

En-gendering critical spatial literacy: Migrant Asante women and the politics of urban space

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The power of spatial configurations in our everyday social practices and ideological constructions of place and identity cannot be denied. When it comes to issues of power and socio-physical space, women of predominantly African descent were and still are at the bottom of the barrel (at which level classism, racism, and sexism violently intersect). This phenomenon is evident in various forms and degrees all over the world, especially within the urban context. Thus you will find that women of African descent are often in the majority at the bottom of the urban power hierarchy in Third World cities, such as Accra, as much as in diasporic cities, such as Los Angeles. The unequal development of urban space is clearly represented in the low spatial positioning of these women. This positioning also has grave implications for their struggle for place in the social construction of spatiality, their understanding of their urban social practices, and their identity construction.

As an architect and a woman of African descent who has always lived in African and diasporic cities, I am particularly interested in how Black[1] women's social and economic lives have been constituted, situated, and enacted in western urban spatiality. I believe that Black women the world over are disproportionately represented in unsuitable and inadequate urban spaces and are also disproportionately underrepresented in urban development decision-making processes. As a Black female architect intent on imagining and constructing radical architectural counter-narratives within hegemonic spatial politics, I agree with Haque (1988) when she says:

I believe that architecture is also informed by the politics of space. It is essentially about the power structures that fund the white male middle-class architects who make up the body of the profession in Britain today. They create the physical environment in which we live and reinforce through their designs their problematic definitions of women, Black people and the working classes. White middle-class architects reinforce through the built form, their stereotypes of how Black and working class people live. Inevitably the buildings they produce reflect a limited response to the arts and to the social life of the people they design for and by doing so, limit the life choices of Black people and the working class (pp. 34-35).

This awareness is an example of what I call critical spatial literacy. It is the ability to read codes embedded in the urban built environment in order to understand how they affect social life and to determine if there is a need for transformative spatio-political action.

Haque speaks specifically to the British context, however, her argument is relevant in many parts of the world because the forces of globalization have created certain western information flows, fragmentation and pace that often replace previous traditional communities and places (Carter, Donald & Squires, 1993). For example, housing development in the Third World that

results from rapid urbanization is often laden with western, male, middle-class conceptions of how people in a contemporary city must live in order to serve a capitalist economy. This occurs through the wholesale adoption of western design, architectural practice, building technology and concomitant social and ideological constructs. For this reason, I believe that critical spatial literacy as a praxis provides the tools for documenting and analyzing Black women's urban spatial conditions just about anywhere in the world. It provides a transformative materialist interpretation of spatiality (a critical literacy of space), which recognizes the spatial nature of socioeconomic life and as a consequence would reveal the possibilities for radical change in the politics of space. To this end, I will discuss and recount experiences surrounding my investigation of how migrant Asante[2] women's household configurations, socio-cultural practices and spatial self-perceptions have changed in Ghana's rapidly urbanizing capital city, Accra. I will also present my findings on Asante women's personal constructions and articulations of space and place in response to their urban lived experiences. In presenting my work, I will describe the significance of research praxis based in a womanist positionality, the construction of social life in a capitalist spatiality, and the importance of a critical literacy of space on and by Asante women living in Accra.

Research Praxis based in a Womanist Positionality

My interest in Asante women's spatial experiences is rooted in the feminist understanding that "...feminist researchers begin their investigation of the social world from a grounded position in their own subjective oppression" (Weiler, 1988). The personal provides an experiential ground from which a theoretical understanding can be made of material structural circumstances. As an Asante woman who has lived in Accra, my personal experience provides a ground from which theoretical understandings can be made of Asante women's structural circumstances in Ghana's capital. I also make this assertion from a womanist positionality, which recognizes that critical consciousness must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, political, and sexual issues into a philosophy that is committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people (Ogunyemi, 1985; Walker, 1983).

I am also an Asante woman who presently lives in an urban diasporic context in Los Angeles, California. I have always lived in urban centers[3] and I have found that my understanding, negotiation, manipulation, and ownership of space (real and imagined) is often predetermined and confined by the prescribed, colonized, gendered, racialized, and class-based social relations of global capitalism. As a woman and as a minority, I am particularly disadvantaged within the politics of space: I have been privy to a minority and female experience of discrimination by design of a predominantly western built environment (Weisman, 1994). I experience this discrimination from location to location despite my access to professional and academic architectural discourse and privilege. Albeit restrictive, each discriminatory circumstance is often mediated by my very specific combination of gender, ethnicity, class position and architectural privilege; thus, the discrimination I experience varies in nuance and degree. It is from these relational liminal spaces that I have been able to develop my own critical spatial literacy, i.e. an

understanding of the dominant ideologies that inform western urban architecture, which then enables my imagining of alternative socio-physical spaces.

For example, during my preliminary architectural training in London (from 1987 to 1990) I found that my personal experience of alternative household configurations, namely my Asante grandmother's communal matrikin house, provided me with concrete examples that contested the Eurocentric and hegemonic spatial conceptions we were being taught, e.g., the belief that nuclear house spatial configurations and women's roles in those *private spaces* was a universal norm. Within my grandmother's Asante courtyard house, located in Kumase, there were very different socio-cultural practices and self-perceptions around gender. For example, a woman's ability to share her childrearing responsibilities with her *abusua* (extended matrilineal family) rather than bear the urban financial burden of childcare gave her a different conception of what work she could do outside of the family home. And yet in contemporary Ghana, it is those western nuclear household models that prevail in housing development within large urban centers, such as Accra. In 1991, while working on a publicly funded building project in Accra as an assistant site architect, I personally experienced the ludicrous extent to which western models of architecture were uncritically used in new housing development. In the design of the project's 76 'middle-class' housing units, there was an extensive use of nuclear house designs and imported construction materials, from the light fittings to the concrete used to build the houses. In Ghana, just as in other parts of the Third World, the uncritical use of western design always goes far beyond the practice of using imported building materials and technology to the formation of new ideological constructs of what is good housing and further still what are suitable household configurations for that housing. An example of this is how in the Accra community, at that time, those houses sold like hot cakes despite the expensive and impractical use of western building design and technology, e.g., the laying of imported English carpets on expensive imported Italian floor tiles in a tropical climate. This was because the community desired what is conceived as modern [western] and therefore prestigious and valuable properties.

My mother's households created both in Accra and the Diaspora contrasted sharply with my grandmother's because of my mother's adherence to western spatial constructs and ideologies. I grew up in a nuclear household that intermittently accommodated my mother's relatives, who came to help her with her childrearing responsibilities and to improve their education or employment opportunities. My mother's staunch Catholicism that adhered to rigid notions of "eternal marriages" and the husband as the "head of the household" pulled taut against the fluidity of my grandmother's three sequential marriages and female-dominated compound house. This created in me a schizophrenic conception of what my role as an Asante woman must be, should be, and could be. It was this amorphous reality that jarred against the prescribed, tidy western definitions of what a 'normal' family house design is and informed how I negotiated my own constructions and conceptions of space and place while living in London.

The example of the tension between my grandmother's house and my mother's was just one reason for my renegade architectural stance that began to develop during the final two years of

my six years of architectural training, when I began to redefine my architectural role in the politics of space by creating architectural designs that served as alternative political pedagogical texts to the hegemonic western architectural models taught as the norm. I resisted the predominant practice of architecture students replicating spatial representations of western technology, a global economy, the universal adoption of “International Style,” and the self-glorified architect by interrogating the political and educational aspects of architecture through my work. In addition, I looked for architectural ideas and concepts that reflected the specific socioeconomic, spatial and political needs of various Third World conditions, for example, as can be found in Hassan Fathy’s (1973) regionalist architectural work in Egypt and Charles Correa’s (1989) in India. At that time, I developed a critical literacy of space as an academic survival mechanism in order to decipher the political ideologies that were hidden in architects, planners, and developers’ building practices and inscribed in their spatial constructions. In that process, I also realized that my singular understandings and/or actions were insignificant in the spatio-political make-up of things and that perhaps substantial socio-spatial justice would be enabled if more than just the members of the building profession understood, re-invented and owned the vocabulary of the built environment. I began to question how a postmodern spatio-political language could be encouraged and nurtured in the general public, especially in those who were the most spatially disadvantaged. Simultaneously and most importantly, I also questioned and began to investigate what my role, as a female architect of African descent, should be. Should I serve society as an “expert” with architectural designs that sought to transform the dominant status quo or would a social justice agenda be better enacted by my facilitating and enabling *critical spatial literacy* in the general public? As much as I was drawn to following the community-oriented, collaborative feminist architectural praxis of the likes of Matrix (1984, 1986),[4] I began to believe that a Black female architect like myself would better contribute to her community by creating arenas within formal and non-formal education for their own critical readings of the built environment, which may lead them to finding ways to change it themselves. It is these experiences that led to my academic transition into the field of education to further understand the pedagogical role of the built environment. Here, I enact the reality of this already dreamt spatial imaginary of my diasporic, African, female, architectural permutation by conducting research that is rooted in the praxes of critical pedagogy, feminist methodology from a womanist positionality, critical social theory as informed by postmodern geography, and postcolonial theory because I am interested in shifting, rather than just inhabiting, the marginality of the boundaries or edge conditions of architecture. In re-defining what it means to be an architect, I also include insights from my architectural training as well as my personal experience of invisible homelessness and being socially housed, in the UK, to do what I call *renegade architecture*, outside the confines of institutionalized architectural practice.

Therefore, I argue for the development of critical spatial literacy. I take as my founding assumption that the built environment has a pedagogical nature that either induces individuals to conform to established organization of mainstream society or provides a resource for the successful empowerment of individuals (and most importantly collectives) against that society. A critical literacy of space is an important project. It is the development of a critical

understanding of the politics of space, for example, determining and documenting what kinds of western European social insights are encoded in the Ghanaian urban built environment, how that built form may reproduce and/or contest dominant foreign spatial ideologies, and how this contestation requires an ability to “critically read the world” (Freire, 1983/1991, 1970/1996).

In describing the importance of the act of reading the world, Freire (1983/1991, pp. 140-141) tells us how his first act of reading was of the socio-physical world, i.e., the “average Recife house,” where he was born, “encircled by trees.” This world presented for him his first reading of texts, words, and letters that were “incarnated in a series of things, objects, and signs.” He perceived this spatial world through the immediate spatial environment in relationship to his family; through the language of his elders’ beliefs, tastes, fears, and values and through a link between his world and wider contexts. Freire further tells us that in learning to improve his perception and understanding of that spatial world by reading it, he became familiar with it and also managed to diminish certain fears he had of it. Freire’s conscious act of reading the world is especially crucial in this era of intense globalization where many of the spatial worlds that African people live in change to contrast sharply with that of their elders’ beliefs, tastes, fears and values. It is to this end that I make an argument for a critical spatial literacy project, especially for women of African descent, to critically read their urban spatial world in order to understand the profound implications of its transformative effects.

For this reason, I argue that research into African women and their families’ spatial experiences cannot simply be a theoretical and/or empirical endeavor. Instead, it must be a womanist spatial research agenda with a pedagogical praxis that is informed up front by a critical literacy of gender, ethnicity and space. In other words, it must be an endeavor to develop critical spatial literacy, which is a praxis rooted in a critical understanding of the dynamics of the social construction of postmodern urban space and the spatial construction of social life, its practices, and its identities. In this definition, it reinforces the centrality of critical consciousness in a womanist positionality. I envisage a critical literacy of space as a theorizing practice with which to understand the local grounded theories that emerge out of our particular socio-spatial identities, urban lived experiences, and spatio-political struggles.

Capitalist Spatiality and the Construction of Social Life

In any given society there is a natural inclination for provision of shelter as a basic human requirement. The successful provision of shelter is essential to the physical, sociological, cultural, psychological and economic well being of every human being. Individuals’ need for shelter and how they design and build it in response to the geographical, climatic and socio-economic conditions that they live in, serve to root them in a particular cultural practice (Howell & Tentokali, 1989). Obtaining adequate shelter is especially important for women who are often responsible for children and the elderly. This global female need for housing was acknowledged at the 4th World Conference in Beijing (September, 1995). At that time, a platform was proposed defining housing as a social and economic investment and as an essential institution

that roots women in place and culture (Hermanuz, 1996).

Yet we find that especially in the modern urban context, there is far less awareness of built forms and space than, for example, in a traditional community (Tuan, 1977). It can be argued that one cause of this lack of awareness is urbanization, especially the restricted opportunity for active participation in the urban development process. Active participation in the development of built forms and space is important as it is representative of individuals' ability to make spatial decisions and place in their community, and it has implications for their political positioning in social relations of power. Spatial awareness is crucial especially within capitalist urban contexts where there is an unequal development of space. Keith and Pile (1993) argue that the logic of capital produces an uneven development of space, which is both a direct consequence and cause of the unequal distribution of power and resources along class, racial, and gender lines (Hayden, 1995; Massey, 1994; Weisman, 1994). In fact, geographically uneven space is an essential condition of capitalist spatiality, as it is the concretization of capitalist relations of production and division of labor (Soja, 1985). In a capitalist spatiality, dominant capitalist groups oftentimes constrain the economic and political rights of individuals, communities, and nations by restricting and defining their access to space (Hayden, 1995). In many instances it is the poor, women, ethnic minorities and children that are subject to restrictive spatial allocation and movement within urban capitalist contexts. This is demonstrated by the fact that those who are often either homeless or living in inadequate housing -in both the economic global 'North' and 'South'- are women, ethnic minorities and their children living in urban centers (Albelda & Tilly, 1997; Bauhmohl, 1996; Bergholz, 1992; Daly, 1996; Dhillon-Kashyap, 1994).

Indeed, in a postmodern geography, many of us become the social effects of dominant groups' spatial constructs. The planned built environments that we inhabit are embedded with other people's meanings of housing, leisure space, a business district, etc. The built form creates a predisposition in us to particular spatial functions and practices from which social identities are ascribed whether or not we choose to contest, subvert, or reject them. Furthermore, as Howell and Tentokali (1989) determined from their experience in conducting cross-cultural studies on domestic privacy, western urban spatiality confronts certain cultural heritages with new models of space and household transactions. Western design and modern construction technologies challenge household behaviors in many new urbanizing societies and reconstitute what is imagined and constructed as family life (Asiama, 1997, Pellow, 1992). This is certainly the case in modern day West African countries, which are challenged with spatial and social structures that are the result of at least three superimposed cultural stratifications: the traditional and pre-industrial phase, the colonial experience, and the postcolonial economical-political structure (Boserup, 1970; Konadu-Agyemang, 2001). Each of these realities varies from country to country and everywhere the position of women and their families depends on the interplay of these three elements (Boserup, 1970).

In traditional West Africa the compound and the family it encompassed was usually the minimal unit of political organization, and decisions within the compound had implications for the wider

political units in villages and in towns. In effect, the western notion of the house being female and private versus the outside being male and public was non-existent in West Africa. Thus, women could exert direct political influence over males or they themselves play important political roles by virtue of their positions of authority, power or influence in their natal and/or affinal compounds (Sudarkasa, 1994). For this reason, it was common for women to have important roles within patrilineages as well as matrilineages in West Africa. The onset of colonization, modernization and urbanization reconfigured space, including households, in West African countries along an uneven spatial development that favored urban centers over rural settlements. The urban center/ rural periphery split consisted of the siphoning of human resources and economic surplus from the rural countryside and smaller towns and cities into the colonial urban cores. This produced the tendency in populations to migrate from rural areas to urban centers in search of jobs, as they still do in droves today. Furthermore, within the urban centers men were favored over women in terms of the allocation of economic and political power in the new capitalist industrial settings, as colonial administrators projected their own western gender constructs in making and maintaining their relationships with West African societies. This favoritism produced changes in traditional social relations between West African men and women within and amongst families, as a public/male versus private/female spatial construct was instituted to complement capitalist colonial economies. In addition, most of the houses built in the urban cores were for nuclear families, which did not encourage the migration of extended families but rather that of smaller conjugal family arrangements lead by men. This uneven development was an important factor in some West African women's increased dependence on their spouses, as epitomized in Oppong's (1974/1981) study of marriage among the matrilineal elite in Ghana. It was also a factor that reduced West African women's economic autonomy and public role (Pellow, 1977), especially as they moved to live with their men in urban city conjugal household configurations that served as the smallest units of capitalist production.

The uneven development of space in West Africa is clearly expressed in Ghana's capital city and its present state of housing and infrastructure underdevelopment that has its roots in British colonialism. The housing problems in Accra are not only a colonial legacy caused by urbanization policies that were insensitive to the local cultural context, but also a result of the failure of successive governments to derive appropriate housing policies and their incorporation of Ghana into a global capitalist economy. Accra is the largest of Ghana's ten urban centers. The population in Accra is 1,657,856 of which 57.1% (i.e., 843,516) are female (Government of Ghana, 2000). In the city of Accra, females head 30.5% percent of households, even though there are nearly as many males as females (Konadu-Agyemang, 2001). Accra alone accounts for 30% of the urban population of Ghana and 10% of the total population of Ghana. In fact, Accra has the highest rate of urbanization in Ghana and one of the highest in West Africa (Konadu-Agyemang, 2001). Housing occupancy rates are high in Ghana's capital. In 1990, the United Nations Development Program and Ghana government conducted a survey in Accra that found that the average number of persons per room was 2.9, i.e., greater than the United Nations standard of 2.5 and that 46.3% of the city's households occupied single rooms, which was often

all they could afford to rent. This lack of space has grave implications for Ghanaian women living in Accra because they spend more time in their houses than the men do (Asiama, 1997).

Uneven urban development in Accra has had an effect on residential units, lineage groupings, rules of descent, and inheritance (Robertson, 1984). These effects are also experienced in other parts of Ghana, for example, the land tenure system in Asante society has undergone change. Land now has an economic value, which was not the case in traditional Asante society. The strong links that existed between land ownership and Asante social and political structures has weakened. Land ownership structures no longer support the continuation of the kingroup, and kinship ties are being weakened. In its place, the conjugal family has begun to assert itself against *abusua* (extended matrilineal family). This means that Asante women's relationship with their kingroup has altered, especially in terms of inheritance and dependence on their spouse versus their *abusua* (Asiama, 1997). As a result, Asante women living in urban Accra provide an ideal population group and setting for the development of critical spatial literacy on how Accra's urban built environment affects household configuration, socio-cultural practices, and spatial self-perceptions. These women are often migrants with a reduced likelihood of access to land and property than they would have in the Asante region. Research in this location and with this population group contributes to an understanding of the postmodern condition of uneven urban development due to fast encroaching western (capitalist) urban spatiality and its challenging effects on women's homes and daily practices.

Migrant Asante Women and Accra's Urban Spatial Politics

From December 2001 to January 2002, I began developing a critical literacy of space on Asante women living in Accra by conducting a small-scale study. In particular, I interviewed three Asante women and three other Akan women, who all live in nuclear family household configurations as a consequence of moving into urban Accra. [5] This was either by themselves, with their children or with their husband and children. They had all, in contrast, previously lived in *abusua* (extended matrilineal family) household configurations in their respective hometowns.[6] Often, this was with their mothers, her sisters and brothers, her sister's children and their siblings. None of the women moved to Accra without some form of prior accommodation and work arrangement. They also strongly advised against anyone moving to Accra without making those arrangements in advance. The women moved to Accra to live initially with sisters, husbands or friends, who provided them with opportunities to come to live in the city. They have since moved into their own places that many of them owned with spouses or alone. These transitions occurred over the long periods of their residence in Accra (from between 15 to 32 years). The women described how living in Accra was markedly different from living in their hometowns. They all stated that Accra was a hard place to survive in;[7] as one woman stressed, "Accra's inside is hot!"[8] Her support for this description of Accra was the exorbitant rents, high utility and food costs, and the corruption. Despite this perception, they preferred to remain in Accra versus go back to their hometowns because it provided one with educational and employment opportunities and the ability to have your *eyes opened*. [9]

In all circumstances, the importance of enduring the struggle in Accra was to gain the finances to build a place of one's own, even if it is a humble chamber and hall arrangement. The women were also quick to say that the ideal configuration of family, to live in their Accra homes, was small and often nuclear. When asked if they would encourage their abusua to live with them, their first responses were negative; however, remembrance of the Akan traditional belief that one cannot say he or she has progressed in life if his or her abusua's progress is not simultaneously encouraged produced the concession that abusua with some form of education, skill or money could stay temporarily only as a way of introducing them into Accra's hectic lifestyle. Most of the reasons given for discouraging abusua to stay were pragmatic and financial, e.g., not having enough money and space for one's own immediate family let alone the extended one. There were also some attitudinal responses that categorized abusua who came from their hometown, as not sophisticated enough to withstand the norms of city life, thus liable to annoy their city dwelling relatives and/or embarrass them socially due to ignorance. The annoying and/or embarrassing abusua were often racialized as backward or 'bush' relatives, who had not yet achieved the western 'eye opening' sophistication of their city peers.

This preliminary research suggests that Accra's urban built environment is a text that is transforming Asante female household configurations, thus socio-cultural practices and notions of what an ideal family should be. In this context, which I term as western urban spatiality, I hypothesize that there is a need for *critical spatial literacy* in order for individuals to understand how the built environment is embedded with codes that both constrain and enable one to participate in the design, construction and/or definition of space. To test this hypothesis, I conducted a more specific and rigorous ethnographic study in the summer of 2003 that began to define this complex problem that is experienced by Asante women and their families and is embedded in multiple systems. I also started to identify and explore the factors associated with the problem by answering the following key research questions: 1) To what extent have Asante women experienced substantial household transformations as a consequence of migration to rapidly urbanizing Accra? 2) What are some of the changes in Asante women's family practices as a consequence of household transformation? 3) What is their spatial self-perception as a consequence of household transformation (i.e., a sense of place)? 4) How has critical spatial literacy influenced their understanding and negotiation of Accra's urban space and the spatial changes it has effected?

Initial analysis of a further thirty interviews conducted with Akan women, nineteen of which are Asante, reinforces the findings in the first study that Asante women are subject to economic struggle in rapidly urbanizing Accra, which is also transforming their households, social roles and identity. However, the women all strongly believe that they are in full control of their quests for "*ani bue*," opened eyes, and all else that Accra has to offer. These women repeatedly asserted that they were in control of their destiny because they believed in making the "impossible possible." They talked of the importance of "*ani den*," being forceful, and of "*hye den*," the act of strengthening oneself, as prerequisites to any woman's "*mmo demmo*," progress.

Many of the women especially attributed their successes to *ani den*, which they described as being an intrinsic Asante trait. In addition, they obtained their *hye den* through various sources; such as God, church or social groups, faith in oneself, and ever so rarely *abusua*. Often times, the idea of turning to *abusua* in times of need was mocked or derided as being an unrealistic and undesired concept. The women went as far as describing themselves as pioneers in many different arenas; to the extent that one woman asserted that it was the Asante who had taught Accra's indigenous inhabitants how to own property. She argued that other ethnic groups were more willing to share their Accra homes with relatives or other tenants, while an Asante's main objective was to live in their own property with their immediate family. In fact, many of the women were adamant about keeping *abusua* at bay, especially out of the marital home, and never saw fit to question their embracing of nuclear family configurations in place of maintaining homes with *abusua* or any other variation. This was in keeping with the results found in the previous study.

En-gendering Critical Spatial Literacy

Today, more than ever, social struggle within the urban context is inscribed in spaces from which people construct place out of their particular social relations. Place then can be viewed as particular, unique moments in networks of social relations and spatial understandings. It is especially in these places or moments that women experience the postmodern condition and the ravaging effects of rapid urbanization differentially and unequally (Massey, 1991, 1994). As a result, in everyday feminist struggles for social and political justice there is a growing awareness of the need for an explicit application of informed strategic spatial practice derived from an analysis of spatial configurations, concepts, and ideologies. For example, this shift in awareness can be observed in the politics of place that is being advanced by women using new information technologies for social struggles over health, environmental and violence against women issues (Harcourt, 2001). It is also widely argued that space is important in the construction of the female subject and in gendered subjectivity and identity (Mohanram, 1999; Rendell, 1999). However, there has not been a natural and comfortable insertion of concerns among women of African descent, living in the Diaspora, into this feminist movement and its struggles (Amos & Parmar, 1984; Carby, 1999; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1989, 1991; Hull, Bell & Smith, 1982; Lorde, 1984; Spivak & Grosz, 1990). Furthermore, there has been contestation against the use of western feminist gender constructs to analyze "Third World" female conditions and to impose international gender and development policies on us (Amadiume, 1995; Arndt, 2000; Mohanty, 1997; Oyewumi, 1997, 1998; Saadawi, 1997).

In addition, oppositional responses -such as womanism (Ogunyemi 1985; Walker 1983)- provide ideologies for contemplating how feminism as it stands is enriched by women of African descent's contestations, experiences, and voices, but do not provide explicit strategies for developing informed spatial practice through a critical literacy of space. As a consequence, there has not been explicit theorizing of how spatial configurations affect the daily lives of women of African descent. There has, also, been very little empirical research on women of African

descent's urban lived experiences (both on the continent and in the Diaspora), in order to enrich and inform a critical pedagogy of space that maps the spatial dimensions of "women's issues." From this context, I argue for research on women of African descent's lived experiences that utilizes the essential pedagogical praxis of critical spatial literacy to analyze and comprehend the profound spatial effects of a global economy, e.g., uneven urban development and the identity disorienting consequences of rapidly changing landscapes.

Utilizing critical spatial literacy as a praxis to research Asante women's lives in Accra means that it is not enough to take their contemporary everyday practices for granted, as they assert ownership over the urban spaces that transform traditional ways of living. Instead and as a result of this research, I have begun a conversation (first with my informants and now with the reader) to discuss the consequences and implications of the transformative power of Accra's urbanity. In doing so, we must analyze how the continued dismantling of traditional notions of physical and ideological *abusua* affect conceptions of Asante female identity both inside and out of Asante culture and national heritage; especially as Asante women position themselves against the racial, gender and class based terms of western capitalist designs and ideologies for living in contemporary society. We would also investigate the schizophrenic nature of an Asante female identity that now translates itself through western concepts of the good economics of maintaining nuclear family configurations while simultaneously adhering to the Akan ethic of always supporting *abusua*, albeit in a temporary fashion. Understanding how new Asante homesteads, social practices and identities are being re-constructed must lead to a greater awareness of how we then project these changes onto our immediate environments and other places that we are connected to. This critical awareness of what constitutes one's local context has significant global implications, particularly in these times where lived spaces are increasingly permeable due to social networks, communication, and the constant movement that takes place. Through this process, we would begin to en-gender a timely praxis of *critical spatial literacy*. Further more, as womanism is about the survival and wholeness of an entire people through critical consciousness, investigating and scrutinizing the components of migrant Asante women and their family's spatiality contributes to a global understanding of gendered urban lived conditions and informs transnational feminist practices that seek to transform the politics of uneven development of space.

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[1] I use the capitalized word Black to denote the political construct "Black" versus the descriptive term "black."

[2] In Ghana, one of the principal ethnic groups is the Akan within which are the Asante that originate from the Asante Region.

[3] I have lived in Nairobi, Accra, London, Bristol, and now live in Los Angeles.

[4] Matrix was a multi-racial, feminist, architectural co-operative and research network, established in 1980. Their organizational structure was that of a worker's co-operative in which each employee was both an employee and director of the company, who earned equal pay and had an equal say in its running. Matrix worked collaboratively and intimately with women's groups in London to design and construct buildings that met their specific needs, e.g., the Jagonari Education Resource Centre and the Harlow Women's Refuge Centre. Whenever working with their female clients, Matrix's main objective was to always empower them to take control over the design and development of their own environments.

[5] Two of the women are Fante and the other Assin. It is possible to make inferences about Asante female experiences from Akan women's and vice versa because Asantes are part of the larger Akan group, which is linguistically and culturally homogenous. However, there are some significant attitudinal differences among Asantes as a consequence of their historic political dominance in Ghana.

[6] Typically, the compound house was designed as a series of rooms that enclosed an open-air courtyard. *Abusua* family members used the rooms allocated to them as their own bedrooms, with the occasional connected living room area, and shared the bathroom, kitchen and courtyard spaces with each other. The courtyard often served as the main space used for eating together,

entertaining guests, and for other social gatherings.

[7] This is in their various occupations as follows: a fresh fish seller, a cassava seller, a dried fish seller, a cosmetic dealer, a retired senior bank manager, and a dressmaker who is also a well-known actress in local television productions.

[8] This phrase is a transliteration of her expletive in Asante-Twi “*Accra emu ye hyew!*” To say that the inside of a place is hot, often refers to how difficult that place is to be in, i.e., it is as difficult as being in a boiling pot of water.

[9] This phrase is a transliteration of the Asante-Twi expression “*ani bue*” that refers to an increase in cultural awareness with a tint of social sophistication.