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**The 'Politics of Recognition' in  
Ethnographic Perspective:  
Reflections on Multiculturalist Strategies**

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# The 'Politics of Recognition' in Ethnographic Perspective: Reflections on Multiculturalist Strategies

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**Abstract/Résumé:**

This is an ethnographic reflection on how migrants themselves creatively engage with multiculturalist notions of citizenship and identity to their personal advantage. This paper explores the workplace stories of Heidi, a thirty-three year old Tanzanian-born German citizen living in London and working in short-term jobs in the city's call centre industry. Heidi's decisions about how to represent her cultural identity to her controlling employer reveal how migrants may strategically use prevailing political discourses about cultural diversity in order to reclaim personal autonomy lost through a heightened need to retain employment. By subverting dominant interpretations of her cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and racial identities, Heidi reminds us of the importance of recognizing multiculturalism's ambivalent potential for identity recognition in immigrant-receiving societies.

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**Keywords/Mots-clefs:** multiculturalism, transnationalism, politics of recognition, ethnography

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## **Introduction:**

For cultural scholar Stuart Hall, multiculturalism “references the strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multi-cultural societies throw up” (2000: 209). In his view, multiculturalisms are as diverse as the multi-cultural societies to which they refer. Needless to say, the unique manifestations of political strategies that attempt to accommodate social diversity through pluralist ideals cannot be accounted for by prevailing political circumstances alone. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have argued, multiculturalism is variously grounded in local historical and social fields that attribute it different political meaning depending on context. They outline how, when ‘debates travel’, problems of translation may arise, so much so that multiculturalism often and unwittingly provokes “a collision of in some ways incommensurable vocabularies” (2005: 295). By extension, those scholars or policy analysts interested in comparatively evaluating specific multiculturalist strategies in facilitating the integration of marginalized cultural, ethnic, and racial groups are cautioned to address the plurality of multiculturalism itself. For many, this proposition may seem impossibly relativistic, commanding that we question the relevance of studying multiculturalism at all. In Hall’s words (2000: 211):

Can a concept which means so many different things and so effectively draws fire of such diverse and contradictory enemies really have anything to say to us?

In the end, Hall reasons that the contemporary, late-modern, post-colonial, immigrant-receiving west is inevitably caught up in the pressures of multicultural practices, and we may at least find value in its very contestability. Recent rioting of ghettoized immigrant youth in France, the violent agitation by largely poor and black urban residents of post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, and London’s July 7, 2005 subway bombings by the British-born adult children of immigrants underline that social recognition of the diversity of ethnic, racial, and religious minorities remains a sensitive and pressing political concern. In this paper, I

propose that treating the multiplicity of multiculturalism need not be done through comparative analyses of policies and projects alone. While understanding how the phenomenon relates and differs between, say, France, the United States, and Britain, it is important not to neglect how countless transnational migrants experience and relate to the multiplicity of multiculturalism as they travel between diverse societies. Rather than focusing on how multiculturalism is variously anchored in different locales, this paper offers a modest ethnographic exploration into how people who live mobile lives, and are connected to kin and diasporic communities around the world offer curious insight into all manner of strategies that attempt to manage problems of diversity.

Building on conclusions emerging from my master's thesis research, this paper draws on the life histories of a family of six adult sisters originating in Tanzania and their close kin who have settled and resettled across Europe, North America, and Africa. In the larger project, I asked: what do experiences of these young, educated, 'black' women coping with a rapidly changing world have to offer our general knowledge about what it means to belong to a nation? That project primarily explored the role of family and small community networks (or what some would call *bonding* forms of social capital)<sup>1</sup> in helping transnational migrants navigate the constricted national fields across which their personal lives are invested. Throughout the project, the sisters' highly mobile life histories and their adaptability in a range of cultural milieus underscored a sense (which they all expressed to me) that they feel incredibly ambivalent about active membership in communities that purport to represent their cultural, racial, and national identities. They are not unlike countless transnational migrants who express a desire to occupy themselves with only their immediate personal circumstances, avoiding the kind of political organization that civic engagement in non-governmental immigrant or 'minority' groups often entails.

Ethnography presents a rich opportunity to explore what significance pluralist ideals have for immigrants like these sisters—individuals and groups—

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful source on *bonding* versus *bridging* forms of social capital see Tossutti, reference in bibliography.

who neither fully embrace, nor explicitly reject the strategies designed to facilitate equality between diverse populations that governments of many host countries espouse. What does the reluctance of these sisters to self-identify as Tanzanian, or African, or black women, or as foreign domestic caregivers, or international students, or even as ‘naturalized’ Canadian, British, or German citizens communicate about how seemingly apolitical migrants understand and engage with multicultural ideals? The sections that follow attempt to answer this question by framing the sisters’ experiences within the ‘politics of recognition’ and drawing out some stories which underscore the often scripted and constricting manifestations of multiculturalist strategies.

### **Recognizing the ‘Politics of Recognition’:**

The Mistral sisters come across as very alone in the world, fumbling through immigration regulations with what knowledge they have acquired from experience, and negotiating day-by-day the diverse social norms which frame their lives. Between the six sisters, they have lived in Tanzania, Germany, Finland, Italy, Portugal, England, the United States, and Canada (in most cases for several years). The four who are married have chosen to build their lives with Danish, German, Dutch, and Australian husbands. These profoundly personal cross-cultural experiences have made these women very savvy in the lived realities of racism and other forms of discrimination in Western Europe, North America, and Africa. Given this, they present interesting questions about what multiculturalism means to people who are reluctant to formally articulate and deploy their diverse cultural identifications.

What Charles Taylor and others have come to call the ‘politics of recognition’ figure significantly in the Mistral sisters’ hesitation to declare and coherently express one or another of their identities. In his most significant work on the matter, Taylor presents a compelling historical assessment of how modern ideals of individual authenticity have increasingly turned contemporary politics towards a preoccupation with identity and demands for recognition (1992). Suffice it to say that, recognition in the sense that Taylor uses it is politically

charged and figures prominently in multiculturalism debates. In his words, each person's identity is (1992: 25):

...partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by *misrecognition* of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or damaging or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.

Useful here, is that struggles over how to assert and have one's identity recognized by those around them can be taken into account over the course of a person's entire life. For instance, what once may have been difficult for a person to assert, such as a homosexuality identity, may become easier as political climates change or as one begins to associate with others who confirm that identity in positive ways. At the same time, repeated failures in being effectively recognized can compound on a person's sense of self, with potentially damaging consequences. I propose that the Mistral sisters have preferred to retreat non-confrontationally, rather than constantly live on the defensive whenever the world around them challenges their German-ness (for never having been born there), or their Tanzanian-ness (for speaking Swahili with an accent often mistaken for South African). In such a way, they avert the most damaging personal affects of *misrecognition*. That is to say, when multi-cultural societies ask of these sisters to identify with groups to which they feel no or only partial belonging, they have long silenced their opinions and withdrawn from such projects altogether. This action has become a means for them to go about their lives as 'normally' as possible, and of avoiding discouragement from lack of recognition of their complex cultural identities that have been formed over years of migration and travel between continents, their familiarity with living both in poverty and in wealth, their fluency in numerous languages, and their knowledge of how to behave in diverse social contexts.

When considering how a person's past life experiences play into the 'politics of recognition', it is important to note that these questions apply at the level of the family as well. The Mistrals moved to different countries at different points in each sister's life-course, putting the elder sisters in Germany for secondary school, while the younger sisters had returned to Tanzania before completing high school. As a result, the youngest—Annika, Vero and Agatha—struggled to a greater extent than the others to complete their secondary educations. Staggered levels of language competence and feelings of comfort in the various cultural milieus in which they have lived mean that even between these sisters there is often disagreement over whether or not a given hardship experienced by one is a result of subtle discrimination, or in Taylor's more precise terms lack of recognition.

This was the case for Heidi, the third eldest of the Mistral sisters. At the time of my research, tensions were rising between Heidi and her sisters in London, with whose families she had been alternating living for close to six months following her arrival from Canada. As the only Mistral in possession of a European passport, and having spent the least amount of time living in Tanzania out of all the sisters, Heidi often cited her European identity when chagrined by her underemployment in the city. The two other sisters in London, Vero and Lydia, often held a "get used to it" attitude to which Heidi would silently nod. She knew that she was unable to identify with a perspective they had acquired after migrating back to Tanzania in their youth, where they had been without the means to move abroad until their Belgian and Dutch husbands eventually enabled migration back to Europe. Heidi preferred a "creatively solve your problems" attitude, which had been behind her acquisition of a German passport in the first place, through a staged marriage to a friend's boyfriend. Heidi's stress was intensified by the fact that she had lived for over a year in Washington DC, where she acquired a particular consciousness as a black woman living in a white-dominated society that none of her sisters seemed to share with her.

What is important to draw from this is how a person's life experiences can significantly complicate feelings of belonging to collective identities, such as



racial or cultural groups, that multiculturalist strategies often take as given. What follows in the next section are two anecdotes relating to Heidi's experiences in London. Over the course of two weeks last summer in which I shared an apartment with her, Heidi conveyed to me feelings (shared by her sisters in other contexts) of being conflicted about how to position herself in relation to other migrants in London. Like Agatha in Berlin, Annika in Calgary, and Mariannik in Dar es Salaam, she questioned whether 'native' Londoners would ever see her as more than an immigrant, and whether she herself would ever be convinced of their sincerity. Heidi's struggles to assert her adaptable cultural identity reveal a creativity and agency among migrants that I hope might inspire more reflexive and adaptable multiculturalist strategies.

Given ethnography's very qualitative approach, it is important to note that these stories are not unique, but representative of the kinds of identity struggles variously faced by each of these sisters. Furthermore, the call centres in which Heidi was working at the time of my visit were frequently populated by other immigrants of African, Indian, Southeast Asian, and Eastern European origin who could speak a range of continental European languages proficiently. With this in mind, Heidi's stories become symbolic of countless other migrants with transnational biographies like her own. I emphasize that, even though these sketches occurred in London and therefore could seem to relate to Britain, Heidi's encounters are, by and large, not place-specific. I am speaking here to our general knowledge of how multiculturalist ideals and strategies are lived, and about a person who has learned a great deal about identity recognition in practice, having herself migrated to and for various reasons endured feelings of being an outsider in Tanzania, Germany, Portugal, the United States, and Canada prior to arriving in England.

### **Identity Scripts:**

When I met Heidi, she had been in Britain for over half a year and was still struggling to save enough money from her transient call centre jobs to be able to start paying rent in her own place. She had just turned thirty-three, and had come

to London to be closer to two sisters who had moved there with their husbands. While Heidi renounced Tanzanian citizenship in her twenties when she acquired her German passport, she had little attachment to Germany now that her family had mostly left. Her sisters in London had husbands and children of their own, which often compounded a feeling of loneliness that Heidi had been trying to escape when she first left Germany several years ago to try her luck in Portugal and Canada, before England. She once told me that “if you don’t have family here, London is really a place where you can feel very alone.”

On days with no work, Heidi would go to the public library, where she warned me not to bother trying to check my email for free. The computers would most certainly be occupied by the same people sitting at them the whole day long. At first when she arrived in London, she told me that she did not catch on right away that they were people just like her. They were mostly immigrants, sitting there as long as they could, returning day after day to scour the internet for job opportunities. Some days, she said, she would start to feel racist, often becoming impatient with other Africans and keen not to be associated with them in the eyes of Londoners. She felt that she was nothing like the refugees from Sudan, the Muslims from North Africa, or the immigrants from the Caribbean. But somehow there she was, facing the same barriers as them.

Heidi was critical of her own racism, carefully reminding herself that it was the frustration and disappointed anticipation triggered by unemployment that made her resent the strangers she generalized about. But she was by no means alone in enduring such feelings. Several of her sisters confessed to me how, racism could sometimes creep into the head of a very good person to comfort them from the more isolating sense of personal inadequacy in the face of sustained joblessness. Heidi’s racism was not what some might characterize as ‘cultural baggage’ that she carried with her from a distant homeland. From the age of eight, she was raised in a Christian Integrated Community in which people from all walks of life (including her family from rural Tanzania) lived under a same roof in Munich. This racism that she struggled to suppress was linked to the difficulty of securing permanent employment in London, and the increasing

desperation to have her post-secondary education, professional work experience, and linguistic skills recognized by employers (and subsequently society at large). Her racism emerged from the pressure to fend for herself in a host society that, on the ground, remained ill-equipped to embrace her diverse life experiences.

Racism was not the only way in which Heidi struggled to belong. One day after a twelve hour shift at one of the call centres in which she held short-term contracts, Heidi told me about a frustrating request the employer (a well-known multi-national computer conglomerate) had made. Only the Friday previous, in an attempt to build employee morale the company had sponsored a staff barbecue. The timing had been opportune, given that bizarre new regulations were presented to staff on a weekly basis. One recent rule stipulated that staff were not allowed to use their own mugs at work, and instead would have to use the Styrofoam or plastic cups provided. We laughed that either the company was partnered with a disposable cup manufacturer, or it was determined to alienate its employees entirely from their workspace. Heidi had no interest in partaking in the barbecue, but she mingled with the crowd long enough to spot that the food which the company had splurged on its frontline workers was considered of the cheapest possible store brands. She scoffed at the empty gesture, dismissing the low-level management for digging employee morale further into the ground by insulting their intelligence with imitation generosity. Few were fooled, but we later learned that a handful of co-workers who stuck around for the free food ended up spending the weekend sick from food poisoning.

At just about the time when Heidi was starting to believe that the company could not become any more restrictive in its treatment of the call centre workers, management organized a staff meeting in which everyone was instructed on the new dress policy. At one point, a manager used Heidi to demonstrate what kinds of respectable mid-thigh mini-skirts were now forbidden. She was not the only employee confused by the stiff new rules set in place for “if ever a client came through”. She had worked in offices where clients actually did show up from time to time. She remembered that a few days advance notice about an important

meeting had always worked quite fine elsewhere. But for some reason, the call centre's management behaved as if the employees (largely immigrants) had never held jobs before.

On the day of the staff meeting, Heidi happened to be wearing a crocheted cap to cover a mess of scraggly hair which was too short to braid, but too long and curly to leave to its own devices. Her manager had also pointed out that hats of any kind were no longer permitted. At the end of the meeting, Heidi approached her female boss with a contrived heartfelt dilemma. She told the manager that her cap was a religious symbol, explaining that her African tribe wore them during important periods of prayer. The boss responded generously. "Yes, I thought it must be something religious. Do you know when you will have to wear it?" Heidi really could not tell, saying it was never exactly certain when periods of prayer would come or how long they would last. She was given permission to wear the beanie as needed.

Heidi recognized what the company and her host society neglected to notice. Whatever political strategies existed to foster her social integration and accept her cultural and racial diversity (which seemed to me more mainstream than anything else in such a global city), there were other forces that, through lack of recognition of her post-secondary credentials from Germany and work experience from other countries, restricted her integration. For Heidi, she was seen as little more than a black immigrant woman, a narrow set of signifiers which she molded to her limited advantage. To her employer's benefit, Heidi's manager extended flexibility towards her fictitious tribal tradition, demonstrating that formal efforts to make workplaces embrace Britain's increasing cultural multiplicities have not fallen on entirely deaf ears. However, the employer's flexibility in respecting her diversity seems astonishingly restricted, as what life experiences of Heidi's were recognized were reserved to asserting her 'African-ness', and limited to the realm of clothing. Heidi used this detail subversively to assert a small amount of autonomy for herself, but she realized that she could not feasibly convince her employer to broaden its understanding of the vast life experiences shared by the immigrant workforce.

## **Conclusion:**

Commenting on Charles Taylor's work on the 'politics of recognition', K. Anthony Appiah has noted that contemporary political emphasis on collective identities reinforces what he calls 'scripts' for cultural identities, defined as "narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories" (1992: 160). In keeping with Appiah's observation, Heidi simply used a script about 'being African', discerned from common stereotypes about Africa as a place of tribes and religion. As I have outlined already, Heidi identifies with many more identities than just her African origins, but it was the expectation (in the eyes of Londoners) to confirm *this* identity in particular, which she felt most heavily weighed upon her. Nevertheless, she chose to remain in London because, in her words, at least she had status as a citizen of the European Union. In her view, enduring racism and lack of recognition as a European would be easier in the company of family, who in spite of day-to-day disagreements, could help make one feel at least a little bit less alone.

I caution against reducing Heidi's stories to the very pressing question of recognizing foreign professional credentials. If anything, these stories highlight that credential recognition composes an even larger problem of identity recognition and recognition of the contribution that individual immigrants can make to host societies. In Heidi's view, the multiculturalist strategy practiced by her employer to account for cultural diversity in the workplace kept her unconvinced about any professed desire by her host society to help its vast immigrant population integrate. As a result of having encountered such situations throughout their lives, the Mistral sisters have long watched forward-looking political ideals of fostering cultural pluralism and encouraging respect for diverse citizens become distorted through simplistic policies and strategies that reduce cultural identities to essentialized wholes (See Appiah 1992: 155). Unless multiculturalist strategies can 're-write' the scripts, or moreover give minorities more options to choose their identities with positive confirmation from society at large, multicultural ideals will be condemned to inefficacy. This means that

multiculturalist strategies must reach beyond the celebration—and often by implication, the reduction—of cultural difference to customs, clothing, and cuisine.

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**\*\*\*Pour toute question relative à la *Série de documents de recherche*, vous êtes priés de vous adresser à:**

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