

International Passports: Portrait of the Nigerian Diaspora

By
Makun Adedotun Jones

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Thesis Supervisor: Professor Ruth Simbao

Abstract

International Passports: Portraits of the Nigerian Diaspora considers notions of alienation and nation-hood through the lens of portraiture. This dissertation addresses issues of identity and representation in a contemporary cultural context as they pertain to the concerns presented through my current visual practice. The paintings that I have produced from real life are primarily depictions of Nigerian individuals, friends and acquaintances (professionals and students) residing in Grahamstown, South Africa as temporary or permanent migrants. I reference the mug shot pose of identity documents and passport photographs and render them in such a way that ideas of their persona are subject to the viewer's gaze and deliberations, thus provoking the spectator to consider questions of otherness and stereotypes. This provocation is subtle and complex, and in many ways I am offering the viewer a re-looking, an opportunity to examine one's moral position and subsequent implication within the act of stereotyping an other individual.

The initial idea within this body of work was to paint images of Nigerian nationals exclusively, yet the restrictive nature of such categorization pushed me to complicate certain nationalist ideologies through the inclusion of non-Nigerian individuals. I look specifically at notions of the other and strangeness in a contemporary South African context and how this connects to the concept of portraiture and not simply portraiture theory but also the social theory in relation to how people are imaged. Throughout this thesis I consider several theoretical concerns in portraiture practice and discourse whilst simultaneously unpacking the psychological and social contexts that influence my practice.

Declaration of Originality

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete bibliographic references. This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for Master of Fine Art at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at another university.



Makun Adedotun Jones

Friday 19 November 2010

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Introduction: Painting Diaspora

The portrait is an imaginative exercise involving the configuration and interpretation of an other. Over the course of a few years I have engaged in this practice as a portraitist. I remain primarily intrigued by the degree to which I, at times, am able to attest to the success or failure of my work as a portraitist. Furthermore, I am fascinated by the fact that on occasions a fully realised portrait can appear unresolved or unrealised within moments of critical consideration. I consistently find that certain factors influence my working process. These influences are largely psychological and the process is affected by and revolves around my own temperamental state when working on a given portrait.

In my opinion, a well-actualized portrait may be seen by someone else as unsuccessful based on the varying way we see the particular individual portrayed. This conflict of seeing in the literal and psychological sense is interesting as it describes how individual subjectivity affects one's judgment and perception of another. This notion is comparable to the idea of stereotyping. In this discussion I argue that recognizing someone or associating a trait with someone else is a kind of trait construction that is similar to the act of stereotyping, be it a group stereotype or the description of an individual. The act of representation is not unique to the artist alone as we all make mental pictures of one another and we often assume that this mental image/representation is in fact real and true. So how does portraiture as an *act*, as an *imaginative* exercise, relate to the portraits of Nigerians that I have produced for this exhibition? Why Nigerians in particular? Why frame these works according to nationality? What happens to these identities in the act of painting diaspora? In what way can my act of

portraiture break down the fixity of nationality and recreate metaphoric passports that are indeed international?

The aim of this project is to consider the role of interpretation and cultural agency in the translation of the ‘alien other’, and to examine how the ‘other’ is subjected to the whims of the one empowered to represent. In my writing and in my painting I deliberately tread very carefully around the subject matter of nationalism in a post-colonial era. Considering the scars of African colonialism, nationalism seems to be the Western ‘legacy’ given to Africa as a reminder of the irreversible premise and psychological subjugation of the colonized ‘other’ and still it remains the legacy of Africa’s relationship with the imperial West. The residue of a divide-and-rule strategy and system that was often employed by European colonialists when dealing with indigenous resistance in Africa is perhaps on a larger scale responsible for the formulation of what we now see as nationalism. National borders in Africa have been constructed from the outside, and even in a post-colonial era they continue to define identity and movement in Africa.

The power imbalance of colonialism in Africa raises questions around the right to represent an ‘other’. A key issue of representation that I liken to the act of portraiture is that as human beings we have the tendency and capacity to confer skewed representations upon one another. I argue that representation as an act can be empowering, but precisely because it is an *action* rather than a passive state, it requires great responsibility. There is an enormous amount of power associated with the representation of the immigrant, alien or foreigner, and in South Africa our perceptions of the 2008 xenophobic tensions and our portrayals of ‘locals’ and

‘foreigners’ are largely shaped by the media and thus often lack in nuance. According to Sally Peberdy (2009:15),

Research documenting xenophobia in South Africa and South African’s attitudes to non-South Africans demonstrates that levels of xenophobia in South Africa are high and that many South Africans favour restrictive immigration and refugee policies, some to the extent of stopping all in-migration to the country.

Perhaps South Africa’s recently found Independence has something to do with the creation of these tensions, as expectations of people’s emancipation from Apartheid led to legitimate hope for a better life which is yet to materialize for the majority of the ‘black’ population. West Africa has also experienced xenophobia, and Lynne Brydon (1985) offers a historical account of the mutual demonization between Nigeria and Ghana in 1983¹. This tension between ‘insiders’ and ‘foreigners’ is commemorated in the name describing the Chinese-made vinyl bags sold in Nigeria and popularly called “Ghana-Must-Go”. These bags are universally associated with migrants and foreigners. In Germany the bags are referred to as Turkish suitcases, and in England they are known as Bangladeshi bags.

Diasporan discourse and narrative inspire my examination of themes relating to alienation and belonging in both my thesis and practice, which inform the final MFA exhibition titled *ALIEN-Nation*. In relation to nationhood and citizenship, an ‘alien’ is a resident born in or belonging to another country who has not acquired citizenship by naturalization. Usually, a ‘nation’ is considered to be a community of people living in a defined territory and organized

¹ Lynne Brydon offers a historical account of events in west-Africa of the massive repatriation exercises in the 70’s and 80’s between Nigeria and Ghana which saw the deportation of several thousands of immigrants deemed as illegally residing in the ‘host’ country back to their ‘home’ country. The administrative governments of both countries at the time justified the act against the ‘aliens’ on economic grounds. The “Ghana-Must-Go” name describing the popular Chinese-made Vinyl bags in Nigeria is one of the conceptual devices I consider in my work.

under a single government, or a community of people who share a common ethnic origin, culture, historical tradition, and, frequently, language, whether or not they live together in one territory or have their own government². More generally, though, an alien can be a person who has been estranged or excluded, or even an extraterrestrial creature from outer space.

In Chapter One: *Portraiture – A ‘Subject’ of Spectacle*, I discuss the overarching notion of portraiture, particularly the Western notion of individual ‘likeness’, and I complicate this idea of ‘likeness’ by making reference to Jean Borgatti’s (1990) analysis of African approaches to portraiture. Emphasis on the ‘uniqueness’ of the individual in Western portraiture is analyzed and compared with the concept of group identities as a stylistic canon in African portraiture. As I question the controversial categorization of “black portraiture” (Powell 2008) in the portrait practice of Barkley L. Hendricks and Kehinde Wiley, it is also important for me to consider the place of my own work in light of the fact that I am a ‘black’ artist painting ‘black subjects’. Does this necessarily mean, though, that my work can be termed “black portraiture”? Further, the theory of the gaze in relation to a specifically African context is looked at in Babatunde Lawal’s analysis of *Aworon* (the act of looking), and I link this to notions of spectacle as a creation of the gaze. By extension I reference Guy Debord’s (1967) “Society of the Spectacle” which I link to other issues of concern such as the portrait in a social context and the degree of collaboration employed in my work.

In Chapter Two: *The Nation Imagined*, I discuss issues of nationalism, belonging, nostalgia and the invention of ‘home’ as well as other strategies of othering that reinforce ideas of

² Encarta (2009) dictionary definition for nation

belonging. I briefly discuss the Western tendency to fix (Bhabha 1983) notions of Africa and ‘the African’ and I link this to the stereotyping and othering of ‘foreigners’ in the invention of *Makwerekwere* in South Africa. ‘Place-bound’ identity versus ‘place-embedded’ or ‘place-based’ identity (Escobar in Simbao 2008:61) is explained in relation to the Yoruba exhortation ‘Omo ile’ and I deliberate the thought behind this notion of camaraderie using Benedict Anderson’s (1983) discussions of nationalism as an ‘Imagined community’”.

Chapter Three: *Representing Othernesses* examines my practical concerns with regard to the act of representation. I consider my complicity in relation to my subjects, acknowledging that all forms of representation are mediated and as such subject to bias. Employing Dipti Desai’s (2000) essay ‘Imaging difference and the Politics of Representation’”, I highlight the disjuncture between representation and the so-called ‘real’. Focusing on representation I analyze Carina Ray’s article on the film *District 9* that was produced by the South African director Neil Blomkamp (2009), and conclude this chapter with a visual analysis of the works of British/Nigerian Artist Yinka Shonibare, evaluating the representational strategies he employs in complicating notions of difference and alienation in his oeuvre.

Throughout my analysis, I discuss my work in relation to themes such as ‘black portraiture’ (Powell 2008), difference, ‘foreignness’ and notions of ‘dark Africa’. Both my practice and supporting dissertation are premised around the notion of a ‘re-looking’. I have worked to present the viewer with the opportunity to confront his/her own perceptions and moral stance with regards to the stereotyping of others, I have also evaluated and examined my own positioning and perspective in the representation of my subjects.

Chapter One: Portraiture – A ‘Subject’ of Spectacle

The correct portrait... is not a faithful record of a visual experience but a faithful construction of a relational model. The act of representing an ‘_other’— the history and the artistic convention are considered as having a shared and/or universal idea at least in terms of its principal objective.

(Borgatti in Zeitlyn 2010:401)

In this chapter I look at a number of specific concerns regarding portraiture in an art historical context; I consider issues of identity in visual culture and the construction of ‘_alien’ identities in South Africa. By evaluating certain notions of the ‘_Nigerian’³ in South Africa, I examine the real and imaginary aspects of this category of people, and raise questions with regard to the sufficiency of the dominant Western theory on portraiture. Are visual narratives on portraiture evident in Western texts adequate in contextualizing something as complex as an identity based upon nationhood? How is one able to navigate such a subject matter without falling into narcissism and essentialist paradigms? I begin this chapter by addressing conventions of Western portraiture, and attempt to unpack what a non-essentialist idea of African portraiture might be. I then discuss portraiture in a specifically Yoruba context, and conclude this chapter with a consideration of portraiture as a collaboration. Throughout the chapter I question the notion of a ‘correct portrait’ and explore constructions of identity as I reflect upon my own process as a portrait painter.

³ The Nigerian as referenced here implies the often axiomatic representation of what constitutes peoples of this demography.

1.1 Conventions of Western and African Portraiture

Although there is not a clear-cut dichotomy between the West and Africa, authors such as Borgatti have pointed out ways in which they differ. In this section I discuss the focus on the uniqueness of the individual in Western portraiture, in particular, the issue of ‘likeress’ as the primary objective of the practice. This credence foregrounds the degree to which our concept of an individual’s identity is invested in his or her appearance. According to Borgatti, “while Western portraiture stresses the importance of the individual, in sub-Saharan Africa, cultural weight falls on the side of the group identity” (Borgatti in Borgatti & Brilliant 1990:29). This is not to say that all Western portraiture operates within one ideological scope, but Borgatti suggests that in general a portrait stresses ‘individual difference’ and often this is, in fact, the expected end. While a link between the copy (the portrait) and the original (the sitter/subject) is often expected in Western portraiture, in African portraiture emphasis is often not directed at the portrayal of character or features, but rather at a combination of other cultural markers. It appears that often times there is an attempt in most African traditional portraiture to say more about the social context of the particular sitter.

According to David Zeitlyn (2010:400), “Portraiture raises many questions about representation. What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for an image to be regarded, or to be used, as a portrait? Similitude is not enough”. Playing with ideas of the ‘alien’, migrant, and group identities, I acknowledge certain operative machinery in the politics of representation that exist in the art portraiture. According to the ethnographer Michael Jackson, the portrait traditions of the Kuranko people of Liberia advocate that, “a true person is one who embodies social ideals, not one who stands out against his or her social background.

Persons exist only in relation to one another; the notion of ‘personhood’ reflects the ontological priority of social relationships rather than personal identity” (Jackson in Borgatti & Brilliant 1990:30). The focus on the subject-matter of the ‘uniqueness’ of the ‘individual’ that is often prevalent in Western discourse on portraiture is perhaps the factor distinguishing this practice from the African canon and approach to portrayal, which often tends to lend itself to a unifying stylistic convention. Perhaps references to the construction of the self-image highly influenced by “social relationship” in traditional African culture offer a stylistic interrogation in the depiction of the ‘Nigerian’ as one constructed homogeneous group in my own work. A considered paradox is the fact that I employ a Western traditional painting technique for the production of these portraits, while at the same time their generic posture compares with the frontal posture of traditional African portrait sculptures, such as the *ere ibeji* carvings in Yoruba portrait practice⁴ (Fig. 1:1,2). According to Brilliant,

Frontal projection is a common compositional type, especially when face-to-face interaction is desired. The magical properties of frontality are well known and have been employed by image-makers to impress the numinous power and authority of the image on the viewer... Frontality also heightens the communicative force of the portrait image in less threatening ways, enhancing the intimacy of reception essential to private, family portraits (Borgatti and Brilliant 1990:20).

According to Borgatti (1990:35), Western culture emphasizes individual identity: “Western art features representation, and the portrait canon stresses physiognomic likeness—notably, the communication of personality through facial features and expression”. She describes the three kinds of portrayal in the African traditional portrait genre: the generic, emblematic and

⁴ The [ere] *ibeji* twin figures are (Nigerian) traditional Yoruba effigies that depict the image of a departed twin. Twins are believed to unite with their deceased half in the afterlife and that the passing of one twin can act as a link between ancestral spirits and the living. Thus a statuette is commissioned to an artist with the recommendation of a diviner who evokes the soul of the deceased twin into it and consequently handed over to the living half for safe-keeping as a commemoration of their union.

representational portrait. Borgatti posits that in Africa, these forms of portrayal were culturally determined and exist with variable emphasis in accordance to artistic practices and function of the represented image or subject. Susan Vogel corroborates Borgatti's assertions even further:

African artists make three kinds of portrayals: a generalized image that uses stereotypical features to represent an individual who can be recognized by the image's context; an emblematic portrait that represent the whole person schematically or allusively by only a few characteristic features; and the depiction of likeness, the reproduction of the visible features of the subject. (Vogel in Borgatti & Brilliant 1990:7)

Margaret Drewal discusses Borgatti's analysis of the disparity in conventions between Western and African conceptions of the portrait genre. As Drewal (1990:43) writes:

Most controversies about portraiture, Borgatti has noted, revolve around the degree to which the personality of a specific person can be conveyed by physical likeness. But it seems to me the critical issue cross-culturally has to do first and foremost with the very concept of reality, and only secondarily with the degree of likeness an image has to it. Indeed, it could be argued that the primary function of a representation is to construct what reality is, not the other way around. In this sense, the portrait is not a mere reflection of reality, but a participant in its creation.

A quest for physiognomic likeness in portraiture is noble but it is also flawed, as what is seen to be 'real' is a construct. Even life studies where the subject is directly referenced and rendered (such as the process employed in the completion of my painted portraits) cannot be verifiably claimed as unaffected by personal whim or inclination. The process and practice is replete with subjectivity. According to Ernst van Alphen, it is the 'meeting of two subjectivities',

The portrait is highly esteemed as a genre because, according to the standard view, in a successful portrait the viewer is not only confronted with the 'original', 'unique' subjectivity of the portrayer, but also of that of a portrayed (van Alphen in Woodall 1997:239).

Although photographic portraits can never freeze moments of 'reality', it seems as if the extended process of painting a portrait from life is further impacted by the combination of

social factors that include real and tangible, as well as imaginary or constructed subjectivities.

According to Coulter (2003:62),

Although the camera may never lie, it is more often through the portrait painter's prolonged engagement with the sitter that the front with which we face the world is eroded to reveal the authentic appearance of the sitter. While the photograph captures an instance, the painted or drawn portrait evolves through time, and unlike film, is capable of telescoping many perceived moments, movements, expressions and emotions into a single image that seems to evoke the presence of its subject.

The authentic appearance of the sitter as referenced by Coulter is questionable, as attesting to authenticity implies claim to truth and transparency in portrayal—a notion that is arguable considering the issue of subjectivity in translating the sitter. In this project I aim to liken this subjective rendering in portraiture to society's dispositions in the translation of the alien other and consider how both processes subject the other to whims and caprices of the one empowered to represent. What transpires is subject to an individual's predisposition and perhaps this explains the partial representation and stereotyping of migrants, whose self-proclaimed identities are undergoing their own forms of deconstruction as a result of their separation from home. In this scenario we are faced with a meeting of subjectivities—the South African image of the Nigerian and the Nigerian's image of home. A pertinent question raised in this thesis is: Can one look at and interpret portraiture in terms of nationality considering that portraiture ought to be regarded as a constructive act that is tasked with representation and/or identification of specific individuals or groups? Similarly, if portraiture is an imaginative exercise, as I state in my introduction, is there a coherent thing such as black portraiture or African portraiture? It is interesting to briefly consider the works of American painters Barkley L. Hendricks and Kehinde Wiley in relation to the writings of Richard Powell.

Barkley L. Hendricks is considered to be a pioneer of “black portraiture” and his paintings of African Americans (Fig. 2) customarily imbue a proud and dignified presence in his “black” subjects. Barkley L. Hendricks’s, *Icon for My Man Superman (Superman never saved any black people — Bobby Seale)*, (1969: Fig. 2.1) depicts a black male subject crossed-hand and donning a t-shirt emblazoned with the popular superman logo. In my reading of this image, Hendricks uses the popular image of superman, the ultimate alien figure who, despite his unbelonging, is embraced because of his super-human prowess to save the metropolis. Perhaps he alludes to the paradox that despite being African Americans, who contribute to the development of America, they remain aliens to the system and their membership is based on convenience. In his *Fela: Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen*, (2002: Fig. 2.2), he captures the well celebrated and highly controversial Nigerian musician and human rights activist Fela Anikulapo Kuti at his prime. Hendricks visited Nigeria in the 70s and 80s during a period when the popularity of afrocentricity and black consciousness gained currency in America and was a huge admirer of Fela’s work. Hendricks’s often described his work as “black portraiture” and this perhaps raises the question: what determines this classification? Is the painting of “black” subjects essentially “black portraiture”? Or is it the producer of the painting that opines “black portraiture”?

The controversial term “black portraiture” poses implications that easily lead one towards essentialist and dogmatic claims in contextualizing the portrayal of “black” subjects. Seeing as there are no categories like “white portraiture” I consider the classification to be more harmful than beneficial to the cause of black visibility which ordinarily is a noble cause. The term

—black portraiture” only acts to reinforce difference and contribute to the Western premise to fix the ‘African other’ within such categorical and definitive paradigms. However, Richard Powell looks at the painting of ‘black’ people by African-American artist Kehinde Wiley and argues the distinction in the perception and representation of black people as having the power to subvert dominant racist conventions by evincing traits such as self-composure, self-adornment, and self-imagining. According to Powell (2008: XVI),

Black people are often active participants in spectatorship—either as knowing spectacles, willing actors, or self scrutinizers—I incorporate where applicable, this sense of collaboration, agency, and introspection [...] Despite a sobering legacy of scorn and subjugation, peoples of African descent have psychologically “loathed” themselves in fancier attire than others customarily allowed them, enacting personas that inspire awe and provide assurances about their place among life’s movers and shakers.

Powell’s book *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* appraises the development of African-American visibility from the 1980s that had historically experienced social and corporeal invisibility in the American public domain. Kehinde Wiley whose work, according to Powell (2008:203-204) is “fictitious assemblage and a process which undercuts claims to ‘portraiture’ in the conventional sense, infringing upon cultural vista and been greeted with an odd mixture of emulation and disparagement”. Wiley’s majestic portraits, *The Officer of Hussars* 2007, *Count Potocki* 2008 (Fig.3:1,2) sets his (male) sitters in heavily decorated backgrounds, clad in contemporary ‘hip-hop’ clothing, such as jeans and jewelry or ‘bling’, but their poses and their props, such as thrones, scepters, horses and other religious attributes quote the portraits of European masters of the Baroque and Renaissance periods. I consider a departure in my own portrait practice against the elaborate and yet socially conscious practice of both Hendricks and Wiley. Although like the work of both artists, the portraits I have produced are centered on black subjects, I consciously attempt to play with the idea of

‘neutrality’ of identity photographs to play-down the visibility of my subjects and complicate the category of ‘black portraiture’. My effort to play-down their visibility works against a premise of ‘loudness’ in the characterization of black subjects (Powell 2000: 8).

According to David Zeitlyn, “a passport photograph is judged good or bad, acceptable or misleading by reference to the physiognomy of the human being who is the passport holder. In the absence of the human the image is ‘taken’ to evoke or represent the human”. The face as a key component of identity allows people to perceive or imagine another individual’s emotional state of mind. Contemporary painter and portraitist David Hockney posits that, “faces are the most interesting things we see and the most interesting aspect of other people—the point where we go inside them—is the face. It tells all” (Nairne 2006:70).

Portraiture is implicitly concerned with the act of re-presentation of particular persons and is one of the earliest forms of artistic expression and consequently similitude or facial ‘likeness’ of particular individuals were the predominant canons for assessing the portrait; a notion that previously characterized the Western perspective of portraiture. Perhaps it is noteworthy that what Western academics understood as a lack of skill in the African approach to portraiture in earlier historical accounts was to be later recognized after the exploratory work inspired by African form of representation by Picasso (Fig. 4:1,2) and some his contemporaries, Vlaminck, Matisse, Nolde and this adaptation of ‘primitivism’ lead to the abandonment of perspective in favour of flat two dimensional picture plane and broke the traditional ‘realism’ thus advancing expressionism and abstraction in the style of Western art. Vogel describes this period as the West’s “turn to African solutions in search of ideas for their work” (Vogel in

Borgatti & Brilliant 1990:7). The African traditional portrait image varied and was highly stylistic, tending to focus more on regional style and at times period-specific conventions in the portrayal of its subjects with less considerations to capture ‘real’ likeness, “instead they evoke the memory of one who has joined the community of ancestors, portraying a spiritual rather than physical reality” (Borgatti and Brilliant 1999:60). Although likeness was present in some portrait traditions in Africa for example the 12th to 15th century Ile Ife bronze and terracotta heads (Fig. 5:1,2), creativity and innovations were made within a certain artistic parameter or what Lawal (2001:510) describes as “stylistic idioms”. According to Lawal (2001:510),

Jean Borgatti has observed a similar tendency in other parts of Africa, namely, the downplaying of “individual” in favour of “social” identity, when an artist simplifies the face to conform to archetypes handed down from the past, though there is enough room for artistic inventions within a given stylistic convention.

While de-emphasizing individual identity in favour of a collective one, and maintaining a archetype in mind, most African portrait artists employed comparative degrees of imagination and memory in their representation. This accounts for the similarities in figurative style. Perhaps we can liken this mnemonic style of representation to my own construction of a generic face that acts as a guide to actualizing my own portrait work (Fig. 6:1,2). The role of memory in the production of the portraits affirms the function of imagination in my practise. The role of the gaze in the creation of images will be further analysed.

1.2 Dialectics of the Gaze in the Traditional Yoruba Context

According to Babatunde Lawal (2001:498-526), portraiture in a Yoruba context considers the semiotic relationship between the portrait image and the spectator, and this interconnectedness

is evident in the tonal nature of the Yoruba language. The term *aworan* has a dual meaning depending upon how it is pronounced. Likewise its application is metaphorical; on the one hand it entails representation or the image as spectacle and on the other it implies the beholder or spectator as the spectacle. He asserts, “because of a change in the vowel tones, the word *aworan* refers not only to *representation*—which is *aworan*—but to its beholder, being a contraction of *a* (the one), *wo* (looking at), and *iran* (spectacle)” (Lawal 2001:498). In his description of the term he highlights the consistence of the root verb *wo* (to look) which links the beholder to the beheld. A contemporary view considered in portraiture describes the visual interaction between the represented image and the spectator. Lawal quotes Lacan by affirming that, “the act of looking is influenced by a host of factors, such as desire, mood, knowledge, cultural milieu, and individual whims and caprices, and it is a reciprocal process as well. What we see (animate or inanimate) also “sees” us and has a particular way of relating to our eyes” (Lacan in Lawal 2001:516). Perhaps there is a transformation of the spectator into a spectacle through the fixating stare and scopic encounter evidenced in looking at the portrait image, particularly one where the portrayed subject looks back in exchange at the viewer in what Lacan describes as the “*gaze*” (Lacan in Lawal 2001:516). Lawal expands on the *dialectics of looking* in Yoruba context, “the eye functions as a double agent of vision and perspicacity in Yoruba culture”. *Oju* (the eye) is described as having the powers of discernment enabling individuals to see or perceive the character of others physically or via image. Lawal (2001:516) considers *iworan* (the act of looking) as specular gaze in postulating that,

As with other aspects of Yoruba culture, the eyeball is thought to have two aspects, an outer layer called *oju ode* (literally, external eye) or *oju lasan* (literally, naked eye) which has to do with normal quotidian vision, and an inner one called *oju inu* (literally, internal eye) or *oju okan* (literally, mind’s eye). The latter is associated

with memory, intension, intuition, imagination, critical analysis, visual cognition [...] among others.

Whereas Lawal's notion of visual perception and cognition describes the eye's task as an instrument for discernment in a careful contemplation of what is being looked at, I relate the above quote to my work with the fleeting way people sometimes construct porous images of 'other' people and especially so where the people looked at are observed as 'foreigners' and 'aliens'. Kendall Walton (1990) postulates, "representations are props for the imagination of others: I represent X to you, and the representation works partly because of your participation" (Walton in Zeitlyn 2010:401). In her self-portrait titled *Me in Magnifying Mirror*, 2000⁵ (Fig. 7.1)—a painting made up of four panels representing reflections from a convex mirror—the 2010 BP Award winner and portrait painter, Daphne Todd, deals with the notion of the self as she juggles personal identity by playing with the relationship between the 'real' (outside, outer, physical) versus the abstract (inside, internal, cerebral). Distancing herself from claims of the painted portrait as an exercise in psychology, Todd believes that the human eye discriminates in many ways, according to Zeitlyn (2010:403), "for her the challenge is to undo the psychology of perception and to paint the colours she sees, rather than those she knows she should be seeing; so oddly, like a camera she concentrates her attention on what is literally superficial".

In my work, I aim to look beyond the corporeal—not so much in order to gain psychological insight of the subjects, but rather as a way of playing with my *oju okan* or the 'inner eye'—to my subjective positioning as an outsider/portrayer and insider Nigerian/compatriot. The task

⁵ Daphne Todd (www.studio-international.co.uk, 2002)

was to ascertain what culturally determined modes existed in my perception and interpretation of them. Would the portrayal be apathetic or sympathetic? Would the portrait reflect a collective or would they retain individuality? The spectator becomes a participator in the representational game. Lawal (2001:522) posits that,

a strong belief in an interface of the visible and invisible, the tangible and intangible, the known and unknown makes it evident that the act of looking and seeing is much more than a perception of objects by use of the eyes. It is a social experience as well, involving, on the one hand, a delicate balance of culturally determined modes of perceiving and interpreting reality, and on the other hand, individual reactions to specific images and spectacle.

1.3 Portraiture in Social Context

There is a degree of risk in how a portrait is acknowledged in a social context especially if one expects there to be some sort of ‘truth’. The capacity to evoke awe as in painted honorific portraits for example, can often be misinterpreted because unlike photographic portraits that weld both honorific and repressive qualities⁶, the painted portrait often ameliorates the representation of the sitter. A case study I consider on the subject of how a portrait portrayal can be misread in a social context is analyzed by Maggie Deignan. She analyzed the discord and public outrage that met the display of a portrait by Irish artist Mick O’Dea in 2003 of a convicted killer⁷ (Fig. 8.1). Perhaps this explains the common accepted view of portraiture to date as a symbol of accolade and a form of honorific representation due to its history as a paean to social success (Deignan 2005:61). In this case, Deignan argues that, “the homage to success is not the sole traditional purpose of portraiture. A strong sense of moral purpose was

⁶ *Invention of Photographic Meaning* (1981) Allan Sekula (1981:10), in describing the positive/negative instrumental ideology in the history of police photography, he observes that, “in serving to introduce the panoptic principle into daily life, photography welded the honorific and repressive functions together. Every portrait implicitly took its place within a social and moral hierarchy”.

⁷ According to Deignan (2005:60), “the man portrayed Brian Meehan, is a prisoner in Portlaoise who was found guilty of the murder of a prominent Irish journalist, Veronica Guerin, and sentenced to life imprisonment”.

another element of portrayal". Following the negative reaction of the work's inclusion at the 173rd exhibition of the Royal Hibernian Academy, O'Dea in defense of his work stated, "I don't particularly look into their case myself, I am not a detective [...] my portraits are not formal portraits. They are not about power or glorification. I try to show the common humanity of all people".

Painter Jonathan Richardson states, "Painting gives not only the persons, but the characters of great men. The air of the head, and mien in general, give strong indications of the mind, partly to improve and instruct us and excite proper sentiments and reflections" (Richardson in Deignan 2005:63). This sense of moral purpose continues to dominate people's attitude towards the portrait image especially when one considers the viewer's initial reaction to grasping a portrait usually invokes the question: "Who is it?" According to Brilliant, the concept of identity affects the relationship between viewer and image, "the viewer's psychological engagement with the portrait image [exists] as if the human being there represented were somehow present before his eyes" (Borgatti and Brilliant 1990:13).

In consideration of O'Dea's case and the ensuing controversy with the exhibition of the portrait of the convicted felon, it becomes evident that social influences shape perceptions and cultural attitudes towards the portrait. The 'imaginary notion' of the 'Nigerian immigrant' is central to my work which like O'Dea's work invites an uneasiness and may perhaps pose ethical questions around prevailing sensitivities that surround my subjects, of issues such as stereotyping and prejudices. Accordingly one may ask: Do these portraits re-enforce stereotypes or subvert them? Or do they promote the idea of identity based upon nationalism

and essentialized self-imagining? Perhaps it portends that the strangeness of the ‘stranger’ and the idiosyncrasies of the foreigner are all subject to cultural and political discursive and the contemporary ‘spectacle’. This with regard to my work creates a situation where the viewer is caught up in a sort of debacle in contemplating ‘how to look’ at the image. A noteworthy complication to the notion of the spectacle is in a critique of modern capitalist societies derived from Guy Debord’s book, *Society of the Spectacle* (1931) in which he challenges cultural representation. According to Debord,

The spectacle consists in the re-unification of separate aspects at the level of the image. Everything life lacks is to be found within the spectacle, conceived of as an ensemble of independent representations. Separation is the alpha and Omega of the spectacle.... Individuals are united solely in separateness (Debord in James Trier 2007:69).

Debord’s Situationist group and its pro-humanist agenda challenged issues of alienation and advocated for the abolishment of class societies where lived experiences had been transformed into spectacle, desire and consumption by institutions like the media. What is intriguing about Debord and his view of modern society is how people are themselves participants as both actors and audience in a ‘society of spectacle’ and how the interesting implication of this notion is adequately captured in Babatunde Lawal’s analysis of ‘*aworan*’. Perhaps in looking at the ‘stranger’ we look at a mirrored reflection of ourselves and the strangeness therein is a construct of our own representational strategies to differ or disassociate and produce differences in one’s invention of the ‘other’. According to Kristeva (1991:1),

Strangely the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns “we” into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible, the foreigner comes in when the consciousness of difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities.

Brilliant (in Borgatti 1990:12) states that, ~~the~~ meaning of portraits, the artistic conventions of their making and their uses are all culturally determined. So too is the concept of the person whose portrayal is the generating cause and iconographic center of the work”.

1.4 The Portrait: A Visual Collaboration

Communion with the portrayed figure depends neither on the viewer taking the portrait to be the person nor on the viewer stepping out of himself while looking at the portrait. Instead the move towards association or psychological interaction follows the general tendency to make eye contact with another in order to register the other as a person, to be similarly registered and to close the distance between subject and image on one side and image and viewer on the other (Borgatti and Brilliant 1990:13).

In the production of each portrait in this body of work, it is noteworthy that the eyes were the foremost aspect of the face that was registered on canvas. In the works, *Tope* and *Blessing* (Fig.9: 9.1, 9.2), the eyes functioned as my indexical marker (a strategy I employed to enable a framework of the overall form of the image), and as other areas of the face developed, the importance of ‘accurately’ capturing the eyes became apparent as stimuli for recognition. Occasionally, the remark, ~~that~~ “that is my eye” by the sitter affirmed and confirmed the collaboration in the production or shall I say, the ‘co-construction’ of the image. Brilliant affirms this participation in commissioned portrait works, ~~All~~ patrons of art seek satisfaction from the artworks they commission, but those who are both patrons and subjects often have a greater psychological investment in the [‘success’] of the work”. My aim is to extend this ~~–success”~~ and collaboration of subjectivities to a third participator/actor that is the eventual viewer. According to James Elkins,

A face is something that is incomplete: a work in progress that stands in continuous need of being seen or touched or written upon. And maybe that is a fundamental

reason for our fascination with faces: like personalities they express and the ideas they communicate, faces need to be used because they are not finished images. (1996:183).

Perhaps in the unfolding viewership of the Portrait series *Ghana-Must-Go* and *The Outsiders* the idea of the sitter's individual personalities will be better realized but even so, as highlighted by Elkins above, like the constant flux that characterize migrant identities, their faces perpetually remain incomplete. In the accompanying chapter I attempt to unpack nationalism as a social mechanism used to marginalize and construct foreignness and difference as well as consider other stereotypical labeling

Chapter Two: The Nation Imagined

One stands at the threshold of a new reality with an emerging sense of alienation. ‘Who am I? Where am I? Who are they?’ ... The rediscovery of difference as a general phenomenon within culture has once again transformed everyone into an ‘other’.
(Jantjes 1998:10)

In this chapter I discuss my work in relation to various theories that engage with concepts of nationalism and foreignness. I make brief use of disciplines such as anthropology, philosophy, sociology and psychology in analyzing themes such as identity, representation, diaspora, foreignness, stereotypes and prejudice. A key aim of this chapter is to analyze the ‘social myth’ of difference and the image of *Makwerekwere* in the context of South Africa in relation to my portrayal of the ‘Nigerian’. I interrogate local attitudes towards foreigners by looking at ways in which the representation of the ‘other’ is used to marginalize. Kathryn Woodward (1997:1) notes that, “The concept of Identity raises fundamental questions about how individuals fit into the community and the social world and can be seen as the interface between subjective positions and social and cultural situations”. By examining the identity negotiation strategies of a group of Nigerian immigrants in South Africa, through the genre of painted portraiture, this research drew my attention to the dilemma and contradictions of a ‘national identity’ in relation to immigrants and indigenous people. In particular my research sheds light on the anathematic re-presentation of the ‘Nigerian’ by local media in South Africa, which I argue influences indigenous thoughts and perceptions of migrants.

According to Benedict Anderson,

Nationalism is an imagined political community – imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (Anderson in Ashcroft et al 2006:124).

The belief in the imagined community often becomes re-enforced once you are removed from the nation, and that loss of belonging creates the feeling of nostalgia commonly ascribed to the migrant (Zerlang in Spliid 2003:14). By looking at certain narratives I consider how various people construct memory and experiences. At times these memories and narratives are fine-tuned and idealized versions of one's actual experiences. Usually the idea is one of constructing memory in accordance to what one desires and has a longing for. This feeling of nostalgia can be explored through art and Svetlana Boym (2002:325-326) writes the following about the work of Russian diasporan artist Ilya Kabakov:

The artist is nostalgic for those fleeing epiphanies and for the world that had more space for them [...] Kabakov's work is about the selectivity of memory [...] Ambiguous nostalgic longing is linked to the individual experience of history. Through the combination of empathy and estrangement, ironic nostalgia invites us to reflect on the ethics of remembering.

In her discussion of the selectivity of memory Boym argues that we reconstruct the past in order to shape the way we desire to see the future. As such, the nostalgia of immigrants (who are often living in spaces of discomfort and discrimination) is about the present and a desired future as much as it is about memories of the home nation. The constructedness of nostalgia can also play a role in the construction of a stereotype—in this case the stereotype of place as home or place away from home. All stereotyping involves some kind of fixity, a static idea of a person or a place.

With the advent of photography, colonialists and anthropologists from the West captured, categorized and framed the identities of the African, and in so doing appropriated power for

themselves. They employed an ideological construction of the 'other' with the concept of fixity, as suggested by Homi Bhabha (1996:18):

The sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise, the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.

To stereotype is to disempower the 'other', for if one can name, label or categorize a person, one is able to 'own' and control him or her. According to Murray (2003:447), naming is a kind of norming. Names are an integral part of both a symbolic and material order that confers legitimacy on those with the power to affix labels to others, and, conversely, de-legitimize those burdened with bearing the stigma of 'otherness'. This condition continues today and dictates the imperial West's gaze of Africa and its representation.

I perceive the Western gaze of Africa is perhaps evident in a select number of the portrait images by German anthropologist Gustav Fritsch (Fig. 10: 10.1-10.3) shot between the 1850s and 1860s. Although these images of South African chiefs were purposed as anthropological studies and Fritsch apparently aimed to register the subjects in their 'untampered', 'real' state⁸, there is no empathy in their representation. Instead, they evoke the images of criminals portrayed in the cropped 'mugshot'; like criminals they are stripped of their dignity, decorum and individual personality. What is plausible in these images is that one can ably discern their oppression. According to Von Robbroeck, "Fritsch embraced the common belief that surface characteristics signified essential differences – a belief that informed most of the new social sciences and pseudo-sciences of the second half of the nineteenth century" (Von Robbroeck in

⁸ This was a period when photographic record was perceived as 'objective'.

Dietrich & Bank 2008:170). The racial narcissism of the colonialists and the seeming fascination with ‘difference’ and perhaps the fear of the ‘other’ were fundamental factors that contributed to the problem of anthropological representation in Africa.

2.1 Imagine the Nigerian – *Omo ile*

Discerning difference in and of itself is not the issue, because oftentimes to raise difference is to grasp who we are and how we define our own identities. However, the problem with the ‘discovery of difference’ is the stereotyping that occurs and the assumption of power that privileges and designates one individual, community or class over another. According to Francis Nyamnjoh (1998:3),

The growing importance of identity politics and more exclusionary ideas of citizenship is matched by the urge to detect difference and to distinguish between ‘locals’, ‘nationals’, citizens, autochthons or insiders, on the one hand, and foreigners, immigrants, strangers or outsiders, on the other, with focus on opportunities, economic entitlements, cultural recognition and political representation.

Identity based upon national origin today is fundamentally ingrained in our subconscious. The ‘home’ as a metaphor includes one’s country, continent, house, city or town and is often an individual’s primary framework of consciousness within which we identify belonging. We often tend to imagine and construct our sense of identity and belonging in relation to the information we are fed by family (the metaphors of the walls around us as we grow up) and by society at large. According to Martin Zerlang,

The house is one of the most significant unifying forces of human thought, memories, and dreams...The house is the first framework of consciousness and accordingly, memory and imagination form an inevitable foundation for the spirit of the place. We have watched the destruction and construction of walls. We have seen

how new nationalism calls attention to the particular condition of place (Zerlang in Spliid 2003:12-14).

An identity that is legitimized by place or is place-bound, often relates to the concept of nationhood and the construction of sovereignty, citizenship and origin. Take for example, the Yoruba term *Omo ile*, a common exhortation amongst the Yoruba speaking peoples of Nigeria which means, 'son of the soil' and alludes to praise, comradeship and the connection of individuals who belong to a common identity, especially an individual of merit who has done well outside the 'home'. The idea of *Omo ile* or *omole ile*, which, depending on its pronunciation can mean 'son of the soil' or 'son of home', has connotation of 'place-boundedness' which is problematic. Even though historical accounts have entrenched generations of families as autochthonous communities, there is a danger in being place bound as against being place based. One is embedded in a place, and the other is bound by it and can therefore be identified by the place or stereotyped and trapped by it. To be place based and embedded is better than to be bound, as then one is contextualized.

To this day the United States of America maintains the law that grants full citizenship to any child born on its soil. Kristeva analyses the matrilineal and patrilineal conflict created by the rights to membership in this system by pointing at the legal systems that distinguish classes of foreigners (Enwezor 1997:39). According to her there are, ~~two~~ legal systems: *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis* meaning law according to soil and law according to blood. Are they then considered to belong to the same group as those who were born on the same soil?" (Kristeva in Enwezor 1997:39). *Omo ile* is an example of the idealization of the putative ancestral home that became manifested in the dogma of the nation, which Benedict Anderson (2006) calls an "imagined community". These imagined communities (be they nations or ethnicities) often form the basis

of discord and imbalanced power relations between so called ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. What intrigues me about the *omo ile* as expression is the nativist connotations that people are intrinsically birthed from soil (*ile*), pinning the individual's identity down in a way that is place-bound rather than place-based. According to Simbao (2008:61),

True cosmopolites are not just open to difference, but actively seek out new experiences, rejecting the confines of bounded communities and their own cultural backgrounds. Moving beyond the boundedness of place though, does not make place obsolete, for as Arturo Escobar suggests, being place-based is not the same as being place-bound”.

In the collective portrayal of a group of individuals as depicted in my work, there is the immediate assumption conferred upon them as a community, but this illusion of a sameness or group identity is imagined and thus their perceived union could be misleading. The viewer entering the exhibition space would likely assume that these individuals constitute a ‘real’ Nigerian community in Nigeria or in the Nigerian diaspora even though Anderson points out that in imagined communities “members may never meet” (Anderson in Ashcroft et al 2006:124). (Many of my sitters do not know each other, even though they form part of an imagined Nigerian community in Grahamstown). In my paintings, I seem to confer or create a certain sense of community in my representation of my fellow ‘foreigners’ and this made me question my complicity in the representation of the subjects. If one examines the context of African representation in colonial anthropology, a valid question arises: who has the right to represent the ‘other’? And how can the ‘other’ be represented? Does my own ‘foreignness’ render my portrayal of ‘foreigners’ more authentic or not? In other words, do our somewhat mutual experiences of ‘foreignness’ create more of a sense of community, or is this irrelevant?

2.2 The ‘Home’ Imagined

Deciding what constitutes a national identity presented a peculiar problem in the selection of my sitters to paint. For instance my initial criteria for choosing Nigerian nationals for this project excluded people who are recently naturalized citizens and who did not possess ‘valid’ claims to Nigeria as ‘home’ or place of origin. I looked to paint ‘*Omo ile*’ whose claim I regarded to be ‘authentic’. Michael Neocosmos (2010: 4) complicates the idea of authenticity in relation to nationalism; he argues that “the nation or the concept of nationality is produced, not simply given, it is made – ‘imagined’— from the actions of men, women and people in general, a ‘subjective political process of becoming’”. Attempting to establish scope for my work, the original objective was to solely paint portrait images of Nigerian immigrants resident in Grahamstown, South Africa. However, upon considering certain theoretical concerns of nationalism such as the ‘insider/outsider’ discourse, I incorporated paintings of individuals of other nationalities to complicate the idea of ‘otherness’ that often reinforces difference and autonomy. Through my process as a painter I aimed to disrupt the ‘us versus them’ mindset as well as common attitudes of nationalism.

Recently while in conversation with a Zimbabwean friend (Fig. 11.1), he remarked, “People say I look Nigerian”. While I did not share his opinion, the realization that subconsciously I incongruously reevaluated his appearance was important. It affirmed I had a constructed notion of a ‘Nigerian’ in my mind and felt certain that he did not appear to match ‘my’ representation of this classification of peoples. Are the facial or bodily features of sub-Saharan peoples discernibly different? Even if they were, it is more important to question why we are so invested in distinguishing these differences with a benchmark such as geography and

nationality. The idea that my Zimbabwean friend ‘looked like’ a Nigerian, as was suggested by his friends, provoked my inquiry, and spurred my interest towards determining this perhaps undeterminable objective.

Woodward (1997:1) addresses the probable discords in identity positions stating, “Identities in the contemporary world derive from a multiplicity of sources—from nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, gender, and sexuality—sources which may conflict in the construction of identity positions and lead to contradictory fragmented identities”. As we have seen throughout history the exclusionary categorization of the ‘other’ encourages certain attitudes and acts that privilege ‘race’, ethnicity and/or citizenship of one over the other, and dress the ‘unknown’ in a certain way. According to Zhang (1991:133), “in history different nations and cultures often regarded one another as ‘savage’ and ‘barbarian’; and this mutual demonization (or idealization) implicated an unconscious psychological projection of the self upon others”. “The savage stranger’ becomes the alter ego of the thinker, the projected self and the ‘mask’” (Kristeva in Zhang 1991:133). Woodward (1997:4) believes, “Sameness and differences are marked both symbolically through representational systems and socially through the inclusion or exclusion of certain groups of people”. For example, in considering a ‘social myth’ of difference, the South African derogatory name for non-South Africans, *Makwerekwere*⁹ in some narratives and discourses suggests that some people have physical features that distinguish them from indigenous South Africans. Features such as darker skin tone, broad foreheads, strong jaw lines and even distinct body odor are supposed

⁹ It is interesting to note that this term is largely used for non-South African Africans and not for other ‘foreigners’. It is for this reason that xenophobia in South Africa is sometimes referred to Afrophobia, as it is largely the fear of other Africans.

idiosyncrasies, which invariably validate the social exclusion of these people. Martin Murray (2003:447) speaks about the figure of the “spectral alien”, *Makwerekwere*, *Magribanga*, and *Grimba* – insulting names directed at the unwanted foreigner – are the subject categories through which those who harbor xenophobic fears incorporate immigrants into their apocalyptic discourses of urban decay, collapse, and danger”. Although there seem to be no credible accounts of the origin of the name, the term is considered a categorical marker and local stigma for the ‘unwanted foreigner’ and references certain characteristic qualities of non-Southern African people including the ‘strange’ dialects of the foreigner that often employ consonants of ‘r’ and ‘k’ sounds hence the ‘makwerekwere’ designation. The question that comes to mind in the constructed image of *Makwerekwere* is whether or not it is plausible to distinctly identify a ‘black’ foreigner. The belief that identification can be visually determined by evaluating idiosyncrasies that characterize the foreigner is in reality folly and a paradox.

The issue of a fixed identity is complicated by performance theorist Peggy Phelan (1993:7) who writes, “Self identity needs to be continually reproduced and reassured precisely because it fails to secure belief. It fails because it cannot rely on a verifiably continuous history. One’s own origin is both ‘real’ and ‘imagined’”. Individuals choose their identities as nationals with claims to place by birth and/or paternal origin. Numerous post-colonial commentators dispute the significance of nationalism and its parochial nature in light of the rhetoric of globalization but Neocosmos maintains that the dilemma of nationalism and its implications has more to do with how the concept is continually exploited by the state and the bourgeoisie as a means to preserving authority over its masses. Neocosmos (2010:3) postulates that, “Nationalism is not an obsolete conception, far from it. The point is to distinguish it analytically and politically

from the state itself”. He argues that its emancipatory purpose in the aftermath of colonial independence remains relevant in the face of “globalization where empire has simply taken on new forms but has in no way disappeared” (Neocosmos 2010:2). The state fears foreigners because they complicate notions of nationality by standing in between geography—they create an unwelcomed distinction which often threatens to fracture the ‘oneness’ and unity that nationalism aspires to achieve¹⁰ (Kristeva 1997:39). The presence of foreigners subverts the concept of nationalism and the exclusionary structures that it is built upon.

2.3 Stereotyping – Othering and the One from ‘That Place’

—And what about origins? Tell us about them, it must be fascinating!” Blundering fools never fail to ask the question. Their surface kindness hides the sticky clumsiness that so exasperates the foreigner. The foreigner, precisely—like a philosopher at work—does not give the same weight to “origins” as common sense does (Kristeva 1991:29).

Phrases like “Nigerian born”, “South African born American” or “Ghanaian born Italian” in reference to particular individuals in the newspapers and other information media (including exhibition texts) are examples of the common framing and categorizations of individuals and identities prevalent in a world where the rhetoric of globalization contradicts the reality of exclusionary matters of ‘race’, ethnicity, nationalism and gender. Expressions like “I am Nigerian” often precede other introductory information about my identity when forming new relationships and acquaintances particularly in the context of a foreign country like South Africa. I have observed that often times it relieves the curiosity of individuals in determining

¹⁰ The national anthem employs terminologies such as ‘compatriots’, ‘fatherland’, ‘motherland’ and other familial qualifiers and is arguably the most vital paradigm of all other devices or symbolic markers according to Woodward (1997:12) through which the institutionalization of nation-hood is made ‘real’. It employs repetition in establishing the exclusive membership of a people as nationals whereupon its continual declaration reinforces the belief and claim to membership.

the ‘strange’ accent that is obvious when one speaks, preventing the ever more familiar question ~~“where are you from?”~~ Perhaps this common framing and partitioning of peoples arises from the desire to pin people down, to evaluate and test predetermined stereotypes. According to Durrheim stereotypes are ~~“rooted in a socially shared discourses”~~ and he considers two ways stereotypes are tested,

The ‘kernel of truth’ argues that stereotypes reflect actual traits that members of different groups possess: Blacks are, in fact criminal, Coloured violent, and Whites and Indians racist. Another set of theories claims that stereotypes are biased representations that do not reflect the truth, but are prejudiced or ideological images of groups. However there are problems with both of these theories as attempts to tell whether stereotypes are true or not are fraught with difficulty. The problem with both of these truth and bias theories stem from the fact that stereotypes do not apply to all members of a category...

They are practical ways of sense making that develop over time. These discourses are primarily collective ways of acting that are best evaluated in terms of their social use and function rather than their truth or accuracy. In these terms stereotypes allow people to position themselves as group members in contrast to other groups, to explain and justify relations between groups and to account for themselves as individual participants or group members (Durrheim et al 2011:113).

Durrheim goes on to establish that often times stereotypes associated with groups are diverse and contradictory: ~~“They are based on ‘perception’ and are ‘ways of seeing’ that are either accurate or inaccurate”~~. The way we see the other speaks of representation and the psychological strategy people employ when attempting to describe the ‘other’— a focal point of my work. According to Zeitlyn, ~~“the human eye discriminates in ways in which cameras do not, and which a painting can replicate. As is well documented in psychology, the mental processes of perception are complex and not straightforward. We do not experience the visual in a direct act of apperception”~~ (Zeitlyn 2010:401). Zeitlyn (2010:399) considers the divisive nature of nationalism,

Kin terms and national and ethnic labels divide the social world into manageable groups of people with whom we can have very different affective and social relationships... we only see individual tokens (people), not generic ethnicities (and yet perception of ethnicity is widespread if not universal).

Helen Pristed (2008:24) writes in her essay “The Concept of Identity”, “In these postmodern times we might as well replace the concept of identity with that of identification... Identifying requires an agent”. In this process of identification, the idiosyncratic marker is ‘difference’ or the notion of ‘othernesses’, which can be social, political or cultural and is framed in terms of dialect, nationality, ethnicity, or religious affinity. Passport photographs or mug shots (frontal, cropped photographs of the face) which recall the history of passbooks or the *Dompas* during apartheid, mirrors the practice of police or immigration officials searching and checking the legality of the immigrant’s stay in South Africa. The ‘black’ foreigner is often stereotyped as a refugee with no plans to return ‘home’ and as such is viewed as a threat to the limited availability of work, while the ‘white’ foreigner is assumed to be a “tourist” (Mathers and Landau 2007:524). According to Danso & McDonald (2001:128), “When there are interviews with non-nationals in the press they tend to be white tourists or volunteers who are represented as benefiting the country by their presence”. The individuals I refer to as Nigerians in diaspora are actively engaged in their host communities or ‘new found homes’ as students, professionals, and commercial traders who have to endure the stigma associated with the activities of the ‘delinquents’, who deal in drugs, human trafficking and fraud commonly known as 419¹¹. Rory Bester investigates the role of local media in perpetuating and criminalizing stereotypes about non-South Africans in his multimedia exhibition on the history of migration in South Africa *Kwere Kwere/Journeys into strangeness* 2000 (Fig. 12). In the popular mind, he points out, “... foreigners are criminals, foreigners are drug dealers,

¹¹ Advance-fee fraud or 419 is the popular term for a Nigerian scam which originated in the early 80s as the oil boom of the 70s declined, the economy suffered repeated military juntas and corruption flourished. It takes its name ‘419’ from section 419 of the Nigerian penal code.

foreigners steal our local women, foreigners spread HIV/Aids, and foreigners take jobs from locals” (Bester 2008: 28).

Having lived in South Africa for the past two years, I have been bombarded with the ‘oppression of the image’, that is, the South African media image of Nigerians. My imaginary global citizenship fostered by the rhetoric of globalization was promptly dispelled by what I see to be a media ‘fixation with citizenship’ (Bester 2008:26). Soon evident to me was the fact that representation and identification were interpolated in the received impression of the immigrant in South Africa.

My application of the term ‘representation’ in this context is based on ‘selective processes’ that define, classify, name and order social reality. Edward Said ascertains that, ‘No representation, whether visual or textual or verbal are neutral, rather they all involve some act of violence and de-contextualization to the subject being represented’ (Said in Desai 2000: 115). Perhaps we can adequately ‘identify’ the ‘Nigerian’ but can we adequately ‘represent’ him or her? Through portraiture I metaphorically play with representation as a means of producing ‘faithful’ copies of the ‘real’. By implication I am concerned with the act of looking and representation. On the one hand the portraits are filled with subtle social and psychological insights, but on the other hand the images reflect the way in which we at times construct porous images of ‘other’ people. A highlight of social attitudes to an imaginary difference and assumed idiosyncrasies of the ‘foreigner’ is the ‘spectacle’ of today’s multicultural society (Debord in Trier 2007:69).

2.4 Afro-Xenophobia – ‘Aliens act’

Ansah (2002:22) considers the global imbalance in human migration from the giving‘ nation’s perspective, based on a key assumption that producing highly skilled personnel is expensive and usually financed substantially by public funds. Thus, the loss of these people through migration represents a "gift" from a poor country that cannot afford it to a rich country that does not need it”. Economic conditions have ensured specialized migrant labour is pulled towards stable and viable countries in developed and vibrantly‘ developing countries where there are opportunities to operate and function in a professional environment with a clear line of career development where their skills can be nurtured, challenged and invested.¹² South Africa’s status as a leading industrial, political and economic state in Africa contributes to its new attraction as a migrant destination¹³. However, the fractured dynamic in social relations in the influx of skilled foreigners into an economy like post-apartheid South Africa with its still largely impoverished majority black population led to the outbreak of xenophobic violence in South Africa in 2008.

Xenophobic relations between 'indigenous people' and 'foreigners' are global occurrences and experiences vary in accordance to factors that are mostly economically or at times politically

¹² Between 1985-93 under the military regime of Gen. Babangida, Nigeria witnessed —massive emigration of Nigerians to other lands” while just a year before, Enebeli Elebuwa, a Nigerian actor famously known as Andrew‘, in a contemplative monologue and in a distinctively American‘ accent played/acted in a government sponsored televised campaign as a man fed up with the infrastructure and economic state of Nigeria and wanting to check out‘ of the country but upon advice from an elderly man he was charged to remain and help government build the nation. This campaign ran at a time that government authorities feared the brain drain‘ and an intellectual migration of highly skilled and qualified personnel. According to Nworah, —while the T.V series became popular with Nigerians, especially because of its use of humour, it however failed to dissuade Nigerians from leaving in droves because the government at the time did not match action with words, as the economy continued on its downward slide” (Nworah 2005).

¹³ South Africa: Policy in the Face of Xenophobia (Jonathan Crush:2008) [Online article] Available: <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USfocus/display.cfm?ID=689>

influenced. The South African incident in 2008 brought my attention to accounts of the Ghana/Nigeria relations of the 1970s and 1980s. The "Aliens' compliance order" promulgated by Dr. K. A. Busia of Ghana in November 1969 (his first month after election) decreed that all illegal aliens be expelled from the country at a time when the economic instability was blamed on the presence of immigrants from across west Africa and predominantly Nigeria. Ironically, according to Brydon (1985:564),

In the long run Dr Busia's expulsions may have had a mild ameliorative effect on the temper of Ghanaians, but it is highly debatable whether any economic advantage was gained. It is, in fact, possible to interpret the effects of the expulsions in Ghana in adverse terms since, when the aliens left, they took with them capital and in addition, a large part of the Ghanaian trading nexus was destroyed.

As expected the "Aliens' compliance order" caused ill feelings between Ghana and its West African neighbors and perhaps accounted for the expulsion of Ghanaians believed to be illegal migrants from Nigeria in 1983 during the "austerity budget" years at a period of economic and political uncertainty of President Shehu Shagari. The mutual "demonization" and "scapegoating" of the immigrant between both state governments is well documented by Brydon (1985:570) who writes that, "the apparent prominence given to aliens as criminals in the Nigerian press coupled with the fact that other Ghanaians were prominent in posts as teachers at all levels, provided a political scapegoat". Ghana-must-go¹⁴ became slang term given to the Chinese-made polythene bags that the unwanted foreigners used to hold and convey their possessions on their unsavory trek "home".

As pointed out earlier in this chapter, the selection of individuals based upon ideas of national identity can be a futile and relatively flawed process influenced by narcissistic paradigms of

¹⁴ The name "Ghana-must-go bags" came about because a large number of refugees conveyed their belongings with the Chinese-made polythene bags during the deportation of Ghanaian illegal aliens from Nigeria in mid-1984.

essentialism. For example, nationality includes naturalization and, picturing a particular scenario, I asked myself whether or not I would paint someone who was originally of Ghanaian descent but had recently become a naturalized Nigerian citizen, or a South African adopted and raised by Nigerian parents. None of these scenarios actually occurred during my process and for sake of scope I initially assumed selection criteria based upon my sitters possessing Nigerian identity documents/passports as well as the individuals' admissions to identifying themselves as Nigerians. I later abandoned these criteria in favour of broadening and complicating my work with the inclusion of non-Nigerian nationals primarily to undo what began to appear like a reinforcement of distinctions and exclusivity rather than a rejection of it.

2.5 The Ghana-Must-Go Series

Through my Masters painting project I have gotten to know a host of Nigerian immigrants who are both students and staff members of Rhodes University as well as other professionals and traders living and working in the city of Grahamstown, South Africa. There was relative harmony in recognizing ourselves as migrants, and the ethnic differences that exist at home were put aside. The alacrity of acquaintanceship since my arrival in Grahamstown brought to mind questions I began to consider regarding underlying factors informing my relationship: What informed our friendship or camaraderie in this context and to what degree was being Nigerian influential? Had I become more patriotic than I was prior to this experience of exile, albeit temporary? Upon return to Nigeria, will the perception of my identity as a Nigerian have been affected or changed?

Preoccupied with these considerations, I looked to explore the question of identity and was drawn to the idea of passport photographs on travel documents, since this was the symbol of my identity and claim to any form of presence as a foreigner in South Africa¹⁵. Therefore the interest to position myself as the ‘_non-Nigerian’ looking at the ‘_Nigerian’ brought my attention to portraiture as it provided the best means to the ‘_othering’ of my Nigerian sitters. For a moment I was capable of being incongruent, to scrutinize them in a way that reminded me of the kind of occasional scrutiny Nigerians encounter at foreign embassies when seeking travel visas to leave.

Instrumental to this study was the fact that I painted all my subjects from life and there was a prolonged process of scrutiny and interaction in the production of their portraits. Painting from life is preferred because it lends itself to an ‘_unstable effect of representation’ that perhaps only life studies allow—which I believed to be of visual significance in the interpretation/description of the subjects. It allowed me address the function of the imagination in the in-betweens of observing/ looking at the model image and the mark-making process, analyzing the degree of conscious abstract mark making, schemata, distortions and subsequent adjustments entailed in the production of a portrait from life.

I began with the portrait of *Emmanuel* who is an MBA student at Rhodes but also a security guard¹⁶ (a.k.a bouncer) for local clubs at night (Fig. 13.1). I drew inspiration from the prevalent image of the ‘_Nigerian’ which I obtained from South African media (television and

¹⁵ From a personal experience my international passport was frequently required to access any kind of public and/or social services in South Africa and this constantly reminded me of my status.

¹⁶ Especially stereotypical of Nigerians is that they often take jobs as security personnel for night clubs, an especial stereotype in the Gauteng area and suburbs of Johannesburg and Pretoria.

newsprints) and the ‘criminalizing stereotype’ of the foreigner according to Rory Bester as earlier mentioned in my analysis of *Makwerekwere* (Bester 2008:26). My considerations then shifted to portrayals that were less imbued with my own subjectivity in my rendition of *Prof. Adesina* (Fig. 14.1) a scholar at Rhodes University, who I captured in his distinctively West African attire with cap. His demeanor and facial expression suggested a ‘no-nonsense’ personality that he was famously known for. It was at this point that ideas that would give the portrait images a degree of symbolism began to play on my mind as I compared them with the rigorously embedded security markings (watermarks) on passport documents (Fig. 15:1,2,3) as well as other symbols like a coat of arms, national flags etc. A symbol and marker instilled with meaning inspired my use of checkered patterns I borrowed from the notorious Ghana-must-go bags¹⁷. These patterns created a banner-like effect and special flatness that recall some of the portrait works of artist Kehinde Wiley for his 2008 *World Stage: Africa, Lagos-Dakar* exhibition, such as *Matar Mbaye* (Fig. 16.1) and *Ibrahima Sacko* (Fig. 16.2). Wiley characteristically fills his portraits with patterned background (and foreground) that allude to ‘African’ and ‘Asian’ fabrics that Yinka Shonibare similarly references and subverts. (I discuss this further in Chapter Three). While Wiley and Shonibare challenge the association of fabric with specific places, the checkered patterns on my portraits emphasise the universality of the pattern on the Chinese-made bags, which are associated with movement and the instability of place through migration. The Ghana-Must-Go bag’s popularity and notoriety as a correlative symbol of immigrant/refugee identity complicates any attempt to pin down the identity of my sitters as they could be nationals of any country. In some of the portraits

¹⁷ These particular checkered patterns are recognizably the most commonly available versions for sale and distribution in Nigeria and aptly named Ghana-must-go.

produced, the often-variegated pattern has been blown up to such a degree that the checks are not easily recognizable, while in others it has retained its distinctive checkered appearance. Zimbabwean born artist Dan Halter, who now lives in South Africa, also explores the use of the Ghana-Must-Go bags in his work *Space Invaders III* (2008) (Fig. 17: 1,2,3). Halter employs over 300 units of the bags known in parts of South Africa as the “Zimbabwe bag”¹⁸ and using the 8-bit space invader motif¹⁹ he produced a video piece in a Johannesburg taxi rank, a popular port of entry for foreigners or *Kwerekwere*.

The notion of ‘neutrality’ typified by passport images or photos²⁰ was deliberately quoted in my portrayal of the subjects—a particular common understanding of formal identification documents is that facial expression is absent and replaced by supposed neutrality. A deadpan mien of the face is understood to enhance recognition of the sitter but accurate representation was only a small part of the objective of my effort, instead, I looked to capture the instance of a transitory moment with a relative degree of integrity in registering semblance.

Other works that materialized from this series of portraits titled *Ghana-Must-Go* include, *Dr. Eric* (Fig. 18.1), *Josh* (Fig. 19.1), *Steven* (Fig. 20.1), and *Dotun* (a self Portrait) (Fig. 21.1). My subsequent series of portraits titled *Outsiders* interrogates the ‘alien’ stereotype associated

¹⁸ “Zimbabwe Bag” in South Africa, “Ghana-Must-Go” in Nigeria, “Guyanese Samsonite” in the Caribbean or “Bangladeshi Bags” in the UK are some of the names associated to the Chinese made Vinyl bags depending on demography according to Dan Halter who is a ‘white’ Zimbabwean artist based in South Africa. [Online] Available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpH7MWMagMQ>

¹⁹ “Space Invader” was one of the earliest arcade games where aliens are ‘shot down’ originally designed and developed by Timohiro Nishikado (1978). Halter uses the stereotype of the ‘space invader’ or the alien foreigner in a playful way to reference local attitudes towards migrants and the xenophobic violence of 2008.

²⁰ As a young boy I always wanted to smile in my passport photograph because I felt it improved my general appearance but I was not allowed to do so and this I believed was the norm. The face is said to be identifiable when it is ‘expressionless’ and this remains so particularly in formal passport photographs for applications and official use in Nigeria.

with the notion of 'dark Africa' and the 'strange', themes that I discuss further in the Chapter Three. In this chapter I also unpack the theme of the 'alien' further in the oeuvre of diasporan artist Yinka Shonibare.

Chapter Three: Representing Othernesses

To recognize the stereotype as an ambivalent mode of knowledge and power demands a theoretical and political response that challenges deterministic or functionalist modes of conceiving of the relationship between discourse and politics, and questions dogmatic and moralistic positions on the meaning of oppression and discrimination...reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the *identification* of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *processes of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse (Homi Bhabha 1983:18).

Prior to the production of the portrait series, *Ghana-Must-Go* and *The Outsiders* I was concerned by the issue of my ‘_positionality’ (Desai 2000). It was a matter of concern that the works produced have integrity as I was conscious I am producing the image of ‘_real’ individuals for public display. Notwithstanding the consent of the individuals painted and their awareness of my intention, it still initially concerned me, as at times it felt disconcertingly exploitative and intrusive not only to the individuals’ privacy but also of mine. The subjects individually appeared to me as very private people and their classification and identification as ‘_immigrants’, ‘_refugees’ or ‘_alien’ was uncomfortable²¹. As a result their submission to participate and sit for the portrait sessions intrigued me and the experience renewed my appreciation for what I would describe as ‘_representational accountability’ which I considered a crucial objective.

²¹ Traditionally, groups classified as ‘_immigrant’ or ‘_migrants’ denote the problematic space they occupy in their host country as a result of their foreign ancestry. However, the term appears limited when it is applied to immigrant groups that occupy a more powerful economic status than the local peoples thus as a result, when viewed in context of South Africa and its majority black and predominantly underprivileged population this classification may appear skewed. The notion often implies the stereotypical image of the ‘_refugee’ which speaks of lack or impoverishment, and considering that majority of the individuals painted possess study visas as foreign or international students, their classification are generally recognized as ‘_aliens’.

3.1 Positionality: Gauging my Complicity

In the past, the production of commissioned portrait works was a relatively straightforward process for me since the task at hand would primarily involve capturing semblance and in certain cases, applying of aestheticisms and ‘controlled’ improvements, alterations and/or corrections to the original face. In these portraits however, there was artistic license to represent the sitters as I deemed fit and in line with the concepts and narratives I hoped to explore. To re-present is to present a subject again and within the framework of fine art, and it often implies a ‘mediated reality’. Perhaps it bestows a degree of power and accountability upon the creator which has the potential to shape our (the creator and the spectators’) understanding of reality – factors when adequately considered should not be taken faintly. The onus was in uniting the perception of my subjects with their representational copy.²²

Representation is influenced by culture and it has the capacity to shape culture and mould society’s values, attitudes, perceptions and behaviors. According to Desai (2000:115),

Representation is a historically determined construction that is mediated by social, ideological, and cultural processes and not as a reflection of reality. Although many forms of representations, including the visual, are presented as fact or reality, they are based on selective processes that define, order, classify, and name social reality.

²² There are existing restrictions on the subject matter of representation in society, limiting the sort of representational signs permissible as well as boundaries that limit spectatorship or viewership of particular representations. For example, motion picture rating systems globally, use the M and R for rating films and restricting viewership which can be considered one of societies attempt to check and modify representation and promote particular sets of values and ideologies. What makes representation complex and hard to contain is that it is read in more than one particular way and one’s subjective position can override the original intentions of the producer/creator of the representation. In psychology, individuals operate and view the world subjectively and ideas of reality differ accordingly. Kushara talks about a subjective reality where all of the things, concepts and “truths” in the universe change between individuals, meaning that each person lives in his or her own world. “We recognize the outer world through our systems of seeing and understanding it. These systems involve senses of reality, manners of communication and ways in which we see other life-forms” (Kushara 2001:302). This is because each person interprets the data they receive differently.

According to Zeitlyn (2010:399), –Accepting the importance of social construction in social science does not mean that our work is free from constraint by _external reality“”. Images do not portray reality in an unbiased way with 100% accuracy, but rather present versions of reality influenced by culture and people’s habitual thoughts and actions. I look at stereotypical representations and popular notions of the _alien‘ at play in social and post-modern art discourses. The aim is to expound on a few notable areas of interest stirring the production of my practice. Dipti Desai (2000:115) raises a similar concern in his essay *Imagining Difference: the politics of representation*:

The reconstructive move in multicultural art education acknowledges the partiality of all forms of representation, and thus highlights the ways knowledge about culture is shaped in historically and culturally specific terms. This move suggests that we should ask not: how can we accurately or authentically represent another culture? A more appropriate question would be, what can we know about another culture? [...] I call for the inclusion of a politics of location and positionality when teaching about cultures other than one's own.

3.2 The ‘Aliens’ in Blomkamp’s *District 9*

In this chapter, I consider Carina Ray’s critique of the 2009 sci-fi and action thriller film, *District 9* by South African born director Neil Blomkamp and examine certain representational narratives in the film that raised eyebrows particularly in its _dark‘ depiction of Nigerians, questioning Blomkamp’s positionality in the adaptation of _Africans‘ which I will link with Okwui Enwezor’s view of the West’s –Afropessimistic” image of Africa. Although the film *District 9* aka *D9* received global acclaim from international audiences, I suggest that perhaps Blomkamp’s representation of _Nigerians‘ in the movie bolsters popular apperception and notions of African _othering‘. It begs the anthropological question with regard to the postmodernist discourses: How can one represent the _other“? The 2009 film, *District 9*,

controversially portrayed 'Nigerian' characters in a rather unflattering manner. The film elicited a response from the Nigerian information minister Dora Okunliyi, who tried to ban the film from cinemas in Nigeria, and it gave rise to numerous online articles that discussed the premise of art, culture and representation²³. Similarly Carina Ray's (2009:32) article took the film to task for its derogatory treatment of Nigerians:

The film unduly picks on Nigerians as violent gangsters, blood thirsty cannibals, murderous arms dealers, and prostitutes who trade in inter-species sex.... What is so strikingly egregious about *District 9* is there is not a single neutral, let alone positive, representation of Nigerians in the film.

Forms of stereotyping and acts of xenophobia result from the identification of foreigners as 'different' often based on predetermined and skewed opinions of 'otherness'. The film succeeds in capturing this dark image of Africa, the sort described by Enwezor (2006:12) as, the 'specters' of the imaginary Western conscience. The question I consider pertinent in Blomkamp's representation of 'Africa' is that of his 'positionality' which one can argue is complicit with Western narratives of the "obvious backwardness that plagues the continent and her peoples" (Enwezor 2006:11). Considering the importance of positionality in representation, Desai (2000:114) suggests that, "although all representations are partial truths", they are always "positional truths which are linked to history, power, and dominance within a global context mediated by economic, political, ideological, and cultural processes". In the film, we observe his attempts at portraying a social commentary on the banality of prejudice by sympathizing with the pitiless treatment of stereotypical sci-fi alien characters and also how he succeeds in establishing humankind's inhumanity. However, on the other

²³ Nigerians 'offended' by sci-fi film. BBC News [Online] Available: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8264180.stm> [Accessed on 20 March 2010].

hand, we observe his contradiction in the pernicious objectification and portrayal of true-life aliens (Nigerians) as embodiments of evil. Ray (2009:32) identifies this,

Blomkamp draws on his country's troubled apartheid and post-apartheid history to address the interrelated issues of xenophobia, segregation, poverty, displacement, and abuse of state power, yet in fundamental and irreparable ways, *D9* undermines its own possible best intentions in its presentation of these pressing issues ... *D9*'s aliens, derisively called prawns because of their crustacean-like appearance, are more human than the Nigerians! So too are the Afrikaans characters who are portrayed not just as evil doers but also as people of complete range of human emotions. At every turn in the film, I kept waiting for Blomkamp to redeem his Nigerian characters' humanity and by extension my own humanity, but he never did.

What impression is the average film viewer left with after the special effects have worn off? And what's at stake for the Africa and African in all of this?

At present in South Africa, I identify the focus on negative news reportage in media²⁴ particularly concerning events in other parts of Africa. In equal manner, I observe this imaging of the *other* is not peculiar to South Africa and is simply an iteration of a model in global news reportage by institutions like CNN and BBC of events in Africa. Enwezor (2006:11) supposes, "Most reasonable observers would agree that Africa fares poorly in the lens of the global media industry and the twenty-four-hour news cycle that drives today". Okwui Enwezor's exhibition catalogue, *Snap Judgments*, explicitly examines the global representation of Africa in what he terms "Afro Pessimism",

Africa is always perched on a precipice, on the threshold between something and nothingness, between survival and negativity of life cycles...It could be said without exaggeration that Afro pessimism is as old as the invention of Africa as the darkest of all places in human history...this is often based on the belief that "nothing good ever happens in Africa"; that her peoples possess nothing of value for the advancement of humanity. The media is filled with this pernicious objectification.

²⁴ This focus on negativity in news reportage in Nigeria is likewise the norm about events South Africa. Perhaps one can say internationally the image of life in South African is one of crime and danger or on the contrary of natural wild life whereas that of Nigeria would be of corruption, fraud, filth and disease (Enwezor 2006).

Enwezor (2006:12) believes Africa requires a kind of “counter-reporting driven by [an] informed, balanced approach to writing and picturing Africa”. The crime of Blomkamp’s adaptation not only reinforces local stereotypes of the “Ngerian” but also a global stereotype of Africa especially when one considers the extant and extent of *D9*’s success internationally. Representation has capacity to read as “truth”, which time and again serves in reinforcing attitudes that may inform and may be informed by prejudice.²⁵ A more recent analogy of the narrative positioning of subject and portrayer is highlighted in Enwezor’s analysis of Kevin Carter’s *Sudanese Child*²⁶ (1993) photograph (Fig.22.1). Although acknowledging the image of the starving Sudanese toddler trying to reach a feeding center helped in sensitizing the global public to the reality of the famine in Sudan, it paradoxically presented a “wrenching image” of Africa to the international community. Enwezor raises a relevant question in regard to the morality and ethical concerns of representation of Africa:

Central to the questions raised by images of calamity, beyond the immediate sorrow of witnessing dreadful scenes of the emptying of African life, is the relationship between photographer and subject. This question loomed large in the reception and discussion of Carter’s Sudanese child. What is the photographer’s ethical responsibility to the vulnerable subject? [...] These questions are raised here not only in relation to the image but in recognition of a broader debate directed at reaching an equilibrium between pictorial concern and violence in representation (Enwezor 2006:18).

²⁵ Notions that things are much safer in Europe and America are examples of common assumptions. Perhaps this was the reason for the shock that followed the recent event of the London riots that was blamed on the actions of jobless youths and foreigners and hints from blogs and news agents attributed the week-long looting and violence that ensued as perpetuated by “African” illegal migrants. African immigrants were tagged as culprits and victims of the violence. [Online] Available: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/europe/united-kingdom/110809/london-riots-police-david-cameron>

²⁶ The photograph by South African born free-lance photographer Kevin Carter won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for feature photography. It depicted the image of a starving Sudanese girl making her way to a feeding center flanked by a waiting/predatory vulture first published in The New York Times, March 26, 1993. Although Carter claimed to have chased away the vulture, the future of the child was never confirmed.

Perhaps one may argue that an adaptation of a sci-fi flick such as *D9* should be taken for what it is—a fictional narrative of a story set in Africa. However, looking at the issue in a manner such as this would fail to acknowledge the scope of its impact on what is the fragile image of Africa already debased by the works of earlier Western thinkers and writers like Joseph Conrad in his acclaimed but controversial book *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Hegel's *The Philosophy of History* (1956), Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979) amongst others. All of whom have painted Africa in a pessimistic light and promoted the 'darkness' of Africa and Africans as mostly possessing some kind of innate dysfunctional quality and nature of 'the place and its peoples'. Perhaps the success of these portraits of Africa is proof of the global acceptance that these are in fact true and authentic representation of things African.

3.3 'Africanness': Playing with Difference.

Looking at the works of British/Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare and his carefully considered approach to the issue of representation of the 'African', one observes his playful meandering of the subject matter. Yinka Shonibare's works explore the ambivalence of exile and Western discernment of Africa and the construction of 'authentic' African identities. According to cultural critic Kobena Mercer (2008:7) in his book *Exiles, Diasporas and Strangers*,

Where migration and travel alter the outlook of the traveler and diversify the metropolitan environments in which relocated communities make their homes, the assumption that the nation-state is merely a neutral 'container' for artistic and cultural production is cast into doubt. Seen in this light, previously minor strands in the received account of modernism and post-modernism, such as African American aesthetics or 'black' British art practices of the 1980's, do not simply demand a more inclusive narrative but a comprehensive re-conceptualization of the analytical tools through which the objects and materials of art historical study are examined and interpreted.

Yinka Shonibare was amongst the ‘black’ British practitioners of the 1980’s that wholly engaged the re-conceptualizations of the analytical tools of historical studies and challenged the cultural interpretation that ensued as referenced above by Mercer. In an account of Shonibare’s return from Lagos to London as a teenager, Olu Oguibe (2004:37-38) examines the artistic constraints placed upon artists in Africa and the African diaspora in what he refers to as the “distracting fictions of difference”:

He spent his years in the British art academy resisting and defying the perpetual demand for difference, struggling to refuse and refute the orthodoxies of his supposed peculiarity. Rather than produce art that represented or signified an elsewhere, as he was required to, an art that separated him from the rest and lent credulity to what he considered distracting fictions of difference, he made art that spoke instead to his affinities with the rest.

Viewed as ‘outsiders’, African artists are often expected to posit some sort of ‘difference’ in order for their art to be considered valid to the Western art establishments. Shonibare’s installations and paintings metaphorically entangle Europe and Africa by playfully deconstructing certain colonial constructed ‘facts’ of cultural identities formed upon the othering of ‘Africans’. Which perhaps is consequential to the obsession in international art practices and establishments with what is considered ‘different’ and the perennial expectation and *raison d’être* for ‘authenticity’ in relation to the other. By using European- and Asian-produced fabrics popularly called Dutch wax prints and stereotypically considered to be of ‘African’ origin because of their popularity in Africa, Shonibare demonstrates the West’s socio-cultural construction of an exoticised ‘African’ identity, and draws attention to the futility and cultural confusion in the search for authenticity and distinctions ‘in-between’ cultures.

In his works; *Alien Obsessives, Mum, Dad and Kids* 2000 (Fig.23.1) a quartet of stereotypical space alien family portrays the complexity of identity appropriations in a contemporary households. Perhaps, this work describes the complexity of his dyad as a British National born to Nigerian parenthood. In its most simplified reading one sees that Shonibare expresses diversity in familial context. In *Scramble for Africa* 2003 (Fig.23.2) Shonibare depicts 14 mannequins representing Western statesmen as they sit around a table to carve out their share of Africa and defining its borders. Paradoxically this act is performed without their heads. *Spacewalk* 2002 (Fig.23.3), reveals suspended astronauts costumed in his signature “African fabric”, perhaps he attempts to provoke a question, are these African astronauts? The ‘African’ fabrics used in most of his work are bought in Brixton, London, designed in Indonesia and industrially manufactured by the Dutch for West African markets where they were subsequently adopted as a result of their popularity. Shonibare’s bi-cultural upbringing was fundamental in explaining his artistic impulse to question the pressure of his dualist identity (Gilroy 1993:97). Although he was born in England, his partial upbringing in Nigeria is significant and as a result his oeuvre characteristically suggests a paradox that one is able to simultaneously embody alien/other and colonialist/explorer at the same time—a demonstration of the complex power dynamic between racial, social and class groups. In his photographic series, *Diaries of a Victorian Dandy: 14.00 hrs* 1998 (Fig.24.1) we observe a staged performance where Shonibare plays the ‘Dandy’, going through a series of routines associated with dandy raising notions of the classy alien loungeur and pretender. Shonibare inserts himself in these photographic tableaux and we observe a portrait of a sophisticated²⁷ ‘black man’ in a

²⁷ In my reading of the image, ‘sophistication’ here speaks of bourgeois class and in relation to popular notions of the foreigner/immigrant it breaks a stereotype. It can also read as the easy acceptance and assimilation the privilege social class offers in the context of race relations in a neo capitalist society.

world of aristocracy and at ease in the company of white male and female actors. In some of the scenes he appears to be the centre of attention, while in the second image *Diaries of a Victorian Dandy: 03.00hrs* (Fig.24.1) he fits in and clearly appears comfortably assimilated in a setting that suggests a Victorian utopia. His appropriation of the identity of the ‘white Englishman’ (in costume and pose) makes him the ‘spectacle’, thus complicating the notion of authenticity and identity in regard to the dandy character.

There is a perpetuation of a Western invented Africa; an imagined portrait of Africa which is reproduced in how Africans see one another. Okwui Enwezor (2006:11) argues that;

We choose which Africa suits our intentions, or, as it were, inventions. Each of these choices surely will correspond to a ‘correct’ representation. In this way Africa ceases to exist as a concrete reality. Instead, it becomes phosphorescent [...], a dazzling dark ember in the figment of our imaginations.

According to Enwezor (in Shonibare 1998:15) “it takes an artist like Shonibare to invest today’s questioning of identity with the pathos of its inherent constructedness, along with his continuing investigations of meaning of modern culture, in a world powerfully radicalized by what Arjun Appadurai calls the globalization of mass commodification and mass mediation”. Shonibare clearly displays his understanding of ‘positionality’ in the way his work display a resistance to being pinned down and identified or framed as African or Western and retains a state of ‘in-betweenness’ and an unstable identity that is ‘true’ to himself but devoid of narcissism. Even though Shonibare was born in London and categorized as a British National, he was forced to negotiate a terrain that remained predominantly racist. A space in which prejudices by hegemonic structures and representations of the fallible ‘other’, worked to inform narcissism and intolerance of actual and/or imagined cultural differences. Shonibare (in Farrell 2003:163-166) acknowledges that,

[T]his notion of loyalty to one culture is unrealistic, and in fact very distant from the reality of everyday life [...] In Nigeria I was open to a lot of experiences: I was living in Lagos, a contemporary society, and I could watch American programs and just basically be a citizen of the world, show interest in many things simultaneously—I did not have to choose. Then when I moved to Europe, to my surprise, I had to choose.

Peffer (in Farrell 2003:23) talks about the double consciousness of the diasporan artist and how this initiates a kind of creative enactment and a coming-to-greater-self-awareness that is generated from living in two worlds simultaneously. For Peffer, the diasporan artist's engagement in the transgression of the subject matter of home and exile, need not merely represent two distinct experiences of two different geographic or cultural locales, placing them side-by-side and not saying much else". Furthermore Peffer (in Farrell 2003: 22) argues that it can also be critical of both sides of the spinning coin of identity, by suggesting their intimate (and often painful) fusion". One can argue that it is of relevance to acknowledge the disparity and similarity in perspectives between Shonibare's position as a so-called adopted British citizen contemplating issues of alienation in his work and that of my own. One can argue for an immediate commonality due to his Nigerian heritage and my own position as a Nigerian in South Africa exploring similar subject matter. The parallels lie in the notion of difference" that characterize relationships between the autochthons and foreigners, as described by Olu Oguibe (2004:33) in the text Double Dutch and the Culture Game. He argues that;

[...] England's outsiders excel in understanding the variegations of difference and its layers of ramifications, and especially in the knowledge that even the quarantine of difference to which they are condemned sometimes offers those who are intent on escaping it, the very key for their escape. The door may be narrow and fraught with risks, for to defy and subvert the illogic of difference, often the Outsider must begin with an exaggeration of his own difference (2004:35).

Whereas Shonibare's considerations of the 'illogic of difference' focuses on the negotiations of the Outsider vis-à-vis England or Africa and the West, I consider the Outsider within the context of Africa, in particular the case of the Nigerian migrant in South Africa, especially where most Post-colonial discourse of an African diaspora predominantly focuses on the experiences of the 'African' in exile in Europe and the Americas and overlooks the increasing intra-African diaspora, which remains driven by the same imperialist forces as international diaspora.

3.4 *The Outsiders*

So is a face a source of power? Something that transfixes, or petrifies? Something that gives us orders not to move? That entices us to follow? Is it the unanswerable engine of seduction or destruction? Certainly it is, and it must also be more. A face is a terrifying thing. Perhaps *the* terrifying thing. (James Elkins 1996:170).

The series of portraits I titled *The Outsiders* is influenced by the paradox of cultural othering and plays with the theme of 'darkness' and the constructed notion of Africa as the 'land of darkness' made famous by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). In rendering the subject's faces I was reliant on their salient facial expressions and on capturing that 'momentariness' when one's eyes meet that of an 'other'. The 'familiar' in the strange as applied here is not in terms of 'knowing' the stranger but in recognising the strangeness or identifying the strange in the stranger as when one stereotypes the alien. For effect and emphasis the faces of the sitters are enlarged over fifteen times their full-scale to create an imposing image, which in a way registers their presence as migrants whose presence by virtue of social status would ordinarily be suppressed and negated. This enlargement required careful consideration and assessment of each sitter's distinctive facial configurations. I observed that the degree of success in this approach to registering the sitter's mien spoke more about my

temperaments and working process and can be linked to how seeing changes over time. As much as I aimed to depict their individuality I seemed to always battle with my tendency to portray them as some sort of group. Subjectivity or rather my own ‘positionality’, perhaps as a ‘fellow’ Nigerian, would constantly force my hand in determining the representation. The sessions were very interactive as we were often engaged in conversation, and I found it interesting to note the degree of intimacy the activity formed between myself and the sitter. The process presented an apparent willingness by each individual to open up as they shared a piece of their personalities and history with me. This process of personal exchange prompted a consideration as to whether this interaction was specifically enhanced by the emphasis placed on the exchange of our gaze. Rembrandt Pearle (1857: 45) considers the difficulty of the approach to actualizing a portrait from an animated sitter,

It is comparatively an easy task to paint a striking likeness of a person sitting silent and thoughtful, without emotion; but to catch the expression of the sitter engaged in animated conversation, whether he “sympathizes with the subject” or not, and to mark every part of the countenance with a harmony and unity of sentiment, is only to be expected from the hand and mind of an experienced artist.

As earlier established, I was preoccupied with the stereotype of ‘dark Africa’ and I actively aimed to subvert this notion within my portrayals of the sitters. I dedicated sufficient time and attention to the treatment of the subjects’ eyes as other areas of the face (Fig.25:1, 2). This was intended to capture the intense stare of the sitter as experienced in the studio and “to close the distance between subject and image and image and viewer” (Borgatti and Brilliant 1990:13) — re-creating the same experience in the viewer’s psychological engagement with the portrait where the gaze of the sitter appears to confront the spectator whilst simultaneously inviting the viewer’s scrutiny. For *the Outsider* series, my sitters were *Blessing* (Fig.26.1), *Folake* (Fig.27.1), *Nomusa* (Fig.28.1), *Nkemdilim* (Fig.29.1), *Tope* (Fig.30.1), *Grace* (Fig.31.1),

Elizabeth (Fig.32.1) and *Kemi* (Fig.33.1). Painting from life presented an opportunity to capture an amalgamation of time and the non-fixity of the face in a portrait representation. Pearle (1857: 45) astutely captures the task of the painter and the advantage of painting from life,

The task of the painter is quite another thing—an effort of skill, taste, mind, and judgment—demanding the opportunity of study during many sittings; not only to perform the executive part, to make it a fine work of Art, in form and colour, but to render permanent and transient expressions of character which may be the most agreeable. This requires all the resources of his Art, all his experience in the manipulations of his materials, and in the study of character and expression.

Portraiture can be acknowledged as a process with a great deal of partiality, as the ‘perception’ of ‘other culture’ is sometimes shaped by individual biases which interrogate claims of authenticity in the art of representation. By rendering sitters in a manner where ideas of their persona are subject to the viewer's gaze and deliberations, I provoke questions of ‘otherness’ and ‘stereotypes’. The individuality of the subject is enhanced within the attempt to create ‘sameness’ that is alluded to by my quoting of the identity document photograph format. Each of the subjects are treated in such a way as to highlight their differences, thus negating the notion of the ‘typical’ inherent within the stereotyping of that which is foreign to the self. I look specifically at notions of the ‘other’ and ‘strangeness’ in a contemporary South African context and how this connects to the concept of portraiture and not simply portraiture theory but also the social theory in relation to how people are ‘imaged’. According to Said (in Ashcroft et al 2006:98),

No one is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or Woman, or Muslim, or American are no more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a

moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or black, or western, or oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except reason and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about

Edward Said's assessment of one's propensity to create and discriminate through identities as a conscious process that is a direct consequence of Africa's imperial history is relevant to this study. The psychology of looking and naming in relation to these faces speaks of the 'reality' that we are all participants within the act of forming and feeding this bias. My own practice is concerned with the active denial of biases and stereotypes. Emphasis is placed on the intimacy of the interactions between myself and the subject's of my work. I have taken time to stress the subject's names, as well as highlighting the relationship between myself as mediator, recorder and representer and the sitter as the object of my gaze. The various dynamics involved in this practice contribute to the creation of 'histories' and communities which are neither exclusively 'real' nor are they entirely fictitious. Like all forms of representation they are constructions, constructions I have worked to address and interrogate within my own act of portrayal.

Conclusion

I am fascinated by faces as well as by the notion that one can read a face. In many respects, the lines, marks, scars, wrinkles, creases, expressions and minute details of the face contain pockets of history and clues to personal narrative.

It can be argued that visual representation in the form of the portrait provides one with a tool that allows one to empathise with others even via imagery and without face-to-face contact. The idea of physiognomy was of positive interest to me until I realized that its claim to this form of facial reading was founded upon a conclusive apperception of character which is essentially flawed. One of the things that I have learnt through the act of working from faces is that the face is constantly changing and never static. It is volatile and consistently displays impulse and emotion. Yes, one can read a face and suppose or imagine knowledge of character but this can never be verified or conclusive, and might not be applicable from one moment to another. We are not necessarily who our faces say we are, for in fact we are often unable to categorically name and describe who we really are. This is, in part, what makes the subject of identity so intriguing to me. Identities, like faces, are constantly fluctuating and changing.

Like Kobena Mercer (2008) who explains the identity of the migrant as continuously ~~in~~ "flux", I am of the opinion that the identity of the individual is constantly changing as one consciously or unconsciously appropriates and utilizes influences outside of the self. Beginning with our parents, attitudes are informed, formed and continue their formation throughout one's existence. While essentialism, be it in relation to culture, ethnicity, race or

national identity, ought to be deconstructed, it is, in fact, bolstered by a fascination with ‘difference’, a fascination that is playfully subverted by artists such as Yinka Shonibare and Kehinde Wiley.

Similarly, ideas of ‘authenticity’ are often misguided, as contemporary culture is intermingled and more complex than simplistic and binarized views of ‘us’ and ‘them’ or ‘self’ and ‘other’.

A common apprehension towards the ‘other’ is clearly captured in Richard Brilliant’s assessment of how we interact with the portrait,

Neither the artist nor the viewing public is necessarily naïve in appreciating the denotative thoroughness of an apparently “realistic” descriptive portrait. It is a commonly held assumption that all of us, sooner or later, show “what we are” in our faces, our bodies, our costumes. In direct social intercourse with strangers we learn to read such clues to the interior with considerable skill, but language, behavior, and continuous observation tell us more. Heart, mind, soul, spirit, passion, temperament, humor, *ka*, they are all immaterial by nature, yet they constitute the character or essence of the individual, the particular content of the package that differentiates one person from all others even when the wrappings are similar. The portrait artist’s task is to make the invisible, yet essential elements of character visible, and so bring together into a single image its corporeal and incorporeal substances (Borgatti and Brilliant 1990:15).

Perhaps we are all more of the same than we present ourselves to be or perhaps the reality is that we are less different. What are tangible are our national wrappings, which inform us of our ‘differences’ and, given the promise of our rights to the nation as citizens, they unfortunately seem to justify the marginalization and othering of the migrant or foreigner. In many contemporary contexts, this seems to have become our ‘reality’. Assessing my own positionality in this raises a few interesting questions: Is my representation of the immigrant adequately considered? Can my part in it be nuanced enough so as to not offend or belittle? Will my subjects identify with my representations of them as ‘authentic’ adaptations of who they are? Does this matter, and if so, why?

The exhibition *ALIEN-Nation* plays with visual and linguistic constructions of difference. The viewer's first contact with the other within this exhibition is an engagement with the sitters' faces, and through this engagement with the larger-than-life face my work attempts to humanize the foreigner, the alien. Through the realization of my practical interests, the following questions have remained pivotal: are we really all that different from one another? Even if so, to what avail is our investment in the matter? Is it necessarily bad that we know or see differences, and is a complete blindness to difference a reasonable goal or not? Finally, what is the relationship between theorizing the construction of difference, and lived experiences of being treated as different?

In light of the above questions it is important to consider how one actively approaches and reacts to difference—both within others and, perhaps more importantly, in ourselves, as Kristeva (1991) astutely suggests. There are multiple ways to respond to these issues and tasks but they are largely individual and personal. In my experience, there is a constant need for self-reflection through communication and interaction with others. If one functions with an awareness of the human inclination towards framing, naming, and labeling, then one may be able to engage with the positive aspects of difference. It is these positive aspects that I seek in my exhibition *ALIEN-Nation* and my thesis, *International Passports*. As I have produced the *act* of portraiture, the act of painting the Nigerian diaspora in South Africa, I have attempted to imbue this imaginative process with dignity and respect for self and other. Ultimately, such respect only occurs when alien-nation is recognised within. Only then can the metaphoric idea of international passports be achieved.

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