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Home and belonging: African women in 'crisis' Greece
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Abstract
In a Greek context in which full integration depends upon looking and sounding 'native', African women are made hypervisible in discourses of the Other. Although the right to mobility is much emphasized in debates about migration, it appears to be their 'being at home-ness' that is most controversial. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Athens in 2014-2015 on the everyday lives of African women, this paper explores home as a fluid yet meaning-ful and meaning-making idea and practice from women's own perspectives; the stories and practices through which a location becomes (or fails to become) a home; and the communal activities through which women performatively construct, and claim, a sense of belonging. The research reveals that although these women may be perceived as suspended 'in-between' homes, most experience a complex – if sometimes ambivalent – belonging to multiple homes located in real and imaginary spaces both 'there' and 'here'.

'No place like home'

Introduction

> They will ask you something like 'when will you be leaving,' because they think that ah, she is just visiting – you are going. But when they see that actually yes, you are not going, you want to stay, they have some question they ask you: 'Why do you choose to stay here? Why can't you go to your country? Because no place like home.' I say 'we know that no place like home, but nobody will be comfortable in a home and move to somewhere else'… To me a home is where you feel comfortable. It doesn't mean where you are born or raised up but where you are happy and you feel comfortable.

Hana, from Sierra Leone, 29 years in Greece

In our contemporary world the question of home has become increasingly complicated for more and more people. The meaning of home appears to be especially complex for those who, like the women at the heart of this study, find themselves at the interplay of a range of locations in relation to class, racialization, and national belonging (Anthias, 2008). Bearing the external marker of racialized 'otherness' according to dominant normative definitions of Greekness, African women are amongst those who become defined by a static foreignness which constructs them as 'eternal newcomers', 'forever suspended in time, forever "just arriving"' (El-Tayeb, 2011, p.xxv). Invisibility and/or assimilation is not a strategy available to them, as it has been for many white migrants of, for example, Albanian descent. A climate appears to have developed in which foreignness has become grounds for suspicion – a question you can ask anyone (Ahmed, 2016).

As Hana's quote above illustrates, 'The home question' (Mohanty, 2003, p.126) reminds these women daily that they are seen as liminal in Greece – at best temporary guests who are '*just visiting*', at worst intruders who do not belong. Their belonging is always open to dispute. Yet there are many ways in which people come to feel 'at home' in a place. Exploring home from the women's own perspectives as a fluid yet meaning-*ful* and meaning-*making* idea and practice, this paper examines the ways in which those who have left, or lost, former homes deal with the complexities and ambiguities that often result. Home-making is thus shown to be an important on-going physical and affective process. A complex and fluid understanding of belonging emerges – one that disrupts essentialist and sentimentalized notions of home as always secure places of 'authentic' belonging and sheds light on the social processes and everyday practices through which a location becomes (or fails to become) a home.

The Research

This paper draws on data collected over the 11-month period in 2014-2015 that I spent in Athens conducting research on the everyday lives of African women. Rather than focusing on the 'bigger picture' of European migration flows, macro-economic indicators, and totalizing state discourse, I set out to analyze the less explored everyday practices and experiences of people affected by migration. In contrast to the quantitative, positivist approaches that often fail to properly contextualize data or address gender-biases in research design (Mahler & Pessar, 2006), I employed ethnographic methods to reveal 'the actual practices of actual people' (Smith, 1987, p.213).

Moving migrant women's experiences from the margins to the centre (hooks, 1994), I did not view women as 'objects' to be observed and studied, but rather as co-participants in the research process. This epistemological stance had important implications for the specific methods I chose and how I used them in carrying out the research. In addition to 'participant-observation' research, I conducted in-depth interviews with eighteen women who, as

knowledge-producers, were given space in which to articulate their own experiences, in their own words and from their own viewpoints.[1] Rather than taking the position of 'speaking for', as Alcoff (1991) argues against, I tried, wherever possible, to create the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with, rather than for, others.

This approach also informed my decision to conduct a participatory action research project in the form of a visual diaries project (VDP). As a tool, the camera has the potential to challenge hegemonic discourses and stereotypes of migrant women through what they choose to reveal and how they project themselves to the world. The idea was, therefore, not only to allow participants control over how they are represented, but also to potentially provide new ways of 'seeing' women who are so often hidden from view or known only through how 'outsiders' perceive and represent them.

The project involved a group of ten women recording visual diaries of their everyday lives with disposable cameras. The questions I asked them to reflect upon when taking the photographs were deliberately open to avoid imposing too many conditions.[2] These questions were: what happens in a typical day in your life in Athens? And, what are the most significant moments/events in your day? The hope was that common themes, issues, and experiences amongst this politically, socially, and economically marginalized group would arise from the images (as well as, possibly, from the act of taking them) around which a group discussion could be held at a later date.

After several weeks and multiple delays, the women came together to share, and talk about their images. As they did so commonalities and differences emerged; experiences and opinions were verified and disputed, agreed upon and challenged. They shared joys and pains as memories were triggered and women told one another about themselves and their lives, past and present. The discussion ranged from the intimate and detailed to the broad and general – from who cooks at home to how African women and men are treated differently in Greek society.

Often it was not what the camera 'saw' but what it could not that was particularly poignant. There were photos women had difficulty in taking for practical reasons. On one occasion, for instance, one woman managed to take a photo in an unemployment benefit office just after a disagreement over a rejected application but was prevented from taking any more. There were also those photos that they could not take because there was something missing from their lives: a desperately wanted refugee passport, money, or the years lost with children left behind, now grown. There were also images women wished were not there: those taken outside the asylum directorate, for instance, or of workplaces they wished they did not have to go to so that they could stay home with their families.

Some of the images from this project are included in this paper. These images speak of women's agency and everyday presence in Athens: they show women shopping, cooking, working, going to church, and socializing – spending time with their friends and families and fulfilling everyday tasks. Looking at the images now, with a little more distance, I am struck by how, both knowingly and unknowingly, the images are subversive, challenging the trope of the suffering, fragile migrant woman (Kihato, 2007). They tell of lives being lived as fully as possible and, as such, reject constructions of these women as in any way in limbo or 'out of place'.

Familiarity and Home
Inevitably, a sense of familiarity – of knowing almost unthinkingly where one is, and where one needs to go for specific purposes and how to get there (Hage, 1997) – grows as people

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[1] These women were from seven different countries across Africa: from Cameroon, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. Other women I met, but who were less central to my research, were from these and other African countries, including: Kenya, Seychelles, the Congo, and Tanzania.
[2] These questions were inspired by a similar project conducted by Kihato (2010) with migrant women in South Africa

spend time in a place. However, for some of the women I met, the mere act of negotiating their way around a city in which they were hypervisible Others (and often did not speak the language) was a source of great discomfort, anxiety, and insecurity. Confronted with these difficulties 'outside', where they often felt vulnerable to forces beyond their control, the domestic spaces of home acquired even more significance (Kihato, 2013). They became not only important protected spaces of inclusion, but also spaces in which women are able to exercise some agency – where they could create a sense of familiarity, ease, and belonging.

Most of the women lived in apartment blocks from the 1960s similar to those I had been visiting family and friends in for years. I quickly recognized their cramped lay-outs, crumbling pastel-coloured bathrooms, and tiny kitchens. What was less familiar to me were the 'tangible mementoes' (Berger, 1984, p.64) with which women had merged current homes with past homes, making these home-spaces both more habitable and more homely places (Hage, 1997). The walls were decorated with photos of the women's younger selves posing with relatives or friends in Africa, Eritrean baskets sat nestled in corners, and Nigerian music videos played on a TV screen. Sideboards displayed keepsakes that reflected complex belonging: a miniature Sierra Leonean and Greek flag (Gloria), the scarf of an Athens football team (Layanah), and a Greek Orthodox icon (Lauretta). These flats may have been far from women's ideal homes, but even to me – an outsider – they provided '*intimations of homeliness*, hints of those feelings, and the possibility for more' (Hage, 1997, p.4 – emphasis in original).

After spending time with these women as they struggled with the complexities and ambiguities of inhabiting multiple homes, I came to understand how important these home-spaces were to them. Indeed, domestic spaces and the tasks associated with them were often key protagonists in women's discussions and narratives. Initially these topics struck me as commonplace and uninteresting – as too mundane to explore analytically. They also troubled me: I felt resistant to the emphasis they placed on women's gendered roles as housekeepers, nurturers, and cleaners. After all, I had set out to challenge stereotypical representations of African women, not reinforce them. Upon reflection I soon realised that although the labour of re-producing homes is often designated (and, consequently, devalued) as 'women's work' (Young, 2005; Ahmed et al., 2003), it represents a process whereby a belief in connectedness and rightful belonging to a place is engendered (Taylor, 2009). So, though it is tempting to leave out the many conversations women had about ordinary domestic tasks, to do so would be to deny not only the 'crucial human value' (Young, 2005, p.125) of such labour, but also its meaning in the women's lives.

The gendering of home-making suggested by the VDP images was supported by references women made to being '*treated like a slave*' within the home and to men being more '*in the world*'. Comments such as '*When I am at home, I'm still doing for people else*' suggest the sheer amount of labour that women do within domestic spaces. In spite of this gendering, the images and narratives do not fit into dominant feminist discourses that frame women's domestic roles and the housework they do as patriarchal oppression (see also Kihato, 2010). Rather, the home emerges as a complex site in which (patriarchal) control and labour mix with care, pride, and stability. The activities women chose to capture suggest they are not only a source of pride, but also an expression of their identities as African women, as mothers caring and providing for their children, and as creative and skilful individuals. This is how the women chose to represent themselves to me and 'the world'.

The women's images illustrate that routine chores are a large part of women's lives both in terms of hours spent and in giving meaning and structure to their days. These daily rituals of home are part of the processes of emplacement through which, by generating a relationship of belonging between person and place, home is both constituted and claimed (Hammond, 2004; Appadurai, 1996). Particularly for women who feel the burden of their liminality, the habits, and daily rhythms of routines, such as food preparation, grocery shopping, cleaning, eating, and caring for relatives can be very rooting (see figures 1, 2 and 3). An important source of stability, they provide an opportunity for women to establish a

sense of continuity, to sustain the rhythms of life and to exercise agency at a time of destabilization. These sometimes mundane daily tasks provide 'the raw material of repetition' through which a shelter can be built (Berger, 1984, p.64).

Home and Away

The women's images, activities, and feelings of 'at homeness' disrupt the binary opposition between 'home' and 'away'. So too do women's descriptions of the disorientation they experienced on return visits to their home countries. As a non-linear process, familiarity can be both gained and lost as people move between, and inhabit, different spaces.

Figure 1: *Making dinner* (photo: visual diaries project)

As Madison (2006, p.248) observes, 'though there seems to be a desire for the home country to remain frozen in time and unchanging, the inevitability of change means that home also becomes a foreign country, while simultaneously deeply familiar (stranger in a familiar land).' Homes, it would seem, do not stop evolving simply because we no longer inhabit them on a daily basis. Consider, for example, Lauretta's description of visiting Sierra Leone after nearly a decade away:

> You know what I find out about myself? I was having that nostalgia for my country. I'm thinking about my country. I feel I am from Sierra Leone. I'm a Sierra Leonean. I'm a foreigner in Greece, you know. But when I visit my country – when I was in my country I realise that I am… what I mean – I am no longer belong to Sierra Leone. You understand? In Sierra Leone I feel not – not even me – my actions and I was not in… I was out of track, you know what I mean? Out of time.

Here, Lauretta describes experiencing a temporal dislocation from her former hometown, in which she is '*out of track*' and '*out of time*'. Similarly, after 25 years in Greece, Pearl was quite literally lost when she visited Nigeria. '*Everything seems different*,' she explained. '*Even I can't find my way to my house. Somebody needs to take me*.' No longer feeling that she possesses maximum spatial knowledge and practical know-how in Nigeria leads Pearl to reassess where home is. '*Greece is really home*,' she concludes, '*because when I went to Nigeria last year it was like I am in a different place. But coming back to Greece I felt a great relief. Though it shouldn't be like that. Maybe because all the youthful years I spent it here*.'

Home is not a place that exists apart as an empty shell for our belonging; 'being-at-home', Ahmed (1999, p.341) writes, 'suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, inhabit each other.' Thus, the lived experience of being-at-home involves the enveloping of subjects in a space which is not simply outside them such that Lauretta feels different – '*not even me*'. This experience leads her to reassess not only where she belongs, but also who she is in terms of her identity:

> Yes I feel like I'm a Greek. Believe it. It's strange but it's true. Yes, yes, I was misplaced from my country to, you know, staying in a country whether I like it or not. My whole structure, characteristic, is changed with not my knowledge.

Separated from the place of her birth and inhabiting a new place that has acquired meaning through daily practices (Hammond, 2004), Lauretta considers herself '*misplaced*' from 'her country'. With time, Lauretta's new home had become inscribed on her skin and in her body – her '*whole structure*' had changed. The immersion of self in locality is, therefore, not simply about inhabiting an already constituted space (from which one can simply depart and remain the same). Were this the case, as a Sierra Leonean by birth, Lauretta would feel more at home in Freetown despite her time in Greece. Instead, and contrary to her own expectations, because the home is not exterior to the self but implicated in it, Lauretta, like Pearl and many others, discovered that it is impossible to return to a place that was once lived as home (Ahmed, 1999). Migration thus involves not only spatial but also temporal dislocation. 'The past' becomes associated with a home that no longer exists except in the imagination, and so is impossible to inhabit (and be inhabited by) in the present. In this sense, migration is a process of estrangement – of becoming estranged from that which was once inhabited as home (ibid).

In women's narratives, visits to former homes which they were no longer 'inhabited in the same way by that which appears as familiar' (Ahmed, 1999, p.343) appeared to invoke a kind of discomfort in the body. They described having become used to a different way of life and cited the need for vaccinations, no longer being able to drink the water, and being kept awake by things once familiar (the noise of neighbours and generators, the darkness of power cuts) as evidence of 'no longer belonging-ness'. As Garrett (2011, p.58) observes, 'Nothing kills a warm, nostalgic feeling for a place like visiting it in real time'. After ten years of being away from Ethiopia, Rose explained that '*the system has changed – so you go home but you don't feel you belong*.' Adanech felt this so strongly when she went back to Ethiopia after separating from her Greek husband after only one year of marriage that she soon returned to Greece. Though Adanech continues to feel an emotional or even ontological attachment (Yuval-Davis, 2011) to her home country, she, like Lauretta, recognises that the experience of migration and the inevitable passing of time means it's '*like you become another person [...] to pick up your life where you left it is very difficult. To go and be a worker for someone else it's very difficult. I have other requirements now. I've got older, I've lived another way of life.*'

Despite missing her country deeply, Adanech is painfully aware that the experience of actually being there might not be *felt* as home – that there too she may '*feel foreign*'. So, in spite of believing themselves to be intimately connected to the spaces they are revisiting, returning after so many years makes individuals feel out of place as they no longer 'fit' with their surroundings (Taylor, 2009).

> And the other thing is it's a little bit difficult to coexist with them. I can't get into their thinking, because I've grown distanced a little. I think differently. [...] They are far more innocent people there. And I was once upon a time. Now I'm not. Because life makes you much harder. [...] I don't have the same opinions or thoughts about life anymore. It's like you become another person.

Here we see the splitting of 'Home' as place of origin and 'home' as the sensory world of everyday experience (Ahmed, 1999). Estranged from the community she left behind, the 'we' of Adanech's former life has become 'they'. Estranged from that which was once familiar (things are now '*a little bit strange*' for her there), Adanech is now familiar with a life in Greece from which she feels continually excluded. As a result, Adanech lives her life with a feeling that she is '*sto pouthena*' [nowhere]. Navigating a life lived between homes, and the divide between familiarity on the one hand and emotional attachment on the other, prevents Adanech embodying and experiencing either place fully as home. Without the security she feels when she is with 'her people', where '*the joy is real, the sadness is real, nothing is fake,*' Adanech cannot feel the 'stability of self' that Anthias (2008: 8) argues is necessary for an individual to feel she belongs to any social or geographical place. As Adanech expressively explained, it is too difficult to '*scrape together*' all of her '*pieces*' in order to feel '*this my home*'.

The experience of spaces, places, locales, and identities to which we feel we no longer belong often prompts us to ask where we *do* belong (Anthias, 2006). This can lead to a sense of loss and liminality in which belonging is no longer felt in either home, as in Adanech's case; or it can reinforce a greater sense of belonging in new homes, as Lauretta explained: '*But when I here I know every bit. Nothing is strange. You understand what I mean. I have my key, I open my apartment, I come home. You know, I feel home. I said I finally reach home*.' Consequently, for Lauretta, as with Pearl, the experience of returning to a home no longer experienced in the body as such seems to have inspired a greater sense of belonging in Athens: '*I feel different,*' Lauretta recalls. '*When I come back I feel home. I feel that I am home*'. After the disruption of vising her '*own country,*' Lauretta regains a sense of familiarity upon her return to Athens. With the return to the normal rhythms of her daily life, she regains the feeling of being emplaced in the everyday context of her existence. Crucially, this is in direct contrast with the old idea that migrants experience the period of migration as a suspension of their real life, which will be continued after the final return home (El-Tayeb, 2011). '*When I come home,*' Lauretta explained, '*all that confusion that I was having in my own country… when I return to Greece I feel I arrive home now. Life goes on. I arrive home.*'

Figure 2: *Doing each other's hair at home* (photo: visual diaries project)

Figure 3: *Food shopping in downtown Athens* (photo: visual diaries project)

Community and Recognition

The feeling of community is crucial for feeling at home. It involves, above all, living in a space where one recognises people as 'one's own' and where one feels recognised by them

as such (Hage, 1997). This was something women often felt, at least initially, but was lost with migration. Even Lauretta, who experienced arrival in Athens as a positive change, was made fully aware that she was no longer amongst her own. Lauretta now chuckles as she recalls hearing excited cries from a balcony in downtown Athens: '*Maria! Maria! Ela na deis! Come and see! There's a black woman passing by!*' Her lack of familiarity with the language, her evident visibility (and novelty) in the eyes of Athenians and a range of new experiences – from seeing her first transvestite (she thought she was seeing a ghost) to attending a Greek Orthodox church at Easter – left little doubt that she was a foreigner in a strange land (and a stranger in a foreign one). '*I was like a villager freshly arrived in the big city*,' Lauretta observes, with affection for her former self.

Yet when Lauretta was finally able to visit her '*own country*' she was surprised to discover that people there no longer recognised her as their 'own' either: '*I was not the Lauretta they know before.*' Lauretta's explanation for this, more than 30 years later, reminds us of the performative nature of identity (Butler, 1988).

> Yes, I was behaving like Greek. Not that I wanted to behave like a Greek, because by the, you know by the feedback of the people who see you, because you went in the community now. You don't know how you are behaving. I was not behaving like the Lauretta they know before. Everybody say that I am change. My movement is change.

A friend, who finally located Lauretta's house in Sierra Leone after being told by neighbours that '*one stranger woman lives there*,' summed it up when she told her: '*Nobody knows you.*' From this moment on, informed by the '*feedback of the people who see you*' that she was no longer recognised by those she considered as her own, Lauretta felt '*more Greek*'.

Place changes us, Massey (2005, p.154) writes, 'not through some visceral belonging (some barely changing rootedness, as so many would have it) but through the practising of place… place as an arena where negotiation is forced upon us.' No longer practised in the place of her birth, Lauretta soon realised she was now also read as a stranger by locals in Freetown.

> They are looking you and they will start talk. The only difference [with Greece was] I understand the language. They said 'oooh, this one she is not from here. She is a foreigner.' They used to gossip, the women. But most of them don't even think if I can speak the language. You understand. [It was] the way I was dressed, my behaviour, everything, you know.

Thus, the experience of going 'back home' disrupts essentialist notions that one simply or ontologically 'belongs' to the world or to any group within it (Bell, 1999). Unfortunately for Lauretta, and other African women in Athens, these are the very same essentialisms that prevent them being accepted as 'at home' in Greece. Lauretta had become 'a foreigner' in both Athens and Freetown.

A similarly complex positioning was highlighted by Ayobami who, at 27 years old, is the youngest of the participants and, after ten years in Greece (during which time she finished high school and attended a Greek university) considers herself 'African-Greek'. Ayobami is comfortable with her dual-identity; others – on both 'sides' of her identity equation – seem less so:

> When I hang out with Nigerian people they don't count me Nigerian enough. And when I go to the Greek they don't count me Greek enough. And I'm like who… I'm not even a biracial so… I understand you doing that to somebody who is biracial, it's normal. But like the Nigerian people think my mentality is much more Greek than being Nigerian. And the Greek think that I have a Nigerian side of me that they don't understand.

Ayobami's observations remind us that the way in which one's belonging is defined – both by ourselves and others – is often not only relational and situational, but also relative. This, as Lauretta's experience also demonstrates, suggests that our sense of who we are in the world shifts according to our location (social as well as spatial), and that sometimes this is a question of difference and not as much as it is about belonging. Thinking of our identities as relational to location in this way, is not simply a matter of identification; it is about our lived experiences and the different contexts in which our identifications are practised and performed (Anthias, 2006, 2008). When it comes to being recognised as 'one's own', this may, however, lead to an absence of recognition – or to feelings of rejection – and, therefore, to a failure to feel 'at home'.

Family and Belonging
The affective dimension allowed by the notion of belonging, which includes the sense of security and well-being associated with feeling 'at home', is, for many of us, experienced when we are with family and loved ones. For some women, like Nneoma who lives with her husband and three daughters in Athens, this feeling is strongly associated with domestic home-spaces as the centre of family life. This was reflected in the VDP where children featured strongly and were nearly always represented in the home – hanging out with friends, playing, posing for the camera, and being bathed. When recognition from the wider community is largely experienced as *mis*recognition, the smaller units of family and close friends are likely to become even more important sources of feelings of belonging.

For women like Adanech, Rose and Saba, who live alone in Athens, the affective dimension of being 'at home' is largely experienced in their daily lives as absence. Adanech explained that it's not a lack of children or the fact that her husband lives in the U.S. that prevents her feeling at home in Athens – it is missing her family '*in general*'.

> I feel that I don't belong here. You want this to be home, here, but a lot of things are missing – a lot of pieces – and it's difficult to gather all of your pieces to feel 'this my home'. So for me whether good, bad, rich, poor, whatever – it's the people who love you without wanting anything in return from you. Without you offering them anything. They don't hurt you. They accept you as you are. Those people for me are my family. I don't mean my country – I mean my family. I might also be in my country and feel foreign, you don't know, because the things there are a little bit strange. But where my family is I feel secure, that I'm at home, even if we gather in a café, family, to laugh, the joy is real, the sadness is real, nothing is fake when you're with your people.

Emphasising that it is the people not the place that enables her to feel 'at home', Adanech, like Lauretta, recognises that she may '*feel foreign*' in 'her country'. She is clear: '*I don't belong to my country – I belong to my family*.' The feeling of ease and comfort Adanech experiences when with her family was similarly expressed by Hana: '*You know when you are with your family you feel different. You have the, you know, the communication is different…*'

When women leave their Homes they not only move out of the contexts of familiarity discussed above, they also face the loss (or alteration) of networks, relationships and socially familiar environments (Taylor, 2009). Though the loss of the homely feeling of community is more common among new arrivals, it can also be experienced by women at particular moments in their lifetime. After all, integration is not a linear process, and feelings of belonging change over an individual's life course in complex ways (Zontini, 2015). Older women like Ruth, for instance, missed the absence of care an extended family would have given her in her later years had she stayed in Nigeria. Echoing Adanech's comments, Ruth described the impact of this as a kind of incompleteness:

> Yesterday as I was cooking I was so tired. I say I wish I was in Africa now. I would just sit down and somebody else would say 'Mommy what are you going to eat?' I

will say this is what I want to eat they will go to the kitchen and cook it. It's like this place we are now it's… There are many days it doesn't make you happy. You feel empty somehow. You feel that you are not complete.

Here, Ruth's nostalgic experience, and the fantasy prompted by it, is essentially a depressive one and as such is an example of what Hage (1997, p.5) refers to as a 'negative intimation' triggered by an experiential absence. It is the accumulation of this type of nostalgia that can lead to states of homesickness (ibid).

As Ruth reminds us, community is also a space where one knows that at least some people (family, friends, neighbours…) can be morally relied upon for help (Hage, 1997). The creation of support networks is particularly important not only for more vulnerable and older women, but also for those who have migrated alone and are missing the supports of extended families. My research suggests that these women find ways of coping day-to-day through everyday interactions and chance encounters, and that it is often thus that the challenges of homemaking come to be understood, met, and overcome (Piacentini, 2014). The importance of the support provided by other women was corroborated by the amount of images women took of friends as they went about their daily tasks together. Women's relationships and social webs are part of their tactics of survival. Saba's pictures, for instance, show friends helping her to prepare her hugely labour-intensive Eritrean cuisine for an event she was catering (figure 4). These relationships also, of course, have an emotional value that goes far beyond mere practical support; they provide the affective bonds that are an important dimension of feeling 'at home'. When younger women referred to Lauretta and Ruth as 'Mommy' it was often more than a sign of respect – it was a term of endearment.

Figure 4: *Cooking together for an event* (photo: visual diaries project)

'We feel more African'

Community is also, crucially, a feeling of shared symbolic forms, morality, values, and language (Hage, 1997). A home is imagined, according to Hage, as a space where one possesses maximal communicative power (in Bourdieu's sense) – meaning the capacity to speak appropriately in a variety of recognisable situations.[3] This was something women claimed through their 'supra-national' African identity (Waite & Cook, 2010). There was an ease of understanding, Hana explained, and a shared context both past and present, between African women: '*we see ourselves all the same, whether we are from Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, we are all just the same. We all have something common*.' Although not the givens they often appear to be, notions of 'origins' and 'roots' can take on added significance as individuals experience the disruption and displacement of migration – particularly when women experience everyday racism, legal abjectification, and social exclusion. As Ruth explained, strong identifications with Africa are not just about a shared nostalgia for the

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[3] Bourdieu (1977) conceptualizes home as a place where a 'well-fitted habitus' operates to create spaces of maximal bodily, spatial and communicative knowledge.

'then-and-there'; they are also a reaction to living conditions in the 'here-and-now' (Senoçak, 2000, cited in El-Tayeb, 2011, p.51).

> What make us feel more Africa is like the society we have is not accepting us. That is the one reason that makes us feel more African every day. Since the place we are they are not accepting us let us believe that this is where we come from. In that place they will not refuse us. This is the reason why we feel more African.

In a context in which they are excluded and made to '*feel more African every day*,' asserting one's cultural identity and cultural 'sameness' becomes a way to affirm alternative identities both publicly and privately (Piacentini, 2014). Lauretta echoed Ruth's words:

> When you are trying to integrate to a society, and you see many tumbling blocks, you don't have no choice than feeling yourself. Because no matter what I do, I am from Africa. And I feel more African […] There is many thing that make me feel more African inside Europe.

Viewed in this way, evocations of 'Africa' can be understood as a tactic of emplacement as women try to re-orientate, form new social networks, and learn to negotiate new economic, political, and cultural realities (Brah, 1996). Neither about 'going back' nor escaping the present, claiming the African identity is a way to shore up a sense of self against othering forces that define women by that which they are not – by their 'non-Greekness'. As Lauretta put it: '*by rejecting you all the time, you find your roots, you understand. Because you cannot stay without no identity. So you have to stick to your feel African*.' Doing so makes the present more habitable and women are better able to face what Young (2005, p.143) refers to as 'the open negativity of the future.'

Figure 5: *Women on their way to a blessing ceremony, Polygono neighbourhood, Athens.* (photo: Viki Zaphiriou-Zarifi)

African churches and collective belonging

In Athens, one of the main sites in which the reconfiguration of home for those who have left home (Ahmed, 1999) takes place is in the growing number of 'African churches' in the city centre. Here, through collective acts of remembering, an 'African' identity and feeling of community can freely, and regularly, be (re)enacted. The creation of an imagined community and feelings of 'at homeness' articulate with multi-local terrains of belonging to create what Fortier (1999, p.41; 2006, p.65) refers to as a form of 'ethnic intimacy'. Deeply rooted in Africa, the traditions and practices collectively performed create an important Athenian space for the manifestation of a community and the 'reterritorialization' of cultural identity. Connections are formed, as Ayobami put it, through bringing '*the culture from home back here.*' Singing familiar songs together or practising the 'call-and-respond discursive mode' (Hill Collins, 1990, p.264) of sermonising (which I witnessed as one congregation responded

intermittently to the pastor's sermon by shouting '*the fire will scatter!*') are acts that resonate with past homes, with other people (both present and absent) and with other times and spaces. They also provide rare moments of freedom and release. What is more, we all need a world we can inhabit comfortably and where we know instinctively how things are 'done'. As Saba explained, church provided a '*good, safe place*' that contrasted with the daily experience of the outside.

Going to church marks a different quality of time and space in otherwise difficult lives. For many women, it was the highlight of their week. '*Sunday is different day for me*,' Saba simply stated. Many shared Lilian's feelings of almost debilitating loss should something prevent them from being able to attend:

> I hold it dearly to my heart. If I don't go to church I feel I have lost something. If I don't go to church on Sunday I feel maybe I am dying. Even if I am very sick I try – I believe if I get there and I will see people and just get there I am ok. So I try… it gives me joy. And I believe Africans we find joy in going to gather in the presence of God.

Even for those who do not have a strong religious belief, the routine of going to church gives shape to their weeks. It provides a rare opportunity in busy lives to '*gather*' and '*see people*'. Churchgoers wear their best clothes, exchange news, share experiences, and show off their children. Even going, as Pearl did in the past (before she became '*crazy about church*') '*just to fill the chair* […without] *even hearing what they are saying or what they are preaching*' has its value in building a sense of 'at homeness' with others.

It was not the physical spaces of these churches that were of significance. Those characterless 'event' rooms, some of which reminded me of bland conference halls, were imbued with meaning through collective ritual. The bodies and movements that inhabited them brought them to life. Common histories, experiences and places were created, imagined, and sustained in what Bell (1999) calls 'the performativity of belonging'. Importantly, rather than simply giving symbolic expression to a 'we', the African identity is formed within these locations as an *effect* of events, rituals, and practices (Fortier, 2006). As Fortier discovered in her study of Italian migrants, these churches are better understood as performative sites for the construction and display of a particular version of African ethnicity. Here, women and men could be 'African' without being concerned with the 'majority gaze' (Zontini, 2015, p.335). These spaces were hidden in the centre of the city and, as I was to discover, often near impossible to find without guidance. The displays that took place within them were meant for the benefit of the *insider's* gaze. As Fortier (2006, p.68) writes, 'it is turned inwards, "we show ourselves to ourselves".'

It is important to note, however, that these are imperfect, dynamic sites of belonging and that the communities they create, and of which they are a product, also have elements of exclusion/inclusion. There will be those who are considered insiders, and those who are not; and even amongst those insiders, as with any group, there will be boundaries, hierarchies, and elements of competition. Painfully aware of this, Nneoma keeps members of the congregation at a distance for fear of judgment about the poor conditions in which she and her family were living. What is more, inevitably, the meaning of church and the rituals practised therein will have different meaning for different women at different times of their lives, as Pearl's changing feelings demonstrate. Put off by the social pressures (and costs) which being a member entails Lauretta no longer goes: '*they are gossiping themself if you wear the same clothes two times. They gossip themself which shoes you wear, all those, so you have to…. This our African church*'.

Though the feelings involved in being part of a community may not always be positive, for the majority of these women church appears to be a hugely significant piece of their home puzzle. The communities and networks they create (and are a part of) not only provide practical supports, but also enable women to experience the comfort of being amongst 'one's own'. Such collective spaces are rare for African migrants in Athens, yet they can play a vital role in helping people to confront the challenges that life in Greece is likely to bring. As the women's narratives illustrate, these spaces and the communities they represent help people both practically and affectively to build a shelter from social and political crisis, from which they can better grasp Greek (and European) opportunities (Hage, 1997).

Figure 6: *African Church, Athens* (photo: Viki Zaphiriou-Zarifi)

Conclusion

Though African women in Athens may be perceived as being suspended 'in-between' homes, the research has revealed that they do not necessarily experience their belonging as such. Instead, most women expressed a complex, if sometimes ambivalent, belonging to multiple homes located in real and imaginary spaces both 'there' and 'here'. Home, in all its different permutations, appeared to be never far from their minds. It featured in women's narratives as a domestic space, as the countries, communities, localities, and families they had left behind, and as the current context in which they live their lives, yet are often made to feel not 'at home' in. Even for those who perceived their spatial home to be a place of fixity, slippage between 'home', as the space of domestic activities, and 'Home', as country or continent of origin, reflected a multi-scale, multi-spatial, multi-tiered and multi-layered belonging in process (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Waite & Cook, 2010).

Although the right to mobility is much emphasised in debates about migration, it is

often the rooting or 'being at home-ness' of migrants that is controversial. Thus, in a context in which women are reminded daily in numerous subtle and not-so-subtle ways (by law-makers and enforcers, neighbours, shop-owners, co-workers, employers, and fellow commuters) that they are perceived as not 'at home', home-making activities acquire even greater significance. So too does the capturing of them in the VDP images. There is a performative aspect in the choice and composition of the women's photographs, which, in a climate of general hostility towards migrants, resists exclusion, liminality and social abjection (Kihato, 2013). These images actively 'talk back' (hooks, 1989) to stereotypes and, consciously or unconsciously, counter dehumanising and derogatory representations of migrants. They do so by capturing an ordinary everyday 'at home-ness' that challenges perceptions of these women as 'bodies out of place'. Thus, the women's images (and the activities they capture) can be understood as a defiant response to being repeatedly told to 'go home'

Problematizing home, as this paper has, is not, however, meant to imply that to leave a place in which one has felt at home in is of no consequence. Rather, it is intended to usefully draw our attention to the *processes* involved. This enables us to see how belonging and 'at home-ness' are neither given nor permanent, but actively claimed, contested, and fought over locally, nationally and transnationally. Belonging is, after all, as Vikki Bell (1999, p.3) reminds us, 'an achievement at several levels of abstraction.' Within the highly charged 'crisis' context of contemporary Athens, this is not merely a theoretical point, it is also an important political one. In the current climate, no matter how much time and labour women devote to making homes secure, it has become increasingly unlikely that this will allow for as many opportunities as women yearn for. Narratives of 'authentic' belonging continue to consign certain bodies permanently outside the national community of which they are a part. In order for people to be recognised as subjects capable of living a life that counts (Butler, 2004), we have also to understand the many ways in which they belong, contribute and invest – both emotionally and practically – in the places in which they live.

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