"If it is a Girl, Let Us Give Her a Curl:" Disrupting Racialized Gender and Black Women's Neocolonial Lived Experiences in London

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Abstract

Hair is a remarkably complex material-semiotic entity. Caught on the cusp between self/society, meticulously contrived and purposely styled, hair is crucial in the articulation of identity and difference. However, although scholars have focused a great deal of attention on the body as a site of cultural production and identity politics, discussions surrounding hair have been largely ignored and relegated to the realm of the trivial or inconsequential.

-Nicole Dawn Watson

This project examines how Black women in London wear their hair, and the ways in which this is impacted by racialized gender within the context of their neocolonial lived experiences. I focused on London because it is the primary cosmopolitan city in the United Kingdom, and Britain (also known as Great Britain, which includes Wales, Scotland and England—where London is located) was the main colonizing power when it began an imperial process of enslaving Africans across the world. I collected data through a series of interviews, social experiments, photography, memoir documentation, academic analyses, feminist conferences and events. I drew from and built upon Black British feminism (also expressed as Black feminism in the British context), African, Caribbean and US Black feminism, as well as a gendered approach to Pan Africanism to deconstruct British capitalism and how it continues to commodify and exploit Black women’s bodies, including their hair. Recognizing how the emphasis on British capitalism provided the impetus for understanding neocolonialism in London and the ways in which social politics negatively affect Black women, I primarily explore the discourses of difference, power, migration and resistance. Studying these critical discourses, I argue that it is necessary for us to deconstruct gender, race and class in London. This contextualized my main argument that how Black women wear their hair is deeply connected to the ways in which they are racialized and gendered within Britain. Moreover, this is critical to the varying ways in which they use their hair to challenge and resist the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and migration.
“If it is a Girl, Let Us Give Her a Curl:” Disrupting Racialized Gender and Black Women’s Neocolonial Lived Experiences in London

by

Shanique Mothersill

B.Sc., University of the West Indies, 2015

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in *Pan-African Studies*

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This thesis marks the beginning of my intellectual journey which started at home, my Jamaican home, where I was first introduced to organic feminism, but had no idea there was an actual name for the kind of women my mother, sisters, grand and great grandmothers, aunts, older female cousins and female family friends are and the way they each live their lives. This introduction complimented the deeply analytical Black feminist questions, theorization and methodology that were introduced to me by Dr. Linda Carty when I took one of my department’s core graduate courses, *Histories, Societies and Political Economies of the Pan African World* with her and while I served as her Teaching Assistant on the course, *Race, Gender and Sexuality in the African Diaspora*. Both courses provided a strong critique of white hegemonic capitalistic patriarchy to locate Black women’s lived experiences as structural racialized oppression.

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Introduction
Colonialism after Colonialism, Capitalism after Capitalism: Speaking of Neocolonialism in London


More like an armed historical and neohistorical system, capitalism is not merely the colonialist, imperialist and neocolonialist inheritance of material realities. It is not simply reactions to economic markets, human labor and resources; nor is it a simple recognition and separation of economic power. Capitalism is not simply the haves versus the have-nots, the rich versus the poor. It is not simply about Western culture nor can it be reduced to a simple blueprint of European colonialism, expansionism and exploitation. Capitalism is a monopolistic, expansive and adaptive, transformative and reproductive, gendered and racialized, multi-leveled, theoretical and methodological, socio-political and cultural, transnational and global mode of production
that promotes the privatized capital accumulation of a few-the minority class. According to Pierre Jalee:

within the capitalist mode of production, production is private and regulated by the laws of conflict and competition. The search for maximum profit leads to unequal development (within sectors and between them, between regions and between countries), which is a constant feature of the system. The engine of production is profit for the industrial entrepreneur, and not the harmonious development of the economic system as a whole.

(77)

Capitalism is therefore a system of power, conflict, oppression, injustice, and a tool of social, economic, political and epistemic violence. It represents and is a manifestation of changing social and political relations, knowledges, institutions and policies. Capitalism is normative and hegemonic. The state is its primary actor and today in many Global North countries, most specifically Britain, capitalism is more or less run by the state on behalf, if not at the behest, of the capitalist class. In this way, the British state continues to create the conditions that favor capitalism, especially finance capital, through its imperialistic and monopolistic “emphasis on industry and always seeking to gain control” (Jalee 83). This capital penetration, specifically of “many giant corporations of industrial origins” in London “from the nineteenth century onward have…characterized banking, giving great impetus to the growth of investment banks” (Jalee 83-84). Thus, capitalism was the basis of colonialism, and it continues to shape neocolonialist imperatives of finance capital today. I therefore centre this gaze to assess, particularly through a gendered lens on how Black women wear their hair, Black women’s neocolonial lived experiences in London. My focus is London and though this is the capital city of the United Kingdom, it is a very different place from the rest of Britain and in some ways tied more into global networks (especially via flows of finance capital) than it is tied to national networks. And in terms of the Black population it is particular too. Therefore, I problematize the
gendered and racialized dynamics of colonial and capitalist discourse in Britain as a whole to unpack in many ways the workings of these discourses in London. In other words, I begin from an analysis of the workings of the British capitalist economy in general and move, more specifically, to the ways in which gender, racialization, and British neocoloniality intersect with Black women’s lived experiences in London.

In the Greater London area (which includes the four boroughs that I utilized in this research), of all groups of women, including other diasporic groups, Black women have been subjected to some of the most damaging lived experiences. This is because capitalism’s expansion relied and still relies so heavily on racism. Thus, conceptualizing Black women’s experiences to the racist gendered power structures helps us to fully understand the tensions within their lived experiences, and how Britain’s political economy functions as an oppressive tool in London. Black women’s objectification and commodification have long been core methodologies of Britain’s capitalist economic system. “During enslavement, women of African descent were seen as having bodies made for reproduction, whether that was in providing sexual services, producing children or giving the labor necessary to ensure white [wealth]” (Shirley Tate 1). Inside this capitalist project, the colonial history of Britain’s political economy clearly represents an ineffable, and therefore extreme commitment, to a greater monopolization of the economy by white folks, specifically white men, through the gendered territorialization and totalization of power. This accounts for “the socio-cultural processes of colonialism and imperialism, the historical basis of the international division of labor, and the position of women in the global economy” (Avtar Brah 67). Within this racist history, there exists the penchant for a gendered, separatist, sexist, classist, ablest, homophobic, exploitative and oppressive British political economy created through the dispossession of Caribbean and African native lands. This
economic commodification and marginalization of Black people and other people of color in general, and Black women in particular is grounded in the pathologization of Black people. Thus, this shapes the manacles of Britain’s class and state structures- where concentrated power and capital constitute the categorical mechanisms of difference inside Britain’s gendering processes.

I therefore centre gender specifically at the intersections of Britain’s racializing practices and the ways in which these practices negatively affect Black women’s lives. Gender, as a mediating category, serves “Europe[‘s]…long tradition of identifying Others through the monstrous physiognomy or sexual behavior of [Black] women” (Jennifer Morgan 170). This demonstrates that Black femaleness, femininity and womanhood carried racialized meaning throughout the “trans-European ethnohistoriographical tradition” (Morgan 168) long before the establishment of Britain’s colonies in North America, Africa and the Caribbean. Morgan argues that:

femaleness evoked a certain element of desire, but travelers depicted Black women as simultaneously un-womanly and marked by a reproductive value dependent on their sex. Writers’ recognition of black femaleness and their inability to allow Black women to embody “proper” female space composed a focus for representations of racial difference. (168)

Mapping these origins and itinerary of gender in Britain’s colonial history enables us to sharpen our focus specifically on neocolonialism in London as a constantly changing system of sexual exploitation and the control of Black women. In fact:

societal divisions of race and class mean not only that the process of gender development is different for different groups of people, but also that gender is differently experienced by Black people and white people, by working-class people and middle-class people (Ann Phoenix 63)
Gender, as a social and economic construction that determines and reflects the sexual division of labor within Britain’s mode of production, therefore constitutes a clear vista through which the cultural workings of neocolonial constructs in London can be illuminated.

To this end, I focus on the kind of racialized socio-body politics that informed Sara “Saartjie” Baartman’s (Hottentot Venus) life in Europe. Janell Hobson argues that:

as a “deviant” body-by virtue of skin color, femaleness, and body shape-Baartman becomes a “freak” in Europe precisely because she is a “type” of Khoisan woman of South Africa. In this construction of her sexualized and “disabled” body, Westerners can prescribe racial and cultural differences-and, hence, their “superiority” as Europeans in comparison with African people and cultures. (“The “Batty” Politic 90)

I am particularly interested in the specific ways in which this body politic has continued to this day since Black women’s bodies continue to mark a culture of deviance, inferiority, savagery and fecundity inside London. Black women’s:

black-faced bod[ies] was [and still are] both cause for alarm and evidence of a dangerous inversion of norms. Her nakedness, her ears, and her nose-all oddities accentuated by willful adornment-irrevocably placed her outside the realm of the familiar. Her blackened teeth and large mouth evoked a sexualized danger…linked her and, by implication, her people to an inhuman monstrosity. (Kim Hall and Girolama Benzoni, qtd. in Morgan 174)

These gendered social codes mark a complex articulation of the interrelationship of colonial polity and Black women’s lived experiences, and therefore create a particular kind of consciousness that underwrites the racial ideologies and political meanings of Black womanhood inside London. Determined by class inheritance and the conditionality of skin-color, especially race and gender, the interaction of these colonial legacies within Britain’s economic power structures shape Britain’s social history. This embodies the ways in which “gender relations are constituted in articulation with class, racism, ethnicity or sexuality in the construction of capitalist, imperialist, or indeed any other form of social relation, and what type of identities are
inscribed in the process” (Brah 67). These naturalized logics of structural racism form the basis of Britain’s social hierarchies and the pathological gender politics that mark Black women’s gendered identities. Whether these identities emphasize Black women’s relationship to gendered power structures or they emphasize certain stereotypes (created by Britain’s colonial conceptualization of Black women’s identities), they provide the impetus for understanding neocolonialism in London.

It is in this politically imposed position, where the requirement of production and reproduction merge, that the Black woman’s experience and identity give structural form to Britain. Furthermore, the convoluted course of capital accumulation at the intersections of race and gender shapes the economic, political and social subordination of Black women and compound the impact of social and economic inequality. With this understanding of the racist and gendered commitments of neocolonialism in London, the political content and ideological strategies of Britain’s culture necessitate the continuation of colonial discourse. Patricia Mcfadden argues that:

colonial historiography attests clearly to the systematic exclusion of Africans from even the most limited meanings of citizenship as an imagined and performed status, and the use of extra-legal mechanisms to ensure that Black women in particular remained confined in the privatized rural spaces of the colony was the most blatant example of these exclusionary state policies.
(4)

Similarly, Tate argues that “the history of the Black woman’s body in the European-North American imagination is imbricated within the racialization of colonialism and enslavement that still remains today, both in metropoles and former/ present colonies” (1). Tate further asserts that this forms the basis of Black women’s representations within white US-UK/European-Latin American-Caribbean cultural consciousness (1). This discourse manifests in many ways and in every space: home, labor market, religious spaces, hair salons, prisons,
academia, etc. It is therefore important that I indicate this history to not only show the capitalist iterations of neocolonialism in London, but also the extremity of Britain’s subordination of Black women and the multiple ways in which the British state continues to oppress them.

This analytical lens is particularly necessary for my examination of Black women as Britain’s ex-colonial/neocolonial subjects. In this way, their lived experiences are shaped by and defined in terms of their multiple encounters with Britain’s immigration system and its iterations of patriarchal colonial discourses. Amina Mama argues that Black women migrants from the Caribbean and Africa could only claim rights on the grounds of marital status and association with menfolk (37). Similarly, Heidi Mizra argued that “women, it was believed, came as either wives or children, dependents on the man…Women emerged in the official patriarchal, neo-imperialist discourse only as subjects for sexual and racist humiliation” (7). These gendered and patriarchal structures of Britain’s immigration system are important to this study since whether a Black woman in London is an immigrant from an ex-colony (in the Caribbean or Africa for example), or she is the offspring of an immigrant generation, she (recruited to serve in Britain’s National Health Service (NHS) for example) continues to be systemically relegated to the second-class, sub-human and inferior margins of British citizenship.

With this in mind, I centre the relationship between Black women’s neocolonial lived experiences, racial social politics and gender to locate Black women’s hair grooming practices as structural, racialized and gendered. How Black women wear their hair, in other words, serve as the entry point into my larger investigation of the ramifications of neocolonialism and its relations to racialized gender. The gendered construction of Black women’s hair is not simply the itinerary I use to problematize their neocolonial experiences, it is also the lens through which I investigate the logical, socio-cultural and political expressions of cultural identities. In this
case, Black women’s hair represents any composition of the strands of threadlike outgrowth from the scalp of Black women, to include any additions and or subtractions.

My central argument is that racialized gender impact the ways in which Black women wear their hair and this is influenced by their neocolonial lived experiences in London. To offer critique and analysis of these meaningful entanglements, I address two primary questions. First, what are the ways in which racialized gender shape how Black women in London wear their hair and second, how is this affected by their neocolonial lived experiences? To this end, I engage a critical gendered Pan African conversation about the choices Black women make about how to groom their hair; I interrogate the gendered cultural complexities of London; challenge racial social politics that negatively affect Black women; emphasise the importance of understanding Black women’s bodies as it is informed by their own understandings of self and community; provide an assessment of racialized gender within the context of Britain; and demonstrate the potential of uncovering Western epistemology by problematizing neocolonial constructs in London.

Theoretical and Methodological Scaffold

Theoretical Approach

*The higher fruits of civilization cannot be extemporized, neither can they be developed normally in the brief space of thirty years. It requires the long and painful growth of generations. Yet all through the darkest period of the colored women’s oppression in this country her yet unwritten history is full of heroic struggle, a struggle against fearful and overwhelming odds, that often ended in a horrible death; to maintain and protect that which woman holds dearer than life. The painful, patient, and silent toil of mothers to a fee, simple title to the bodies of their daughters, the despairing fight, as an entrapped tigress, to keep hallowed their own persons, would furnish material for epics. That more went down under the flood than stemmed the current is not extraordinary. The majority of our women are not heroines—but I do not know that a majority of any race of women are heroines. It is enough for me to know that while in the eyes of the highest tribunal in America she was deemed no more than chattel, an irresponsible thing, a dull block, to be drawn hither or thither at the volition of an owner, the Afro-American woman maintained*
ideals of womanhood unashamed by any ever conceived. Resting or fermenting in untutored minds, such ideals could not claim a hearing at the bar of the nation. The white woman could at least plead for her own emancipation, the Black women doubly enslaved, could but suffer and struggle and be silent.

-Anna Julia Cooper, 1893, at the World Congress of Representative Women (qtd. in hooks, Ain’t I a woman 2)

I centralize the experiences of Black women because of two reasons. The first represents my own positioning and flesh (from within my own body). This is similar to Chicana feminists, Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga’s, call for a theorization “from the flesh” in an attempt to move oppressed groups from the margins to the centre. As a Black woman, born and raised in the Global South (specifically Jamaica, which arguably still remains a colony of Britain), I am determined to help erase our oppression and celebrate our defiant stance against it including celebrating and deconstructing the varying ways we wear our hair. I have always been drawn to honoring, studying and sharing Black feminist political work, resistive traditions and activism within the theoretical, methodological and physical communities that I have come to appreciate. These traditions were introduced to me by the organic feminist work of my mother, sisters, grand and great grandmothers, aunts, female cousins and female family friends - both living and dead. These women and girls worked harder than any other person I have known before or since, and despite their unparalleled struggles against patriarchy and sexism for example, I have only recently begun to understand and appreciate their work and lives. In fact, I can remember one of my aunts telling me that “it is important as Black women that we go to war for this generation of Black women and the resistive generation of Black women that we want to embody and create.” Statements like these have always stuck with me and so I have always traveled with and within these traditions of Black feminism.
The second reason for centering Black women is very close to the first. I think it is important as a young Black feminist that I commit, like the many women before me, to exploring gender, race, and class within Black women’s identities, social relations, and cultural practices—which includes learned homophobia—and the kinds of institutions that impact their lived experiences. It is especially important because of Black women’s marginalization within and erasure from all spheres of the larger socio-political society. Most importantly, are our commitments to anti-exploitative and anti-oppressive struggles—which I think is inherent to Black womanhood. My appreciation of Black feminist “lyrics against the grain” (a phrase I use to emphasize the decolonizing discourses of rejection and refusal of coloniality and patriarchy) compliments the deeply analytical feminist theorization that contextualizes and shapes this project. This framework is the basis upon which I structure my theoretical and methodological scaffolding and situate my strategies of refusal. It underwrites my ethical orientation toward understanding Black women’s lived experiences and serve to inform how I approach this project while reminding myself to generate lyrics against the grain.

To fully appreciate my theoretical footing in Black feminism, I primarily employed British and US Black feminist epistemologies, emphasizing the ways in which these differ but are critical to my understandings of Black women’s issues. This compliments the transnational Black feminist work of African and Caribbean feminists that shape the decolonizing methodologies I will discuss later. Black feminist genealogies originate inside the historical realities of Black women’s continuous struggles against the exploitative and oppressive global political system within which they find themselves. Black women have been deeply invested in and have participated in the acknowledgement, recognition, and struggle against their sexual and
racial oppression. This is very critical as it is through these embodiments of Black female struggles that I position my exploration of Black women in London.

“Black British feminism as a theoretical and intellectual movement has it genesis over 50 years ago in activism and struggles of Black women migrants from postcolonial Caribbean, Africa and the Indian sub-continent” (Mirza 6). Referring to these migrants as Third World feminists, transitional feminist scholar, Chandra Mohanty, argues that “Third World feminists in Britain position the racist state as a primary focus of struggle” (Feminism without Borders 69). It is therefore inside the British state and the post-war immigration system that Black women’s shared experience with sexism, racialization and their impact, articulates a political and strategic identity which creates and fosters Black British feminism or Black feminism in the British context. This ‘personal is political’ approach to feminist struggle accounts for the ways in which, according to Mizra:

Black British feminist reveal other ways of knowing that challenge the normative discourse. In [their] particular world shaped by processes of migration, nationalism, racism, popular culture and the media, Black British women, from multiple positions, reveal the distorted ways in which the dominant groups contrast their assumptions. As Black women [they] see from the sidelines, from [their] space of unlocation, the unfolding project of domination.

(5)

Despite the socio-political movements, multicultural and transnational politics of Black British feminist struggle, Magdalene Ang-lygate argues that “unlike the North American experience, daily realities of on-going global migration and the resulting transnational diasporic experiences are often neglected and insufficiently accounted for in British feminist discourse” (169). While I agree with Ang-lygate that these constructs have not always been at the forefront, I argue that migratory and transnational discourses remain a major part of Black British feminist
critiques. These discourses were also central to the anti-racist and feminist work of the late Claudia Jones during her life in London.

US Black feminism is also at the core of my project. In this way, I present it as a supplement and not to supplant Black British feminism. US Black feminism provides a strong critique of Black women’s oppressive relationship to the white hegemonic patriarchal American political system that “has always been determined by [Black women’s] membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes” (Combahee River Collective 10). bell hooks argued that:

Black women in 19th century America were conscious of the fact that true freedom entailed not just liberation from a sexist social order that systemically denied all women full human rights. These Black women participated in both the struggle for racial equality and the women’s rights movement.

(Ain’t I a woman 2)

According to the Combahee River Collective:

The most general statement of our politics...would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.

(9)

The Collective further asserts that:

There have always been Black women activists-some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown [and nameless]-who had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique.

(10)

This group of women also includes Anna Julia Cooper and Amanda Berry Smith whose political activism centres Black women issues.

A gendered lens on Pan Africanism also provided an invaluable theoretical lexicon to this project. Primarily concerned with the African Diaspora, African peoples and peoples of African
descent, Pan Africanism “as a form of global consciousness- the realization that no Black person will be free until all Black people are free-emerged precisely to confront the old race-based global consciousness which underlined capitalist expansionism” (Ernest Wamba-dia-Wambia 199). Epistemologically, it is known for its geographical and historical breadth; the historiographical currents of resistance to forced servility and inequality; and for asserting a philosophy of global solidarity particular to Africans and peoples of African descent. Pan-Africanism has centralized the freedom, independence and self-empowerment of Black people, and the integration of African legacies, spiritual allegiance and connections. Fundamentally, however, Pan-Africanism- over the last six to seven decades has been problematic given its exclusion of Black women and Black feminism. According to Mire:

- this does not mean that, in actuality, [Black] women have not participated in the struggle against colonial imposition nor does it mean that [Black] women have not substantially contributed to [Pan-African] culture and politics. (2)

For example, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (whose work and life is detailed Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Mba’s text, For Women and the Nation) and Amy Jacques Garvey had been organic feminist activist through their grassroots political work in Nigeria and Jamaica respectively. Both made significant contributions to the fight against colonialism and for women’s rights in those countries. However, their work has not been recognized by the Pan Africanist movement since the “political and literary discourses have been dominated by the interests and the aspirations of [Black] men” (Mire 2).

Pan Africanism’s misogynistic gaze therefore erases Black women’s intellectual and political histories and their historical feminist campaigns. It also does not examine the role of capital and class oppression in and around the ideas of race, racialization and gender. However, like many female feminists before me, I honor female Pan Africanists and their Black feminist
legacies. In other words, I too use a gendered Pan Africanist lens which accurately interrogates categories of class and locates gender. By drawing on the significance of this formulation of Pan Africanism and critiquing its role in the production of power and knowledge, iterations of gender and class shape my Pan African approach.

**Methodological Approach**

My methodological approach to this project is difficult to parse from my theoretical principles. Unlike some other qualitative approaches, Black feminism formed the basis of my methodological commitments to a feminist ethnography that refuses the normative violent hetero-patriarchal and colonial practices of doing ethnographic research. I recognize that the orthodox and deeply normative colonial research practices that I was taught as an undergraduate are not appropriate because, according to Black feminist scholar, Linda Carty, they “have had a long history of excluding certain groups, for example, Black women…” (“Seeing through the Eye of Difference” 127). She further stated that “as Black women, we have been objectified by this form of ‘objective’ knowledge, the discursive imperialism that constitutively locates us as part of the ruled, whose role is to learn, accept, and apply the methods that sustain those relations to ruling” (127). This statement not only demonstrates the far-reaching effects of coloniality, but it is also an urgent call for feminist ethnographic praxes that contribute to anti-colonial/anti-white discourse. According to Dana-Ain Davis and Christa Craven, “feminist ethnography has the important potential to contest the neo[colonial] intensification of efforts to neutralize difference and inequality, where everyday life is reconstructed in ways to support upward distribution of resources and widening inequities are tolerated, if not encourage” (194).
Of course, this is why I write poetry as a way to not only think through this methodologic approach to feminist praxis, but also decolonize how I present my arguments. My purpose is to establish, like radical poets such as Dionne Brand, Gina Ulysse and Tiphanie Yanique, the terms of my refusal of the normative, disciplining and regulatory expectations of academia. Here I use poetry in multiple ways: as an analytical tool that attempt to foreclose the traditional way of writing theory and praxis, and thus a political category; as an illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless—about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding. (Audre Lorde 1)

I also use poetry as an ideological tool that draw from feminist epistemological formations. As a metaphorical feminist political tool then, poetry is how I travel through the geopolitical, socio-political, cultural and transnational discourses that I examine in this project. My aim is therefore twofold: first, to build upon work that has brought poetry into a political conversation within Black feminism in a way that resists existing disciplinary apartheid; and second, centre a poetic methodology that will literally disrupt racialized gender and Black women’s neocolonial lived experiences in London. I use the following excerpt from Lorde’s “Poetry is not a luxury” as my poetic itinerary:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (1)

My use of photography (which I also call “gendered imagery”) is directly tied to my decolonizing use of poetry. In general, photography provides a visual component to this study.
More specifically, it disrupts traditional photography that, according to Paula Johnson, “has contributed to the inculcation of negative imagery of African Americans in US society” (9). This is also true for Black British women in British society since there has always been a “prevalence of stereotypical images” (P. C. Johnson 9) of Black women. I use photography then, to stage a political project that rescinds these stereotypical images by valuing and documenting positive images of Black women. In particular, I privilege a Black woman epistemology of resistance rather than simply representing them positively. This emphasizes my own appreciation of creative production expressed through the visual semantics of resistance, as well as my commitments to feminist ethnography that collapses art with Black women’s resistance and agency. With this in mind, I have included gendered imagery to contribute to the long history of revolutionary photographing which includes Jamaican born photographer, Renee Cox among others. P. C. Johnson asserts that this type of photography “provide[s] additional opportunities for understanding beyond stereotypes and nondescript statistics. It demands more than a glance, however, one must actively look to see the human dimensions and complexity of their lives” (12).

While in London, I conducted field research using qualitative mixed-methods to collect data since I sought the interpretation and explanation of concepts tantamount to Black women’s lived experiences in London. I identified London because it functions as a primary cosmopolitan city in the United Kingdom, and Britain was one of the main colonizing power in the Western world when it began an imperial process of enslaving Africans. London serves especially working class Black people in Western Europe, and the specific inner London boroughs of Southwark, Lambeth and Lewisham that I utilized have a particularly high concentrated population of Blacks (Kaye 3-5). I also utilized the outer London borough of Bromley. While in
relation to the white British population, Bromley has a smaller Black British population, it is the largest borough in London and it shares borders with the abovementioned boroughs (“The Ethnic Population of England and Wales”).

I conducted twenty-two (22) semi-structured interviews throughout London and each interview was accompanied by a single social experiment and a photograph taken of each participants’ hair. In order to further problematize the issues, I also collected a poetic memoir documentation. Like the interviews, social experiments and photographs, I used this method to challenge conventional kinds of Western ethnography that would ignore the voices of the “subject.” This undoing of epistemic violent research methods mirrors my own consciousness of the construction of Black women’s epistemologies. As a Black woman myself, I centred my own body and the bodies of the Black sisters I engaged. This meant that I was simultaneously an insider and outsider which allowed me to create a non-hierarchal methodologic dynamic that interlocked our voices and experiences. Similarly, Carty speaking about her experiences of being both insider and outsider while conducting research in the Caribbean argued that “[her] origins gave [her] an advantage, enabling [her] to understand cultural nuances that could either help or hinder [her] research” (“Seeing through the Eye of Difference” 125).

I performed archival analyses of a corpus of Black Beauty and Hair for the Beauty Conscious Black Woman, Root, Flamingo and Ebony magazines at the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton, London. I performed academic analyses of texts such as Black Women Bodies and the Nation: Race, Gender and Culture by Shirley Tate; The Heart of the Race: Black Women’s Lives in Britain by Beverley Bryan, et al; and Black British Feminism: A Reader edited by Heidi Mirza. I attended the “Feminist Emergency” and the “I/Mages of Tomorrow: Envisioning Black,
POC futures, disabled, queer and trans futures, feminist futures” conferences at Birkbeck, University of London and Goldsmiths College respectively, as well as the lecture on “Decolonising the ‘angry’ Black Woman” by Shirley Tate which was also held at Birkbeck, University of London. For the purposes of observation and further examination of the issues, I also attended several Black feminist-oriented social events such as “Black Girls Picnic” and the “Afro Beauty Culture” at the Lambeth Country Show.

The interviews, social experiments, photographs, memoir documentation, hair magazines and academic texts expanded my understandings of how Black women in London wear their hair. For example, I was better able to understand the interrelatedness of racialized gender, afro/kinky hair or mixed hair and certain cultural practices in London. Jayne Ifekwunigwe argues:

in gender-specific, family centred narratives of metises [or mixed] women, the inherent tensions between being and becoming Black, being and becoming continental African or African Caribbean, and being English as opposed to British epitomize the psychosocial struggles between subjectively and alterity…Their experiences of multiple identities, which are necessarily contradictory, socio-culturally constructed and essentialized, demand new paradigms for looking at citizenship and belonging. (127)

These methodologies therefore did not only provide me with the gendered discourses that I needed to better understand racial social politics within London, but also emphasized the continuation of colonial discourses and the institutional codes and ideologies that exist within a gendered Britain. The conferences, lecture and social events helped me to further challenge the politics of location, citizenship and belonging inside Black women’s lived experiences and served as the main source for my Black British feminist approach and analyses. I used these methodological resources to contextualize constructs of gender, race, class and culture, and to reveal the dynamics of power and race relations inside neocolonialism.
Chapter Abstracts

Chapter one, *Gender, Race and Class Inside London: A Black Feminist Inquiry of Neocolonialism*, discusses Black women’s experiences in London, focusing on the ways in which racialized social politics affect their lived experiences. I employ Black British feminism, African, Caribbean and US Black feminist theory to meaningfully critique and challenge these experiences. This contextualizes my analyses in chapter two, *Ebony’s Roots: Black Women’s Hair and Racialized Gender*, where I centre the voices of the women I interviewed. I used a gendered lens on how Black women wear their hair to explore Black women’s socio-political and marginalized locations within London. I also discussed the implications of gender, class, race and the racialization practices that serve to compound the impact of social and economic inequality disproportionately affecting Black women.

In this regard, I examined how Black women’s hair is impacted by racialized gender by deconstructing Brand’s notion of the Door of No Return. Here, I deconstructed the ideas of diaspora, transnational histories, migration, immigration, resettlement and belonging as functions of racialized gender; concepts of ‘home;’ the politics of citizenship and location. I also explored the functions of diasporic connections. This is central to my critique of Black women’s politically-imposed identity. Ifekwunigwe argues that Black women’s “narratives of identities demonstrate the hierarchical and at times paradoxical ranking of the essentialized constructs and concepts of Blackness, Whiteness, Englishness, Caribbeanness and Africanness in English society” (145). Speaking of the mixed women whose testimonies she featured, Ifekwunigwe also asserted that “the unresolved postcolonial struggles between Africa and Europe, Blackness and Whiteness, Black man and White woman are all permanently inscribed on the faces of the metises [mixed] daughters” (147). Racialized gender therefore, at the intersections of Black
women’s hair grooming practices and the Door of No Return shape how I reveal Britain’s commitments to a continuation of coloniality. In this chapter, I also incorporate the poetic memoir to provide an example of Britain’s current commitments to race, racism and gender discrimination.

In chapter three, *Re-rooting: Decolonizing Black Women’s Hair*, I decolonize: reject, refuse and challenge, through poetry and gendered imagery, the colonial narratives, racialized gender and gendered perceptions of how Black women wear their hair. These are created within and across borders inside an inherently imperialist and capitalist global political economy. I therefore thread the critical transnational legacies that live within the “roots” of Black women’s hair in Britain, the Caribbean and Africa to offer critique of and re-imagine Black women’s “HAIRtage” (a term I use to discuss the colonial legacies of Black women’s hair). To this end, I re-construct, particularly through the images that I captured of the participants’ hair, the racial, political and socio-cultural Black woman identity that represents a politics of refusal from a decolonizing frame.

In the conclusion, *I am Black and Woman, My Hair is Black and Woman*, I further emphasize the importance of understanding Black women’s lived experiences, as these are informed by their hair grooming choices, their own understandings of self and community. I close with an articulation of the gendered and racializing boundaries of the African Diaspora in general and Britain, Africa and the Caribbean in particular. Marrying the complex ways in which the socio-political relations of racialized gender are constructed at the experiential level bridges the gap between how Black women wear their hair and their very real and varying experiences in London. I therefore close where I started inside Britain’s capitalist political economy and how it
exploits and commodifies Black women. As Deebie Weekes highlights, “one of the most important signifiers for Black women is the way in which we experience our Blackness” (125).
Chapter One
Introduction

One of the greatest gifts of Black feminism to ourselves has been to make it a little easier simply to be Black and female. A Black feminist analysis has enabled us to understand that we are not hated and abused because there is something wrong with us, but because our status and treatment is absolutely prescribed by the racist, misogynist system under which we live.

- Barbara Smith xxiv

We assert the equal importance of improving the status of Black, and we believe that without attention to gender matters, there can be no long-lasting solutions to many of our race problems.

- Betsch Cole and Guy Sheftall xxvii-xxviii

In this ‘place called home’ named Black feminism, we as racialized, gendered subjects can collectively mark our presence in a world where Black women have so long been denied privilege to speak; to have a ‘valid’ identity of our own, a space to ‘name’ ourselves.

- Mirza 4

I argue throughout this chapter that Black women’s neocolonial lived experiences in London cannot be fully understood without a Black feminist analysis of gender, race and class that appropriately locate Black women in Britain. “The first thing we need to establish is that ‘gender’ and ‘race’ [and class] are constituted categories which are always in process—that is they are always in the act of becoming; and…feminist work provides a good starting point” (Gail Lewis 164). Gender, race and class are therefore not the superficial patina of the British capitalist system; a binary, transient and veiled understanding of Black women’s lives. Rather, they are fundamental to the sustenance of the neocolonial enterprise that maintains the British capitalist state, which is as much a part of Black women’s lived experiences and everyday lives as it is central to the institutional practices, colonial normativity, cultural and intellectual dimensions of colonial discourse, and the articulations of ‘Othering’ within Britain. Let me hasten to add that I do not mean to imply that gender, race and class are exclusive and dominant subjects of neocolonialism insofar as patriarchal power dynamics and global political economy exist and are
reinforced within intimate relations with them. However, in addressing questions of gender, race and class in London, I focus on the ways in which neocolonial power structures impact Black women’s racial identity, sexuality, labor power, power relations, cultural practices which include hair grooming practices, and the kind of British hegemonic normalizing institutions that impact social politics. Similarly, Anne McClintock argues that:

race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they be simply yoked together retrospectively like armatures of Lego. Rather, they come into existence in and through relation to each other-if in contradictory and conflictual ways. In this sense, gender, race and class can called articulated categories. (5)

Concepts of gender, like race and class are therefore not easy to define. They have a multiplicity of meanings and conceptualizations that have led to the question of ‘difference’ “understood as inscribed in and through the operation of power” (Lewis, 16). ‘Difference,’ then, has provided the analytic position from which the ideas of gender, race and class combine with the spatial, social, psychological and changing aspects of knowledges and practices. “Thus, both ‘race’ and gender [and also class] ‘difference’ become objects of analysis in the attempt to explicate their processes of constitution, as does their relation to that which is simultaneously (if silently) constructed as the norm” (Lewis 16). In this way, these categories of ‘difference’ are not synonymous with but are intimately connected to the experiences of Black women as marginal subjects in London, and the political reality of their heterogeneous ancestry, backgrounds and social positions. Hazel Carby writes:

Black women have come from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, and we cannot do justice to all their herstories in a single chapter. Neither can we represent the voices of all black women in Britain; our herstories are too numerous and too varied. What we will do is to offer ways in which the ‘triple’ oppression of gender, race, and class can be understood, in their specificity and also as they determine the lives of Black women. (45)
I agree with Carby because it is immediately clear to me that the many variations and axes of ‘difference’ that constitute Black women’s lives have limited the number of voices and stories that I am able to represent. However, it is within these complex spaces that we are provided with an opportunity to better analyze the interplay of gender, race and class, and in doing so further challenge the complex operations of neocolonialism. Although I have organized this chapter around the conceptual categories of gender, race and class rather than the subject of womanhood, blackness and economics, and while the entire chapter foregrounds Black women, it discusses gendered power relations, gendered roles, gendered labor, sexuality, racialized skin color, racialized labor power and the economic roles and power of empire as central.

Given the significance and centrality of these social categories, what do I mean by gender, race and class? The scholars: Joan Scott, Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham and Zine Magubane, have theorized gender, race and class respectively, and do so brilliantly. Rather than simply presenting an ephemeral gloss over the respective terms, they have meaningfully and in different ways layered the complexities and socio-political formations of hierarchy and ‘difference’ inherent to the categories, which offers an opportunity to position my own analysis of Black women’s neocolonial lived experiences in London. Defining gender, Scott argues that:

The core of the definition rests on an integral connection between two propositions: gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power…gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated. Gender is not the only field, but it seems to have been a persistent and recurrent way of enabling the signification of power in the West…Established as an objective set of references, concepts of gender structure perception and the concrete and symbolic organization of social life. To the extent that these references establish distributions of power (differential control over or access to material and symbolic resources), gender becomes implicated in the conception and construction of power itself. Gender, then, provides a way to decode meaning and to understand the complex connections among various forms of human interactions. (42 and 45-46)
In relation to race, Brooks-Higginbotham argues that:

Like gender and class, then, race must be seen as a social construction predicated upon the recognition of difference and signifying, the simultaneous distinguishing and positioning of groups vis-à-vis one another…Race serves as a ‘global sign’, a ‘metalanguage’, since it speaks about and lends meaning to a host of terms and expressions, to myriad aspects of life that would otherwise fall outside the referential domain of race…Race not only tends to subsume other sets of social relations, namely, gender and class, but it blurs and disguises, suppresses and negates its own complex interplay with the very social relations it envelops. It precludes unity within the same gender group but often appears to solidify people of opposing economic classes. Whether race is textually omitted or textually privileged, its totalizing effect in obscuring class and gender remains.

(253 and 255)

Whilst Magubane says this of class:

Practically speaking the goals of the incipient capitalist class were as follows: (1) to have production in society as a whole come under the control of the capitalist appropriator; (2) to have the organization of production fully integrated with the organization of appropriation; (3) to have virtually all production make subordinate to the demands of capitalist exploitation. Thus, [when we think about class] the whole lives of individuals would be drawn up ever firmly into the orbit of production processes…Capitalists…exercise an unprecedented degree of control over production in order to ensure profitability. This translates into more rigid control over the labor process, which is not accomplished via disembodied economic forces but through the introduction of political power into the production process…This phenomenon, [is] a process of class struggle and coercive intervention by the state on behalf of the capitalist class that put [Black] women’s labor and [Black] women’s bodies at the centre of both its ideological and its practical assault… The disposition of power that obtained between individual capitalists and workers had as its condition the gendered configuration of society… [which become] a site for the staging of class conflict and class struggle.

(27-29)

Despite variations within and between these theoretical arguments, they have provided the lens through which I examine the workings of gender, race and class in London to uncover how Black women are abused, minimized, marginalized, erased and silenced. hooks argues that:

as a group, Black women are in an unusual position…for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group. Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, classist oppression.

(Feminist Theory 14)
While hooks is not hierarchically structuring oppressions, she writes this in and about a society where, historically, First Nations women have been part of the most decimated peoples by the same capitalist forces that continually marginalize Black women. As a result of these systematic patterns, Black women are perceived and treated as gendered, racialized, political subjects, and in some ways, this becomes the instrument for articulating the ideological codes of subordination. It is here, then, that power is subsumed under neocolonial, political and material circumstances:

As such, these categories, are implicated within and expressive of power: they mask other social relations in the very same moment as they carry and reinflect these other relations, and therefore, in understanding these categories (social and analytical) as relational, we must see this relationality as multifaceted rather than simply binary. (Lewis 165)

These points constitute a clear vista for my own Black feminist inquiry of neocolonialism, but by no means am I the first Black feminist to have noticed, conceptualized, questioned, examined, challenged and disrupted the functions of gender, race and class in relation to neocolonialism. Barbara Smith asserts that “the concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality and, I believe, one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought” (xxxii). From the enunciatory positions and deeply analytical feminist theorization of British, Caribbean, US, African and women of color feminists such as Stella Dandzie, Suzanne Scafe, Mukami McCrum, Gail Lewis, Jan McKenley, Mia Morris, Amrit Wilson and Jocelyn Wolfe (interviewed for the Sisterhood and After oral history/life history research project. Their oral testimonies are in the British Library Sound Archive); Shirley Tate, Beverly Bryan, Amina Mama, Valerie Amos, Pratbha Parmar, Ann Pheonix, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Razia Aziz, Tracey Reynolds, Debbie Weekes, Jayne Ifekwuigwe, Naz Rassool, Felly Nkweto Simmonds, Consuelo Rivera Fuentes,
Black feminism is the powerful, radical, decolonizing, deconstructing, historicizing, contextualizing and operationalizing theoretical and methodological recognition of and challenge to Black women’s multiplicity and simultaneity of oppression, a movement towards confronting and changing the personal (Black women’s domain) and political (where power is exerted). This polyvocality of work embodies theories that disrupt gender, race and class and the processes of colonialism, imperialism, neocolonialism and capitalism that accounts for Black women’s collective and individual experiences. This, together with the epistemological importance of Black women’s differential ways of being and making sense of the world in which they live, grounds Black feminist thought. In other words, Black feminist thought, and I borrow from McCann and Kim:

asks questions, including: how do structures of gender difference subordinate women as women? How can we understand the ways in which specific events result from gender oppression, rather than unique individual misfortune? How can we be sure that we have clear understandings of oppressive situations? How is women’s subordination as women connected to related oppressions based on race, ethnicity, nationality, class, sexuality, ability, and gender identity? How can women resist subordination? What changes are needed?

(1)

This constellation of key questions anchors the key organizing principles which provide the useful cultural prism through which social inequalities are understood. Brah argues that:
Black feminism prised open discursive closures which asserted the primacy of, say, class or gender over all other axes of differentiation; and it interrogated the constructions of such privileged signifiers as unifies autonomous cores. The point is the Black feminism not only posed a very serious challenge to colour-centred racisms, but its significance goes far beyond this challenge.

(114)

One principal theorization of this has to do with the way in which discursive practices help to constitute the relations between gender, race and class which serve to inform this inquiry. Furthermore, it does so in a way that allows us to assess the various impacts of these inequalities, that are themselves gendered and racialized positions in the lives of Black women. Thus, the following discussion draws upon Black feminism to explore neocolonialism in London.

“Cause’ we’re ‘different’ right?”
Black Women’s Neocolonial Lived Experiences in London

The idea of ‘difference’ is perhaps one of the most critical and consistent thematic features that had been emphasized while I conducted my research throughout London. Here, I attempt to think further towards an understanding of the notions of ‘difference’ within Black feminism and examine the places of ‘difference’ within the lives of Black British women.
‘Difference’ as an ontological (concerning being and reality), epistemological (knowing) and political (demonstrating power relations) discourse presents questions that are integral to who Black women in London are, how and why things are the way they are? ‘Difference’ then, in its most basic domain informs Black women’s lives. Moreover, since categories of ‘difference’ are rooted in the discursive insistence on the measurability of power where ‘difference’ comes into being, ‘difference’ shapes socio-cultural and political constituencies of normalizing discourse. Essentially, “the norm is the measure of difference. It produces reality, objects, rituals of truth, knowable individuals and subjectivities” (Tate 4).
Most of my interviewees, if not all, were very clear about how the construction of ‘difference,’ and the categorical logics produced alongside it, affected their everyday lives in London. In particular, they emphasized that, as a result of the perceptive assumptions that non-Black folks had of them, ‘difference’ continues to inhabit more than just the cultural articulations of ‘Othering.’ It is also an implication of the kinds of neocolonial topography upon which Black womanhood is constructed in London. One interviewee said, “we’re reminded how different we are because we stand out” (June 25, 2017). Another interviewee said, “well a Black person versus a white person, there is always that difference” (July 29, 2017), and a third interviewee said, “they might look at you, maybe in a different way” (July 29, 2017). Although the specific ways in which these women were racialized and or gendered were not the same, the condensation of the divide between whites (and other dominant groups) and non-whites in this discourse constructed the equivalence and similarity in their experiences created by the conditions of inferiority, exclusion, marginalization and discrimination. This means that ‘difference’ literally separates Black women (the Other) from dominant groups based on their gender, race, class, and this separation is the starting point from which other fields of intersecting ‘difference’ are constituted. In other words, “there are qualitative differences along the dimension of gender and its meaning in British society which have implications for Black women” (Mama 36).

It is this complex interplay of ‘difference’, the Other and the British state that led Tate to ask: “which differences must cease to be salient and which others become visible for the rather abstract national ‘we’ to be a binding force? Who becomes the ‘them’ against which belonging can be measured?” (8). This also led Brah to ask:

How does difference designate the ‘Other’? who defines difference? What are the presumed norms from which a group is marked as different? What is the nature of
attributions that are claimed as characterizing a group as different? How are boundaries of difference constituted, maintained and dissipated? How is difference interiorized in the landscapes of the psyche? How are various groups represented in different discourses of difference? Does difference differentiate laterally or hierarchically?

(115)

Embedded in these questions are the various articulations of neocolonial discourse and practice inscribed in the social reality of everyday lives. In a sense, these questions also marry the history of Britain’s differentiation practices, which are consistent with the contemporary expressions of ‘difference’ in London. When we think about Sara “Saartjie” Baartman’s life in Europe, and the socio-body politics that made her a spectacle throughout Europe’s cultural archives, the idea of ‘difference’ is even more apparent. Sara was lured from her home in South Africa and transported to Europe (specifically London and France), where she was exhibited in many circuses and freaks shows as a cartooned and what Hobson called “mythical and ‘strange’-shaped ‘Hottentot,’” (“The “Batty” Politic” 89-90). Her genitalia, bottom, breasts, lips and skin were seen as fascinating to the British and French people she encountered, so much that she attracted stares, she was studied, poked and ridiculed, and she served as commodity for British and French capitalism. Tate tells us that:

The Black woman’s bottom was cannibalized by both the gaze of whiteness and its manufacture of the bottom for white women’s consumption. What we have here is the double move of estrangement from the difference of the Hottentot Venus bottom by whiteness, at the same time as its revalorization as commodity in the bustle.

(53)

The question then becomes-why was this so? Sara’s story speaks to both: the narratives of ‘difference’ that existed in the 1800s, and the continuation of those expressions even today. Because of her perceived ‘difference’ which indicated her social categorization as a gendered, racial and sexual deviant, Sara’s experience as an analytical tool serves here as the site from which the experiences of Black women can be better understood. In relation to these theses of
racial, sexual and gendered deviance, Hobson argues that, “even when we move beyond the literature of Baartman, we still find this ideology of deviant Black female bodies reiterated in contemporary popular culture” (Venus in the Dark 9-10). In particular, the demonstrates the ways in which Black women in London continue to negotiate the boundaries of ‘difference’ at home, work, school, etc. Individually and collectively, Black women exist outside the ascribed and natural frame of British society, except as the anomalies. Tate argues that “the Black woman’s difference was constructed as psychological, cultural, moral and physical” (2). In this way, ‘difference’ is constructed around categories of exclusion and these give meaning to the divisions of blackness and whiteness, manhood and womanhood, sexualities, racial identities, ethnicities, class, and labor roles.

The most salient inscription of ‘difference’ is the fact that it maps onto the prevailing common sense about Black women, both within and outside Black communities. In exploring ‘difference,’ it became clear that this “common sense” has been internalized by Black women. Of course, most of my interviewees were cognizant of how deeply they have internalized their ‘difference,’ and sometimes invariably or inadvertently allowed it to reduce them. Speaking specifically about this internalization of racial difference, racial discrimination against Black women, and the differential treatment it perpetuates, one interviewee said:

we know, longstanding issue of racial discrimination in this country, as Black people we try to hold our own, not like shun them, because we are living in the country where we have to mix but because we know there is a level of discrimination; we try to just stay on the side of our fence, do what we have to do. We work with them, we go out and have meals in the restaurant, we mix with them, but as Black people we are aware of their level of discrimination.
(August 3, 2017)

In part, this statement speaks to the several terrains that the internalization of the categories ‘difference’ crosses that serve as points for theorizing the neocolonial manifestations of Black
women’s lives in London. There are therefore three points to which I attend. First, ‘difference’ as an epistemological tool exports and validates certain knowledges about Black women in London. These are in turn translated into the projects of institutionalization, and are carried by the socializing systems of citizenship, belonging, justice, personhood and law. This is also key to the ways in which ‘difference’ affects every day social relations and experiences. Second, social inequalities are undeniably compounded by racialized, gendered, and capitalist practices that have a multitude of articulations and intersections within governing socio-cultural configurations. In other words, Black women’s experiences with inequalities reduce them to the very margins of ‘difference’. ‘Difference’ then, as a form of civic arena indicates the ways in which it is organized into systematic interactions. That is to say, this is evident within socio-economic discourses and London’s institutional structures. And third, the practical workings of ‘difference’ generally, and differential positions specifically, emphasize the particularity and importance of Black women’s individual and collective experiences within systems of power and power relations. This means that ‘difference’ in London speaks to notions of subjectivity that are accentuated by Black women’s identities and formulations of self.

While Black women in London served as my primary site for this investigation, and since they themselves are diasporic beings (specifically from the Caribbean and Africa), it is important that I also note that ‘difference’ situated within the uneven systems of neocolonialism broadly is indicative of a Pan-African Black woman experience. Possessing this Pan African element, ‘difference’ is central to our understandings of heterogeneity, origin and colonial discourse. From the onset, categories of ‘difference’ cogently enunciate what it means to be a racialized, gendered and commodified Black woman. In so much as neocolonial imperatives represent and
shape social and political relations and the Pan African experience, ‘difference’ is a chief contributor.

**A Sustained Quarrel with London’s Projects of Power and Class: Understanding the Gendered and Racialized Black Woman**

I now turn my attention to the projects of power and class to further conceptualize Black women’s racialized and gendered objectification and commodification in London. My inquiry is not limited to an examination of British capitalist institutions, it also deconstructs power and class constructions at the microcosmic level in London. By exploring power in this way, I am particularly interested in the different power relations that are inherent to neocolonialism, and the ways in which power and class differences are exerted. I therefore focus on the interwoven and perhaps difficult places from which power and class become dominant. To fully understand how power and class operate, and since both are important constitutive elements within the broader structural and political categories of Black womanhood, I centre the germane transcripts of white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, the capitalist class and masculinity. All take a hegemonic social position and are established where institutional power and finance capital merge. This responds to a recognition of the necessary relations between Black women, Black men, white men and women, the poor working class, the middle class and the upper class. Poor Black women struggle with the various forms of exploitations that are collated with the different gendered and racialized modes of domination and coercion, violence, and gendered forms of social organization. These contribute to a particular productive system: the actual British constituents of class production and power relations. Magubane argues that “the power relationships that conditioned the nature and extent of exploitation [are] partly a product of, and [are] significantly influenced by gender relations within the contending classes” (29). Brah also argues that:
Our gender is constituted and represented differently according to our differential location within the global relations of power. Our insertion into these global relations of power is realized through a myriad of economic, political and ideological processes. Within these structures of social relations, we do not exist simply as women but as differentiated categories, such as ‘working-class women’, ‘peasant women’ or ‘migrant women’.

This is the building block of the British capitalist empire, where one gender, race and class dominates all others. So, “just as the patriarchs rule the family, the elites of the nation-state rule their citizens” (Andrea Smith 280). Because Black women in London are situated at the bottom of this hierarchal system, their inferiority is often seen as the norm and constitution of their marginality, powerlessness, objectification and commodification. One interviewee said:

I think we [Black women] don’t see ourselves as part of society as much as a say a privileged white person, a white person might be the same class as myself will see themselves much more privileged than me because obviously they’re white, I’m Black so you know in terms of equalities and stuff that we can get in society that person would get it easier than I would. I would have to work maybe twice as hard to get where they would be.

(June 25, 2017)

This pillar of power and class relations frame the white hetero-patriarchal capitalist logic that affects the very labor markets that Black women in London depend on to feed their families. This is especially important to the understandings of the post-war period in Britain, a place where Black women (West Indians for example) have been the backbone of the British economy. Fae Ellington tweeted that:

I think West Indians who went to the UK to help rebuild it after WWII & their families born there, should walk throughout the streets in silent protest with placards bearing 3 simple words. #WeBuiltIt. Because they did. Even before they arrived...We had. We built their industries, the transportation sector, factories, houses, hospitals etc. West Indians were employed in these sectors and more and many subsequently went on to create their own businesses. And what of ALL that was taken from us during slavery?!

(qtd. in “UK should be reminded that it was built by Caribbean immigrants”)
Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe assert that “the Black woman’s experience of work in Britain mirrors our experience of work over the past five centuries. This has been one long tradition of back-breaking labor in the service of European capitalism” (17). In this logic of expansionism, Black women’s labor is the necessary but abused force within the economy. In this vein, some of my interviewees spoke at length about Black women’s interactions with the National Health System (NHS), a field with which many are very familiar and having worked for there for generations. One interviewee emphasized that Black women have built the NHS, even though they were given the most menial jobs (June 25, 2017). Similarly, another interviewee said, “they would have like certain type of [menial jobs]- they couldn’t do [jobs that were considered critical]-cover certain areas on the ward [referring to hospital wards]. They weren’t employed in certain areas” (August 3, 2017). Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe also spoke about the NHS. They had this to say:

Our experiences within the National Health Service are crucial for they both highlight and sum up our role in this economy as Black women workers, underpinning the Welfare State. Our concentration in the least prestigious areas of service-a service which has consistently failed to cater for our own health needs when we have become patients-emphasizes how racism has excluded us from benefits of a society which relies so heavily on our labour. (38)

These oppressive encounters with the capitalist state locate the deeply uneven systems of power which further constructs the matrices of racialization, exploitation, exclusion and ideologies of inferiority. For the working-class Black woman, the economic pressures of their class are therefore very severe and damaging. This is compounded by their experiences with mental health (one interviewee spoke about this at length), prison, housing, education and religious systems. All have seen Black women suffer at the hands of the state. These categorical power structures are extremely problematic, and they continue to subject Black women to the
forces of the government, judiciary, and British culture. Therefore, it is first necessary to question the logics of power and class as they are informed by neocolonial discourses within the labor and cultural markets, and also social institutions. Second, it must be understood that gendered representations of class and power are somehow immanent in productive relations: the exploiter and exploited relationships. Mama tells us that:

The location of Black women in the labour markets reflects and compounds the dimensions of inequality intrinsic to the British society. In accordance with racial differentiation, we are to be found in the lower echelons of all institution where we are employed (this in itself reflecting patterns of a segmented labour market), where the work is often physically heavy (in the factories and mills no less than in the caring professions), the pay is lowest, and the hours are longest and most anti-social (night-shifts, for example).

(37)

It is immediately clear that economic activities demonstrate that Black women are devalued by sexism and patriarchal labor power in London. Amrit Wilson asserts that, “while I do not see patriarchy as an autonomous system, I regard patriarchal relations-relations between men and women that subordinate women- as a core attribute of the vast majority of historical and existing social formations” (3). In this way Black women are perceived along the lines of what Mrinalini Sinha calls “gendered modes of national belonging” (263) that have been central to the construction and performance of masculinity and femininity, sexism, misogyny and racism. Similary, Mama argues that

The sexist and racist devaluation of Black female labour in Britain is not only historical but also a contemporary fact and…the situation, far from improving, appears to be deteriorating. In addition to this we have particular relations to the British state, firstly as workers to capital needs, and secondly to the legislative apparatus, particularly through immigration legislation which is used to mediate this relation and keep it on terms that do not include our interests as workers.

(40)

In particular, masculinity and femininity, as the political representations of power and class polarity, reflect Britains culture and the neocolonial imperatives of London in two ways.
One, the pervasiveness of powerful male figures especially the figure of the man in control of the family provides an important context for understanding Black women’s own reverence to these systems of power. Carty argues that:

> In this case, the objectifying is primarily done by men who employ it as their basis of power. They present the world which they have created as truth and objectivity, but it is actually their world. Their power, then, is based on an ideology of masculinity. (“Black Women in Academia” 288)

Before considering the broader mechanics of masculinity in relation to femininity, it is important that I point to a critical statement made by one of the interviewees. This statement points to the day-to-day experiences that Black women have to negotiate, whether or not they are in intimate relationships with Black men. It also demonstrates that the micro-aggressions that male-dominance permit men to perform are both a cultural representation of gendered ideologies and the numerous other ways that racism and misogyny debilitate Black womanhood. In this vein, Black women’s second-class citizenship is reflected by patriarchal practices and neocoloniality.

The interviewee said:

> to think that you’ve got your Black brothers, I am not saying they can’t have relationships with white girl, but at the end of the day in regard to, racial discrimination and I know, in case of any quarrels, they always turn around and say, ‘you black bastard’, so [Black women] are never safe in that relationship and that’s the reason why it’s so compelling to us.  
> (August 3, 2017)

Again, it is important that we understand that Britain’s arbitrary and often unquestioned exploitation of Black women rules supreme, and Black women themselves have been cooperative and complicit in the protection of its projects of power and class. This compliance, specifically with patriarchy, masculinity and the white capitalist class structure is perceived as the acceptable gendered role of women. In particular, when we think about how these power structures have deeply affected sex and sexuality, the provision of power relations become even
clearer. So, for Black women, both in heterosexual relations with men and or same sex relations that excludes men, their lives are constructed around the distillation of the somewhat “ascribed” and “natural” hierarchy between masculinity and femininity. This goes beyond the mere ideas that Black women are mistreated in terms of economic forces and capital wealth, to reflect the tensions between gender inequality and Black women’s sexuality. Mapping power and class as the itinerary for the racialization and objectification of the Black woman as ‘Other’ gets to the core of neocolonialism in London. Most importantly, in deconstructing the complexity of the intersections of white hetero-patriarchy, capitalism and the British state, I have better positioned Black women’s daily encounters with inequality.

**in the beginning, the story:**
**A Black Feminist Poem about Black Women in London**

the story never really ends for Mama, Daughter, Sister, Niece, Auntie-
for Black women
it never really stops beginning: a never-ending beginning, without an end, just a beginning, that keeps beginning
from below the deep deep deep D E E P headless blue:
the white infinite blue-bottomless-the poisoning place of male dominance-an immeasurable Atlantic depth-
a tomb: an emptiness: a gift unasked for-unwanted
a stink: RITING OF PASSAGE
as Her back reverence your SUN, belly to the field.
a becoming: a beginning- echoing Her
Birth
Life
Death
a genocide, massacre, holocaust, you crown: British Glory

a story: that never stops: forever in the beginning: an inexhaustible starting, beginning
for Black women
the chains of race\textit{genderxclassxethnicityxsexualityxagexsex}
bones of your
post-war, burnt in the war, then after the war
an exploitation
reigning full of white-hetero-patriarchal-dominance
-a constant power to the regeneration of capitalism (its own instrumentality: a blued-eyed
neocolonial song)
to She who understands, a knowing that fucks Her everyday
each second, every minute-She bleeds-the blood-She needs to breathe-She cannot breathe!
each hour, day, week, month, year
TIC
TOC
TIC
TOC
until she
feels tastes smells

B
E
A
R
S
Home: Empire
Home: Britain
Home: London
hurting so much-paining and struggling-the only reality
for Her: a difference: broken down in the margins
NAKED: but not naked enough: an unpleasant sound: a rhythm of Buckingham: a predator
preying
while She is praying that your systems were just Her phantasmagoric dreams
of a Black woman’s past
but you are a hegemonic disease: political, social, environmental and economic bug
the unveiled language of power

this story: the beginning coming on a boat named BEGINNING, not Her boat, but Her beginning
for Black women
in London, there exists a primitive manifestation of
racism, classism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia
an uncivilized backward neocolonial song: the OTHER and US
    Black women and the beast: dancing on Her soul,
    the soul you named a proletariat barbaric
that blossomed from the wilds of Africa, the Caribbean and Asia
as a sub-human: less than: not even human:
the Western science Sara “Saartjie” Baartman lived and died upon
your systemic, theoretical, methodical caricature of Black women’s beings
obviously, a logic of nothingness and ‘something-ness’ that is British culture
a position: where She perfects the organization of your world

becoming the story at the beginning: the skies awakening at the beginning of the story:
Her reality.
for Black women
your establishment never dies. it rises again and again
with fresh new meanings of Her: but the same meanings equipped with adaptability
an experience: daily: day by day: an oppressive assignment from the devil
London: is hell
for Her: her people: her ancestral spirits and her generations
for the sustenance of this, your apartheid, is the unavoidable cycle that render her inferior
incarcerating all Her holiness, Her glory, Her dance, Her song
in the Health (NHS), Education, Religious and the other industries
all perilous industries connected to the boat
to this beginning story, interrupted but beginning, resisted but beginning
for Black women
in London
in the beginning: Her story.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I sought to examine the social relations of gender, race and class inside
London to better deconstruct Black women’s encounters with neocolonialism and the workings
of white hegemonic power dynamics. I primarily employed Black and women of color feminism,
(sometimes now referred to as transnational Black feminism although that term was not used
either by feminist scholars or the interviewees themselves), specifically its contributions to
understandings of Black womanhood in the British context. According to Rose Brewer, the
major propositions of a Black feminist stance are:

1. critiquing dichotomous, oppositional thinking employing by both/and rather than
   either/or categorizations.
2. allowing for the simultaneity of oppression and struggle, thus
3. eschewing additive analyses: race + class + gender
4. which leads to an understanding of the embeddedness and relationality of race, class and
   gender and the multiplicative nature of these relationships: race x class x gender
5. reconstructing the lived experiences, historical positioning, cultural perceptions and
   social construction of Black women who are enmeshed in and whose ideas emerge out of
   that experience, and
6. developing a feminism rooted in class, culture, gender and race in interaction as its
   organizing principle.

(33)
These principles guided my approach to investigate the regimes of neocolonial power: how they inform gender, race and class structures. My arguments are therefore framed within a socio-political understanding of Britain and the ways in which is deploys ideas about ‘difference.’ I used this idea in an attempt to understand the link between the formation of citizens/Black woman subjects, imposition of racial identities, and the Othering projects of belonging. While this chapter discusses Black women’s lived experience as the core analytical place from which categories of ‘difference’ are central to the oppressive British power structures, it also focuses on gendered power relations, gendered roles and gendered labor. From this, I argued that cultural institutions and practices are involved in the process of reconstituting the gendered and racialized Black woman. In particular, I was concerned with the continuation of colonial discourses in London to show how Black women are conceptualized as the necessary anomaly. In this way, the marginality and exclusion of Black women from dominant positions, ground the necessary operations of neocolonialism.

I also argued that the projects of power and class are particularly important to the normalizing hegemonic discourses of white hetero-patriarchy and capitalism: fields of masculinity and femininity. Magubane writes:

> The shape of the space that came to be understood as the civic realm [is] determined by the outcome of conflicts between working classes and middle classes and between men and women. The axis around which these conflicts turned in the former case [is] that of gender-specifically, the right to define what constituted the greatest threat to the working-class family. In the latter instance the conflicts turned on the manipulation of racial discourses: the ability to finesse the meaning of race [is] tantamount to the ability to shape the space that bore the title of the civic, or social, sphere.

(94)

This statement shapes my arguments in two ways. First, it emphasizes the complexity of the role of the capitalist state and its imposition of a particular kind of economic power structure in the lives and on the backs of Black women. With this argument, I linked some of the points made by
the interviewees about the ways in which patriarchy abuses Black women institutionally. In addition, they spoke about the far-reaching impact of these categories of power. Second, Magubane’s statement speaks to the direct links between the projects of power and class, and the ways in which Black women uphold them. My concern here is the ways in which certain categories of subordination contribute to the oppressive operations of femininity and the expectations of Black womanhood.

I closed the chapter with a Black feminist poem that I wrote emphasizing Black women’s lived experiences and multiplicity of oppression in London. This poem speaks extensively about the legitimacy, adaptability and circulatory elements of neocolonialism. I have tried to identify the colonial webs that are constitutive of gender, race and class relations in an effort to provide the framework from which chapter two can stem.
Chapter Two
*Ebony’s Roots: Black Women’s Hair and Racialized Gender*

**Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I conducted a Black feminist analysis of Black women’s neocolonial lived experiences in London, and the ways in which the social relations of gender, race and class have been a locus for the interconnectedness of the categories of difference and hegemonic power dynamics inside Britain, and particularly within London. In this chapter, I continue in the general vein of looking at Black women’s everyday encounters with capitalism and neocolonialism by examining how they wear their hair (which I call “Ebony’s Roots”) and how it is impacted by racialized gender. Specifically, I use Ebony’s Roots to explore what Dionne Brand calls “the Door of No Return.” According to Brand:

> The Door of No Return is of course no place at all but a metaphor for place...it is no one place but a collection of places...A place where certain transactions occurred, perhaps the most important being the transference of selves. The Door of No Return-real and metaphoric as some places are, mythic to those of us scattered in the [African Diaspora]...It is a place which exists or existed. The door out of which Africans were captured, loaded onto ships heading for the New World. It was the door of a million exits multiplied. It is the door many of us wish never existed...The door looms...as a horror...The horror is of course three or four hundred years of slavery, its shadow was and is colonialism and racism)...The door casts a haunting spell on personal and collective consciousness in the Diaspora...One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives. Where one stands in a society seems always related to this historical experience. Where one can be observed is relative to that history. *(A Map to the Door of No Return 18-19, 22 & 25)*

I begin here, at the door, to provide using Ebony’s Roots, a diasporic gendered analysis of the racialization and political marginality of Black (Caribbean and African) women in London. In other words, Ebony’s Roots serve as the map to the door that opens to webs of origin; belonging and diasporic citizenship; the continuation of coloniality; neocolonial institutions; capitalism; racialized and gendered ideological codes; as well as the politics of Black women’s lived experience: objectification, commodification, subjugation, exploitation and oppression that
continue to shape racialized gender and the ideas of Blackness, Whiteness, Englishness, Britishness, Caribbeanness and Africanness in London.

Ebony’s Roots is therefore a very complex matter that I use to emphasize, in various ways, the social context of Britain. It is concomitant to the process by which shared experiences, cultural expressions, Black British identity, senses of alienation and the cataclysmic practices of discrimination cannot be separated from the economic realities and political processes which have shaped Black women’s lives. I argue that Ebony’s Roots is central to Black women’s neocolonial lived experiences and since Ebony’s Roots is the antithesis of non-Ebony’s Roots/the dominant Roots, the very idea of Ebony’s Roots is perceived as the quality of ‘Otherness’/outsider, a primary constituent of the Door of No Return. In this way, the coalescence of Ebony’s Roots, structures or codes of Otherness and the Door of No Return reveals Britain’s commitments to race, racism and gendered pathology. Perhaps the most important point here is that Ebony’s Roots (symbolic of Black women’s bodies) is one of the central structuring features of Britain’s systems of oppression, and it is impacted by racialized gender and discourses of Othering, a place where the Door of No Return is most evident. The actual amalgamation of Ebony’s Roots, racialized gender and the Door of No Return takes place in the cultural fabric of Britain- the social institutions of neocolonialism and therefore the political reality of blackness and being a Black woman. “Encoded with meanings of ‘foreign alienness,’ ‘Black pathology’ and ‘social and ethnic inferiority,’ blackness has historically provided the category against which the concept of the British ‘nation’ has been defined in popular consciousness” (Naz Rassool 187). The power of this association between the structures of blackness and Black women’s daily experiences with the pathologization of Black folks is
clearly a product of colonial discourse and the normative social conditions of life in the diaspora.

Brand asserts that:

In many senses the Black body is one of the most regulated bodies in the Diaspora. Perhaps the most regulated body is the female body, any female body, but the Black body is close and symbolic second. (The female body is also a ‘naturalized’ body-like the Black body having no ability to articulate itself outside of its given ‘natural’ functions. It too is a domesticated space, a space taken over by a process, cultivated into a symbol.) By regulated I mean that there are specific societal functions which it is put to, quite outside of its own agency-functions which in fact deny and resist its agency. It is as if its first appearance through the door of no return, dressed in its new habit of captive and therefore slave, is embedded in all it subsequent and contemporary appearances. (A Map to the Door of No Return 35)

Ebony’s Roots is indeed a core and unique component of the physical appearance of Black women and this is central to the idea of ‘difference,’ a deeply inherent difference constructed on the basis of an invidious physical contrast, a sufficient sign for white-hegemonic discourse that Black women are separate (and needless to say, lower). The role of Ebony’s Roots then, in shaping this idea (and being a wellspring for my analyses) is not merely because it is ubiquitous throughout London and present a negative imagery of Black women in Britain. It is also central to the racial standards created through the processes of the British empire. These have labeled the Black woman a racial and gendered inferior- the lowest exemplum of humans (as she is simultaneously seen as less than human, not even human). One interviewee said, “that is how race works that there is this kind of daily reminder that you are colored [meaning Black], that you’re less of a human, you’re less of a citizen, you have less rights than other people” (June 23, 2017).

Whereas, Black and women of color feminism were my main focus in the last chapter, and while this chapter also takes an unapologetically feminist approach, I focus primarily on the ideas of the 22 women I interviewed and the woman who participated in the memoir documentation (who did not necessarily call themselves feminists). I centre their voices, their
stories and the ways in which they provided me with a set of images of strength, pain, emotions and knowledges for uncovering Ebony’s Roots. I argue that the ways in which these women told their stories are important. Their stories decode the cultural practices of London, while also providing the sociopolitical explanations of life as diasporic Black women. Writing about Ebony’s Roots (which she calls “my hair”) and how it is impacted by racialized gender, the participant of the memoir documentation wrote the following poem:

My hair does not define me.  
But yet it’s a significant part of who I am.  
It’s nappy because it’s natural.  
Representing my authenticity, integrity.  
What you see is what you get.

"Your hair is too ethnic",  
To progress in this organisation  
The guiding words of my white female manager.  
This organisation is too racist.  
I exclaimed to myself.  
So I'm leaving.

Wow!  
I’m not alone.  
I’m not an alien.  
There are a few more of us,  
With natural hair in the workplace.

I am not my hair.  
But it's a part of me.  
Like all my defining characteristics  
That makes me a working black woman in London City.  
(September 9, 2017)

While imageries of resistance (which I discuss in detail in chapter three) are embedded in her poem, I included it in this chapter because it presents a riveting example of Black women’s experiences with Ebony’s Roots and the proliferation of racism and gender discrimination in London. She declared: “I am not my hair. But it’s a part of me.” This statement represents the structured ideologies that glorify negative perceptions of Black women in London. These
ideologies remain imprinted on the culture of Ebony’s Roots as on a palimpsest of the Door of No Return, shaping neocolonialism and informing Black women’s lives. We can therefore learn from Ebony’s Roots not only why Black women are oppressed in London, but also how this oppression functions, how it is used to sustain systems of dominance that fuel British capitalism and neocolonialism. In this chapter, I focus on Ebony’s Roots: A Gendered Place and Ebony’s Roots: The Door of No Return and the Deep Structures of Racialized Gender.

**Ebony’s Roots: A Gendered Place**

As I mentioned earlier, Ebony’s Roots is the name I use to refer to how Black women wear their hair. It is taken very seriously by the women I interviewed, perhaps even more than gender. But because Ebony’s Roots is itself ‘gendered,’ it makes for an arduous gendered definition. Here, I attempt to define and critique Ebony’s Roots as a gendered place to provide some insights into the dehumanizing and subordinating practices of London that shaped Black womanhood in the past and continue to shape the present. More than just equating a politically determined meaning to Ebony’s Roots and reduce it to the merits of “good” or “bad” hair or “natural” versus “straight” hair, I describe Ebony’s Roots as a gendered place that is socially constructed, mediated and shaped by race and gender, but not approved by the dominant culture. It is important that I note here that across London, dominant pathologies of body politic, violent perceptive tendencies, the politics of location, the socio-economic impact of inequality and the configuration of power relations all combine to ensure that Black women’s experiences with Ebony’s Roots are markedly different, and are perhaps some of the most damaging, compared to their white counterparts. I therefore discuss the socio-cultural representations of this gendered reality as it is mirrored by Black women’s lived experiences, but also as it is shaped by
neocolonial discourses. I argue that this highlights Black women’s understandings of self and community since it is within Ebony’s Roots that both group and individual subjectivities have been shaped.

Indeed, my study of Ebony’s Roots examines it as a colored (that is, taking many forms) and symbolic ideological system that has inherited the British nation. Thus, my goal is to investigate Ebony’s Roots through the political, cultural and social codes that marginalize Black women as inherently and unpleasantly different, which embodies the ideologies of the broader context of British culture. To this end, I return Ebony’s Roots to Africa, then back to the diaspora, by taking it across the Atlantic, from parts of Africa to the New World and then migrating it to London. This return is difficult, but critical for understanding the issues of Ebony’s Roots. Similarly, Pamela Johnson asserts that, “as Black women, we gain more understanding of our current conundrum if we look at the link between our hair issues and those of our ‘ansisters’” (“Crown and Glory” 105). She further stated that:

In pre-slavery Africa, where everybody was Black, beautiful and as kinky as they wanted to be, hairdos were as unique as one person is from the next. Styles were elevated to high art. They might be carved, sculpted with mud, clay or butter, or adorned with combs, beads and shells. Many do’s were imbued with meaning. Some continue to be continue. In Zambia and other parts of the continent, for example, the shaved head of an adult can connote mourning for a loved one. In places such as Cameroon, the shaved head of a child with a tuft on top is thought to offer protection from evil spirits. In Nigeria, hair that grows in spirals (that look like locks) on a baby marks the child ad special and a future devotee of Olokun [orisha of wealth] and other water spirits. (105)

This recapturing of history helps us to better deconstruct Ebony’s Roots since this return to Africa is not merely an exercise of historical fact-finding. Rather, it provides us with a clearer understanding of the African and colonial “roots” of Ebony’s Roots- the historical context that shaped African women’s experiences with Ebony’s Roots. This context continues to shape the current experiences of Black British and other diasporic women. Moreover, this context
emphasizes why Ebony’s Roots continues to be seen as strange, dark, barbaric, primitive, and savage, a position that it held since Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Arthur de Gobineau discussed and began to philosophize the “Black Other.” This has been the wellspring from which Ebony’s Roots has been perceived as the “problem.” Thus, the image of Ebony’s Roots is not only present today, it is often unchallenged and unchecked. Pamela Johnson argues that:

Actually, we’ve been puzzled about what to do with our hair for centuries. It started when we were forced to leave Africa without a moment’s notice and without our stuff. Our foremothers stumbled off those ships dazed and confused. They’d been stripped of everything, including the combs and cowries they used to fix their hair, (“Crown and Glory” 105)

I thus enter this discussion about Ebony’s Roots through a difficult gendered place. Indeed, it is in this place that Ebony’s Roots (and the larger context of the Black female body) undergoes a negative metamorphosis, from being seen as a confluence of glory and goodness to one of inferiority and subordination. Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson wrote:

Our hair speaks with a voice as soft as cotton. If you listen closely-put your ear right up to it-it will tell you its secrets. Like the soothing peace it knew before being yanked out of Africa. Like the neglect it endured sweating under rags in the sun-lashed fields…And even today, it speaks of its restless quest for home; a place that must be somewhere between Africa and [the Diaspora], between rambunctious and retrained, and between personally pleasing and socially ‘acceptable.’ For the longest time… (Tenderheaded xv)

Intriguingly, whilst Ebony’s Roots is somewhat unwelcomed, disillusioned, traumatized by and alienated within mainstream British cultural politics, it proves to be a compelling place for not only understanding the “colors” or lack thereof of each strand, but also how these are framed inside the British empire. You will see later on in this chapter that it each strand carries an overarching sense of exile and displacement as well as the post-war immigration to Britain of thousands of Caribbean and African migrants.
For my interviewees, Ebony’s Roots can be relaxed, natural, weave, extension, wig, braid, bun, dreads, thick, thin, pressed, afro, plaits, twists, turban-tied, wrapped, fro-locks, straightened, curls, kinks, coils or cane-row, or some combination of these. These varied constructions of Ebony’s Roots are a subtext of Black women’s identity and they demonstrate the ideas of cultural multiplicity in which differential elements of Ebony’s Root are understood, not in tandem, but in their synchronic ties to race and gender. Such entail an engagement of Black women’s political, racial, class and gender identity upon a complex terrain on which blackness can be deconstructed. These entanglements are the bearers of transnational histories and diasporic connections that are reconstituted, albeit in different ways, where Ebony’s Roots intersect with Black women’s lived experiences. The heterogeneity-the multiplicity of- Ebony’s Roots is therefore a central position in the formation of gender, diaspora and the dichotomy of blackness and identity. One interviewee said, “I think having curly hair is a big part of my identity, the Black side of my cultural identity” (June 25, 2017). Another said:

I think it [Ebony’s Roots] is really important. I think having afro hair, having thick hair. I guess well it’s all part of the phenotype of blackness and not just the look of it but I’ve been able to express myself with my hair particular when I’ve got the fro locks or if I’ve got braids in, there is a very distinctive blackness (June 25, 2017)

Similarly, a third interviewee said:

So, hair is definitely an important part of women’s identity and like in Ghana for example, you know, it’s often put into different styles and you might wear like a little like a head wrap and stuff so that’s also part of it and so yea it’s an important part of being a woman um in Ghanaian culture so yea. (July 28, 2017)

These statements were supported by Weekes who argues that the “authenticity of a Black women’s identity can be often measured in relation to the physical signifiers of hair and skin” (114). Referring to how her own Ebony’s Roots relate to her identity as a Black Nigerian
woman, one of my interviewees said, “the curls, definitely the curls and I am natural, so it’s very tough and hardcore, you know when you put that comb through it and it stuck there, yes, I would say the curls definitely show for sure…yeah yeah” (July 29, 2017). Similarly, another said, “[in wearing Ebony’s Roots], I try as much as possible to identify with where I come from” (July 29, 2017). In the case of the Caribbean, one interviewee said, “well that’s what most Caribbean people do, either they wear weave on or they like their weaves or extension or some people like their afro hair, their natural hair so it depends” (August 3, 2017). I emphasize these statements because they enable us to examine the nexus of differential social meanings that are constructed inside Ebony’s Roots. That is to say, Ebony’s Roots is not simply a social construction, it is also a kind of signifier of skin-color, physiognomy, cultural identity and a constituent of diaspora and the transnational psyche of Black women.

The decision to wear Ebony’s Roots in this or that way is also critical to my definition of a gendered place. Consequently, the processes of subjectivity and social practices that were emphasized by my interviewees will be illuminated here. Ebony’s Roots is determined by their mood; feeling; the space they are about to engage at a particular time (school, work, a social or religious event); religion; trend; the protection of their natural hair; a political statement; time; style that is manageable; personal phase; economics; what works well with an outfit; what is suitable for the demands of motherhood; controlling factors; convenience; the hairstylist; vacation context; the weather; fashion; taste; lifestyle; the culture of one’s home country (or countries) or a combination of some of these. For example, in response to the question, who or what determines how you wear your hair, one interviewee said, “for me, it’s just like a matter of convenience but mainly the easier way that I can just have my hair you know, that’s it” (June 25, 2017). Another said, “I think there are other controlling factors so when I was in a corporate
space or I had a 9-5 job in a government organization they didn’t want to see my hair in the natural state” (June 25, 2017). Another interviewee said, “myself” (June 25, 2017) and another said:

I reflect on our older generation and as a Jamaican, you know, pictures of the maroons, Nanny maroon and all the other ladies and in Jamaica we’ve got Maroon settlement, so we still have that strong unity of Maroons in Jamaica and the hair is just so beautiful. So, to me that’s my marker really, to continue doing it, not just because I’m patterning them or anything; it’s what suits me.
(August 3, 2017)

A fifth interviewee said, “umm, depends on how I feel for the month or for the week or so.
That’s the way I feel, that’s what I would like” (July 29, 2017), and another said, “I do what makes me feel comfortable and what makes me feel confident” (July 29, 2017). In light of these varied reasons for choosing Ebony’s Roots, I am able to juxtapose the cultural manifestations of Ebony’s Roots with the problematic interpretations of it. Focusing on the images that define Ebony’s Roots as too radical, too militant, unprofessional, unattractive, unkempt, dirty and exotic, it is clear that the political and social discourse around what Ebony’s Roots means is closely related to the gendered and raced Black woman body in public and private life, and the socio-political culture of London. This provides a glimpse of the complex nature of what Noliwe Rooks calls:

hair dramas…what happens when the specific understandings one group of people hold regarding the meaning of [Ebony’s Roots] on a Black female body come into conflict with the individual understandings held by members of an outside group invested with the power and authority to bring those bodies and [Ebony’s Roots] in line with what they believe to be acceptable,
(“Wearing Your Race Wrong” 284)

In this vein however, the interviewees were clear that with the growing natural and kinky-textured hair movement throughout London and the global world, there has been a widespread acceptance and appreciation of Ebony’s Roots, both inside and outside Black
communities. Nevertheless, they quickly emphasized that the colonial legacies of Ebony’s Roots and the preconceived notions of gender that it fosters continue to be very damaging. When asked (in the form of a social experiment) how each interviewee thinks I would be treated in London with my twist outs and or afro, one interviewee argued that:

I think as well possibly, maybe in like workplaces, you’d come off-come across as not even, I don’t know if the word is difficult but just someone that “ok we need to keep an eye on this one, we need to focus on how to make her this or that” so I do think there would be a lot of umm trying to mold you into something that you don’t wanna be and sort of classing you as like this trouble maker- “ok she might be a problem” yea no definitely I think it’s very undercover racism in London so you wouldn’t directly feel it, you just start to sense things and yea.
(July 29, 2017)

Similarly, another one said:

um, cause yea the natural hair is like that…people would look at you and think like I think there would like a toughness that go along with like “oh can’t approach her” or something…um yea like people would think like yea you’re a tough lady, I mean you’re unapproachable yea I think that’s what I’d say
(July 28, 2017)

A third said:

You would be seen as...that you’re not trying to conform...in London, I am not saying you know, certain parts or you’re not trying to conform, you’re trying to be different ethnic, you know so you’re not yea...you’re a rebel, going against the grain.
(June 25, 2017)

And finally, a fourth said:

You would be treated as if you’re doing the wrong things. I want to use a Nigerian- so you’re not from here so we use, they would think you’re like a delilah, you’re doing the wrong things, you belong to a gang or Rastafarian and all that. that is it. My last daughter has locks, her own is getting longer and I tell her that they don’t-they will not like this-they will think you’re-because of your race-your color, they will think your gang or whatever.
(July 29, 2017)

These statements reveal Britain’s violent exclusionary practices and the ways in which the gendered place of Ebony’s Roots is also the development of a particular kind of consciousness that reflects white standards, values and desires to control the Black female body. In other words,
Ebony’s Roots is primarily indicative of the social apartheid between Black women and dominant groups in all spheres of life: media, school, church, work, etc. Having established these parameters, it is clear that inferiority and sub-humanness link Black women to the British nation.

Moreover, one interviewee had this to say:

I do feel like subconsciously being in Britain, you’re not really empowered [as] Black women because we feel generally speaking-inferior. We may realize we feel inferior, but it’s programmed I feel because if you look at the media-if you look who is in position for power all over the world, we doubt you would see a Black woman, a Black man or anyone Black.

(July 29, 2017)

This means that gender and racism at work and in the streets of London continue to position Black women to face the heaviest blows of neocolonialism.

Another critical component in defining Ebony’s Roots as a gendered place is the power and influence of patriarchy. I am arguing here that Ebony’s Roots have been negatively affected by Britain’s gender relations, which are inscribed within neocolonial discourses, the cultural fabric of London, discourses of the media and the ongoing structures of finance capital. These are indicative of the categorization of dominance and power relations between white men, Black men and Black women. Like I discussed in chapter one, patriarchal rule is primarily concerned with the continuous objectification and exploitation of Black women’s bodies. In this subsection, I look specifically at how patriarchy constructs negative notions of Ebony’s Roots. One primary manifestation of this, is the control of Black women’s appearance, and since Ebony’s Roots is central to physical appearance, this forces Black women into a gendered place where they can only be fully accepted and approved of if they are groomed a certain way. Hobson argued that:

Certainly, in the arena of personal relationships, being physically attractive is the most valued quality, especially in our consumer culture, which places considerable emphasis
on our bodies. If we add to this the cultural perception of whiteness as a marker of beauty and power, along with wealth as a means by which to maintain the body beautiful, then we may recognize those women who are nonwhite and poor as extremely disadvantaged. *(Venus in the Dark 12).*

The physical control of Black women then, is integral to patriarchal rule and power.

According to Wilson, “modern western patriarchal ideology has long decreed that [Black] women must be judged by their appearance first and foremost” (27). The inscriptions of femininity and femaleness that is evoked by this demonstrate that patriarchy’s control of Ebony’s Roots is mobilized along the axes of masculinity and machismo. These controlling factors start as early as childhood and continue throughout Black women’s lives. While I did not explicitly ask about patriarchy, the interviewees provided me with some direct and or indirect experiences with patriarchy (that I know too well) when we discussed Ebony’s Roots. One interview said:

> But some of our Black men, I think they rather girls with the long hair, not all of them, some of them, you understand, they don’t appreciate the Black women, so they tend to stick around with the white girls and maybe some of them might look at our hair

(August 3, 2017)

She further stated that:

> Half of the black women in this country, they have children for black guys and when they look around they are gone, they are with the white girls and they treat the white girls with so much respect and as I’ve said before, you might see ten black guys out there, more than half of the ten black guys are with white girls and the black guy, pushing the buggy, carrying the baby on the back and if you see the other half with the black girl; the girl struggling with the baby and doing everything.

(August 3, 2017)

Mapping these iterations of patriarchy inside Ebony’s Roots, the interviewee illustrated that in almost every situation, reactions to Ebony’s Roots carry a problematic gendered rational where supremacy is solely in the hands of the male population. Indeed, this has constructed notions of Black female powerlessness and subjection. Nalini Persram argues “but if patriarchy [is] the ideological means of establishing dominance of men over women, it nevertheless relie[s] on the
reification, as well as the subordination, of the concept of the feminine in order to sustain itself” (207-208). One profound example was when an interviewee told me that Black men would “still” be attracted to me even though I wore my natural hair- the hair type most hated by Black men in London. She further stated that my acceptance (if any) by a Black male would be as a direct result of my curves, body type and size. Specifically, she said, “actually, I think most Black men, I think because you are a very attractive woman [because of my body type] that it would hard for most to be like ‘oh I prefer wigs’” (June 25, 2017). This idea of getting a “pass” because my body would be preferred emphasizes that Ebony’s Roots is mediated by gendered and racialized constructs inscribed by patriarchy. Another interviewee said, “yea, when I’ve got weave in, I get different sort of attention and [this is] probably…from the male side when you’ve got the weave in” (July 20, 2017). In this way, she demonstrated that the sexual desires or non-desire of Black males may allow or not allow Ebony’s Roots to be accepted- when we think about the sexual scripts of patriarchy. In other words, patriarchy categorizes Ebony’s Roots through the Black female body it accompanies. It became clear too that as a direct result of this, some of my interviewees carry certain ambiguous feelings towards their natural hair. The unresolved struggle here underscores that white standards of hair are internalized by Black women. Weekes argues:

the historical association of Whiteness as a yardstick for beauty has become internalized not just by Black women but by Black men also. This process of negating the beauty of Black textured hair and darker shades of skin has strong implications for Black women in terms of appearing attractive to males. (115)

In this way, Black women’s femininity is not only opposed to “pure” white femininity, it is also illustrates that Black femininity is perceived as unpleasant while white femininity is good, beautiful and acceptable. Ebony’s Roots has not been very easy to define but inside an
understanding of racism, sexism, gender, class and patriarchy, its various meanings were illuminated.

**Ebony’ Roots:**

_The Door of No Return and the Deep Structures of Racialized Gender_

The definition of Ebony’s Roots as a gendered place adds critical dimensions to the Door of No Return and the deep structures of racialized gender. Now that I have outlined what I mean by Ebony’s Roots, I will now look at these dimensions. Brand asks:

> Why do we consider the door of no return? Because it exists without prompting. It exists despite all efforts to obscure it or change it or reinterpret it by its carpenters or its passengers. The Door of No Return is ocular. It is propitious. From it one may reflect, grasp.  
> *(A Map to the Door of No Return 72)*

Of course, this Door of No Return is largely born of slavery, and British expansionism through colonialism and imperialism. It serves the capitalist class and fuels neocolonial imperatives. It is the ideological continuity of state, racial, political and economic violence against Black women and it shapes and promotes imperatives of power and privilege. It produces knowledge that normalizes white hegemonic practices, gendered and racialized dynamics and the symbiotic relations of difference and exclusion. It is deeply connected to Black women’s subordination and marginalization in London, and it contributes to the ways in which they experience particular vulnerabilities arising from race, gender and other systems of dominance. In this discussion, I am particularly interested in its ties to the ideas of diaspora, transnational connections, migration, immigration, asylum, refugee, border-crossing, resettlement, assimilation and belonging all functions of racialized gender. To this end, I argue that Black women have been generations of post-war immigration to Britain, and “as literal members of the British Empire, they… after all,
moved from one part of that Empire to another, to the epicentre of the Empire, the ‘Mother Country’” (Eddie Chambers 2).

While I do not fully explore these structures insomuch as encounters with them imbue certain qualities such as stricter immigration laws and bordering policies, I am keen to this context and the role it plays in making the Door of No Return a difficult but situated place (not fixed, but constantly being shaped by everyday social interactions within the British nation and violent nation bordering). Dominican scholar Lorgia Garcia-Pena argues that, “such acts of violent nation bordering are historically determined; yet they also require the complicity of the citizens in the violent policing and erasure of racialized bodies” (2). Mohanty added another layer when she argued that, “in effect, the construction of immigration and nationality laws, and thus of appropriate racialized, gendered citizenship, illustrates the continuity between relationships of colonization and white, masculinist, capitalist state rule” (Feminism without Borders 66). She further asserted that “British nationality and immigration laws define and construct ‘legitimate’ citizenship—an idea that is constitutively racialized and gender-based” (69). In this vein, I examine the ways in which these come together to influence Ebony’s Roots and therefore are impacted by the deep structures of racialized gender. This is hardly surprising because Black women’s experiences with the Door of No Return have always had a direct bearing on the matter of racialized gender. I therefore argue that Black women in London are negatively affected by the Door of No Return, since in my discussions earlier discussions about Ebony’s Roots, it is clear that their bodies are constantly policed and surveilled while simultaneously denied security and freedom.

Let me add that my examination of Black women as subjects of these neocolonial processes is not homogenous as though untouched by difference: different diasporas, different
histories and different migratory patterns. Rather, in the formation of a diasporic examination of Black women’s experiences, my study reflects a tapestry of interwoven life experiences inside neocolonialism. I consider these collective trajectories important moments in the formation of the Black woman subject. Furthermore, since my interviewees would, almost intuitively, speak from inside an understanding of racialized gender that names Ebony’s Roots and their bodies non-white British, mixed race, Black, Black-British, African, Caribbean or Afro-Caribbean; rather than Aryan, White, White-British, Anglo-Saxon, English or European, it is important that I explore the structures of racialized gender as a damaging signifier of Ebony’s Roots and a racialized manifestation of the Door of No Return. In the popular and indeed official discourse “British” is a more capacious category and at the same time “British” is very much equated with “sovereignty” in these Brexit times. “English” is much narrower and fundamentally equated to Whiteness. Ifekwunigwe argues that:

an analogous assumption would be that only people fitting the protypic phenotype description of a White person can be English. Everyone else will have to make do with British. In addition to former is citizen and the latter a mere subject.

(136)

An interviewee also testified to this point when she said:

No matter what race, even though I born here I don’t see myself as English, I see myself as more say Jamaican even though I ain’t been there before, but I still accept in the past I do originate from Africa so that’s the best way I can describe it.

(June 25, 2017)

According to Magubane, “the idea that Englishness and Anglo-Saxon racial purity were indissoluble became much more deeply entrenched in with the advent of settler colonialism and imperialism” (110). Racial purity at the Door of No Return therefore expels Black women, while ousting their Britishness and rendering their gender and race visibly invisible and unwelcomed. One of my interviewees said:
Well, especially some of the white people [will say] ‘oh, go back to your country, you Black bitch, you Black this, you Black that’ you understand? ‘You Jamaicans go back to where you come from, leave our country.’
(July 16, 2017)

Of course, the evocation of this situation demonstrates that for white folks, the social meaning of Britishness assumes a superior positionality in relation to Black women and this remains an underlying racialized conception. “Most damaging of all, it appeared that many white Britons were similarly skeptical of the extent to which blackness and Britishness could peacefully co-exist within the same body, be that body a single entity or a collective one,” (Chambers, 6). This fundamental link between being black, British and also woman emphasizes that racialized gender matters at the Door of No Return and it is critical to the ways in which certain processes of racialization and gender have always negatively categorized Black women. These categories also imbricate other categories in the white British/English imagination. The Black British woman is therefore a socio-cultural identity and a somewhat un-national, foreign and transnational identity-that continues to be perceived as “animalistic,” “barbaric,” “grotesque,” “strange,” “unfeminine,” “lascivious,” “obscene” (Hobson, Venus in the Dark 54). Black women continue to be perceived as the “Sapphire,” “Jezebel,” “Mammy,” (Patricia Collins 69-96) “the welfare dependent lone parent,” “the strong black woman” and “the big mama” (Tate 2).

If one assumes that these images derived from stereotypes generated by whites, it is already clear that dominant white perceptions of body size, shape and skin color alongside assumptions of Black women’s psyches and productive/reproductive functions, [and continue to be] imprinted onto their racialized bodies constructed as the binary of the iconic frail, thin, asexual white femininity.
(Tate 3)

This is why Collins argued that:

As part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or creating new
And of course, these symbols are further complicated by one’s actual name. One interviewee said:

I think we all have different feelings, you got the Caribbean that are here who don’t have their original surnames, so their surnames or their same last name are similar to people in America, so they, I guess, that’s a constant reminder. Ummm, you know, my friend, a Jamaican, she was at work, she got a Welsh name-Thomas, and someone asked her ‘oh, do you have Welsh in you? You have Welsh surname.’ She said to them ‘my great great grandfather, whose slave master was Welsh’ and straight away, she was like stunned, she didn’t know what to say, because it’s not something that is too exposed.
(July 29, 2017)

It must be understood then that racialized gender is perhaps most troubling to those Black women who were not born in Britain, but instead, came to Britain through generations of migration, a shared neocolonial position at the Door of No Return. This is why, though many of these women have been able to secure British citizenship, according to Chambers:

the migrants’ Britishness was neither respected nor recognized by the vast majority of white Britons, and at every turn they found themselves being treated not as fellow Brits, but as foreigners to be kept at arm’s length and regarded as delinquent, sinister and, perhaps most damaging of all, a ‘problem.’
(5)

Racialized gender has therefore marked a socio-cultural politic that Caribbean and African women are not English, and barely British, let alone humans and equals. This resulting alienation and harmful labeling practices are assigned by dominant groups as the natural Black British women’s racialized position. Writing about the experiences of Dominicans in the US, Garcia-Pena said:

This initial alienation allows for a dramatization of an everyday life reality: immigration, assimilation, and oppression, shedding light on the significance of cultural representation in creating the possibility for political questioning. The antagonism presumed by the monolingual subject embodies an underlying conflict between the nation’s rhetoric of inclusion and multiculturalism and the impossibility of assimilation for some immigrant subjects.
One interviewee supported this when she said:

They [Black women] can say that they are British, but they can’t say that they are English because to be English you have to be white like you’re white English, whereas you can be Black British as it were or Asian British or whatever so I think notion kind of… of national identity that you are only partially allowed to be from here even if you were born here
(June 23, 2017)

She also asserts that:

like when you do these government forms, at least in Britain, you do get these kind of categories and you have to choose one and I am mixed: Black African and white so that’s kind of why I identify like that even though I don’t like it.
(June 23, 2017)

Another interview would agree because she said:

Slavery is now, different forms. But it’s not in the quite same way as that but it’s a bit like toned down but it’s still there. It’s still there. So, if aint still there why is it that sometimes when you get forms sometimes they ask what color you are or something like that.
(June 25, 2017)

At every turn, these experiences with racialized gender ensure that the Door of No Return is enmeshed with the juxtaposition of belonging and not belonging. This opens critical sites for thinking about Black female objectivity and experience as well as the categorization of the outsider within. According to Rassool, “political and geographical displacement effected by political exile, as well as the racism in which slavery, colonial and neocolonial relations [are] legitimated, indelibly mark the ‘Black [woman] experience’” (188). This way of viewing Black women in London makes for not just a complex conversation around racialized gender, but also the politics of belonging that it affirms in relation to Ebony’s Roots.

Brand asks, “how do we read these complicated juxtapositions of belonging and not belonging and intrabelonging[?] In a place such as this, so full of immigrants, everyone is deeply
interested in belonging[?]” (A Map to the Door of No Return 71). If Ang-Lygate were to answer Brand, she would probably say, “the spaces of (un)location uncharted territories where the shifting and contextual meanings of diaspora reside—caught somewhere in between, and inclusive of, the more familiar experiences of (re)location and (dis)location” (170). This emphasize that the inner coherence of belonging to spaces of (un)location and the simultaneity of ‘not belonging’ to those spaces is the place of Ebony’s Roots. For this reason, I think an interviewee said, “yea, I definitely see how if my hair was an afro, I’m Black and they probably wouldn’t describe my hair as like mixed race” (June 25, 2017). Let me pause here to briefly discuss this idea of “being mixed” in London. Ifekwunigwe asserts that:

At the moment, countless terms abound to describe ‘mixed’ people and usually reflect the prevailing political and social attitudes regarding racial and ethnic pluralism. As part of a constantly expanding inventory there: ‘mixed race,’ ‘mixed parentage,’ ‘mixed heritage,’ ‘mixed blood,’ ‘mixed racial descent,’ ‘mixed descent,’ ‘mixed origins,’ ‘mixed ethnicity,’ ‘multiethnic,’ ‘dual heritage,’ ‘multiracial,’ ‘biracial,’ ‘inter-racial,’ ‘creole,’ ‘mestizo’ or ‘mestiza,’ to more derogatory and colloquial ‘half-caste,’ ‘mulatto’ or mulatta,’ ‘half blood,’ ‘half breed,’ ‘hybrid,’ ‘zebra,’ ‘Heinz 57’ and the list go on. (126)

Being a mixed woman in London is not only understood within the framework of curl pattern and hair texture, it also signifies the hybrid bricolage of the somewhat ‘pure’ white gene with some other form of non-white gene inside a woman’s body. This often imbibes a psychological struggle between one’s understandings of their own Ebony’s Roots and being a sub-sub-subaltern woman. As a mixed woman, one is classified as ‘Black,’ even though one constantly navigates a multiplicity of ethnic locations and identities. In this regard, an interviewee said, “I hated the notion of “mixed” because it supposes that there is a pure race and that I am a kind of mixed breed” (June 23, 2017). Evidently, her proximity to whiteness deepens her struggles with social alterity. This is complicated by varying shades of blackness which for Weekes are not “in essentialist ways, in terms of fixed, natural, immutable characteristics” (113).
This was evident in the magazines (Black Beauty, Ebony, Flamingo and Root) that I studied. They demonstrated that light-skinned women with “mixed” or straight hair textures are always preferred. Another interviewee stated that, “when [she] was younger, [she] used to be asked a lot if [she] was mixed race. [She] think[s] that was more to do with [her] complexion than anything and because [she] used to straighten my hair” (June 25, 2017). Another said, “I think a lot of people see the curly hair and assume I must be Black or mixed race. I haven’t really been asked often” (June 25, 2017). Another interviewee said:

So, my mother was classified as Cape colored [referring to South Africa] and my father as a white man so I was always classified as mixed race… growing up. So, then I kind of grew up with this Black but aware I was mixed and then when I came to London, I was hyper aware that you have to be very careful with the titles and stuff that you use because the thing is I am never negligent of the fact that I do have lighter skin. (June 25, 2017)

These cultural understandings of being ‘mixed’ (especially having a certain type of curl pattern or straighter hair or lighter skin color) shape and in some ways challenge the socio-political meanings of identity, race, lineage, ethnicity, place, belonging, citizenship and transnational constructions of hierarchy. “In this instance ethnicity, and all its associated indicators of identity-race, color, culture-becomes intimately related to politico-territorial definitions of place, conceived both geographically and anthropologically” (Persram 206). This is critical to the everyday experiences of Black women in London, but particularly critical to ‘mixed’ Black women’s experiences. This is because the latter opens a deeply complicated door within the Door of No Return. Ifekwunigwe argues that:

Their transnational identities represent both their family constellations as well as their individual experiences. These transnationalities challenge the very notion of the English-African Diaspora as static and unitary formations which obviates cultural, national, ethnic, regional, and class differences, among others, and of course, ignores inter-racial collaborations.

(146)
In my interviews, when we spoke about some of the other ways in which Ebony’s Roots is impacted by racialized gender and bear all the hallmarks of a fundamentally problematic Door of No Return in London, one of my interviewee shared the following:

So being of Caribbean descent it almost feels like I’m having to base, first of all being Black British, being Black British and Caribbean, umm those are like the identities that you know had a British experience but I wasn’t born and raised in Jamaica so I know that I am British, but at the same time there is something that pulls me a part from my classmates because I have grown up in a Caribbean-a Jamaican household based on the way I was raised, I’ve been parented and stuff like that. So, I think that came really from my mom because she was you know raised in Jamaica and because she knew, because she also lived here, and came here and was born here but raised in Jamaica-came back when she was 15, she had a very different time. So, I think for her, umm it was really important for her to pass on, umm, just the basic thing of being able to look after my hair, that was really important. So, every Sunday, I would sit between her legs and she would put in my canerows and I would ask her for beads and stuff like that and without realizing, umm I’ve always celebrated my culture through hair.
(June 25, 2017)

And another said:

they assume I’m African but they’ll sort of determine what African I am or even more West Indies as well-they won’t necessarily say you are Nigerian, they’ll just say “oh maybe you’re Ghanaian” because Ghanaian and they start to sort of stereotype if you like so they’ll say “oh Ghanaians have long hair, Ghanaians have nice hair, you’re Ghanaian”.
No, I’m Nigerian. Or “you’re hair is quite silky or soft, do you got Caribbean” so yea a lot of people don’t tend to see me as Nigerian first until I confirm.
(July 29, 2017)

These statements enable us to begin to deconstruct the cultural systems in London which operate to differentiate Black women from dominant groups; to represent them as different; exclude them from constructions of Britishness and Englishness; and mark them as objects. I would suggest that while this is constituted within the material circumstances of everyday lives, it is particularly constitutive of social consciousness. It is especially necessary that we understand that with this consciousness, Ebony’s Roots is marred by an almost irreparable civic imprint both at the Door of No Return and because of it. Drawing on the constructions of Ebony’s Roots that I discussed above, it is immediately clear that the politics of positionality not
only excludes Black female agency, but in producing social consciousness, social hierarchy and
attaching social meanings to Black women’s hair, it demonstrates its superior ability to
categorize them as social inferiors. Brand posits:

the Black body is situated as a sign of particular cultural and political meanings in the
Diaspora. All these meanings return to the Door of No Return- as if those leaping bodies,
those prostrate bodies, those bodies made to dance and then to work, those bodies curling
under the singing of whips, those bodies cursed, those bodies remain curved in these
attitudes.
(A Map to the Door of No Return 35)

Thus, Ebony’s Roots justifies the non-citizenship of Black women in London. The
categories of difference echo the difficulties that Black women face in safeguarding a
transnational interpolation of “home” in the British context. “In effect, then, citizenship and
immigration laws are fundamentally about defining insiders and outsiders” (Mohanty, Feminism
without Borders 67). This theme of home is therefore another analytical place from which to
understand Ebony’s Roots, the Door of No Return and racialized gender. It embodies the
concepts of diasporic connections and is an important subtext of transnational histories. In this
sense, London is not the centre, but life in London has a critical bearing on our understandings of
Black women lives. An interviewee said:

Some of us who have children here, we try to bring our children up in the way we were
brought up, not under this British rule, you know, just trying to carry on with the cultural
identity, with everything, with our food, because we have to cook our food like how we
were brought up.
(August 3, 2017)

She went on to say:

Living in the country is for opportunity reason but our identity, our culture, nothing will
ever change, it will still remain the same and that’s the reason we keep going back home;
even though we are here, we still go back, that’s where our loyalties lie, cause that’s who
we are, strong identities, strong people.
(August 3, 2017)
Clearly, the relationship between ‘home,’ Black women and diaspora becomes the centre for struggle against dispossession, dislocation, marginality and exclusion, belonging and un-belonging. It can be assumed that there is a “knowing” of this diasporic position among Black women. “That is the lesson, perhaps, especially for us immigrants and migrants: that home, community, and identity all fit somewhere between the histories and experiences we inherit and the political choices we make through alliances, solidarities, and friendships” (Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders* 136). My interviewees indicated that whilst for them, and subsequent generations of Black women, ‘home’ will be a legitimate claim for belonging, this will continue to be marked by a violent politics of displacement within Britain in general and London in particular.

Thus, ‘home’ in Britain, and the ‘return’ to ‘home’ outside of Britain is marked by certain geo-political tensions of everyday life, a critical function of life in the diaspora. Brah argues that “the concept of diaspora places the discourse of ‘home’ and ‘dispersion’ in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins” (192-193). This idea of home is therefore integral to the differential articulations of Ebony’s Roots insomuch as the Door of No Return is constituted. It is important to note though, that my interviewees made it clear since Ebony’s Roots is subsumed into concepts of ‘home,’ they are able to hold onto collective memories and identity, and so resist and pass on a resistance model to the next generation. Carty asserted that “such feelings of ‘home’ reside only in the immigrant’s imagination and serve the purpose of comforting nostalgic reflection” (“Seeing through the Eye of Difference” 125). One interviewee said:

I’ve got the identity at home with my family…umm having to negotiate these very white spaces but still being able to hold and maintain who I am in these spaces and it’s literally trial and error. So yea I think it’s always like we talk about this being the bridge, this
generational thing of being the bridge of umm being comfortable within that geo-heritage cause’ you can go back to your family and all that.
(June 25, 2017)

Another agreed. She said, “because we come with this extra culture that is ours, you know that we’ve got from home or whether it’s from food or whatever you know, that we can kind of mix into our British experience” (June 25, 2017). Persram asserts that:

The experience of displacement, division and subordination within hegemonic ideologies…have created the conditions for counter-discourses of home, unity and self-determination based on the idea that temporal accumulation possess the means to undermine the neocolonial attempt at cultural imperialism through the consolidation of a collective, culturally specific consciousness.
(208)

I noted earlier that Ebony’s Roots is important to my understandings of the different concepts of ‘home;’ however it is not synonymous to ‘home.’ What is at stake is the way it colludes with ‘home’ to articulate the workings of the Door of No Return and the deep structures of racialized gender.

**SUITCASED:**
**Oh, When the Racexile Black Woman Confronts London**

Suitcased:
London moonlight lit you blue: blue bay
Journeying through silence, rage and fear
Objectified
And measured by varying conceptions of “home:”
Diaspora
Migration
Immigration
Asylum
Refuge
Border-crossing
Resettlement
Assimilation
Belonging
Losing your balance, shedding, wallowing in horrors
Horrors you wished you would forget: DO NOT REMEMBER YOUR “EVERDAYS” BLACK WOMAN
For peace almost never existed

Raceexile:
London moonlight lit you blue: blue shore
Bleeding always, blood spilling
Choking always, word-less pain
And love
Magnets and repellants of terror
Search: Passion, unrighteous passion
Love rejected: no love for you, Black Woman
Refused.
Criminalized blackness
But important to Queen Lizzie’s dominant archives
Mama broken: unconscious and hurt
Raging always
Daddy erased. Disenfranchised.
Imagine Black Woman, imagine!
For your revolution is a better world.
Not their logic of occupation
Inside.
Your Black body.

Confronted:
London moonlight lit you blue: blue ocean
And you keep thinking back
Back to the home
Committed to unknowing and undoing
Hollering down in ice
Drowning routes home, transition, settlement, resettlement, journeys: drowning YOU
Disappear or cry or fear or scream
Suffocating
But surviving
And breathing always
Desperate for revival and recreation
F R A G M E N T E D
But preserved by the ancestors,
They.
Migrants too.
Because your own revolution worked
in Blue.
Conclusion

In this chapter, the voices of the women I interviewed could be heard narrating their different experiences with Ebony’s Roots, and describing the social reality of racialized gender, as well as the complexity of the Door of No Return. I primarily examined the ways in which the British nation has not only kept Black women at the Door of No Return, but how and why this door continues to carry discourses of coloniality. Brand argues that:

The thing is that I think Blacks in Diaspora carry the Door of No Return in our senses. It is a passport which, after boarding the plane, we are unable to make disappear by tearing it up and throwing it into the toilet. We arrive with its coat of arms, its love knot, its streamers, its bugle, its emblem attesting to our impossible origins. This passport is from the territory of Door. The territory is vast, its nature is shiftable. We are always in the middle of the journey.

(A Map to the Door of No Return 48-49)

I also discussed the ideas of diaspora, transnational histories and connections, migration, immigration, resettlement and belonging as functions of racialized gender. This helped me to deconstruct the concept of ‘home,’ and the politics of location. I explored the functions of diasporic connections in an attempt to critique the oppression of Black women inside London. I suggested that how Black women wear their hair (or Ebony’s Roots) is a complex gendered place that emphasizes Black women’s relationality to modalities of cultural identity, patriarchal power and diasporic dispersion from Africa to places known and unknown, oppressive and tyrannical. I have analyzed this in relation to Brand’s Door of No Return where she argues that:

Flung out and dispersed in the Diaspora, one has a sense of being by or glimpsed from this door. As if walking down a street someone touches you on the shoulder but when you look around there is no-one, yet the air is oddly warm with some live presence. That touch is full of ambivalence; it is partly comforting but mostly discomfoting, tortured, burning with angered, unknowable remembrance. More disturbing, it does not confine itself to remembrance; you look around you and present embraces are equally discomforting, present glimpses are equally hostile…Being in the Diaspora braces itself in virtuosity or despair.
Along with the women I interviewed, my own reflections of my experiences with Ebony’s Roots have ushered me into a complex racialized and gendered place concomitant to my lived experiences. It is immediately clear then, that inside neocolonialism, the Black female body undoubtedly inhabits a problematic socio-economic and political place. Ebony’s Roots teaches us that when thinking about Black women’s neocolonial lived experiences in London, there is a certain amount of geo-political, transcultural ‘homing’ and social consciousness that should be considered.
Chapter Three
Re-rooting: Decolonizing Black Women’s Hair

Introduction

In this chapter, I enter a decolonizing discussion (through poetry and gendered imagery) about how Black women use their hair as a form of resistance. Poetry (inspired by Dionne Brand’s No language is Neutral; Tiphanie Yanique’s Wife; Gina Ulysse’s Because When God is Too Busy; Trimiko Melancon’s Unbought and Unbossed; Molara Ogundipe-Leslie’s Re-Creating Ourselves and Zillah Eisenstein’s Against Empire) and gendered imagery (inspired by Eve Tuck and K. W. Yang’s “R-words: Refusing Research;” Linda Smith’s Decolonizing Methodologies; Noliwe Rooks’ Hair Raising and Paula Johnson’s Inner Voices) serve as my theoretical framework and the analytical lens through which a refusal and a rejection of the colonial legacies, racialized gender and gendered perceptions of how Black women wear their hair are discussed. They are therefore the artistic decolonial methodologies that I use to move beyond the disciplinary expectations of colonial epistemologies toward an exploration of a decolonial space in which poetry, gendered imagery and Black women’s decolonized hair become a resistive philosophy. I begin from an analysis of Black women’s resistance to colonial legacies in general and move, more specifically, to the ways in which a re-imagination of Black women’s “HAIRtage” (a term I use to discuss the problematic legacies of Black women’s hair); and a re-construction of their neocolonial lived experiences intersect inside a decolonial frame.

“This decolonial focus moves us away from the question of whether or not they are victims or parody in terms of European racism, sexism and heteronormativity, so often the focus of feminist critique” (Tate 7). I therefore centre gender as a tool that functions to oppress Black women at the intersections of the racialization processes within London. To this end, I addressed two main questions: one, as an analytic and theorizing tool, how do the choices that Black
women make about how to groom their hair continue to resist the ways in which they are
gendered and racialized within the context of neocolonialism in London? And two, how can a
gendered imagery of Black women’s hair re-root Black women’s colonial HAIRtage? The
following poems communicate exactly what I have expressed above. Furthermore, it gets to the
heart of my participants’ emotions directly as it was expressed to me in our discussions around
what it means to have their hair perceived as a problem.
I

Re-rooting: Colonial Legacies
mournig no more! no more mourning!
the necessity of conciliating our hair
in its form and spiritual history

and so, this a warning!
a rebirth of dangerous roots
dangerous knots
dangerous kinks
dangerous coils
dangerous curls
of a Black woman
decolonizing. her hair.

crying no more! no more crying!
the logic of our HAIRthology
the altar of our HAIRization
the dictionary of our HAIRplex

beyond the edges
is a space where we disrupt the mirror

and so, the mirror
is how we know that we have burnt down Babylon
strand by strand
every colonial dread
every colonial twist
every colonial canerow
every colonial braid

decolonizing Black women’s hair
When I Become THE AFRO

No, do you need a helmet?
No, do you need a pillow?

I am Revolution
I am Militant
I am Righteous
I am Powerful
I am Resistant
Again! and Again!
When I become THE AFRO

No, do you need a helmet?
No, do you need a pillow?

I am still too Aggressive
I am still too African
I am still too Strong
I am still too Sovereign
I am still too Black
When I become THE AFRO

No, do you need a helmet?
No, do you need a pillow?

Note: you will it need it!
When I become THE AFRO
My Urban Braids:
From the Margins to the Righteous Centre

The time is now
For the centre to be renamed
To be called “truth”
A prelude to righteousness

The Beginning
Of
The
Righteous
Centre

Where My Urban Braids
a RIGHTEOUS verb
a RIGHTEOUS noun
a RIGHTEOUS adjective
built a home

A wave that came
Steadily struggling in
From over there-the margins
From behind
From the deep Atlantic-
Once home
No longer my forever

From the emptiness:
a Black woman’s blues song

From the shadows

My Urban Braids take the centre-Armed!
My Urban Braids hashtag the centre #Mine

The overthrow has come
Make way! Make way!

The revival morning of the centre
An entrance song
A feminist storm

My Urban Braids: the RIGHTEOUS centre
If London were a Black woman

If you had met her when you first came you would have met God you would have known that her hair is fire earth water wind sunshine sunset dawn dusk spring winter autumn rain snow sleet you would have felt her resistance her coming up out of the colonial coming up out of the numbness her singing a feminist glory song walking upon the ash of the plantation where your standards were created walking upon the ash of a gendered sexualized racialized capitalist melting pot suckling her Black children protecting her soul her weapon most valuable living in her liberty exactly as she chooses she is the phenotype of warrior bleeding until her people are free until again and again your legacies are destroyed your tongue tied until she owns a dance a song you would know that she keeps returning to her native land each visit a cartography to close
the border to recreate a new HAIRtage over and over you would have seen her as the interplay between truths you would have known how she unlearnt the internalized conditions that made her explode.
"No!  
*I Don’t Know Where Your Hands Have Been!*

It was the Anniversary of my Freedom  
And there- only you and I present  
You, a White hand  
Me, a Black woman FREE  
I intended to dance on your grave  
After I lowered your casket  
with my two strand twists

But your hand came running
Fighting the magic
Opening the gates of captivity
And stereotype
A re-memory of Sarah “Saartjie” Baartman
And the human zoo you created with her body, my body

Oh, how your hand came closer
The hand that I ALMOST forgot
On this my Freedom Anniversary
The hand, sorcery hand that whipped my back no more
Coming up with another whip
Escaping
My freedom song
Dashing up to my Queendom
My HAIR
My HAIR
My Fucking HAIR

“Should I grab it and break it?” I asked myself
Your eyes opened wide
Your hand moved closer
Higher and higher
Coming for my crown
Where my Freedom lives

But on this, my Freedom Anniversary
If you but touch MY HAIR
You will die!
The 10,000 curls I was taught to hate
The 10,000 curls I was taught to hate
The 10,000 curls I was taught to hate
The 10,000 curls I was taught to hate

Are the 10,000 curls I love!
Every morning from the time I got here, I rage!
I never born here!

Despite the chasm and the tears
Despite the screams and the fears
I never born here!

I remember the first time I went back home, they kept asking “how your dread grow so long?”
I shouted, “my dread is my armour!”
For I never born there!

I went back again (sometime later)
And I spoke with a little girl who asked, “why you wrap your hair?”
I screamed “little girl, I have to protect my resistance!”
For I never born there!

I almost born when Massa was still in power
So, I live
When Massa’s legacies call  
For a future of war and a broken people  
So, I grow my dread long and thick for if  
Massa  
Think  
He go’ win

Tell Massa, I never born here!  
But I will fight to live here!  
For I never born here!
My hair is my choice: a disruption
My hair is my liberty: a disruption
My hair is my freedom: a disruption

This is me
A missile
Launched
Across London
In every direction
My hair is my lover: a disruption
My hair is my ancestry: a disruption
My hair is my God: a disruption

Here, in this disrupted place
I never eat alone
Sisterhood-a meal
Tradition-a welcome song
Where I sit in front of another
Black woman
Who makes heaven on my head

My hair is my transgression: a disruption
My hair is my unapologetic Black womanhood: a disruption
My hair is my decolonizing tool: a disruption

Confronting colonial violence
Challenging my incarceration

My hair is my agency: a disruption I will forever be!
II

Re-rooting: Racialized Gender
As the neocolonial train traveled on, her Blue eyes
A novel I must not share
Entered my most intimate space
The one where I store my identity- the identity I call home

As the neocolonial train traveled on, she thought I became helpless
In need
Of a saving grace
The lie she knows as the “truth”
As the neocolonial train traveled on, London became still
The moment my hair was identified
Challenging notions of beauty
A message to her blue eyes

As the neocolonial train traveled on, I became my own Black woman
I
Whispered
  Dear
  Precious
  Feminist
  Epistemologies

As the neocolonial train traveled on, her mouth spoke words
After those words
There were bones
And then blood

But that quickly became my fire
For Ms. Blue Eyes said, “your body makes you one of us, but your hair is disappointing!”
As the neocolonial train traveled on
With this nuclear bomb to your throat
Do not shed a tear!

With each inward squeeze I make
Retrace my lineage

I push deeper
For the millions and millions of
Lives
You took from me
And deeper
till sweat starts dripping from my AFRO CROWN

And deeper and deeper
For this is World War Hair

And even deeper
For the five hundred years that have become five hundred more years!

POW!
Let the Church Say Awomen

Awomen, Awomen!

Transnational identities
Diasporic identities
Border identities
Global Identities
Immigrant identities

Are my hair!

Awomen, Awomen!
Britain Sits Upon Our Identity No More!

Your butt we accept no more
This place is maddening
This imposed place will not be my daughter’s

Another queen unborn
This place is not meant for her
I tried to knot fresh flowers into my hair,
I tried to knot the riverbed into my hair

But the strand broke
So desperate for fresh air
But unveiling who I was to become
One who understands that beneath you is an unforgiving place
a “never forget” place
a memory-filled place

where you offended
us
interrupted
our
formation
and
made
us
a
colonized
yours

We are awakened
Your identity returned
And our peace restored

Your butt shall sit upon my identity no more!
Why must me father be a white man?
Because me hair suits yuh lineage?

Why must me coils be yours?
Because me people were monkeys who swung from trees?

Why must me mother be a white woman?
Because me hair speaks well?
Because me English is proppa?

Why must me God be yuh God?
Because me countrywomen kneel?

Tell me why!
Tell me why!
For me Father is a BLACK KING!
And me mother is a BLACK QUEEN!
My Hair Intuition Tells Me: THERE WILL BE A STORM

I am the storm
With hair sweeping through London
Uprooting racialization
Uprooting oppression
Educating my people
And their intersecting identities

This storm will not surrender until
The showers of raindrops
Bring terror upon your sins

This storm of earth
This storm of knowledge
This storm of love
This storm of pain
This storm of sex

You shall become the slave
For the monarch shall now grow MY sugarcane

This storm shall spit fire upon you

This storm shall commit your suicide
And repeat
For your rape, again and again of us Black women

This storm will not lose its power!
Poisoning Neocolonialism

1. Mixing coconut oil + awareness
2. Mixing shea butter + consciousness
3. Mixing custard + Black women’s march
4. Mixing shampoo + the natural hair movement
5. Mixing conditioner + resisting sexism and misogyny
6. Mixing aloe vera + anti-racism
7. Mixing castor oil +
resisting homophobia
8. Mixing olive oil + rebellion
9. Mixing vinegar +
   Black sisterhood
10. Mixing lime juice +
    afro

#PoisoningNeocolonialism
III
Re-rooting: Gendered Perceptions
I. Forbidden
In the castle of the forbidden
I
A Black Woman
Lives
On the quarantined British Land
Where my skin
Is forbidden

II. Roots
Great Grandma
Grandma
Mom
Sister
Aunt
Female Cousin
Female Friend
They hate the roots
You taught me to love
The same roots we met
To
Share
Our Love
The same roots you became my race women
my gendered reflections

My roots are strong
My roots are strong

**III. Breathing**
I’ve met many “Mama Souls”
They taught me Black feminism
They song a feminist choir song
I breathe here
Honoring struggle
And
Resistance

**IV. Spaces**
No space for us-Black women?
Fuck your space!
Our own space is divine!
Translating My Black Hair
Me: Woman Nigerian
Me: Woman British

You just always smell the devotion between comb and brush
The sweet reward for detangling the thickness
The sound of reclamation
The rhythm of love
The communion of winning

That coconut oil that drips
from coil to coil
Massaged in by traditions
And lessons of hairstyling
The spirituality of washing

Translating My Black Hair:
Me: Woman British

The hair pins crackle
But hold the sections
My hand run through
Again! and again!
I add more moisture
For the steam
Each strand eating magic
Creating new magic

After an hour
She is ready
I shape
And shape
And
Leave her to dry

Oh, what a sweet song I sing!
In the Name of Black Motherhood:  
My Mixed Daughter and Her Curls

Fig 18

Black motherhood chose me  
So, I will not fail  
For it is an anti-colonial instinct that my mother conceived alongside me

The politics of molding the mixed curls on the mixed head I will always mold  
The politics of oral traditions  
The politics of naming the obsession with straight hair  
The politics of teaching her Black girlhood & Black womanhood

For she must know
Her people
Dead and alive
I must return her to Africa
Again! and again!
Memory after memory
Song after song

My daughter will be called Africa
For her mixed soul
Like her mixed curls
Will understand why I mourn and celebrate Africa
Her mixed curls will tell others of her Black woman magic

And my mother-
The organic ministries she will recover
Will teach her about motherhood
And this will become my daughter’s position

In the name of her own Motherhood
So, help me God!
I went on a date with HAI Rtage
When she spoke of herstory
I heard
The theory of each strand
Starting where my ancestors dreamed
Of my strong spirit and sacrifice
I heard
A dance that rhythms a freedom theory
One that continues to awaken us Black women and girls
REminding us to REmember home
Home: where, for some of us, fire started
You restoreth souls and ties experiences
You tell stories: stories through dance
And uncover Black women’s histories: that’s magical!

The method of each strand
Making my own herstory
Making my own herstory
Making my own herstory
A dance that rhythms epistemology
Decolonizing

The philosophy of each strand
Ranting for each generation
Fro-ing for little Black girls
Mediating all night
A dance that rhythms throughout the nation
Words of power
Living in power

The reimagined strand
Never sitting still
Protecting
Exhaling
Exhaling
Exhaling
Rejecting
Refusing
Your perceptions

Sticking out in defiance.
A celebration!
A dance that rhythms ancestry
It awakens memory
And
Spiritualizes fire
It is a connection to other female spirits, to bones, to blood, to names
It is a connection to God
Radical approaches of the untamed hair

It is a refusal
To be contained
A refusal to conform
to
racial, sexual and gendered scripts
It is keeping it real
Shutting them down
Un-privileging them
Un-dominance-ing their spaces
Un-power-ing their homes
Un-fund-ing their march
Un-monarch-ing their state

It is a rejection
Of how they treat us
A rejection of our neocolonial lived experiences
A rejection of “no access”
A rejection of controlling images
A rejection of them-the system that hates us
A rejection of their institutions

It is therefore a challenge to them that come
To steal
To kill
And to destroy

And an invitation to fight!

Radical approaches of the untamed hair
Radical approaches of the untamed hair
Your name keeps showing up in the hair salons
But today, it stops!

My bun will no longer hide you safely

My bun is a decolonial space
Brave and necessary
Sacred and dominant

A place where you don’t fit
Don’t even bother to tell me how to do my hair
Don’t even try to underplay my identity
SHUT YOUR MOUTH!

Let Black women go!
Let Black women go!

Our hair-
EVERYTHING!

We don’t care if you like it straight like them white gyals’

We are tired of your ABUSE and MINIMIZATION
Your preferences we no longer try to please

While the war still rages
Grab them by the Patriarchy!
For! I, E Y E S, seen not the unnormal
So, unlearn?

But! I, H E A R T, lives the sempiternal inscribed and inscribed epistemology
the learnt: the one
the only
harbinger of the spirits: histories: legacies: worlds
So, unlocate?

Look! I, S K I N, knows not unideology
unpower never birthed me
mummy said THE code, Western code, not her code: the code birthed I
So, unknowledge?
inside THE knowledge of God?
inside THE truth?

Because! I, F E E T, never walked the unimagined
So, unposition? Reimagine?
the only vision: the path: the instruction

Unlearn! I, B O D Y, H A I R, heavy: not knowing: never the unWESTed West
So, resist?
I, M E, searching

found!
searching
found!
searching

I, WOMAN, fight!
For! I, B E I N G, began unlearning!
The excellence of the great place within us is my hair
The hair we learnt when we were nameless and formless-un-birthed
The hair we pursued as we grew into our own magic
The hair that helped us to form ideas about those deep places
The hair recorded & emotional
The hair we carry in our wombs: a combination of dreams and hopes and struggles
The hair of exploration and possibility
The hair of sounds, rhythms, vibrations and sweet melody

The hair we learn as we bear the intimacy of critical thinking

For there are new ideas in my hair
New ways of feeling courage
New ways of struggle
New ways of resistance
New ways of promise
New ways of fucking things up
New ways of pointing toward freedom
New ways of freedom
New ways of examining

My hair is “in your face” theorizing
My hair is “I ain’t even smiling” theorizing
My hair is taking the table
My hair does not need a seat at your table
My hair is sisterhood
My hair is collaboration
My hair cannot be policed
My hair is outraged
My hair is Black Superwoman with her cape

My hair is confession
Recreating how we pay homage
Recognizing that my generation is not quiet
Recognizing that we are doing real work
#SayingHERName
Even though you tell her to go kick rocks
Hair-ING for our joys
Hair-ING for the newcomers
Hair-ING with little Black girls
Hair-ING because of our struggle

My Hair is the Glory Come!
Conclusion
I am Black and Woman, My Hair is Black and Woman

I close this study where I started-inside British capitalism which at the hands of and in the name of the British state and flows of finance capital in London-is inherently linked to neocolonialism. Throughout this thesis, I have insisted on the long, unequal and exploitative relationship between Black women and the British state, a sort of genealogy of anti-Black womanhood that is strongly linked to the dominant structures of power and oppression. This emerged out of the historical events: slavery, colonialism, imperialism and migration, that have placed Black women in a racialized, gendered, geopolitical, ethnoracial, unnatural, violent and marginal position that signifies the symbolic trope of white supremacy through the hegemonic discourse of a continuation of colonial logic. This colonial legacy has left an imprint on British national consciousness that marks the legitimacy of the ideology justifying white-hetero-patriarchy. Inhabiting the cultural and socio-political archives of London, this has led to economic inequality and social disenfranchisement disproportionately affecting Black women within the experience of everyday life. My analyses illustrated the particular ways in which focusing on Black women’s neocolonial lived experiences within an understanding of colonial epistemic violence and the categorical systems of privilege and power enabled an exploration of how Black women wear their hair and how it is impacted by racialized gender. This also provided the opportunity to examine the ways in which this connects to systemic and hegemonic variations of gender, race and class oppression.

In this case, the important point to emerge from the study overall is that the complexity of Black women’s lives in London frames their experiences of being “Othered” and being regulated to the often-unchecked margins of the British nation. Drawing from and building upon the long history of Black and women of color feminist epistemologies, this thesis, in many ways, was a
Black feminist response to the tragedies that have taken place and continue to take place as the British capitalist political economy rests on the backs of Black women. I am acutely aware that this approach may not fully change the painful experiences of Black women in London, nor erase for example, the socio-political violence of British culture-particularly how it affects the ways in which the participants of this research wear their hair. But I am confident that the work that this project has started will get me closer to the type of organic conversations about the ways in which Black feminism and its allies can demolish colonial legacies and capitalist regimes. This approach is necessary because it is important:

from the base of these everyday experiences to build a transformational feminist politics, because now, in this supposedly post-feminist era, feminism is needed more than ever before. This kind of feminist politics cannot be primarily about negotiating rights from the state of but is about hanging structures of power and, inseparable from this, changing our outlook on the world.
(Wilson 171)

The value of this approach lies in its decolonizing theoretical and methodological framework, and the way in which it develops a wider set of Black feminist possibilities for uncovering neocolonialism and its many ideologies in London. It is particularly useful for investigating how these ideologies are socially constructed and it serves as an important source for decolonizing knowledge and action. Each chapter, in various ways, provides the blueprint.

Chapter one showed how Black and women of color feminists have been deconstructing and dismantling the social relations of gender, race and class in the African diaspora in general and particularly in Britain to illustrate how these frame Black women’s multiplicity of oppression. This chapter also traced the power of feminism in questioning, challenging and conceptualizing the connections between racism and the capitalist class that both expand and complicate the socio-cultural workings of white hegemonic discourse. Chapter two provided accounts of how Black women wear their hair, the connection to Brand’s Door of No Return and
racialized gender. These accounts were given by the women I interviewed and the woman that participated in the memoir documentation. This chapter not only examined Britain’s current commitment to race, racial formation, racism, gender and class oppression, it also showed the manner in which dominant exclusionary practices mark the uneven systems of citizenship, justice, law, power and power relations. The variety of evidence that this chapter engaged emphasized the multiple ways in which Black women, as racialized and politically marginal subjects, are deeply enmeshed within the discursive, institutional and political dynamics of London. Chapter three was inspired by the photographs that I took of each participant. These images, as well as the resistive imageries rooted in each interview, shaped my poetic analytic framework for understanding the varying critiques of and challenges to colonial legacies, racialized gender and gendered perceptions. This breaks away from the powerless discursive representations of Black women (a sort of nostalgic trope of slavery- where Black women supposedly did not have agency) in order to create a dialogue around the ways in which Black women have always been resistant and defiant to normative social constructs-using their hair.

Given the changing tides of British capitalism and how these continue to oppress Black women, it is important that I also stress the importance of recognizing the impetus for discussing differences among Black women, especially since this further complicates neocolonialism in London. In other words, clumping Black women’s experiences with oppression and exploitation into one universal analysis of their lived experiences creates a reductive homogenous discourse that ignores their varying experiences. Similarly, Mohanty in unpacking three methodological universalisms around Third World women’s oppression argued that “these arguments are not against generalization as much as they are for careful, historically specific generalizations responsive to complex realities. Nor do these arguments deny the necessity of forming strategic
political identities and affinities” (“Under Western Eyes” 77). I agree with Mohanty because it is immediately clear that while the collective trajectories of Black women are core to the construction of the Black woman subject, it often takes away from their differential experiences with race, gender and class for example. This has led Brah to ask:

Is ‘difference’ incompatible to universalism”? to which she answered “one possible way of thinking through this is with the aid of the concept of ‘diaspora space,’ where difference and commonality are figured in non-reductive relationality. Here, axes of differentiation and division such as class, gender, sexuality articulate a myriad of economic, political and cultural practices through which power is exercised. Each axis signifies a specific modality of power relation. What is of interest is how these fields of power collide, enmesh and configure; and with what effects. What kinds of inclusions or exclusions does a specific articulation of power produce? That is, what patterns of equity or inequality are inscribed; what modes of domination of subordination are facilitated; what forms of pleasure are produced; what fantasies, desires, ambivalence and contradictions are sanctioned; or what types of political subject positions are generated by the operations of given configurations of power? (247-248)

In light of this, I intend to continue (in later work) to take the discourses of power very seriously because I find the reification of different economic, political and social realities most evident here. Indeed, when thinking about Black women’s hair, all the elements of these processes and the structures and functions of racialized gender should be further deconstructed. In outlining the importance of using the ways in which Black women wear their hair to examine the economic and the political in British capitalism, I have also provided a broader set of possibilities for looking at the connections between capitalist ideologies, race, gender and the act of rendering Black women inferior.

Looking back at the beginning of this project, the goals and objectives were many. I wanted to firstly engage a critical gendered Pan African conversation about the choices Black women make about how to groom their hair. This was most pronounced when my interviewees spoke about their ancestral and racial identity. It immediately became clear to me that they all
carry an inherently Pan African discourse within what I would argue are their “diasporic (and transnational) souls.” The women therefore became, for me, “transnational beings” which is not to say their specific transnational histories and connections were not previously emphasized. Rather these histories and connections were especially illuminated as an embodiment of transnational connections, and perhaps served as the most provocative “insider” moment for me, having travelled from Jamaica to the US and then to the heart of the colonial empire in the UK. These experiences and the particular histories that I carried helped me to better engage the participants’ embodiment of “being transitional.” Below, I list some examples of their own expressions of “being transitional.”

2. “I see myself as more say Jamaican” (June 25, 2107).
4. “Umm! I’m Black, yea I’m Black, Umm originally African but of Caribbean descent” (June 25, 2017).
5. “Umm Afro Caribbean” (July 20, 2017).
6. “Umm so I’m Ghanaian, but I also have Portuguese ancestry so Black African is my main sort of racial identity” (July 28, 2017).
7. “I’m a Black British, Black Jamaican, any way you want to put it definitely Black girl” (July 28, 2017).
8. “Umm I’m mixed. So, my mother is Chinese, my father is Zimbabwean and I’m fine that I’m” (July 29, 2017).
12. “Well for me as a Black woman, my identity…comes from the Maroons really, my fore parents, my mother included…She is a Maroon inhabitant, my grandad, he was a part of the Maroon” (August 3, 2017).

This Pan African discourse is not simply the genealogical representation of different diasporic places and borders. It addresses gender as an elaborate place (marking a space where it is a superordinate category among the notions of unity, integration, and inclusivity that traditional Pan African epistemologies discussed). But, this was (and still is) ignored by some aspects of
Pan Africanism and its concepts of diaspora. I therefore contested, like the many female Pan Africanist before me, the project of Pan Africanism by charting the contours of its most exclusive sites where specific formations of gender in the diaspora are almost never discussed. Moreover, in thinking about Black women’s experiences with hair and how this complicates my study of Black women at work and in the streets of London, as well as how I examine the Pan African diaspora, it is evident that gender is an integral part of my study. In addition, marrying a class analysis with the iterations of gender relations also shaped my approach to Pan Africanism. I believe that this disrupts the British political economy. In this way, the inherent, varying and all-encompassing resistance to coloniality that it evoked created a reservoir of knowledge, power and resistance strategies that will continue to serve Black folks in the African diaspora—irrespective of their gender and class.

Second, in an attempt to remain grounded in my disruption of the social relations of racialized gender, I focused on the cultural complexities of London and the social politics that negatively affect Black women and their hair. In order to do this however, it was necessary that I push beyond, quite insistently, the participants’ “refusal of race,” that is, their refusal to forthrightly talk about racial issues. All the while, they illustrated the manner in which the British state continues to racialize and gender their bodies. Thus, despite my best attempts to limit the scope of unanswered questions that this project would produce, I am nevertheless faced with trying to emphasize and deconstruct this refusal. I remember though, a conversation between Dr. Gail Lewis and myself at Birkbeck, University of London which made this clearer. I visited her to discuss my research progress, especially finding this “refusal of race” frustrating. She told me that the refusal of race says more about the continuation of colonialism and the ideologies of fear that it fosters than it does about the act itself of refusing race. This statement
forced me to look deeper into the workings of neocolonialism and therefore identify the spaces where this “refusal of race” is simply an emphasis of racialization in London. Nevertheless, I would suggest that more needs to be done in the deconstruction of this refusal and the benevolent conceptions of race relations that are central to British culture.

Finally, I tried to uncover Western epistemology by problematizing neocolonial constructs in London. I therefore looked at the ways that whiteness and white supremacy, as colonial epistemologies, imply a notion of patriarchy that benefits the British empire. Here, the centre firmly holds white hegemonic power and the periphery is the home of Black women and other minority groups. Persram argues that “in this way it operates as a means by which hierarchies of power established by patriarchal Europe during the colonial era ensure their reproduction in a postcolonial space” (212-213). The scholar also asserted that “England as a metaphor and source of colonial paternalism was (and still is) considered ‘motherland’” (208). While I am not just focused on England, but Britain as a whole and London in particular, Persram’s argument is very crucial. The value of the patriarchal paradigm that is outlined here lies, I believe, not only in the ways in which it positions the masculine subject as dominant, but also that, for Britain and in London, it is the author of meaning inside systems of dominance. Along the lines of neocolonialism, there are parallels and interrelationships between my search to make sense of the violent British colonial history and my study of its legacy in the present British nation. Particularly, I was interested in how this continues to shape knowledge, the cultural archive, psyche, ideology and social politics around Black women’s lives in London.

“If it is a Girl, Let Us Give Her a Curl: ” Disrupting Racialized Gender and Black Women’s Neocolonial Lived Experiences in London therefore bridges the multiplicity of social margins within Black women’s lives while also bringing attention to the multiple sites of
division and negative relations to power that emerge on the individual and collective level within London. I thus suggest a reimagining, not only of Black women’s HAIRtage, but also the many articulations of colonial discourses, neocolonial imperatives and the traumas of migration that have informed Black women’s everyday lives. In later work, I intend to address the following questions: how much further can Black feminism take us in bettering Black women’s lives? How can the way Black women wear their hair become revolutionary praxis? If we were to dismantle neocolonialism tomorrow, what or who may arise and how do we deal with this? How the fuck do we bury capitalism once and for all?
Appendix

**Location:** Birkbeck, University of London

**Description:** I conducted some of my academic analyses at this institution. I also attended Professor Shirley Tate’s lecture on “Decolonizing the Angry Black Woman” and the Feminist Emergency International Conference (flyer below).
**Location:** Black Cultural Archives (BCA), Brixton, London

**Description:** I performed some academic analyses as well as archival analyses of Black hair magazines here. Below (left), I am using the reading room, (right) is a Black cultural exhibition that was showcased at the time of my visit.
These are examples of the four Black hair magazines that I studied.
Location: Goldsmiths, University of London

Description: This is the I/Mages of Tomorrow: Envisioning Black & POC futures, Queer & Trans futures, feminist futures conference that I attended (flyer below).
Location: Brockwell Park, London

Description: This is the annual Black feminist event, Black Girls Picnic, that is held by Black women and other women of color throughout Europe. I conducted several of my interviews here.
Location: Brockwell Park, London

Description: I attended the Afro Beauty Culture @ The Lambeth Country Show here. The participants showcased afro-culture inspired hairstyles, clothing, accessories, etc.

Location: London Borough of Bromley

Description: One of the boroughs where I conducted my interviews.
References


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“UK should be reminded that it was built by Caribbean immigrants, says Fae Ellington.” *Jamaica Observer*. 18 Apr 2018, www.jamaicaobserver.com/UK_should_be_reminded_that_it_was_built_by_Caribbean_immigrants,_says_Fae_Ellington?profile=1228


Vitae

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