

Conclusion to Part III

What I have intended to show in the two main closing chapters is that life storytelling and sharing is a crucial part in the making of a Black feminist activist self and in fostering Black political community. I opened the thesis with a vignette about a life-story panel. I did so because the life story is an important thread of my research on building Afrodiasporic identities, and this last part takes life storytelling as an artistic, political and community-building practice at its centre. I argue that, much like coming-out stories for gay men and lesbian women (Weston 1997), the sharing of one's life story, of experiences with discrimination and finding relief with a group of people who have experienced the same things, functions both as a community-building practice and as a self-identity-forming process. Kath Weston, researching gay and lesbian family-making, writes of coming-out stories:

Such narratives are customarily related to and for other lesbians and gay men rather than for the benefit of a heterosexual audience. Coming-out stories had the advantage of representing a category meaningful to participants themselves. (1997, p. 15)

The life story in Black movements is a way to connect emotionally to a community of experience. The two chapters in Part III show that life storytelling is a process that evolves over time, it is learned and situated. In the case of Black and feminist activists, it is learned by becoming acquainted with Black literature, going to events on Black identities and being involved in Black communities. I explore the tradition of life storytelling and writing in Black and feminist movements and how the practice travelled from the USA to Germany through the key activist figure and icon of the Afro-German movement, Audre Lorde. In many of her writings, Lorde reflects on themes – from structural racism to lesbian love and female solidarity – through autobiographical narration, and this in turn has influenced Afro-German activists of different generations and ages – from Ika Hügel-Marshall, who was born after World War II, to May Ayim, who was born in the 1960s, to contemporary activists such as Oxana Chi and Layla Zami.

Forging an activist identity is a process linked to personal development, as feminist scholar Leekie Hopkins explains in her article 'Creating an Activist Voice' (2001). The encounter with Black scholarship can be key to developing an activist identity for people of African descent. It can lead to a re-storying of self in light of experiences of racism and racialisation (Urrieta 2007). Yet life storytelling is not only important for self-fashioning: It has an important role in creating community. Reading or hearing these life stories is intended to resonate with Afrodescendant or racialised women. Nevertheless, it is important to note that such activist practice is a niche activity for Afrodescendant people in Germany and only includes those who have been involved in Black or feminist movements. Yet it is still gaining prominence through the resurgence of movements such as Black Lives Matter in 2020, a movement in which 'Say their names' is a crucial slogan. In their work as Afro-feminist performers and researchers, Layla and Oxana mobilise both biographies and autobiographical narration. They seek to restore memories of women who have often been marginalised and forgotten by history. Their performances are a way to bring their memories back to life and also to present them to a global public of Black feminists, and feminists in general. By means of this practice of wide dissemination and thanks to the flexibility that has allowed them to travel and live in different corners of the world, they have been able to build a global political and artistic network.

Oxana and Layla operate on another level of activism to the likes of Aminata, who is very dedicated on the local and national scales. Aminata is also much less transnationally mobile, and her rootedness in Frankfurt is important for her family and her networks. Furthermore, political activism is only one part of Aminata and Lamine Camara's lives, while it is at the centre of Oxana and Layla's. Oxana and Layla are not directly involved in national or local politics, although Oxana's dance repertoire features many figures who were active in Germany. Rather, the important thing that they want to stress is the diversity and hybridity of diasporic identities, which can be detached from a national context. The component of mobility – that is, being internationally mobile as well as using the moving body to tell stories – makes it possible to connect (with) different communities on a global scale. Oxana and Layla put a lot of emphasis on mobility for developing diaspora, an aspect that Gilroy (1993) has stressed as being crucial to the development and dissemination of the concept of African diaspora. Gilroy underlines the potential of transformation through travel, the potential to analyse socially and culturally constructed categories – the concept of race, for example – by getting to know other contexts, but he also acknowledges the importance of national context. Travelling in Europe as well as to Africa has made many African American intellectuals realise how attached they are to the category of national belonging – both that they had an American national identity and that they were perceived not only seen as Black but also as American in other countries. In this way, they were able to develop elsewhere a feeling they were often denied in the USA. Gilroy described that feeling for the likes of Martin Delany or the writer

Richard Wright. In Oxana and Layla's case, when they travel their German/French nationalities also play an important role; Oxana has often discussed how she experiences that her Germanness is often more accepted elsewhere than in Germany. The German national context is not central to her understanding of self, but it does play a role. Oxana and Layla's engagement in Black and feminist politics goes beyond their professional lives and suffuses their private lives too; the two are not separable. Being a Black and feminist activist is an embodied activity that they carry everywhere with them. As a couple they live the ideals of Black and female solidarity by supporting, working and loving each other. Oxana and Layla build community with each other, and by travelling and performing they co-build a global network of Black and feminist artists and researchers.

