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Nomadic Trails in the Unfolding of the Self

Maria Tamboukou

Abstract

In this paper I explore possibilities of using nomadology as a lens to look at what is happening in the lives of young women today, particularly raising questions of how they stand or move in relation to a web of discourses, practices, subject positions and spaces. Making connections between Deleuze and Guattari's influential work with feminist nomadic inquiries, I attempt to draw diagrams of multiplicities in the becoming of female subjectivities. Drawing on secondary analysis of existing ethnographic data, I focus on young black women's 'moments of becoming' that can be described as rhizomatic: ways of being at home without being rooted in a place, an identity, a memory. In therefore following points of movement along rhizomatic paths of becoming, I attempt to rethink questions of what it means to be at home, what it means to be estranged, what it means to move in between space/time boundaries. Like a tent put up in the desert, nomadism, I suggest, shelters new images of thought about what potentially exists 'outside' any gendered and racialized social order framing young women's lives today. Enmeshed in the complexities of these lives, nomadism further highlights analyses of new modes of being or rather of becoming, no longer constrained within closed identity boundaries.

Being a nomad, living in transition, does not mean that one cannot or is unwilling to create those necessarily stable and reassuring bases for identity that allow one to function in a community... Rather, nomadic consciousness consists in not taking any kind of identity as permanent. The nomad is only passing through; s/he makes those necessarily situated connections that can help her/him to survive, but s/he never takes on fully the limits of one national, fixed identity. The nomad has no passport – or has too many of them.

(Braidotti, 1994, p.33)

Starting from this intriguing extract from Rosi Braidotti's influential study, *Nomadic Subjects*, in this paper I am reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of using

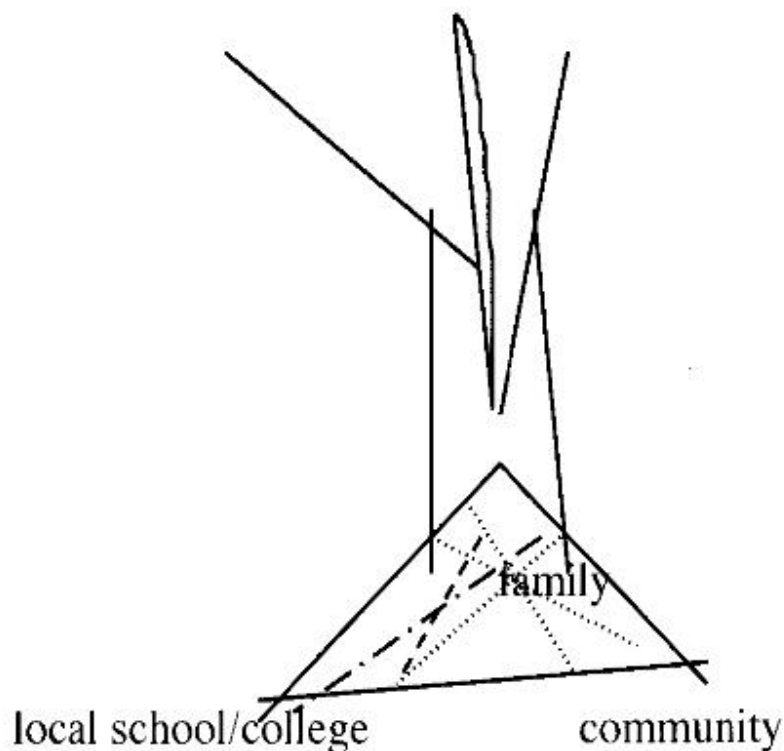
nomadism as a rhizomatic model of thinking about and theorizing contemporary female subjectivities. I am looking in particular at existing narratives of young black women in the UK as they talk about, reflect upon and sometimes problematize their decisions relating to how they move from school to the post-compulsory educational terrain. These are narratives of transition, articulated literally on the move. It is this context of unplanned and not rarely accidental movement surrounding the young women's stories that has made space for nomadism to emerge as a theoretical plane for these stories to make connections. Taking up Deleuze and Guattari's concept of nomadism does not necessarily impose a necessity on the research and indeed the researcher to follow or be consistent with Deleuze and Guattari's philosophies. In any case Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical work does not construct or impose a closed theoretical and/or methodological framework. Indeed their philosophies have fought against any totalitarianism in thought, and not only. Nomadism invites multiple ways of experimenting with thought, making space for previously unthought-of connections to be made. If there is any maxim in Deleuze and Guattari's philosophies, it should be their suggestion that "to think is to experiment."

But before I go on exploring nomadic connections, let me make a cartography and a genealogy for the deployment of these connections. The nomadic figures of my sociological imagination emerge from existing ethnographic data (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 1999) and particularly from the life stories of four young black women – Amma, Delisha, Kaliegh and Rena – living in London, at a transitional point of their lives, when they are making decisions about their post-compulsory education. Their nomadic stories were traced within interview transcripts, taken for an ethnographic study of a cohort of young people from an inner London comprehensive school and the nearby Pupil Referral Unit^[1]. In first working around the concept of nomadism (Tamboukou and Ball, 2002), we moved along the trails that have been sketched out by relatively recent feminist experiments with Deleuze and Guattari's work (Braidotti, 1991, 1994; Probyn, 1993; Grosch, 1994; Kaplan, 1996; St.Pierre, 1997; Buchanan and Colebrook, 2000). In light of Colebrook's argument that feminist thought is a becoming (2000, 11) what we wanted to experiment with was not how "correct or faithful" the concept of nomadism is, but rather how it "can be made to work" (Colebrook, cited in Tamboukou and Ball, 2002, 268). What we attempted to do was to draw a map of rhizomatic lines and make connections with other theoretical and

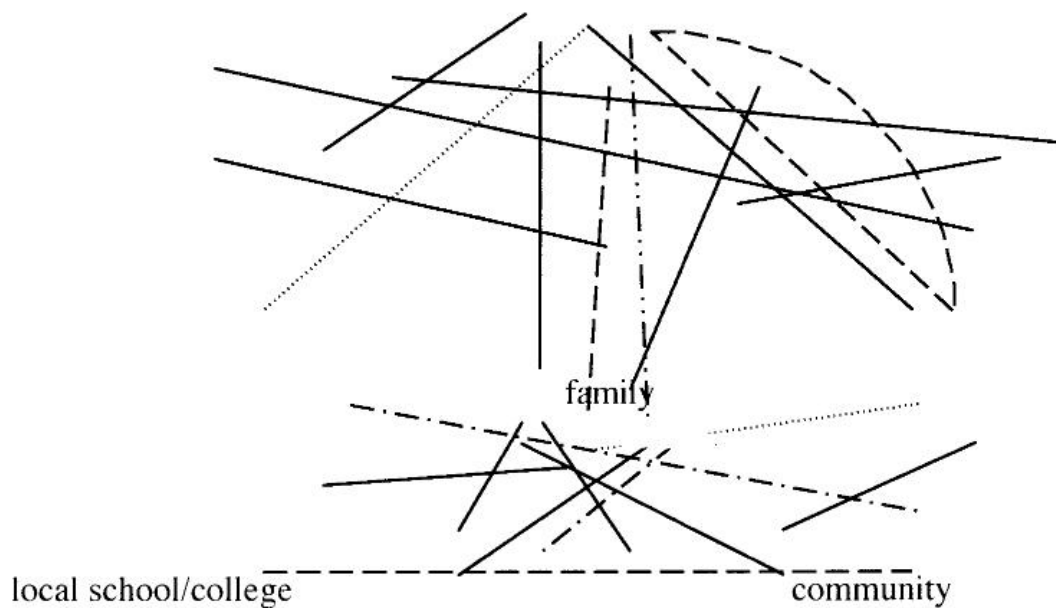
methodological possibilities, namely feminist critical thinking and the work of Foucault. Our first attempt at working with nomadism (Tamboukou and Ball, 2002) – met as it has been with serious considerations regarding the possibilities and limitations of nomadism in the analysis of the young black women’s narratives – has led to further reflections on how it is possible or indeed impossible to apply a rhizomatic model of analysis to what has been described as an "arborescent" type of transition resulting from the hierarchical structures of schooling. It is in addressing this question that the paper now moves.

Young black women as nomadic subjects

In turning to examine how and whether nomadism works, I now want to look more closely at the young black women’s narratives. As has already been pointed out, the first image their stories were depicting was very much perceived as arborescent rather than rhizomatic; what their stories charted was a closed and well-bounded triangle designated by their family, their local school/college and their community (See Tamboukou and Ball, 2002, (271).



This triangle is clearly of the arborescent type: according to Deleuze and Guattari, arborescent systems are hierarchical systems with centrally organised memories. Any element in this system is subjected to a higher unit, the channels of communication and transmission are pre-established, while the individual is integrated into the system at an allotted place (1988, 16). However as the young women’s narratives were being deployed, the supposed support from the three points of the triangle was problematized as misleading: “I think I should have talked to a lot more people rather than leaning on what my sister said, or what her friends said, you know... I left my choices late and very limited,” admits Amma in one of her later interviews, as she looks back to the decisions she has already made and regrets her "choice." The young women problematize their families, but also their schools and communities, often expressing fears of confinement within them. Kaliegh does not want to go to a college which is “too close” to where she lives because: “I live in Streetley, I know everyone on the way round and I don’t want to know people, I don’t want to know too many people.” Thus, within their own discourse, the arborescent model seemed more and more inadequate as a way of recognising themselves, imagining their future and accounting for their life-moves and choices. Their experiences can better be viewed as rhizomatic, as they move away from the arborescent type of experiences coming from their gender, class, ethnicity and locality.



The only way to follow these fragmented, incomplete and often contradictory life stories was to follow their "lines of flight," away from pre-established destinies, be they of gender, "race" or class.

In this context nomadism turned out to be a methodological model that could work with the evading subjectivities of the young black women. In choosing to look at these subjects through the lenses of nomadism, we were aware that nomadism was indeed one of a myriad possible constructions that was made out of the data of the interviews. Seen as nomads, what the young black women said or did could be put on a map of rhizomatic formations, without having to be pathologized. What they said or did gave us new insights into the many ambivalent sides of being young, black and female in a metropolitan city, like London, at the dawn of the new millennium. To do that, however, we had to problematize previously held assumptions about youth, femininity, blackness, localism and/or good/bad educational provision and try to rethink all these notions and their interrelations in the void left by the disappearance of stable and solid points of reference from the young black women's narratives. In a Foucauldian framework, we had to problematize the conditions of possibility for these narratives, discourses, practices and subject positions. In this way our analysis was forming rhizomes with different lines of thought as well as with the discourses within which the young women's narratives were being unfolded.

So far I have argued that the young black women's lives should be analysed within a rhizomatic system of analysis as opposed to the usually adopted arborescent or tree-like system. But what is a rhizome in Deleuze and Guattari's thought? This is what the paper will now turn to.

Theorising rhizomes

Rhizomes, Deleuze and Guattari explain, are very different from roots and radicles. They assume very diverse forms, including "the best and the worst" (1988, 7) and have certain principles that characterise them:

a) Principles of connection and heterogeneity: unlike the tree or root "which plots a point" and "fixes an order," any point of the rhizome can and must be connected to

any other (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 7). It is the destabilization of the "fixed order" that the young women's narratives most forcefully brought forward: although they had difficulties in being identified with either their community, school or family, they do keep connecting with all of them as well as with what is "outside them," which, in Delisha's case, can almost reach the boundaries of a "criminal" trajectory: "I know what is going on... I have seen everything; I have seen every type of illegal thing..." It is from "the outside" of the arborescent triangle that Delisha speaks here, while she still positions herself within it. What the young black women say could be analyzed not by an arborescent connection to the speaking subject "who means what she says and says what she means" (Britzman, 1995, 230), but by reference to a method of the rhizome type, decentering the speaking subjects from the discursive terrain they open up. If, on the contrary, they have to be marked by what they say, then their stories become intelligible, they can easily be pathologized as almost schizophrenic.

b) "Principle of multiplicity: it is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive multiplicity that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 8). What is particularly important for multiplicities is that they are defined by "lines of flight," through which they escape enclosed formations and connect to other multiplicities from the outside. There are indeed narrative "lines of flight" emerging from the young women's narratives, most often leading to planes of inconsistency. Indeed the only way they can be read is not the triangle from where they speak, but from the outside, the planes, where they are attempting to fly.

Seen from the inside of the triangle, the young women appear either indecisive or unable to "choose" and they are continuously changing their mind about where to go and what to do. Kaliegh does not see any real difference among the Colleges she can choose from; she feels and perhaps is trapped in a vicious circle of predetermined missed opportunities. Seen from the inside, she is hopeless and perhaps desperate. However from the outside of the triangle and in the light of nomadism, she imagines herself flying away and seems able and prepared to "recreate her home/school/community, elsewhere and everywhere." The young women's language moves backwards and forwards between and beyond the limits of the triangle. Their stories can be read within a register and lexicon of entrapment but "not merely" that.

They can also be read as "lines of flight," containing possible "ways out," ways of being different, other places in which to be.

c) Principle of asignifying rupture: against the oversignifying breaks separating structures or cutting across a single structure, a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines or on new lines (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 9). Looking at the turning points of the young women's life trajectories, "significant moments" or "turning points" were indeed traced, sometimes even recognized and named by the young women as such. Their transition to post-compulsory education was in itself a significant rupture. However, the model of "asignifying ruptures" was much more useful in the analysis of what they said and what they did while in transition, as well as for their subjective understanding of its significance. We have already argued (Tamboukou and Ball, 2002, 275) that they may even have fabricated some of these asignifying ruptures themselves. This does not imply that these fabricated stories are less powerful or effective in constituting the subjects who speak them. The narrative lines that run through the stories that they make to locate themselves within regimes of truth and common sense discourses relate to the emergence of an accident, an asignifying incident that creates a rupture with their previous way of life and opens up a nomadic passage to a different mode of being. The young women's discourses are definitely deployed within the constraints of the importance of turning points in the formation of the self. Perhaps we could argue here for the fictitious character of "significant" ruptures as juxtaposed to the pragmatics of "asignifying ruptures" which were more effective in accounting for how their narratives ultimately evolved.

d) "Principle of cartography and decalcomania: a rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model [...] it is a map, not a tracing [...] since there are so many intersecting lines of segmentation and of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, 12). In working with maps Deleuze and Guattari particularly stress "the force of desire as a form of political option to live out problems" (1988, 13). Although the stories that the young women tell about their lives lack the type of determination that would give the analyst a form of hard-core agency, they do project the force of these young women's desire to become what they envisage, sometimes even identifying with the objects of their fiction or desire. And I would think here that this force of

desire that can mobilise the "war machine" within any individual can more often appear in the cartography of young people, whose lives and thought retain more entry points to planes of phantasies, fictions and desires, and as Deleuze and Guattari point out: "it is always by rhizome that desire moves and produces" (1988, 14). So, the young black women talk a lot about real-and-imagined travels; travelling indeed is part of their "fantasy futures." As we have pointed out, "what the young women want to avoid is being stopped or hindered from going beyond the limits of their local communities" (Tamboukou and Ball, 2002, 280). Since the rhizome "intersects roots and sometimes merges with them" (1988, 13), it is critical to map various ways that the young women try to form rhizomes with their families, communities and educational institutions, but also with "lines of flight" out of these social settings and be attentive to how these "lines of flight" are sometimes blocked or are made to take root in the pre-existing triangle.

Rejecting old questions, making rhizomes, thinking in terms of nomadism

I have argued that rhizomes offer more effective models of making sense of young black women's lives, drives, decisions and/or choices. What was identified in their narratives, which were first deployed within the restrictions of the family / community / college triangle, were "lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories as its dimensions, but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification" (1998, 3). Revisiting the three social settings of the arborescent triangle, what was brought into play was both the contingency of its construction as well as the continuous crises these social settings are nowadays undergoing. Whether we speak of late or post-modernity, globalisation, the new gender order, the liquidation of our lives, we cannot but see these transformations radically changing the ways we have used to theorise them. In Deleuze and Guattari's thought it is at the time of crisis that new lines of flights emerge, no matter whether they will soon be inserted into new arborescent structures of the state machine. In following lines of flight we were interested in transitions, and this is where the concept of nomadism became so relevant in the analyses of these processes of becoming. Nomadism is, of course, only one of a myriad ways to look at these transitions, and it is by no means exhaustive. The young women's narratives, seen from the nomadic perspective, throw new light on the processes of their subjectification, the ways they act upon themselves

to cease being what they are and attempt to become other. In addition, we have looked at these becomings while we as analysts are in the process of experimenting with our own thinking, thus becoming part of the rhizomes we attempt to construct and put on the map. There are lines of flight criss-crossing each other as well as intersecting with roots and lines of segmentation in the maps we are making. In Deleuze and Guattari's thought, arborescent structures coexist with rhizomes and often intersect. The arborescent structures of the triangle create fictitious, but very strong relations, interpellating these young black women to fixed gendered, racialized and classed identities. We cannot downplay the importance of these hailings and how they function to keep these young women in their spheres of belonging. Perhaps this is why nomadism is so relevant. Following nomadic passages these women can come and go incessantly, at least within the discursive terrain that their narratives have opened up for us to look at. In the rhizomatic model as applied to the interviews of these young black women, questions like Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for? cannot generate any consistent answer. After all, according to Deleuze and Guattari, these are totally useless questions. Thinking in terms of nomadism, we can thus point to "other ways of travelling and moving: proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going, rather than starting and finishing" (1988, 25). Why do that? What can be the political implications of using nomadism? I will leave the answer to Braidotti's pithy statement:

The nomadic subject is a myth, that is to say a political fiction, that allows you to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience: blurring boundaries without burning bridges. Implicit in [the choice of this figuration] is the belief in the potency and relevance of the imagination, of myth-making, as a way to step out of the political and intellectual stasis of these postmodern times. Political fictions may be more effective, here and now, than theoretical systems. (Braidotti, 1994, from the cover)

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