

Book Review: *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* by Nadia Ellis

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Queer of color Critique/Literary and Cultural Studies/ Affect Studies

Nadia Ellis' work follows in the tradition of scholars including Sommerville (1994) Trouillot (1995), Gordon (1997), Luibheid (2002) Childs (2009), and Espirirtu (2014) who have utilized interdisciplinary approaches to construct alternative narratives of the subaltern, black and/or queer subject. Such an interdisciplinary approach is exemplified by Ellis' use of Munozian "queerness" and "diaspora" as articulated by Brent Hayes Edwards and Saidiya Hartman (Ellis, 2015) to elucidate a structural relationship that exist between them that centers the interplay of geography, race, place, sexuality, class and the always imagined "elsewhere" (2). Ellis writes that it is between these critical orientations of Queer Theory and Diaspora Studies that diaspora is articulated as producing a "productive tension between attachment and drive toward idiosyncratic individuation [which is] often marked by frustration" (6). Ellis' work is much a commentary on knowledge construction/production and circulation as it is about the material, social and political realities of those for whom it may be difficult to lay claim to any one place and any one identity.

Divided into five chapters, *Territories of the Soul* looks at a series of Case Studies to demonstrate how (1) applying different theoretical and methodological approaches recovers narratives otherwise obscured; (2) how subjectivities necessarily shape political and scholarly

positions and, (3) the usefulness of resisting limiting identity categories to embrace instead what she calls “queer futurity” (103). To do this, she engages with some sources including novels, immigration policies, film, music, and other archival sources.

Whether in her relatively brief discussion of Stuart Hall, or her more elaborate engagements of the life and work of C.L.R. James, the writings of Baldwin and Lamming about each other, the literary and visual artwork of Salkey and Patterson or the music of Burning Spears, Ellis properly situates her cases in a queer theory by demonstrating their transgressions against cis-heteronormativity undergirded by nationalism, colonialism or imperialism - to be “elsewhere”. She points to the disruptive potential of queer diaspora - with subjects who are neither here nor there and whose presence leads to extraordinary practices of placemaking (such as Passa Passa Wednesday in Jamaica), culture and identity.

Ellis reads communication between James and Constance Webb not to strip James of his accolades as Caribbean intellectual and activist but to contextualize some of his musings on Britain and the United States. By exposing the visceral nature of his communication and his affection toward Constance Webb, Ellis suggests commensurate with the views of Baldwin in *Nothing Personal* that affection or love seeps into attachment to space. She simultaneously makes the point about what the archive often misses and what can be recuperated if read through a different analytic/theoretical lens. Further, Ellis’ reading of immigration policies limiting the flow of Caribbean migrants to Britain and policies determining sexual freedoms of homosexuals map in a sort of ‘Sommervillian’ fashion, the co-constitutive nature of race and sexuality and suggests an explanation for deep-seated homophobia in the Caribbean. It is commonplace for

Jamaicans to talk about homosexuality being a “white man thing” that is being “imported” - Ellis helps us to understand how this might have come to be so.

Other useful interventions of the piece concern the highlighted complexities and contentiousness that are often evident in spaces seemingly organized around sameness or linked oppressions. The misreadings of both Baldwin and Lamming of each other and their insistence on the ways they are different makes a point that is applicable outside of this context- the problems of homogenizing narratives. Thus, she solidifies the point that while QBIPOC (Queer, Black, Indigenous, People of Color) may experience similar forms of structural, systematic, or everyday violence, location (read here as geography- western, non- western, urban or rural; age, class sexual orientation and all other axes of difference) matters. It is the way these intersecting identities are 'made to matter' that results in the feelings of loss and longing- and an inability to belong. Thus black subjects like the protagonist in Salkey's story are never able to mark a physical and psychological space of belonging fully - and it is the continued search for this space that marks the territories of the Soul.

Overall, Ellis adds to the discourse on the import and significance of interdisciplinarity and engages her cases in ways that demonstrate how such an approach might work to fill silences if not erase gaps. Notwithstanding the strengths of this book, some of her points might have been missed due to the complexity of her writing.

Other References

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