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The plasticity of diasporic identities in super-diverse cities

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Diaspora making in superdiverse contexts

In ‘super-diverse’ cities such as London across the western hemisphere an intensification and diversification of migrant groups is having a profound effect upon how diaspora making is taking place and how diasporic identities are being formed. A wider range of cultural resources and an increasingly complex ethnic landscape is precipitating the dismantling of conventional categories of difference and identity. In Britain, for example, this diversification consists of a transition from a more conventional immigrant and ethnic minority population (large, well organised African-Caribbean and South Asian communities and citizens originally from Commonwealth countries or former colonial territories), to a ‘new migration’ from a diverse range of origins mostly relating to places which have no specific historical and colonial links with Britain (Vertovec 2007). It is argued that alongside the trend in an increasingly diverse make-up of the population we are also seeing a proliferation in the ways in which people (particularly young people) are expressing their identities (Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah 2010, Vertovec 2012). This emphasis on the ‘super-diversity of identities’ suggests the enabling of a more open, public and visible expression of social identities (Valentine 2013, Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah 2010). These developments also present new challenges to the way we may categorize and encounter other people (Valentine 2013), as well as potentially presenting new possibilities for identity formation (Barber 2015). It is argued that a multiplication of diverse identities can contribute to a more complex, fluid, and nuanced understanding of ‘race’ and ethnicity, and therefore diasporic identities. Conceptions of ‘super-diversity’ then are arguably useful in two ways, firstly, it can offer the potential for avoiding essentialisms by focusing on ‘processes of identification’ rather than points of origin (Wessendorf 2013), and secondly it holds the potential to open a space to develop more sophisticated notions of ethnicity in urban

contexts by extending dominant or traditional conceptions of multiracial and multi-ethnic contexts beyond ‘hypervisible’ groups (i.e., South Asian and African Caribbean migrant-settler populations in the British context) (Knowles 2013). If we understand diasporic identity construction as involving a process of negotiation between the homeland and host society (Parennas and Sui 2009), the concept of diaspora and thus processes of diaspora making must necessarily be understood in relation to how they are shaped by ‘race’ and ethnic relations (including racisms) in the host society as well as a range of social and economic relations within the diaspora community; this Chapter will focus on relations in the host society. Parennas and Siu have argued that diasporic consciousness and identification ‘emerge and grow stronger from local processes of racialisation’ (2009; 7). The more traditional black/white binaries shaping identity politics are thus recast by a more diversified cultural and ethnically plural landscape. These two things might have a very particular significance for diaspora making and diasporic identity construction in that they might open up some of the constraints posed by more rigid traditional power structures of the post-colonial era by the introduction of new forms of difference. By the same token it may also offer a new and different range of constraints and opportunities for fashioning diasporic identities. So in exploring the potential transformatory effects of super-diverse contexts upon diasporic identity formations, we must also pay attention to parallel processes which reinforce existing social hierarchies, such as the way in which ‘old’ essentialised racisms often persist under new guises. New diversity discourses have been criticised for hiding inequalities through prioritizing and celebrating more ‘acceptable’ kinds of diversity by taking an overly superficial and culturalist approach to difference. While certain differences are marked as ‘diverse’ - those that are largely an aesthetic, politically and morally neutral expression of cultural difference – others become marked as a ‘problematic or dangerous difference not grounded in loyalties and marked by unwanted, or morally objectionable practices’ (Anthias 2011; 326, Inda 2006). We need to think about how this has the potential to shape and obscure diasporic identity formation and the presentation of difference by diaspora groups.

In order to explore how super-diverse contexts shape diasporic identity formations this Chapter will use a notion of diaspora and diaspora making as a creative and on-going process involving relations in the host society, ‘homeland’ and the international diaspora (Parennas and Siu 2009). As Parennas and Siu (2009) have noted that diaspora is not simply about transnational forces that shape race relations but also the local manifestations of social inequalities such as racism and xenophobia. Likewise, Hall (1996) has argued that diaspora can form a

‘positionality’ built on a shared experience of racism and political position. Diasporic identification may then be understood as a ‘strategy of resistance’ which offers a basis for examining larger structures of domination at work, offering a potential for mobilizing cross-ethnic and cross-racial political alliance (Parennas and Siu 2009; 10-11). This means that we need to take into account the social context in which diasporic populations live and how these effect upon subject formation as well as the kind of positionalities that are created. The following sections of this Chapter reflect specifically upon the role of discourses in shaping the experience of groups who are visible but under-represented within the British multicultural imagination and consider whether the notion of super-diversity offers greater opportunities or constraints to negotiating new forms of identity and inclusion. An emphasis will be placed upon whether super-diversity offers a move away from the more constraining effects of more ‘fixed’ and recognisable diasporic identities and whether diasporic groups and individuals are afforded greater flexibility in fashioning their identities through occupying a more diverse cultural terrain where a wider range of images and labels are available to contest broader structural discourses. With these questions in mind, the Chapter interrogates central contradictions and outcomes related to being both visible *and* invisible in super-diverse cities, the role of ‘passing’, and the role of social context in providing both limits and opportunities for diasporic identity formation.

The complexities of visible and more familiar/invisible difference

Diasporic identities are fashioned in a wide range of ways in super-diverse cities according to nationally-specific historical power relations that render ‘difference’ more or less visible. The visibilisation of difference may relate to processes including colonial legacy, race-relations and forms of racialisation based on nationally specific models of ethnic incorporation, cultural and religious differences as well as a representation and recognition in cultural and political debates and discourse (Philips 1997, Taylor 1995). Yet the processes by which difference becomes legible, familiar or instead overlooked in everyday life becomes arguably more complex in super-diverse cities where an increasing array of visible markers of difference may be present at any one given time. Encounters across difference may also be rendered more complex and multiple (see for example, Amin 2002, Ali 2003, Ahmed 2000) leading to an obscuring of conventional categories used to understanding difference; and therefore intersubjective negotiations of identity categories. Such complexity, multiplicity and diversity

may well obscure the boundaries between groups, leading to an increased inability to recognize or distinguish between diasporic groups and identities. While more established diaspora groups (including those with former colonial links to a country) might be more visible in the discourses of a nation, other newcomer groups may occupy ‘uncharted positions’ within society due to their non-colonial experience, meaning that they are often subject to a ‘poverty of categorisations’ (Ang-Lygate 1997). Being subject to a poverty of categorisations may work in two ways; on the one hand it might liberate groups and individuals from crude and fixed forms of stereotyping or on the other hand, it might enforce a resorting to even more basic and homogenising categories. Newer and more ‘uncharted’ groups (for example, in Britain those from Eastern Europe, East and Southeast Asia, Latin America and the Middle East or other minorities within conventional commonwealth minorities) might also be subject to a more complex positioning - in terms of their recognisability in everyday encounters in society and in public discourse. This may take place at different levels; for example, forms of visible and more familiar difference experienced by British new commonwealth groups African-Caribbean and Asians might be experienced at both a discursive level (recognition of culture and history) and at an embodied level (recognisability in everyday encounters). This may be constraining due to the inescapability of ‘recognisable’ categories while at the same time their recognition of the visibility/ their presence and that of the cultural heritage may enable a more clearly demarcated politics or ‘positionality’ⁱ (Hall 1996). For less recognizable groups, their difference may be less visible (either because of their skin colour) or less familiar (due to perceived ‘impenetrability’ of cultures; for example, of Southeast Asia). This particular feature of invisibility maybe experienced in a range of contradictory ways as illustrated below using the example of the British Vietnamese and the East Asian category.

In the super-diverse city of London, the lack of familiarity with East and South East Asian groups has often led to an inability to distinguish between ethnic groups leaving individuals to experience a sense of ‘not belonging’ and to engage in constant identity work in order to mitigate the effects of being invisible or being called upon to give an account of one’s embodied presence (Barber 2015; also see Ahmed 2000). The Vietnamese, like other East and Southeast Asians in Britain (including the more established British Chinese population) have tended to remain invisible and ‘silent’ minorities who rarely feature in debates on British multiculturalism (Parker 1995; Song 2003). Their invisibility has often protected them from the ‘worst kinds of racism’ such as the direct and ‘old’ racisms experienced by Black Britons, instead theirs is often indirect and often ‘positive’ racism (see Archer and Francis 2007). On

the other hand, forms of visibility were experienced by this group at a cultural and embodied level through their racialised difference which conformed to a tendency to label all East and Southeast Asian groups under the more familiar 'Chinese' category. Like other East and Southeast Asian groups the Vietnamese are often perceived as Chinese or simply homogenized under the Chinese category (Archer and Francis 2007, Barber 2015). In super-diverse contexts, the inability of others to distinguish between East and Southeast Asian groups leads to an outcome whereby rather than allowing for complexity and diversity within the British East and Southeast Asian category (or a more nuanced appreciation of 'difference'), anyone of East/Southeast Asian origin is classified as Chinese leading to a homogenizing tendency rather than a proliferation of difference. For the British-born Vietnamese, instances where they are rendered visible tended to be through the highly racialised confines of Orientalist discourse (Said 1978).

The above example illustrates an unexpected outcome of super-diversity upon diasporic identity making. In everyday encounters, a more fixed, recognizable category becomes adopted by a less visible group to provide an easy and effective way to engage in mainstream society at the superficial level, highlighting the need to resort to easily recognisable categories in superficial/fleeting encounters across diversity, while also avoiding unnecessarily lengthy discussion about ethnic origins. Thus the homogenization of difference into 'the Chinese' provides a 'workable' category for the Vietnamese in their encounters with others works effectively, because like most encounters in cities between strangers, these encounters tend to be fleeting or rare (Amin 2002). Thus more broadly, the visibility or invisibility of diaspora groups in super-diverse contexts may work on a number of different levels relating to a combination of physical 'difference' and discursive invisibility. The consequences of this exclusion through invisibility and racism (of the more indirect and 'positive' forms) is likely to lead diasporic individuals to engage in practices of transnationalism to seek out meaning and belonging in the 'homeland' (Delaney 1990, Cohen 1979) including forms of 'ethnic authentication' (Prennass and Siu 2009, Barber 2017).

'Passive' and 'deliberative' passing

Processes of globalisation have rendered the figure of the 'stranger' more complex in recent decades and this is supposedly altering our ability to be able to easily distinguish between so

called ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ (Rumford 2013, Ahmed 2004). In super-diverse contexts, this process may be further intensified; as argued above, conditions of super-diversity may obfuscate interpretations of, and familiarity with, difference. Diasporic youth in particular may be able to actually navigate between group identities and positions to become sometimes more visible and readable and at other times less visible and categorisable depending upon the social context. Practices of passing can become ways to mobilise ethnic and class positionalities in order to strategically appeal to notions of ‘acceptable diversity’ which are embodied within particular versions of more visible ethnic difference. Scholars recognize that passing can take a variety of forms and may serve a range of different purposes and intentionalities ranging from; ‘a fleeting momentary experience’, ‘mistaken identity’, ‘opportunistic action’ to even the ‘subversion of structural and/or personal inequality’ (Gilbert 2005: 68). Both ‘passive’ and ‘deliberate’ acts of passing thus may be used strategically for seeking acceptance within certain contexts, to achieve social mobility or simply to escape stigma. Examples include, the avoidance of interethnic entrepreneurial rivalry (Tuan 1998), to passing under more ‘acceptable’ forms of Asian Americanness (Shah 2008). Passing, may offer opportunities for individuals to manage the effects and outcomes of their broader structural positioning within power relations of ethnic and class hierarchies, and to position themselves more ‘positively’ in the super-diverse city.

Building upon the example of the British-born Vietnamese, the super-diverse context of London has enabled this group to pass as a range of different East and Southeast Asian ethnicities in order to manage the judgement and social expectations of others. The most common form of passing; passive passing, usually occurred through a process of misidentification where the Vietnamese (like other East Asian groups; see Yeh 2014, Archer and Francis 2007) are frequently misidentified in their everyday encounters as either Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai or ‘Oriental’, because they elude more straightforward processes of ethnic or racial assignment in British race-relations (to which these other groups might more recognisably conform). When unchallenged, this process can provide a form of ‘convenience passing’, because it offers both an easy and effective way to engage in mainstream society at a superficial level, while at the same time, enabling the British-born Vietnamese to avoid uncomfortable or lengthy discussions about their ethnic origins (Barber 2015). The second form of passing; deliberate passing, occurred in relation to a range of behavioural and symbolic attempts to creatively engage with, resist, or displace negative stigmatizing labels. This kind of passing was more often used by young working class men who used ‘visibility strategies’

such as hairstyling (spiking and dying), dress style and social mixing/participation to avoid Orientalist racisms associated with the stereotype of the 'passive effeminate Asian male' and avoid more narrow associations with cannabis growing and criminality more recently associated with the Vietnamese in Britain (Silverstone and Savage 2010). The use of visible embodiment strategies to to pass as Japanese, Korean or Thai and engage with more positive images associated with 'Oriental culture', enabled these diasporic youth to achieve a better status and image within these contexts (Barber 2015). In the super-diverse London borough of Hackney, where numbers of East and Southeast Asians are highest, being accepted in a more positive way within youthful 'super-diverse' contexts (such as 'the street' or local 'club') required the navigation of a complex hierarchy of images of 'East Asianness'. Similar hierarchies have also been observed among American Asians in the USA where the status of the country of origin (along geo-political lines) has strongly dictated the perceptions of different groups in the new host country context (Kim 2008). For example, Japanese youth culture has been well received among youth in the European context (Kinsella 1997), and Japanese Manga style identity has been linked to providing alternative constructions of masculinity by avoiding the hegemonic/subordinate binary (Barber 2014). Japanese hairstyling, for example, has served as a public performance of 'resistant' Vietnamese masculinities by enabling a negotiation of more positive and powerful masculinities in multiethnic contexts. The re-appropriation of Japanese hairstyling by the Vietnamese in the context of London was also combined with other embodiment practices creating a new transethnic style, which facilitated the construction of a broader pan-ethnic 'Oriental' identification and consciousness (Barber 2015, Yeh 2014). This opened up access to a greater range of sub-identities from which to 'choose' (Song 2003). Here a super-diverse context maybe seen as encouraging and enabling a masking over of difference to depoliticize identities (working class Vietnamese masculinities) which are experienced as 'bad diversity'. The structures that allow for this kind of passing depends upon the existence of populations which are not yet seen as part of multiethnic Britain and are still relatively unfamiliar.

What difference context makes.

A focus on context, place and locale are central to constructions of identity (Back 1996, Nayak 2004), likewise, social geographers have long understood place and identities as mutually constitutive (Skelton and Valentine 1998, Massey 1998). In the super-diverse setting of London

the transitional multicultural ‘migrant’ landscapes characterising East and Southeast London are of particular note. Eade (1997) has argued how the complexity of living in the global city has given way to new ethnicities and new cultural attachments, the development of which has been illustrated in the above sections. While super-diverse contexts have been found to enable forms of convivial culture in public spaces (Wessendorf 2013), other ethnographic work shows how super-diverse contexts can also enable belonging at varying levels moving beyond an insider/outsider distinctions (Hall 2016), further research finds the convivial encounters in super-diverse spaces to be less straightforwardly progressive and questions the quality and depth of ethnic mixing that takes place (Neal et al. 2014). Super-diversity itself is not uniform across all parts of London and the extent and nature of the ethnic mix may be variable (Vertovec 2012). While many of the participants in my research lived in East London, not all of them did and their experiences of other parts of London shaped how they engaged with and performed their identities. For example, aspirations for collective identities tended to emerge in circumstances where issues of power and representation were important. Superdiverse contexts such as ‘the club’ in the East of London were drawn upon as important identity spheres for these young adults in which to exercise political identity and contest forms of invisibility (see Barber 2015). In other contexts, particularly the mainstream institutions including the workplace where white norms still dominate, a less easily categorisable self was seen as more beneficial and enabled Vietnamese women to be read under more ambiguous notions of difference and discourses of the ‘exotic’. The notion of the exotic temporarily enabled individuals to escape fixed labels and negative stereotypes, providing agentic opportunities for renegotiating the terms of their interactions and appeal to more ‘positive’ forms of racialisation. The specific power dynamics inscribed in super-diverse contexts were variable; for some participants belonging and being accepted in sub-cultural club settings were more immediately important than being accepted in mainstream institutions where white norms prevail.

The limits and possibilities of the social construction of identity

While super-diverse contexts may enable greater elasticity in diasporic identity formation due to the greater range of images and affiliations that may be drawn upon, this should not be conflated with an ability to shift the power dynamics of racial discourse. In super-diverse cities we might find experiences of invisibility becoming more common and holding a range of different outcomes and possibilities for diaspora groups to negotiate labels and

categories at a superficial level. This may occur in the following ways; Firstly, there can be 'category confusion' and/or 'category overload' on the behalf of the external onlookers which may extend the range of identity options available to diasporic groups enabling a switching between and beyond existing categories. Secondly, a wider range of images and discourses become accessible and may render deliberate passing and creative identity making more possible. Thirdly, more opportunities for becoming less visible and avoiding the worst effects of racism in truly diverse contexts may make forms of strategic negotiation more possible while at the same time reinforcing existing structures of 'good diversity' and 'bad diversity'. However these strategies are still likely to be heavily tied to residual power dynamics in host society's race-relations. By assessing the ways in which diasporic identities are positioned and performed in super-diverse cities, a number of further questions are raised about the potential for agency and the plasticity of diasporic identities at the margins of society. The first issue relates to the question of when is being visible desirable and when it is not? When confronted with feeling invisible in super-diverse settings and what are the options and advantages to becoming more visible in intraethnic encounters. This question may relate to questions of power that reside in the ability to categorize others or not. We must ask: to what extent do they actually play a part in the multiethnic settings which they occupy and on which terms? For example, the Vietnamese men in my research were often located on the peripheries of these social scenes, and in their plight to become more visible; they display aesthetic 'presentations of self' as strategies for masculine empowerment. However, these visibility strategies are problematically caught within the confines of highly consumerist and traditionally more 'feminine' modes of asserting power, as the basis for challenging existing narrow stereotypes - so does super-diversity require more superficial performances and claims to identity to become visible and to belong? There are dangers of simply conforming to notions of 'good diversity' rather than confronting or challenging racism. Aesthetic strategies such as hairstyling and performative disruptions through countering-Orientalist discourse might create a space for a wider interpretation and variation of images of East and Southeast Asian masculinities in Western societies, but the very strategy of countering racism by becoming more visible is in itself problematic. Caluya (2006) explores the central flaw in 'strategies of visibility' whereby subjects seek to become more visible, noting that they 'fail to recognise that racial visibility is a precondition of racism in the first place' (2006, 4). To the less discerning eye, their subtle strategies and performances of resistance could be read as simply reinforcing existing notions of Oriental discourse, rather than as offering a substantial alternative. As Caluya (2006) suggests, we need to more carefully critique the terms of visibility itself and question 'what'

precisely is made visible, in what way and to 'whom'. The risk is that their responses become reliant upon gendered and sexual discursive and visual regimes, and thus become 'trapped in a cultural politics of subversion' (Caluya 2006). With this in mind it may be concluded that the plasticity in diasporic identity formation does not occur without various costs to the diasporic group and individual, as navigating the images and expectations of the host society inevitably requires some sort of erasure of the self.

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ⁱ It should be noted that the variation and difference and fragmentation within these groups is also well documented (e.g. Alexander 1996) .