to identify with people of African descent:

We were all black, yes. But my black experience was not the same as the type weathered by the members of the Seventies. We all came to Britain as economic refugees, but the experiences and expectations of the African were through libraries, colleges, universities and grant departments, while

all most of them wanted was simply a good job. Most Africans in those days would take any job, however dirty, because they knew they were here to work their way through college. Most of them hoped to go home after their studies. The Caribbean wanted a good job, which he would hold just as if he were in the West Indies. (Emecheta 1986, 149)

Though in *Gwendolen* the abstract image of Africanness, embodied in Iyamide, is a quasi-utopian vision, in *Head above Water* the portrayal of Caribbean people is much less idealised. The novel offers a self-confident, hopeful and optimistic image associated with childhood, purity and the promise of the future, while the autobiography suggests that the gap between people from Africa and the Caribbean is much too large to bridge. Iyamide seems to embody that certainty and permanence which the affiliative communities are unable to offer Adah, yet the price of this self-confidence is the erasure of those nomadic moments that made Emecheta's vision of London so unique in her early autobiographical writings.

At Home in the City: *Kehinde*

As in *Gwendolen*, *Kehinde* offers a utopian vision of Africanness, which is associated with the spiritual realm in this novel. The main character, Kehinde, who lives with her family in London, is African; her husband, though unhappy in the West, is less violent than Francis or Gwendolen's father. The family seems to be more integrated into British society: Kehinde is wearing a Marks and Spencers mackintosh and is depicted as a woman well-established in her job. Her children, socialised in the city, prefer English food to Nigerian cuisine:

Albert and Kehinde ate their ground rice and egusi soup. The children had recently started to complain about the monotony of having ground rice and soup every evening so once in a while, like tonight, to stem further argument, Kehinde would heat some baked beans and serve them on toast with a little salad of lettuce and tomatoes. The parents thought it was an awful meal, but the children knew what they wanted. (Emecheta 1994, 2)

Also like *Gwendolen*, *Kehinde* is a more African novel than *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen*. Firstly, Kehinde uses Nigerian English when she speaks to her friend, Moriammo, and there are a number of untranslated Igbo and Yoruba words in the text as well as a glossary of terms at the end of the novel. Second, the main character is in touch with her cultural heritage through the voice of Taiwoo, her dead twin, who reminds the reader of the voice of the Presence, Adah's guardian spirit, or

Chi in *Second-Class Citizen*.¹² Yet there is a crucial difference between the two novels: whereas the Presence guides Adah in Nigeria and she seems to have no access to it in London (in fact, the affiliative communities seem to take the role of the Presence in the city, since it is not her Chi that helps her, but people in the library), in *Kehinde*, as Brenda Cooper notes, her dead twin speaks to her only when she is in the Western metropolis (Cooper 2007, 154). The other striking difference is that in *Kehinde*, just as in *Gwendolen*, the focus seems to be on one-to-one interactions (between Kehinde and Moriammo, Kehinde and Ifeyinwa, and Kehinde and Taiwoo, for instance). Communities are absent in this novel, yet there is a sense of spiritual wholeness that Kehinde finds at the very end, which, like the vision of Africanness embodied by Iyamide, cannot be regarded as the experience of the self alone.

In fact, Kehinde seems to have two aims: she wants to have a stable place, a house of her own, in London; and to find access to the spiritual world, as well as her heritage, through Taiwoo's voice. The house therefore becomes an important trope; whereas in the earlier texts the affiliative communities were located in temporary places, such as the library, and the house was seen as an unsafe location, a place of deprivation, violence and uncertainty (Adah is often beaten by her husband; Gwendolen is raped in her own bed), in *Kehinde* it is the house that offers a sense of stability for the main character—she is able to claim ownership of her property in London which, according to Nigerian custom, would belong to her husband.¹³ Furthermore, whereas in the autobiographical novels Adah either had access to the guidance provided by the Presence or the help offered by the supportive communities in the city, in *Kehinde* these are no longer posited as binary opposites. The conclusion of the novel suggests that she finds a space of her own in the Western metropolis yet remains innately connected to her Igbo heritage:

Kehinde sighed. She added one more teaspoon of sugar to the tea she had just poured herself and stirred it absently, looking into space. 'Claiming my rights does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything it makes me more human,' she murmured to her Taiwoo. At length she put the cup to her lips. She felt the sweet liquid running through her inside, warming every part. 'Now we are one,' the living Kehinde said to the spirit of her long dead Taiwoo. (Emecheta 1994, 141)

It seems that Kehinde, just as the heroines of Bildungsromans, has established her sense of identity by appropriating homescapes in the city. All of Emecheta's female characters need to escape oppressive