When Migration Turns from the Spectacular to the Ordinary

Postmigrant Inflections of Analytical Categories and Concepts of Migration

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Postmigration is a new term in migration studies, in Anglophone contexts in particular. It is a term, concept, condition or perspective that is rapidly developing and has proved to change the ways in which the phenomenon of migration is framed and studied in relation to Western societies. The term itself originated outside academia, around the turn of the millennium, in art circles in Germany, with Berlin as the epicentre. Artists weary of being categorised as ‘minority’ or ‘migrant’ voices and their work as ‘migrant literature’ or ‘immigrant film’ or ‘second generation’ art, began provocatively to label themselves and their art as ‘postmigrant’ to signal an end to their categorical exclusion from the presumed norm of a born-and-bred national culture, art and literature. They wanted to signal their participation in shaping German art and culture, and the collective national self-image, which no longer (if ever) fitted the idea of a white, rooted and historically homogenous demos. Today ‘postmigration’ is a fairly common term in the public debate in Germany. It owes much to the Berlin director Shermin Langhoff, often referred to as the inventor of the term (e.g. see Foroutan 2016, 230), who popularised it in 2006 by launching the Postmigrantisches Theater as a distinctive brand for new productions at the innovative Berlin theatre Ballhaus Naunynstraße (she has developed this approach further at Maxim Gorki Theater since 2013).

Subsequently, ‘postmigration’ has become a central concept in German (im)migration research, although its meaning is hotly discussed. It is sometimes used to describe the second and third, etc., generations of immigrants, who have no experience themselves of migrating from one country to another – a use of the term that can be traced in Anglophone research, too (e.g. see Baumann/Sunier 1995). This is the least exciting conception of the term, and it is also frequently rejected as yet another exceptionalising categorisation. A more progressive use understands ‘postmigration’ as a concept that describes not a specific part of the population but a condition for the whole population in its entirety. ‘Postmigration’ describes a new social condition in which migration constitutes a founding and permanent circumstance in shaping the nation and its collective ‘we’. The prefix ‘post’ does not signify an end to migration in this use of the term, nor to all the social problems connected with migration. Quite the contrary, it signifies the crossing of an empirical and cognitive threshold, the point at which migration has grown to become a central and crucial dynamic in social, cultural, imaginative and intellectual change. If anything has ended, it is the idea and the discourse of migration as something exceptional or socially peripheral.

Naïka Foroutan is one of the leading scholars in the research on Germany as a ‘postmigrant society’ (Foroutan’s term). She defines the ‘postmigrant society’ as a society that is fundamentally
formed by historical and ongoing migratory movements (see Foroutan 2016, 231; see also Foroutan 2015). Still, as is currently evident all over Europe, there may be quite a gap between a society that is empirically (demographically) postmigrant, on the one hand, and politically postmigrant, on the other. The latter requires a wide public consensus, and political and institutional recognition of migration as something that centrally constitutes the population and collective experience, or the narrative or image of the ‘national we’ that is collectively shared. In this connection, Foroutan contends that a society is not politically postmigrant until it publicly recognises itself as an immigrant nation (as attempted by Schröder in 1998 and Merkel in 2015 when they announced Germany to be an immigrant nation) and institutionally (as attempted by Tate Britain with the 2012 exhibition Migrations: Journeys into British Art, which reviewed British art and identity as “fundamentally shaped by successive waves of migration”) (see Foroutan 2015, 2; Tate 2012, n.p.). A public recognition like this depends on a refutation of the romantic myth of the nation as constituted by a culturally and racially pure and harmonious people organically growing out of its bordered ground – a myth that precisely, and only, upholds itself by the suppression of the historical reality of movement, migration, cultural (ex)change, hybridity and heterogeneity.

In line with this, several researchers deploy the overall concept of ‘postmigration’ as an analytical category that re-launches migration and sociocultural diversity as a state of normalcy – of commonplace and universal relevance and consequence – and something that defines and includes all members of society, regardless of individual background. As an analytical category, postmigration in this way makes the collective experience of cultural heterogeneity visible (discursively and historically) and how the (once) marginalised – or the (continued) politically and imaginatively marginalised – is indeed a central driving force within the nation’s social reality and everyday life (e.g. see Yildiz 2015, 22; see also Schramm et al. 2019 for a detailed account of ‘postmigration’ as an evolving academic term).

Yet, at the same time, and although highlighting migration as an essential social fact, the ‘post’ in ‘postmigration’ also marks a distance from certain tendencies in the established studies of migration. By rejecting identity markers such as ‘foreigner’, ‘migrant’ or ‘second’ or ‘third generation immigrant’, the term discontinues the discursive repetition in migration studies of migration as an exceptional matter of otherness and minority politics. The term in this way dissolves binary distinctions between the migratory and the non-migratory, and between immigrants and non-immigrants; this, in itself, generates new explorations of what the collective national ‘we’ is or is on its way to becoming. Regina Römhild, another important figure in the ‘postmigrant turn’ in Germany, has expressed the core implication of the term’s revision of migration studies. In her view, postmigration may overcome the widespread practice in migration research of focusing narrowly on migrants (a practice that repeats the binary distinction between the migrant and the presupposed norm of a non-migrant identity). This is a practice that needs to be turned on its head, she says: research in migration needs to be ‘de-migrated’ (entmigrantisiert) in order to ‘normalise’ migration and allow migratory issues to be analysed not as an exception but as an integral part of everyday social reality. The other way around, and for the same reasons, social and cultural studies (in general) need to undergo a ‘migratisation’ (Migrantisierung). In this manner, she argues, we arrive at a research perspective from two sides in which migration is no longer the object of research but its very point of departure (Römhild 2015, 44). An analytical practice that has its cognitive base in migratory movement and cultural multiplicity as an empirical norm.
comes to replace a longstanding practice in migration, cultural and social studies of examining everything with a presupposed sedentary and homogeneous cultural norm as its (politically unconscious) starting point.

In Germany, the study of migration has only recently moved from the social sciences into art studies (e.g. see Dogramaci 2013; Dogramaci/Mersmann 2013). The same applies to the concept of postmigration, in spite of the fact that it originated in art circles. The most substantial research has taken place in the social sciences, and the concept has only been gaining ground in art studies within the last five to six years, where scholars have begun to speak of ‘postmigrant theatre’, ‘postmigrant film’, ‘postmigrant literature’ and a certain ‘postmigrant aesthetic’ (e.g. see Sharifi 2011, 2015; Peters 2012; Geiser 2015; Heidenreich 2015; Schramm et al. 2019; see also Dogramaci 2017 for the term ‘post-exile’ or ‘post-emigration’ in German art). Yet, as my colleagues and I argue elsewhere (see Schramm et al. 2019), using ‘postmigration’ as a term that denotes a subgenre does not take us any further than existing categorisations such as ‘immigration art’ or ‘migration literature’, etc. It is more productive to speak of ‘postmigration’ not as a vehicle of identification or categorisation (save a general historical condition) but as an analytical perspective that may be employed in the exploration of any given work of art – much in the same way that a postcolonial perspective may be employed in readings of works by Turner or Shakespeare without their works being viewed as postcolonial works in themselves.

The question is what a postmigrant analytical perspective looks like – what does it do and how does it work? The answers are yet to be discovered, though, as a starting point, I would argue that the contours of a postmigrant analytical perspective may emerge if we look at the ways in which the premises of the concept of postmigration change the usual concepts from migration studies that we typically employ in studies of art reflecting migration and cultural multiplicity, i.e. concepts such as belonging, race, identity, hybridity, multiculturalism, othering, ethnicity, etc. If we follow Römhild’s point of normalising migration as a commonplace yet essential element of the social life and self-image of a nation (and the transnational blur of its boundaries), one of the interesting things that happens is that any issue of migration will achieve a dual status: as crucially significant and trivially banal at one and the same time, as something whose significance appears and disappears concomitantly. Arguably, then, it is the dual status of migration – as significant and banal at once – that affects analytical concepts or provokes them to change, and, if we are dealing with works that already more or less explicitly address or reflect migratory issues and realities (e.g. works of a certain multicultural resonance), it is the ‘de-migratising’ dynamic of the postmigrant perspective that becomes most noteworthy – i.e. the ‘normalisation’ of migration or the disappearance of the exceptionality of migration into everyday life. To give an example, a concept such as ‘identity’ comes to be inflected by a whole range of everyday affects generated by a complexity of social, cultural, economic, psychological and bodily conditions that are not unique to a first-hand migrant experience or necessarily hail primarily from the experience of a migratory family heritage. The analysis of identity in relation to a work of art changes accordingly. The dissolution of clear distinctions between (uprooted) migrants and (rooted) non-migrants gives way to the analysis of multiple subject positions and social interrelations in which the significance of a biographical migrant experience or immigrant background (near or distant) may appear and disappear in different contexts. Easy categorisations such as ‘native identity’ and ‘migrant identity’, or idealisations of a particular ‘migrant subjectivity’, lose
currency as terms that easily overwrite a far greater complexity of contradictive and shifting individualities within complex social and existential contexts.¹

This article leaves no space to engage with postmigrant inflections of all of the major concepts from migration studies – this is a huge task and one still to be done (and to be registered as more and more postmigrant readings of art come into being). For the sake of a little more detail, I will offer a few theoretical reflections on how the concept of belonging may change in a postmigrant frame of analysis, before moving onto a brief illustrative case study of London-based Lynette Yiadom-Boakye’s paintings. The analysis of belonging in Yiadom-Boakye’s art is interlinked with the concept of race. Although racialisation continues to be an issue in milieus where the presence of multiple cultures and skin colours has become an everyday norm, I will show how a postmigrant analysis of art may be sensitive not only to the continuance, but also to the contradictive and anticipatory disappearance of any social magnitude or dissension attached to skin colour. In the latter respect, postmigration causes the concept of race to enter into close proximity with (controversial) concepts such as ‘post-race’ and ‘post-othering’.

In migrant analyses of art and literature, the question of belonging is mostly viewed in terms that have to do with the act of migration. Typically, belonging is looked at in terms of national, ethnic or cultural affiliation only, and sharply contrasted with sensations of national, ethnic or cultural unbelonging. Roots and uprooting are recurrent metaphors, and analyses have traditionally been concerned with nostalgia or the loss of ‘roots’ and the struggles to ‘re-root’ depicted in migrant art, film and literature, if not soaring into a (now much criticised) celebratory discourse of transnational nomadism, the work depicting a deconstructive or weightless condition of ‘belonging nowhere and everywhere’. In all cases the analysis of belonging singles out a ‘migrant’ identity or subjectivity as distinct from a ‘native’ or ‘non-migratory’ position or context. To describe how the concept of belonging is de-migratised in a postmigrant analysis, we may borrow and further develop a metaphor from Roger Bromley. With reference to Raymond Williams, Bromley speaks of belonging as a structure of feeling. The diasporic discourses of new and distant homelands typically rely on mytho-poetic images of rootedness, uprooting and re-rooting, and may accordingly be characterised in terms of a ‘vertical’ structure of feeling: it is a structure of feeling, or, we might add, an analytical orientation, governed by the more or less finite implications of national, ethnic or cultural attachment – a root metaphysics mystified by the root metaphor’s iconicity. Yet, according to Bromley, the ‘vertical’ structure of feeling is increasingly replaced by a

¹ As for an important concept such as hybridity, I refer to my book Migration Literature and Hybridity: The Different Speeds of Transcultural Change (2010), which may offer one possible outset for exploring de-migratisations and re-migratisations of hybridity as an analytical concept. Using Bakhtin and Deleuze (among others), the theoretical chapter of the book offers tools to differentiate between several forms and modes of hybridity and hybridisation. It describes Bhabha’s postcolonial-migratory notion of a ‘third space’ as a case of ‘intentional hybridity’ that highlights hybridisation as a critical and productive force of cultural difference and instability. In Römhild’s terms, Bhabha’s form of ‘intentional hybridity’ translates as a migratisation of the concept of hybridity and a deliberate deployment of the concept to challenge sedentary presumptions of cultural stability and homogeneity. Next to intentional hybridity, the book develops Bakhtin’s concept of organic hybridity (and related theories) as a tool to make visible a form of cultural hybridity, or a slow and inconspicuous form of intercultural change, which is disappearing, or ‘de-migrating’ into the experience of a (changing) sameness in everyday life.
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‘horizontal’ structure (Bromley 2011, n. p.). He explains horizontality as multiple simultaneous feelings of attachment to cultures and places on a local and international level that may be far more important than any narrow national sensation of belonging. Horizontality is a suitable metaphor to describe the way belonging as an analytical concept changes in a postmigrant frame of analysis, yet, in a postmigrant deployment, the horizontal orientation in feelings of belonging – or the horizontal orientation in the study of feelings of belonging – would incorporate more than Bromley proposes. Horizontality in a postmigrant analysis would include Bromley’s attention to sub- and supranational feelings of belonging (along with ‘vertical’ feelings of national, ethnic or cultural belonging), but the advantage of horizontality would not relate only to a multiplication of cultures and places of attachment – it would relate to a multiplication of modes of attachment or ways in which feelings of belonging (or unbelonging) are produced.

The latter includes the production of feelings that are not particular to or necessarily related only to a migrant experience, and so not to any galvanising myth of national, ethnic or cultural naturalisation, but to everyday material practices and relations, where feelings of (un)belonging are produced in sometimes unpredictable or very small and inconspicuous ways, but definitely and always in contradictory ways. As the particularity of migratory issues dissolves into an everyday social life that is crucially and banally shaped and produced by migration, the analysis of belonging begins to spread out and split up large-scale (and many times abstract) concerns with national, ethnic or cultural (up)rootedness with questions of how a work may reflect feelings of belonging and unbelonging within a multitude of minute everyday processes and shifting, incomplete and contradictory sensations of detachment and attachment. In this mode of analysis, feelings of meaningful attachment may be studied as products of shifting social, economic and individual psychological and bodily conditions and contextualities. They may be studied as contradictory sensations of attachment and detachment generated by shifting everyday contexts of socialisation and self-inventions, by intimate relationships and arbitrary encounters, and even by different emotional responses to the same thing from one moment to the next or transitory bodily sensations of emplacement or displacement (conscious and subconscious).

The modes in which sensations of belonging or unbelonging are produced in a work multiply in this perspective, and questions of national, ethnic or cultural attachment or detachment (distant or near) come to form but one line of inquiry, immersed and incomplete as they are within a complexity of other incomplete socio-psychological, emotional, bodily and existential circumstances. In short, a key analytical concept in migration studies such as belonging is made to engage with a greater and more complex matrix of life issues and changing contextualities than the exclusive attention to cultural and national rootedness or uprootedness may call for.

A postmigrant analysis of Yiadom-Boakye’s portraits

Moving on to the case study of Yiadom-Boakye, it should be noted that the changes that have been going on in German art circles since the early 2000s share many overlaps with developments in black British art and studies. Many British artists also distance themselves from patterns of cultural identification (a process that gathered speed in the 1990s). Likewise, themes and formal experimentations continue to expand in ways that cause the relevance of categorisers such as ‘migrant’ and ‘black’ to wax and wane. Leon Wainwright describes the change in the
British context as a general shift away from the 'Black Art' period of revisionism from the 1970s to the early 1990s that was characterised by strongly identitarian oppositions and continuous struggles for institutional visibility. He sums it all up as a change away from the feeling of being 'black in Britain' towards a feeling of becoming 'black British' (Wainwright 2006, 170). The post-migrant perspective (and its post-race and post-other appendages) may be seen as an extension to this line of thinking. Without erasing continued feelings of being 'black in Britain' or becoming 'black British', the concept also adds the possibility of analytical perspectives in which a categoriser such as 'black' melts entirely into the categoriser 'British', i.e. 'black British art' becomes 'British art' (where the category 'British', and this is very important, already in itself presupposes multiple positions, cultures and skin colours).

In relation to this, an inspiring term that has cropped up in the study of belonging in recent black British literature is 'ease of presence' (e.g. see Upstone 2010, 88, who also credits Darcus Howe for the term) which is employed to describe an increasing disappearance in contemporary British literature of the kind of race-related anxieties of unbelonging and social exile that marked 20th-century literature — and 20th-century art, as in for example Tam Joseph’s UK School Report (1984) and Marcia Bennett’s Between a Rock and a Hard Place (1992) (figs. 1 and 2). As we shall see in the analysis of Yiadom-Boakye, 'ease of presence' may help to describe a post-racial sentiment in which sensations of displacement and unbelonging caused by racialisation and internalised racial identifications appear to be disappearing, or, at least, to have lost the power over the subject they once had. The analysis will also show how 'ease of presence' is a term that goes very well with a horizontal analysis of belonging, as a 'de-migratised' alternative to terms such as rootedness and uprootedness. Not only does the term mark a shift away from the heavy focus on migrant experiences that fills up such root metaphors, 'ease' and 'unease' also appear to call for a far more expansive and embodied mode of analysis than 'rooted' and 'uprooted' when it comes to describing the heterogeneous and entangled mesh of (fleeting and more enduring) affects that create or thwart sensations of belonging.

Fig. 1 | Tam Joseph, UK School Report, 1984, acrylic on canvas
Yiadom-Boakye’s art is often categorised as ‘diasporic art’ (with reference to her Ghanaian descent), in spite of the fact that she was born in London (in 1977) and that migration or issues of national, ethnic or cultural displacement, unbelonging or re-rooting really seem to have vanished out of her pictures. Her paintings (e.g. figs. 3–5) look like conventional portraits, but they are not. Yiadom-Boakye (who is also a writer) is a painter of fictive subjects. The faces and bodies in her pictures are not images of real people, but assemblages of bits and pieces from photos and magazines, live models and her own inventions. One of the most striking things about her art in this regard is not only the way in which it opens itself completely to the viewer’s interpretation (something that is of course not uncommon in visual art), but the way it does so while inviting something similar to a literary mode of reading. As introduced in the catalogue for one of her solo exhibitions, Yiadom-Boakye’s pictures depict “fictional subjects who inhabit a world purposefully left open to the projected associations and inferences of the viewer” (Jack Shainman Gallery 2012, n.p.). As we shall see, this is important for the way in which a concept such as (racial) identity is set in motion by the pictures.

Fig. 2 | Marcia Bennett, Between a Rock and a Hard Place, 1992, mixed media

Another feature that invariably captures her audiences is the fact that the faces, heads and bodies in her pictures are almost exclusively black. She responds to this in a manner that both emphasises and trivialises that aspect of her art: “People are tempted to politicize the fact that I paint black figures, and the complexity of this is an essential part of the work. But my starting point is always the language of painting itself and how that relates to the subject matter.” In another context, she says: “Race is something that I can completely manipulate, or reinvent, or use as I want to. Also, they’re all black because […] I’m not white” (cit. in Jack Shainman Gallery 2012, n.p.).

In a postmigrant frame of analysis, Yiadom-Boakye’s art would be recognised on one level as a manifestation of how the UK is fundamentally shaped by migration. As her ‘portraits’ people the walls of galleries and museums, they contribute to the contemporary mirror – or, in fact, narra-
tive – of the collective ‘we’ as a multicoloured, multicultural product of historical and contemporary migration. In extension, her canvases work as a postcolonial/migratory corrective to the general history of the black body in white European art, i.e. its common presence, historically, as an exotic or menacing peculiarity and its general absence, historically, in descriptions of a shared heritage and the commonplace of everyday life (in spite of exceptions to the rule, also in European portrait painting, such as Jan Mostaert’s Portrait of an African Man (c. 1525–1535), William Henry Hunt’s Portrait of a Black Boy with a Slate (c. 1840) or Astrid Holm’s Rose Sets the Table (1914), to mention but a few). But as much as a postmigrant analysis would illuminate how the images speak in the context of a recent and deep migrant and postcolonial history, it would also be sensitive to how any migratory (or ‘diasporic’) exceptionality is disappearing in her art. If compared to Joseph’s UK School Report and Bennett’s Between a Rock and a Hard Place, Yiadom-Boakye’s fictive portraits do not explicitly thematise questions of belonging, for instance, or anxieties regarding racial identification or ethnicity or heritage. There is no anxiety either of national or social exile, or any sense of her subjects representing a minority or in any way a peripheral status. Any deliberate framing of migratory and racial exceptionality has vanished altogether, replaced, it seems, by everyday situations and themes. Yiadom-Boakye’s figures relax, read, think, wait, daydream or linger in unselfconscious emotional states. We may (at least in that regard) speak of an ease of presence radiating from her fictive figures. Yiadom-Boakye states herself that they are “suggestions of people […]. They don’t share our concerns or anxieties. They are somewhere else altogether” (Nathan 2010, n. p.). Although “somewhere else altogether”, their presence is undeniable: “That emphasis on a strong presence is really important, and I’m always looking for a strong line, a strong curve or a strong look. They should never appear to shrink away” (Yiadom-Boakye 2015, n. p.).

Withdrawal and strong presence seem to occur at the same time. This, I would like to think, may be due to the possibility that what we are in fact encountering in her pictures is a strong presence of the ordinary or the banal – only spectacle and exceptionality withdraw. The commonplace or the ordinary is certainly one of the prominent features when looking at Yiadom-Boakye’s canvases. With only a few exceptions, her subjects are all plainly dressed, in everyday loose and baggy T-shirts, blouses, pants and simple dresses, touching on the characterless and nondescript. Ordinariness is sometimes further underlined by titles such as 11am Monday (2011) or 4am Friday (2015). Schwabsky touches on the gist of it when he says that her subjects are individually unique, but they do not “exteriorize or dramatize their individuality” (Schwabsky 2011, 36); nor, as we shall see, do they exteriorise or dramatise any particular racial identity.

If Yiadom-Boakye’s images were brought into the context of a postmigrant (horizontally oriented) analysis of belonging, they would be noted for the absence of any symbolic drama of ‘diasporic’ uprooting, re-rooting or uncertainties of national inclusion. In a work such as A Culmination (fig. 3), for instance, analytical attention would have to be redirected from an exclusive (and vertical) discourse of (racial and cultural) roots to a tracing of sensations of ease or unease as they flicker across the faces and bodily poses – states of ease or unease which may be caused by a complexity of factors. At a first glance, a sense of belonging or an ease of presence emanates from the group on an emotional and bodily level, which seems to originate precisely from the display of everyday ordinariness. A casually gathered group of young men, all dressed in the same green coloured suits, are blending in with the green of the background, leaving the impression of some kind of unproblematic emplacement in an outdoor and presumably public
space. Yet the vagueness of time and place and the absence of any symbolic content push the viewer to entertain explanations for the apparent ease of presence within a range of possibilities, as suggested in the physical appearance of the four figures. The men stand close, their bodies touching, as if bound together by the intimacy of familiarity, or by some occasion, perhaps a cultural ritual (all being dressed up), or perhaps their familiarity is due to a shared experience on the basis of age or gender, or class. They seem to be the same age, to be fairly relaxed in their own all-male company, and, like most of Yiadom-Boakye’s figures, or, indeed, characters, seem to enjoy the social and economic ease that comes with some level of middle-class security. Their apparent familiarity may of course also derive from a shared experience of racialisation. A post-colonial or migrant reading may look at the picture with the assumption of the group being encircled by a larger white space. A reading like that would squeeze the men together and confine the apparent effortlessness of their social emplacement to that of a limited racial group and space. It is possible, yet nothing in the picture itself suggests it. On the contrary, their apparent ease of presence seems also to apply to the appearance of skin colour in the picture (as in all Yiadom-Boakye’s pictures): “It’s as if they’ve never been made to feel that their race could count against them […] one could call them ‘postblack,’ to use the term coined a decade ago by Thelma Golden.” (Schwabsky 2011, 36)

If we bracket race (and other group designations), singularity and individuality are allowed to take over the picture. Our attention moves to different emotions and states of mind as they
run across the faces and bodily positions in the picture, which may both unsettle and confirm the sense of a shared belonging that the group engenders at an initial glance. Only one character confirms the group visually by looking inward, towards it, and his eyes and conversational smile are in fact only addressed to one other person, who appears inattentive, casting a sideways glance at something outside the group. The only smile in the picture also has a note of uncertainty quivering in the corner of the upper lip, and on the opposite side we encounter a slightly worried expression, or perhaps it is absentmindedness to judge by the glazed-over look in the eyes. The character is withdrawn and somewhere else in thought, slipping out of his presence within the group. The last character is semi-transfixed on something in the direction of the audience (or looking the audience in the eye). He might be confirming the group behind him through the confrontation with an outside or outsider, but his eyes also seem about to form a question that has yet to find its focus. In this manner, individual states and fleeting emotional expressions shimmer back and forth in the picture in ways that produce an inconclusive quivering of the impressions the picture may give to questions of emplacement, belonging or fitting in. Yiadom-Boakye has said about her figures that “[t]hey have no roots, no origin other than their skin colour – which is not actually presented as a strong sign of identity” (Grau 2014, 41). When the concept of belonging meets with art in this way, it is forced into a horizontal mode of inquiry where metaphors of ‘rootedness’ give way to questions of how belonging is produced indistinctly by a multiplicity of coinciding factors, such as class, age, gender, bodily life, cultural practices and individual situations and circumstances. Ethnicity and race, too, become relative and inconclusive factors in the horizontal analysis.

The ease of presence Yiadom-Boakye’s black characters generally impart – the apparent absence of feelings of unbelonging or displacement caused by (internalised) race identifications – may be explored from another angle, one that causes the issue of racial identity (or difference) to disappear altogether. Wainwright is right in observing that black British art (and ‘migrant art’, we can easily add) has always suffered from “an unfair reputation for making art solely around cultural identity debates”, which, he says, “has probably held back a more sophisticated reception” (Wainwright 2006, 155). Added to that, “[t]he linguistic and textuality paradigm” of the 1980s and 1990s “would suppose that art objects have the ability to codify narratives, or to offer a didactic ‘voice’ in a wider political struggle” (ibid., 157). In the end, works of visual art “have been made into signifiers, named as cultural products, transformed and translated into signs and representations” at the expense of attention to the material dimensions of the work: “the tactile and visually-apparent physical ones […] textures and colours” (ibid., 157). Against this backdrop, Yiadom-Boakye’s pictures seem almost as if they want to obfuscate, if not entirely inhibit, any allegorical or semantic reading – on both the formal and the content level of the works: there is an absence of symbolism and the works are deliberately framed conceptually as fictions with no clear or legible meaning or narrative, not even in the peculiar and obviously literary titles, which often remain opaque and mysteriously inexplicable and mostly seem to have no apparent connection with the image displayed, e.g. A Culmination or The Cream and the Taste (fig.4).

For the sake of moving away from reading images as “interpretable texts without sensory diversity”, Wainwright encourages a renewed sensitivity to the “diverse phenomenological performances” that are central to the visual arts, such as the material dimensions of tactility, texture, composition and colour (Wainwright, quoting Barbara Stafford, 2006, 158). Appreciating the
"phenomenological performances" of Yiadom-Boakye’s art is not isolated in the sensory diversity and vivacity of the materiality of colour, paint and canvas, however. Materials, colours, forms and subject matter all converge in the sense that the vivacity of the paint itself interchanges with the vivacity of the represented figure. Paint, to Yiadom-Boakye, is “alive, fleshy and unpredictable” (Yiadom-Boakye 2015, n.p.), and so are the characters in her paintings. They are precisely not legible identities and they are not symbols or images that scale the individual onto a representational responsibility larger than themselves – ‘migrant’, ‘native’, ‘black’, ‘ethnic’. They emerge as arbitrary, heterogeneous and volatile subjectivities. Reading them is difficult. The figures are expressions of moods and emotions of ordinary people, but they are momentary, often incipient emotions and almost unnoticeably dramatised in the fleetingly subtle curves and twitches of facial flesh and muscles (a tremble by the eye) and expressive bodily gestures and postures (a slight slant of the head). Other than that, they reveal nothing by themselves. “Rather than a statement of affirmations” or any “explicit narrative”, they qualify, like poetry, as "suggestions" (Grau 2014, 37).

Accordingly, the viewer’s reading of the characters will always be incomplete. The limits of any linguistic or semantic – or textual – mode of inquiry that may be brought into the picture by various contextualisations are made clear and exceeded by the sensory and visual performance of the subject matter. The visual aspect of the faces – determined by no premeditated specificity of meaning – provokes bodily felt sensations and intuitive emotional interpretations of human
communication as shaped in fleshy matter. That is what Yiadom-Boakye’s paintings may ultimately draw their viewers into: the depths of an incomplete empathetic activity of intuiting the inner world or emotional state of another human, which always withdraws from absolute knowledge or identification, and, in turn, unsettles our own position as rationally detached and informed ‘interpreters’ or ‘identifiers’. Race disappears, accordingly, in Yiadom-Boakye’s art, along with any anxiety of racial unbelonging or marginalisation, not only in the attention the paintings draw to their own creation and materiality – the vivacity of the brushstrokes (made visible by their sloppiness and urgency) – but in the attention they call to the vivacity and multiplicity of emotional nuances and in the very ordinariness of the subjects. Broadly comparing Yiadom-Boakye with different tendencies in black art, Karen Rosenberg notes the following:

Where painters including Barkley L. Hendricks, Kehinde Wiley and Mickalene Thomas have taken a celebratory, triumphant and sometimes showy approach to the black subject, Ms. Yiadom-Boakye makes it nearly invisible. She favors a dark, near-monochromatic palette and loose, even sloppy brushwork. Faces are inchoate, bodies phantomlike. (Rosenberg 2010, n. p.).

Yet, in a postmigrant reading, race does not disappear in Yiadom-Boakye’s art because her faces and bodies withdraw into a “dark, near-monochromatic” space or become “inchoate” and “phan-
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tomlike”. It disappears precisely in the abundant visibility of black faces and bodies, and, crucially, in the mode of their abundant visibility. The skin colour of Yiadom-Boakye’s characters is visible, abundantly so in its repetition on canvas after canvas, but it is not made visible in any lyrical or symbolic mode; it is made visible in a mode of everyday ordinariness and commonplace spontaneity – in gestures, moods and demeanours that are widely if not universally familiar. In this way, Yiadom-Boakye’s subjects come to belong to a cognitive space that white bodies and faces have seamlessly inhabited in European art for centuries: the representational space of the human, not of racial identity but of universal faces and bodies in which the reflection of human feelings becomes the main issue, drawing their viewers (regardless of their skin colour) into an empathic play of emotional questioning and discernment – if not simply into the intuitive social and intersubjective sympathy produced by the automatic reflexes of neural mirroring.

All of this does not place Yiadom-Boakye’s art in a naively post-critical or post-political position in relation to the question of migration and race. “It always stuns and worries me when people say, ‘Oh, but you’re not political,’ because I am,” she says, “It’s just that there are many ways to skin a cat” (Yiadom-Boakye 2015, n.p.). Yiadom-Boakye’s works are imbued with “historical consciousness”, but they avoid “the academic and histrionic”, as Schwabsky puts it (2011, 37), which makes them political on a level that is more embedded than overt, digging deeper into the nebulous depths of interhuman relations and interdependences – the shared but strange depths of human emotion that makes any finite identity or identification impossible and the instinctive somatic and empathetic reflexes by which the self momentarily loses itself in the thought of the other. Accordingly, the political charge of the paintings is perhaps most effective when it disappears from view.

Conclusion

Almost twenty years ago Kobena Mercer announced that migration and multiculturalism were finally moving into a state of normality in Europe:

> To the extent that the postcolonial vocabulary, characterized by such terms as ‘diaspora’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘hybridity’, has displaced an earlier discourse of assimilation, adaptation and integration, we have witnessed a massive social transformation which has generated, in the Western metropolis, what could now be called a condition of multicultural normalization. (Mercer 2000, 234, emphasis in original)

A postmigrant perspective takes its point of departure in “the condition of multicultural normalization” and the consequent displacement of normative assumptions of cultural and racial homogeneity implicated in traditional uses of concepts such as assimilation, adaptation and integration. It is an analytical perspective that migratises the study of society and shared narratives of the collective ‘we’, but at the same time it de-migratises the study of migration. The latter, I have argued, is particularly visible if we consider the de-migratisation of analytical categories and concepts such as identity, belonging, race, multiculturalism, othering, ethnicity, etc., through which the study of migration has continued to exceptionalise migration as something other than a social norm.

I have sketched a few examples of how such concepts are changing as migration changes from the spectacular to the ordinary and how, from that angle, we may begin to draw the con-
tours of a postmigrant frame of analysis for the study of multicultural and multicoloured works of art: how a de-migrated use of concepts such as belonging and race opens up greater complexities in, for instance, the study of identity in relation to the work – complexities that are likely to escape analyses that rely on migratory binaries of rootedness and uprootedness or narrow national, cultural or racial notions of belonging and unbelonging. Yet, as stated, the work of developing a postmigrant frame of analysis in relation to the arts – what it looks like, what it does and how it works – has only just begun. The methods, shapes and effects are bound to be multiple. Another possibility that this article has not touched upon at all is the entire re-migration of the study of works that remain entrenched in presumptions of a pre-migratory and ethnically and racially homogeneous national past: what interesting postmigrant studies lie ahead of, say, Caspar David Friedrich’s or John Constable’s landscapes?

References


