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Circular Consciousness in the Lived Experience of Intersectionality: Queer/LGBT Nigerian Diasporic Women in the USA

By Meremu Chikwendu¹

Abstract

This essay will introduce and analyze the idea of *circular consciousness* as the product of the constant negotiations involved in the lived experience of intersectionality. *Circular consciousness* is the understanding that subject positionings are in constant motion, sliding over, under, and around each other, consequently informing and redefining identities. The essay pulls from intersectional theory and feminist postcolonial theory, speaks to queer theory, and calls for increased and continued elasticity in our understandings and theorizing around power, subjectivity, agency, and identity. Advocating for a renewed dedication to the political origins of intersectional theory, this article will focus on LGBQ Nigerian-born women currently living in the USA. Blackness and nationality, as well as Nigerian-ness and the 'coming out' are the themes used to emphasise the tensions, contradictions, and spaces for agency in the daily experience of multiple identities.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Postcolonial Studies, Nigeria

Introduction

"My passport is green and my lover's a woman," writes 'Z,' a half Nigerian, half Malaysian woman living for many years in the USA. The colour green is a reference to the Nigerian passport, which has a green cover, and by claiming this 'green' marker of nationality, Z is identifying herself as Nigerian—not Malaysian, and not American. Z's words are exemplary of how lived experiences of intersectionality can entail a conscious understanding of the various circuits that one's multiple identities move, or are pulled, through: geographic locations, embodied positionalities, invisible lines. This understanding can foster strategies for daily living which include shifting, reorganizing, and strategically deploying identities. The privileging of certain subject positionings in some contexts and alternate subject positionings in other contexts becomes a strategic tool for daily survival given, as Kimberlé Crenshaw has described, "the need to split one's political energies between two sometimes opposing groups [that] is a dimension of intersectional dis-empowerment" (1991:1252). However, my interest is in the mindfulness which can shift this "intersectional dis-empowerment" into a tool for empowerment—a tool for redefining, transgressing, and critiquing hegemonic constructions of identity categories.

In the example above, Z is making a conscious choice to be 'this and not that' by privileging her Nigerian-ness over her other potential national identities. And in choosing 'this,'

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she is making an unspoken critique of ‘that.’ In this case, the critique is against dominant ideas around what it means to be Malaysian or to be American. She is inferring that those categories, and the ways she feels they have been constructed, are not flexible or inclusive enough for her. She is encouraging us to engage in further interrogations of Malaysian-ness and American-ness. Furthermore, although Z is privileging her Nigerian nationality by stating that her passport is green, by adding the phrase “and my lover’s a woman,” she is bringing her sexuality, her queerness, to push against her Nigerian-ness in a move that simultaneously embraces yet challenges and redefines what it means to be Nigerian, as well as challenging and redefining what it means to be queer in the Western world. Thus, Z is criticizing existing knowledge while also creating new knowledge, an action that Patricia Hill Collins has described as a component of the work that subjugated knowledge does, creating “empowerment [that is] twofold” (2000:286). The conscious, strategic deployment of identity carries an understanding that identities can be hierarchised even though they are simultaneously experienced. I use the term *circular consciousness* to describe this particular lived understanding of intersectionality.

This paper stems from a 2011 research project involving six self-identified LGBQ Nigerian diasporic women ranging in age from mid-20s to mid-30s. Three of the women—Nkechi, Fayola, and Amaka (pseudonyms)—were interviewed one-on-one via telephone, and three women—Z, Fly, and Spectra—are prolific online bloggers whose websites are rich with essays, audio recordings, and video diaries chronicling their lived experiences. One essay and one audio interview are used as data for each of the online bloggers, who are referred to by their online aliases. All of the women, except Fly, were born in Nigeria, and raised in America, where they continue to live.

The women live under the weight of several narratives – for example lesbian, queer, immigrant, woman, black, American, Nigerian—yet they do not “properly” belong to any of them; rather the narratives are all brought into relation through the women’s daily lives. Thus, belonging and not belonging become recurring themes for the women, and they have self-definitions that are circuitous, always on the move, sometimes seeking fixity, sometimes not, and each informing the other. This paper will begin with an exposition of *circular consciousness*, and then demonstrate how it permeates negotiations of racial and national positionings through an analysis of Blackness and Nigerian-ness. Lastly will be an analysis of the meeting points of sexuality and nationality through an examination of the gay coming out narrative as an improper fit with a queer diasporic identity. This is by no means an exhaustive study of LGBQ Nigerian diasporic women; rather it is an inquiry which seeks to join with other ongoing projects working to add continued elasticity to theorizing intersectionalities.

Circular Consciousness

My use of the term *circular consciousness* comes from dissatisfaction with the way that embodied experience of multiple identities was described within early postcolonial theory. For example, Frantz Fanon’s writing of his experience as a postcolonial subject in which he perceived himself as existing in triplicate: “...it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person... I was given not one but two, three places...I existed triply” (1986: 112). Postcolonial literary theorist Homi Bhabha also uses triple-ness in his

idea of a “third space of enunciation,” which he describes as “a process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness, at which point the agency of identification—the subject—is itself always ambivalent” (1990:211). Additionally, Paul Gilroy uses the term “double-consciousness” to describe “the special stress that grows with the effort involved in trying to face (at least) two ways at once” (1993:3).

Wary of the use of numerical values, such as double or triple, to describe lived experience, I wanted a concept that captured the feelings of anxiety and ambivalence, yet also captured a conscious awareness of the multiple positions; an awareness that can catapult one into actively seeking strategies to maneuver within the ambivalences. Furthermore, assigning numerical values to identity suggests a tallying approach to oppression, an approach that has been debunked by feminist intersectional analyses. Yet within feminist scholarship on intersectionality, I was further dissatisfied by multiple subject positionings described as a “network of strands” (Spivak 1988:204), “axes” (Crenshaw 1989), “interlinking grids” (Yuval-Davis 2006:199), “matrix” (Collins 2000), and as “crossroads” (Crenshaw 1991). These are all very productive and advancing terms; however, embodied experience does not necessarily feel suspended in axes or crossroads. Daily life incurs more motion, more movement, and more fluidity. Kathy Davis has noted that it is “precisely the vagueness and open-endedness of ‘intersectionality’ [that] may be the very secret to its success” (2008:68). I would like to mobilise this “open-ended” potential of intersectionality in developing the concept of *circular consciousness*.

Circular consciousness is the understanding that subject positionings are in constant motion, sliding over, under, and around each other, consequently informing and redefining each other. Within *circular consciousness*, intersecting subject positionings leave traces upon each other, which work to push understandings of the lived experience of intersectionality as non-hierarchical, relational, and overlapping. The movement is circular, but not bounded. It is not a closed circle – as in repetitious – and there are no beginnings or endpoints; rather with circularity I want to suggest constant motion, during which some understandings might drop off, and new understandings might be picked up. These redefined understandings encounter all the other redefined identities and leaving even further traces. In this way there is constant reshaping. *Circular consciousness* is also the movement around power, subjectivity, and agency, including the agency to deflect unwanted definitions of our identities. As Patricia Hill Collins noted, “Rather than viewing consciousness as a fixed entity, a more useful approach sees it as continually evolving and negotiated. A dynamic consciousness is vital to both individual and group agency” (2000:285).

Consciousness as a mobilising call to arms is a familiar refrain among many rights-based movements, and consciousness-raising is historically an important experiential component of political activism. Attaining critical awareness of structural disenfranchisement and institutional imbalances in order to see seemingly invisible operations of power is synonymous with having political consciousness. I want to bring this politicised understanding of consciousness into my conception of *circular consciousness*; to remember that intersectionality has its roots in anti-racism and anti-marginalisation political activism. From the oft-cited example of Sojourner Truth’s 1851 speech with her powerful refrain, “And ain’t I a woman?,” to the Combahee River Collective Statement (1983:264), more than a century later that “our particular task [is]the

development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking,” intersectionality was first and foremost an experience-based understanding that power is deployed and felt multi-dimensionally and multi-directionally.

Intersectionality has since become a running thread through various interventions into “single-axis analysis” (Crenshaw 1989:139) and can contemporarily be viewed as “the need to explore the interconnections between different axes of differentiation and social divisions” (Brah 1996: 14). That is, it can be a theory, an analytical tool, a political device, and as I will argue, a way of being conscious. *Circular consciousness* is the understanding that there is no firm ground, yet there can be self-awareness of the ways in which one is hailed categorically; and from this self-awareness, agential strategies can arise in which identities are tactically deployed. Gayatri Spivak famously called this type of manoeuvring “strategic essentialism” (1988: 205) and then subsequently distanced herself from the phrase because “my notion just simply became the union ticket for essentialism. As to what is meant by strategy, no one wondered about that” (1993:35). It is these strategies that is under examination here, the strategies that can be useful in remaining self-determined while negotiating multiple identities.

“To them I’m just black”

Despite the post-structuralist deconstruction of race and its revelation as a discursive construction, to be identified as Black, is to be under the weight of multiple and contradictory narratives. More specifically for the women in this study, to be a Black woman in America involves navigating historical and cultural narratives, mostly of pathology; while to be a Black Nigerian woman entails navigating another set of culturally specific narratives. Additionally, they found that particularly in America, to be Nigerian becomes ‘to be black’ despite the two not being collapsible. In that context, Nigerian-ness disappears within the larger signifier of Blackness; thus, upon their relocation to the USA, the women were assigned an additional positionality which then intersects and circles around their other multiple positionalities.

Nkechi, who moved to the USA at age 13, states that when she first arrived in the States, her teachers, classmates, and others in her neighborhood would refer to her as Black, whereas in Nigeria, she had thought of herself as Yoruba, her ethnic group. Moreover, even though she was hailed as Black, she found that “some [Black Americans] were mean to me in school” because of her accent, because of negative stereotypes of Africans, and because she lacked their particular cultural references, be it television, movies, or home life. Nkechi felt a divide between herself and Black Americans, a group she felt both pushed into and pushed out of, leaving her multiply alienated in the new country. She acknowledges that such shaky ground made her feel “self-conscious,” “scared,” and “ashamed,” elaborating that, “Still to this day there are things that I can’t say, [it’s] like, ‘No I don’t know that TV show,’ or ‘No, I don’t know what you’re talking about ‘cause I wasn’t born here.’” This is the difficulty of living the in-between, not only theorising the in-between.

Z, as well, expresses feelings of in-between-ness when she describes the reaction she receives from Nigerians:

I get a lot of, 'You're Nigerian? You don't look Nigerian.' And when I tell them my mother is Malaysian they're like, 'Ohhh, that explains why you don't look Nigerian,' because in their heads, you know, you're not really Nigerian. You're a half-caste, you don't belong. And I've gotten used to the not belonging [...] In Malaysia...they will literally not believe me to my face because there are no Malaysian mixed people that look like me. To them I'm just black.

Z's feeling of "not belonging" is the result of multiple ethnicities and nationalities, which effectively become erased when "Black" has come to signify much like a blanket that covers over other identities. Subsequently, the need to reassert these covered-over identities becomes even stronger in such instances, leading Z to say, "Even when I get the American passport, I don't plan on giving up my green one, and I will never be American." She describes herself as Nigerian, despite the awareness that to some Nigerians she does not "look Nigerian" and despite being half Malaysian; the claiming of the "green passport" can be read as the need for self-determination and the need to perform control over how she is defined rather than being weighed down by externally imposed definitions. Furthermore, Z's statement that she will "never be American" can be read as a declaration that she will never allow her Nigerian-ness to be erased, replaced, or conflated with "Black."

Fly also expresses similar sentiments regarding the category "Black." Interestingly, she is the only woman in this study who was not born in Nigeria; rather she was born in the US and then spent her childhood in Nigeria until the age of nine, at which point she moved back to the United States. In spite of her American birth certificate, Fly self-identifies as Nigerian, saying:

[...] people, sometimes they're surprised that I identify as Nigerian and not first generation [...] they're like, 'Oh your parents are Nigerian but you were born here so therefore you're Black.' [...] Like, well actually, I'm Nigerian, I just happen to-I always think of it that I'm a Nigerian that happened to have been born on this continent.

Fly's statement shows not just the conflation of Nigerian with Black, but also the linking of Black to American when she is told that "you were born here so therefore you're Black." Her choice to say "I'm Nigerian" works to criticise the conflation of her nationality with this constructed signifier, and also to critique America's ownership of Blackness. This is relatable to Paul Gilroy's argument that Blackness is not specific or original to America; rather, the construction of what had come to be recognized as Blackness is a product of the transnational movement around the "Black Atlantic" which has been "continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship" (1993:15). These Nigerian diasporic women have literally traversed the "Black Atlantic" in their journeys between Nigeria and America, once again calling up the idea of circularity in their interpretations of their personal, national, and racial identities. In this instance, a *circular consciousness* allows for the deconstruction and reconstruction of Blackness, and as Rinaldo Walcott states, "black diaspora queers have been interrupting and arresting the black studies project" from the start (2005:92).

Fly offers a further breakdown about her relationship with Blackness and Nigerian-ness:

I'm not Black. Black is not my ethnicity [...] Despite this, Black is something I identify with politically and socially given that I've spent so much of my life in the States and I do see myself as part of a global Black community of people [...] I'm not Black. I am Nigerian. Period. I am not Nigerian American. I am Nigerian. To be specific, I am an Ijaw and Urhobo Nigerian [...] I've learned to be a part of Black American culture and given that I live in the States and contribute to the evolution of Black art forms with the art I create, yes, I claim hip hop, soul music, Black American dance styles and the performance arts. I'm still a Nigerian within all that. Whenever anyone asks me where I'm from, I say Nigeria. Because na so.

Fly's assertion requires a complex reading which examines the contradictions within her refrain of "I'm not Black" while also admitting to identifying with certain markers of Black culture as well as admitting belonging to "the global Black community of people." The Nigerian nationalism that Fly exhibits should not be confused with xenophobia, an accusation that is sometimes leveled against immigrant communities. Her statement can be analyzed as a reaction against prescriptive constructions of Blackness, while also maintaining an awareness of the way she is marked as Black, and needing to find a way to live daily under this marker; thus the need to redefine its contours for her specific position – needing to remain "Nigerian within all that." And within being Nigerian, she needs to remain "Ijaw" and "Urhobo," which are her specific ethnicities. Fly is exemplifying *circular consciousness* because Nigeria, Ijaw, Urhobo, Black, and American are all leaving traces upon each other reshaping her self-identity. The pulls of her subjective needs, struggles, and contradictions are in constant motion around her multiple identities.

The women in this study inhabit what Avtar Brah has coined "diaspora space," which is the theoretical space where both the immigrant and the inhabitants of the host country are transformed by their interaction resulting in an arena where "boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them' are contested" (1996:208). They are challenging the US narratives around race, ethnicity, and nationality while these very narratives, particularly Blackness, are destabilizing their own understandings of Nigerian-ness. Thus, space and place, be it geographic location or ideological consciousness bring additional stress to the process of identity construction within intersecting subject positionings.

Strategic Silence

Donna Massey has written about the need to recognise places as intersectional, stating, "If it is now recognized that people have multiple identities then the same point can be made in relation to places. Moreover, such multiple identities can either be a source of richness, or a source of conflict, or both" (1994:5). The women in this study maintained a constant consciousness of the intersectionality of places and the impact of place upon their experiences of intersectionality. As LGBTQ-identified Nigerian women, they were very aware of the places they could be "out" and the places where they needed to be "in." Their ambiguous relationship to "coming out" troubled the notion that inside and outside the closet are mutually exclusive zones.

Place shifts relationships and access to identifiers, and the ability to express LGBTQ subjectivity varies depending on the place: be it a nation, city, street, or house. This stress that accompanies 'place' pushed the women to utilise strategic deployments of identity as they negotiated the disclosure of their sexuality.

The paradigm of "the closet" is structural to queer political strategies and queer academic scholarship. The closet, and the subsequent coming out of the closet, is a narrative that has become ubiquitous with queer identity. "Out of the closets and into the streets" is now an iconic chant. This preoccupation with the closet sets up a dangerously divisive binary between those who are "in" and those who are "out," with those who are "out" being the privileged population, and those who are "in" being the pitiable group. The closet narrative creates a correlation between "out" and *pride*, and "in" and *shame*, and polices what it means to be properly queer. Sexuality becomes intertwined with tropes of visibility and invisibility, thus sexuality becomes something that needs to be seen, spoken, or otherwise made public in order to be legitimised. The coming out narrative is even more damaging when observed from a global vantage point because it then becomes a signifier for modernity. The Western world is able to consider itself modern because its queer population is able to be out, and therefore the non-Western world must be pre-modern or backwards. When coming out is used as a measurement of modernity, it becomes clear how damaging this metaphor can be for non-Western populations.

There are scholars of sexuality who have critiqued the closet narrative, for example, Steven Seidman who criticised the tendency of intertwining shame narratives with sexuality narratives, and argues that coming out is not a universal storyline, but rather is informed by how individuals are positioned socially. Seidman notes that, "[...] decisions to conceal pivot around considerations other than, or in addition to, fear, shame, or guilt. Individuals withhold information about their homosexuality because it is defined as personal, because disclosure would involuntarily 'out' others (e.g. parents or friends), or because they wish to minimize stereotypical reaction" (1999:26). Peter Davies makes a similar argument that the Western script about "shameful unhappiness to happy pride" is misleading, and not only is there no definitive coming out experience, but coming out "is a 'long and winding road': a series of realignments in perception, evaluation, and commitment [...] (1997:75)." Furthermore, Marlon B. Ross has written of his belief that white queer theory is suffering from what he calls "claustrophilia" which he describes as "a fixation on the closet function as the grounding principle for sexual experience, knowledge, and politics" (2005:162).

The women in this study all describe themselves as out in their daily lives, meaning that they have disclosed their sexuality to friends and coworkers, they frequent LGBTQ spaces, and some partake in queer activism. They articulate that their sexuality is a part of their sense of self, and none of the participants express feelings of shame about their sexuality. However, when in the presence of their families – particularly their parents – all the participants note that their relationship to their sexuality, and to "outness," becomes more complex. That is, the women all have an awareness that they are able to be out in their daily lives because they live in separate cities from their parents, which affords them a place to be out. For example, Nkechi says, "I don't live at home, I live clear across the country and they [her parents] have backed off;" and Z says, "For me, I'm fortunate that I have some level of detachment from my family." In this way, their queer diasporic experience is not dissimilar to the American queer narrative which tells of

queer people leaving home and moving to “gay village” in order to be out. However, even as the participants seemingly adopt this aspect of the queer narrative, it is still always informed by their intersectional positioning.

The following comments from Nkechi express her struggles with negotiating coming out around Blackness, Nigerian-ness, and family and she speaks of a divide between herself and other LGBQ Black women in America:

[...] there was still always, like a gap because some of the things that were very strong for certain people, for a lot of black women, I didn't feel the same way about. The background or experiences were not the same, so, I'm talking about I can't just come out because it's not just about, 'Oh, your parents are gonna be mad' or something like that. Like, this is life or death for me almost, and for a lot of Nigerians in that situation. I don't know if it was fully understood [by the Black women] because, you know, it's not the same background.

The previous section of this paper demonstrated how narratives of Blackness fragment when brought into relation with Nigerian-ness, however through Nkechi's words, it becomes clear that both Blackness and Nigerian-ness fragment further when brought into relation with sexuality. Once again, there is circularity here with each identity informing the next and so on. Nkechi is making a distinction that her coming out narrative is different from the (Black) American coming out narrative. For Nkechi, the situation is “life or death” and not just that her parents are “gonna being mad.” Additionally, Nkechi feels that being open with her parents about her sexuality carried the potential for physical danger, as she relates a “scare” she had when she was 19 years old and her parents discovered emails she had sent to a girlfriend:

The whole house shut down and it was like World War III in there. But we were doing a silent war. And my dad I believe almost threw me out 'cause it looked like he was going to either that or like severely beat me. I basically lied my way out of that.

Nkechi attributes the severity of her father's reaction to him being a conservative and religious Nigerian man. However, at this moment in her life she expresses satisfaction with being out in her daily life, and does not see coming out to her family as a marker of self-determination. Therefore, the closet is not an issue that preoccupies her.

Fly also touches on the concern of physical danger as one aspect of her larger problems with how fixed she perceives the notion of coming out to be:

Well, I'm not out to my family in Nigeria, because I don't – it's really interesting, thinking about coming out and what that means in an African context. Because what coming out typically means, you know, is you sit everyone down around dinner and you're like, 'Mom, Dad, I'm gay.' Now, in Nigeria you don't really talk to elders the way that people talk to elders in this country, like, you wouldn't-you just don't do that. [...] So I don't know what coming out in an African context means. And also to layer on top of that [is] the fact that, you know, homosexuality is illegal in Nigeria, and so I'm not trying to put myself in a

position to be in, like, physical danger. And also I don't know Nigeria – the roads, and how to get around – like I know, let's say, New York, right? So it's not safe for me to do that.

Fly's statements shows the impact of transnationality on her interrogations of coming out. She references "Africa," "Nigeria," and "New York," calling to mind, once again, Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic" with its circularities and movements. She is very conscious that despite living in the USA her Nigerian-ness, her specific "African context," pulls against her American "outness". James Clifford writes that diasporic positioning "maintain[s] identifications outside the national/time space in order to live inside, with a difference" (2000:308). In order for Fly to live inside the US, she must maintain a connection to her identification outside it; or in terms of disclosing her sexuality, in order to perform the closet narrative safely, she must maintain a connection to her Nigerian identity. Furthermore, she cannot relate to coming out until she has positioned herself within the narrative, and once positioned, Fly is aware that the coming out story is not easily mapped onto "an African context" because it could lead to "physical danger." This reveals the coming out story for the local conception that it is, and how it is not universally applicable.

Fly and Nkechi's comments also reflect the ways that their Nigerian family culture is not collapsible to American family culture. As Fly says, in America there is a coming out script where "you sit everyone down around dinner and you're like, 'Mom, Dad, I'm gay.'" That script is not translatable to their own "dinner table" because that script is not compatible to their particular diasporic situation. Z, as well, echoes these sentiments about Nigerian family dynamics troubling notions that sexuality needs to be spoken:

I remember one of the strangest things I thought when I came to the US was how Americans could have this—sorry for the generalisation—this mentality where they're like – You can tell them, 'Oh, you know my father doesn't really like that I do this,' and they're like, you know, 'Who cares about your father? Just be with me, you know, forget about your family.' And Nigerians are like, 'Excuse me, did you just talk about my family?' The best way I heard of describing it was that in some cultures you put the individual before the group, and I think in the States it's like that, you know. You're, like, praised for being an individual, in a lot of other cultures, you're seen as selfish if you do that, you're supposed to put your family before yourself, you are supposed to put the wellbeing of the community before yourself, even if it is at personal expense.

Z's account mirrors similar sentiments within the gay Black American population and the importance of family. Historically for Black Americans, family and community have been sites of safety, support, and shelter from societal marginalisation. Therefore, for some gay Black Americans, the decision to potentially disrupt this safe space by coming out is not a decision taken lightly. Likewise, the women in this study are communicating the importance of family in their Nigerian culture, the importance of maintaining family relations, and the significance of respecting the family space. Furthermore, there is suggestion that in Nigerian culture, sexuality is

not an adequate topic of discussion at the “dinner table” or with one’s elders, therefore in that context, silence is not an indicator of shame but ironically a marker of respect.

These issues of speaking and silence are echoed by Fayola and Amaka. Fayola is not out to her parent or siblings yet she feels they “already know,” saying that in her family, “We’re pretty good at keeping our thoughts to ourselves, even from each other.” Even though she has never spoken about it to them, Fayola believes her parents might already know her sexuality because “they’re family [...] family knows.” The Western closet narrative, as it stands, does not leave space for these instances, these glitches, where sexuality can be “known” without being spoken. Amaka’s situation is slightly different because she came out to her parents by introducing them to her girlfriend. Her parents reacted with surprise and disbelief, however since that event – the coming out – her parents do not discuss the topic and Amaka knows not to raise the issue either, saying:

[...] we can kind of have a conversation if we keep it gender neutral, but once I start bringing the gender of the person that I’m seeing into the conversation it becomes, like, a no fly zone.

Amaka chooses to silence her sexuality in order to maintain a relationship with her parents, a relationship that she says she values very much. Of the six women in this study, only Spectra says she is able to have a dialogue, and only with one of her parents, her father:

my mom immediately turned to God to ask him ‘why, why why why and why her?’ and [after] a narrative on the plight of her existence having a queer daughter, that was it [she did not bring it up again]... but my father, on the other hand has been very, very supportive, he follows my blog, and he’s just all around amazing, so yeah I think I’ve gotten the split reaction.

These women are negotiating around speech, silence, visibility and invisibility, without privileging one over the other. They demonstrate that being “in” or “out” are not fixed positions, and are not mutually exclusive and that someone can be both “in” and “out” at the same time, choosing to be strategic in their use of the coming out narrative. Their multiple identities and their simultaneous belonging and not-belonging to many different groups is both deconstructing and reconstructing the Western coming out narrative, as well as pointing out the locations where the narrative is unproductive (for example in “an African context”). Their lived experience shows queer self-determination does not make meaning solely around being “in” or “out,” rather agency can be cultivated from the fluidity of movement around “in” “out” and “in-between.”

Conclusion

The six LGBTQ women of the Nigerian diaspora featured in this project are negotiating the lived experience of multiple subject positionings. It becomes evident that their daily life is not a matter of struggling at the nexus of axes or intersections, but rather that these intersectional identities are in motion. This movement brings them into relation and as they circle over and around each other, the identities—and the women’s self-definitions—are constantly redefined. The

way they relate to being Nigerian is informed by the way they relate to being queer, which is in turn informed by the ways they are marked as Black, which is in turn informed by their gender identity, and so on. I use the term *circular consciousness* to describe this embodied awareness of the circuitousness of identity construction, the circuitousness in our understandings of power and agency, and consciousness as the catalyst for strategies for daily survival. Identity is used in this paper as a concept that Stuart Hall has named “under erasure,” because while it has been exposed as non-essential, as discursively constructed, it is still central to questions of discourse, subjectivity, and power (2000:15). Identity may be a deconstructed concept, nevertheless these women experience “identity formation that locates the enacting of self at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit” (Muñoz 1999:6). I am interested in the potential for agency that can erupt from this “short-circuit.”

Living in-between and being “this and that” is a position the women simultaneously accept and disavow, particularly when in-between-ness is not freely chosen but is a positionality that is thrust upon them. They struggle with how to be Nigerian and something else, how to be Black and something else, how to be queer and something else; acknowledging shared connections and histories, while also maintaining that *something else*. In terms of negotiating Nigerian nationality around US narratives around Blackness, this need to be *something else* is a catalyst for change. For instance, when asked about her nationality Nkechi says, “I’m not fully Nigerian and I’m not fully American, I am definitely half and half,” and then interestingly she mentions her siblings, saying, “my brothers, not so much, at least the last one is like, ‘I’m American,’ but he’s probably a quarter Nigerian, I’m half and half.” Nationality is understood as a sliding scale, it can be “half and half” or “a quarter,” showing a conscious shifting and realigning of identities. There is fragmentation, yet the capability for self-determination remains, much like when Fly stated that she is “not Black” while simultaneously acknowledging that Black is something she can identify with “politically and socially.” A *circular consciousness* allows for the understanding that one is involuntarily marked by categories (such as Black), yet from within that category the women are able to expand the boundaries; in this instance, by showcasing that Black is immigrant, Black is queer, Black is Nigerian, and so on.

Additionally, the interrogation of various permutations of multiple identities allows for the eruption of new understandings of intersectionality. In this study, bringing diasporic subjects into relation with sexuality studies and queer theories revealed thought-provoking themes, such as the critique of the “coming out” narrative. Gayatri Gopinath discusses this need for added flexibility in the use of the closet when theorizing alternative sexuality, here using “the quilt” as representational of the closet:

Shifting critical scrutiny away from the space beneath the quilt to the quilt itself suggests the possibility of a reterritorialized desire that exceeds the master narrative of the closet... The quilt can be read not so much as a concealing device beneath which the ‘truth’ or visual ‘proof’ of sex and desire lie, as much as a kind of mediating and constantly shifting surface that negotiates and marks the border between different economies and organizations of erotic pleasure (2005:150).

The idea of the closet as a “mediating and constantly shifting surface” provides a more complicated and usable re-working of the coming out narrative, one that allows the closet to be

used more flexibly in individual strategic navigations of visibility and invisibility. For the participants, the closet is already a “shifting surface,” a transformative discursive space where subjects and identities can re-align. Through this “reterritorialization” of the closet, a queer diasporic positioning redefines the meanings of inside and outside, pre-modern and modern, while also showcasing the importance of bringing space and place to our understanding of intersectional identities. In their lived experience, issues of location, translocation, geography, and citizenship are always in circulation, as well as the knowledge that “the dinner table” or family home is not a safe or appropriate place for coming out, whereas living in a “gay village” away from family home offers a place for different constructions of identity. Also highlighted is the need to engage both the global and the local in theorising intersectionality.

Viewing the lived experience of intersectionality as *circular consciousness* contributes to deconstructing power as discourse, that is exposing identity categories as discursively constructed – for example, that Black is not a real or fixed identity. However, this category, while understood as constructed is tangibly experienced in daily life, and this opens up strategies for agency. There is a circularity around power, subjectivity, and agency which allows for the conscious, strategic deployment of identities, with identity understood as “a process never completed – always ‘in process’” and “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (Hall 2000:6; 1990:225).

From her position of “becoming” Spectra reflects on her experience of, “[...] coming to the United States and realizing that you’re being defined–redefined–in this whole new way,” and further noting that this redefinition from the outside requires “picking up and sort of slotting yourself with that movement as well [...] and everything is a queer issue just like everything is a woman’s issue.” Spectra’s location as transnational, diasporic queer facilitates the connection of “queer issues” to “woman’s issues” and most likely also to international issues, Black issues, immigrant issues, and so on. She is then able to use her *circular consciousness* to enact the intersectional call for political coalitions based on relations to power. It is this political consciousness that my use of *circularity* seeks to return to analyses of intersectionality, given that “a dynamic consciousness is vital to both individual and group agency” (Collins 2000:285).

Multiple identities that struggle with maneuvering being *this*, *that*, and *something else* are in constant motion, constant evolution. The positionalities of Nigerian, Black, lesbian, woman, and immigrant may be experienced circularly, yet the very real existence of oppression requires a hierarchising of identities, followed by careful deployment of these identities to ensure daily survival. The continued interpolation of different permutations of multiple identities is necessary for maintaining diligence to the task of interrogating intersections, and bringing flexibility and fluidity to continued theorisations of power, subjectivity, and agency.

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