SeFoNe Project Description

Dr.Cassandra Ellerbe-Dueck

"Searching for Neighbours": Dynamics of Physical and Mental Border

With the most recent enlargements of the European Union, the issues of migration, integration, and the permeability of Europe's borders have become contentious issues dominating the political debates of many European Union member states. In light of Europe's socio-cultural and political evolution, the growing diversity of the "European neighbourhood" beckons for new thought processes in regard to economic restructuring, migration and integration. The SeFoNe project entails a multi-layered research objective and aims to examine and compare models of "translocal" neighbourhoods focusing on emerging discourses and good practices in three spheres of life in the "new Europe":

- Physical "borderlands" of the new European Union
- Mental borders experiences in multicultural regions of the European Union
- Mental and physical border experiences in transnational networks e.g. networks of African diasporic migrants.

Networks of African Migrants

The third strand of our research will examine the reality of mental and physical border as experienced by a particular group traditionally positioned along the periphery of and with limited access to the European space: Africans. Here we will focus on individuals with migrant trajectories of the African Diaspora residing in non post-colonial and or metropolitan capital cities, and follow their networks across various localities and countries where possible. This layer of our research seeks to examine not only our informants interactions with persons and groups of the receiving countries, but also to investigate the maintenance of culturally defined translocal networks and whether or not these networks possibly strengthen or weaken the motivation to create good neighbourhoods at local levels.

Summary of Six-Month Fieldwork Conducted in Germany by C. Ellerbe-Dueck

The past six-month period of fieldwork enabled a categorization of networks types pertaining to African diasporic migrants. These networks can be described as professional, student and socio-political activist networks. However, in many instances these network types tend to intersect and overlap. As of this writing, twenty-nine interviews, consisting of semi-structured and casual conversations have been conducted and recorded. The networks examined extend to various nearby cities such as Nuremberg, Munich, and those located at a greater distance from Bayreuth: Berlin, Cologne and Hamburg. I have also been able to trace members of the AASAB (based in Bayreuth) network to the USA and Scotland. Telephone or emails interviews are planned with these individuals.

Prior personal/academic contacts/acquaintances, and the snowball method were employed in gaining access to members of these networks. Participant observation, collection of print media and notation of Internet sources e.g. websites/blogs/ online newsletter /magazines have contributed to the richness of the ethnographic data collection.

The ethnographic material has thus far rendered important information and insights into the networks and networking practices of individuals of the African Diaspora in Southern Germany. Here, the term Diaspora plays an important role for our research, because not all of the interview partners stem directly from the African continent. I have conducted interviews with individuals from USA as well as the Caribbean e.g. Haiti and Guadeloupe. Interviews have been conducted in German, French, English ad Portuguese. The majority of these informants were either born or immigrated to Germany either recently or as far back as thirty years ago.

Briefly summarizing the results of the interviews and field notes, the following themes appear to surface consistently in the ethnographic data. They are as follows:

1. Dissatisfaction with negative media depictions of Africa and Africans.

2. Experiences of racism (which is always gendered) and glass-ceiling phenomenon in the labour market (particularly for individuals with advanced degrees) and discrimination in the search for adequate and affordable the housing.
3. Concern for the future of African diaporic youth[1] regarding education and equal employment opportunities.

4. Lack of acknowledgement of the various migration trajectories and diversity of the African diasporic community,

5. Visibility versus invisibility and participation of African diasporic women, disputes over gender-defined roles (e.g. positions of authority within the networks), and the intersections/ co-formations of gender, “race”, class, generation and how these social categories influence the positioning of these individuals in a predominately white society.

6. Feelings of rejection and the perception of not being welcomed in Germany. Here, stringent legislation (particularly African individuals pursuing tertiary education) surfaces as a major problem. Many informants commented on this issue and feel that such legal structures and lack of effective integration measures make it nearly impossible to create

[1] The case with African diasporic youth is an important one; because this particular strand of African derived European populations are disproportionately confronted with suspicion, barriers, border and obstacles to moving up the socioeconomic ladders of many European societies. “Fortress Europe” is not merely a barrier to those attempting to enter the European space, but is also linked to either non-existent or failed integration policies of many EU nation states. According to the African Youth Foundation, “Young African people are seen as liabilities to European countries rather than crucial for the future of an African-European cooperation”, (African Youth Foundation, “Heritage Café au Lait- All Different, All Equal- Intercultural Dialogue in Europe” Bonn, Germany 2006).

harmonious “neighbourhoods” when one experiences social exclusion and marginalisation.

The networks of persons of the African Diaspora serve as what could be defined as real (not in a spatial/geographical sense) and virtual neighbourhoods, which provide members of this group with a space of refuge and a sense of home and belonging-ness. The networks also serve as a coping strategy, because they enable this group to withdraw into a “safe” space in order to exchange tactics for coping with the many difficulties they often face in the host society.

Another important aspect of the research deals with my position as a researcher. The fact that I am a Black female researcher often comes into play in various ways. One aspect in particular deals with the in depth-ness of their descriptions of certain events or experiences. It is often assumed that I as a Black person/ woman already know and am familiar with what they have experienced (when gender-related), therefore certain things are merely brushed over, which requires me to pose additional more in depth questions. Here, I assert that this points to the necessity, particularly in the German context, to include minority researchers or researchers that reflect/represent the populations that are the subject(s) of such investigations.

For more detailed information about the Sixth Framework EU Project: “Searching for Neighbours” Project, please go to: www.sefon.soton.uk

SefoNe
Searching for Neighbours