

Resisting the 'Native Informant' trope in examples of African Diaspora art and literature

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## Abstract

This thesis draws attention to the existence of the ‘native informant’ trope in the African Diaspora. It argues that a strong emphasis towards studying diasporic groups in relation to their African origin revives, consequently, the colonial politics that underpin the continent as an unknown mythical place. In response to this issue, I introduce multidisciplinary case studies that highlight various artists and authors who resist and challenge the diasporic individual as the ‘native informant’. Their works reinterpret and redefine the relationship between African communities, their connection to the continent and their experiences of living abroad.

Analysing the exhibitions *Looking Both Ways*, *Africa Remix* and *Flow*, I investigate their visual art discourses that interpret diasporic artists and their works as cultural embodiments of their African background. As a result, the three art shows marginalise other potential readings to view diasporic experiences.

This thesis introduces three resistant themes that reconceive the diasporic person’s relationship to the African Diaspora based on language, spatial interaction and self-identification opposed to a geographic tie. The first theme (language) references Victor Ekpuk’s drawings and Isidore Okpewho’s novel *Call Me By My Rightful Name* to suggest a language based diasporic experience. The second theme (spatial interaction) looks at Emeka Ogboh’s sound installations and Teju Cole’s novel *Open City*. Both works examine a diasporic individual’s conflicted engagement with her place of origin. The third theme (self-identification) considers the individual-community relationship in Wura-Natasha Ogunji’s performance art and Chika Unigwe’s novel *On Black Sisters’ Street*. Each of these visual-literary pairs focus on various components that shape the African diasporic lifestyle.

My research re-interprets the continent’s significance in the diaspora from a geographic construct to a socio-spiritual connection to a community. Firstly, it outlines the persistent issue of a colonial residue in Africa’s definition as a physical-cultural space, and secondly, it offers three alternative discourses to read diasporic identities outside a geographic framework. I argue that belonging is a social individual-collective effort rather than an anchor to a tangible environment.

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## Chapter One

### **The political construction of Africa as a geographic space**

#### **African Diaspora's historical legacy**

African Diaspora studies is a large scholarly field that studies various African descendants' relationship with their African places of origin. Many writers apply a geographical framework, in which they study the individuals' diasporic experiences based on an interaction between two places of affiliation, namely the current host country and the home origin located in Africa. However, this thesis seeks to critique this dominant approach, and argues that geography cannot be taken as apolitical. The term 'Africa' is a socio-political construct that is rooted in colonial discourse.

The writer Ali Mazrui criticises the lack of political understanding of Africa's constructed definition, as a geographical concept that encompasses all African countries and cultures. He claims that various types of interactions influence the construction and perception of Africa. Furthermore, he outlines Islamic and Western contact that has shaped and reshaped the continent's identity yet he, suggests that European colonial conceptions of Africa are still in existence. The term Africa denotes more than a continent and is a political symbol for a struggle between domination and self-governance (Mazrui 60). European conceptualisation and cartography are main contributors to Africa being turned into a continent (Mazrui 68). Colonial conquest legitimised Africa's identity as a physical place and a home for African people. Mazrui writes; "One of the great ironies of modern African history is that it took European colonialism to inform Africans that they were Africans" (Mazrui 284). His comment indicates a dilemma on how African descendants should engage with or subvert the concept of Africa.

I take Mazrui's statement as a question that probes whether or not colonial history determines the African descendant's identity in relation to the continent. He historicises the term Africa while highlighting its political nature as an entity constructed from colonial history. His emphasis on European interaction, as the constitutive narrative, is problematic because he takes one specific period of African history, and marginalises other pre-colonial conceptions of Africa. Therefore, the continent comes only into existence during and post-colonial era. African people and descendants find themselves in a time paradox, where they attempt to invent and reinvent the continent as a living space and a political symbol.

In *The Invention of Africa*, V. Y. Mudimbe discusses the impact of colonial experience on the continent's invention and reinvention. He argues that colonialism produced new discourses on African traditions and cultures, which promoted and perpetuated European categories and constructs. The colonial invention of Africa created Africanism, a scientific discipline that studied African ways of living and its peoples (Mudimbe 16). Contrary to the colonial conception of the continent, he refers to counter ideas from Negritude and Pan-Africanism. These political movements operated in the African Diaspora and sought to reinvent Africa's identity as a political space of blackness, where African descendant groups united against colonial oppression, and rediscovered their identity through their continental historical roots (Mudimbe 18). Mudimbe outlines Africa's invention and reinvention through time, but he does not engage with the thin line between subversion and perpetuation. Pan-Africanism and Negritude are examples of re-inventive projects that I argue ironically position Africa within a Western framework.

During the 1900s, Pan-Africanism started as a political movement against the colonial aftermath of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. WEB Du Bois' study of the Afro-American community influenced Pan-Africanism's political thinking, as the scholar focused on the psycho-social experiences of racism and discrimination, where feelings of resentment and despair against White domination resonated with Africans living in Europe and Africa (Geiss 5). Pan-Africanism's manifesto portrays racial solidarity and self-awareness as tools that craft cultural unity and political independence from imperial and colonial systems (Geiss 10). However, the trans-Atlantic experience subjects Africans and Afro-Americans to a homogenous identity. Immanuel Geiss argues that Pan-Africanism's universal expression of African pride is, in fact, Western-inspired and possesses limited application towards Africa's socio-political development (20). Therefore, Pan-Africanism is a response to and a product of European ideas of superiority.

In contrast to a trans-Atlantic political focus, young French black intellectuals started the Negritude movement in the early 1930s that gained popularity until Senegal's post-independence in 1960. The political science scholar, Irving Markovitz, states that Negritude is an African version of conformity to French civilization (42). French intellectuals reproduce a colonial myth of Africa as a developing civilisation that requires French intervention either through cultural or social presence in the continent's state of progress (Markovitz 47). One of the forefront members, Léopold Senghor uses the political movement to legitimise his African-French ties that situate his identity in both and between those two places. Not all intellectuals agree with the movement's romanticism of Africa such as Frantz Fanon and Ezekiel Mphahlele.

Fanon argues that Negritude essentialises Africa as a single entity with a single black culture, which neglects the social relations between African countries (189). In addition to Fanon's critical point on the movement's portrayal of Africa, Mphahlele states that the Parisian African elites oversimplified the continent's complex history and distorted the African reality (23). Negritude was more for the French African intellectuals' search for identity than an encompassing communal fight against colonialism.

Both Pan-Africanism and Negritude cater for the elite, as they do not consider the survival of the ordinary African masses but rather focus on their relationship with the West. Their political engagement with African descendants living in Europe or America compromise the evaluation of Africa's socio-political state. William Ackah defines "African reality" as an embodiment of African people's experiences of living on the continent, and those outside of it are unable to understand or grasp its socio-political structures (31). His term suggests that diasporic groups experience a geographical distance, an emotional and psychological estrangement that creates a disjuncture between their perception and the actual state of the continent. Subsequently, he proposes that political movements regardless of their agenda should start on the continent based on concrete factors which affect people and the land (Ackah 32). Ackah's solution addresses the two issues present in Pan-Africanism and Negritude: distance and social position. The first problem refers to the physical separation from the continent and the second problem refers to the intellectuals' higher socio-economic status compared to those living on the continent. He argues that diasporic political movements center their own alienation as the motivation for their formation and distance themselves from the everyday people who live on the continent. However, Ackah homogenises the different lifestyles and experiences unique to each African country under his term African reality. His holistic vision is a singular form of an African reality rather than a multitude of existing realities. Ironically, Ackah commits a similar error to Pan-Africanism and Negritude because he takes Africa as an encompassing space. This reveals that the problem lies in the diasporic relationship with the continent.

### **Africa in relation to the African Diaspora**

Ackah explores the social aspect in the Diaspora-Africa relationship and concludes that people in the African Diaspora need the continent for self-esteem and identity purposes. Their African ancestry provides a stable point and safe space that counters displacement, isolation and alienation within their "Western" homes. In exchange for an identity validation from historical

roots in African countries, the individual self-appointed herself the duty to combat negative stereotypes and transform how Westerners view Africa (Ackah 13). However, African diasporic groups occupy a position in a Western space where they are susceptible to essentialised and colonial ideas of the continent. African descendants negotiate their identities that, ultimately, reflect the historical relations between physical places, as Ackah's argument leads me to believe that identity creation is linked to the established ties between Africa and the West.

Jean Rahier and Percy Hintzen state that diaspora is a form of interpellation where the diasporic individual integrates two different places of attachments (x). First coined by Louis Althusser, the concept interpellation defines a social process whereby each person in the society adopts an imposed ideology (165). In response to this definition, they argue that diaspora is a unique social initiation into Western living with traces of African heritage (Rahier and Hintzen xi). Diasporic people encounter and internalise socio-cultural values, which help construct their identity, and interpellate them as subjects of those referenced locations (Rahier and Hintzen xi). This process produces a double consciousness or a double awareness of two co-existing identities. Rahier and Hintzen's analysis of diaspora as interpellation implies an underlined ideology that draws from historical interaction, between the West and Africa and the social infrastructure of each space. However, these two scholars do not elaborate on the social role that comes with interpellation. I argue that African organisations focus on the role that diasporic groups should perform: they must uplift and help build the continent rather than their "Western" homes.

The African Union defines the African Diaspora as an extension of a black solidarity that includes participation in Africa:

The African Diaspora consists of peoples of African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union (CIDO 2018).

According to the above definition, the Union includes every diasporic group that has ancestry in Africa. Diasporic individuals are able to contribute in two ways: physical involvement within African regions and the securing of social networks across various African diasporic communities. Both social roles contribute to Africa's visibility in the global space.

In contrast to the African Union's focus on the continent's development, the literary scholar Paul Gilroy examines the influences of African culture that create the diasporic culture and lifestyle in the Trans-Atlantic space. He concentrates on the cultural diasporic activity in

Western spaces rather than their impact on Africa. For example, he examines the doubleness in the cultural intermixture specific to Black Britons (Gilroy 17). Gilroy sees the influential potential for diasporic groups to engage in a counter-culture, which “rethinks modernity via the history of the black Atlantic and the African diaspora into the Western hemisphere” (19). Their historical experience of slavery bonds their community and provides them with the cultural resources that reinvent cultures in European and American regions, which defines their social role from an amalgamation of ancestral roots from diverse places. African diasporic people are cultural innovators and appropriate African and Caribbean cultures. Moreover, the Black Atlantic becomes a physical and metaphorical breeding ground for cultural hybridisation. Gilroy’s interpretation of the Black Atlantic contests the nation-state, ethnicity and national particularity, as he uses culture as the binding formula for diasporic group identity (19). African Union, in comparison, sees African nationality as a form of elasticity that connects diasporic groups to specific African countries. My concern with Gilroy’s argument is that he takes Africa as a cultural abstract source rather than a compilation of diverse and perhaps contradictory African identities.

Gilroy’s research on the trans-Atlantic region represents the old African Diaspora paradigm. He studies the cultural effects of the first forced African migration, during the 16-19<sup>th</sup> Century, called Trans-Atlantic slavery, which establishes the founding myth for the old African diaspora. Consequently, this diasporic period sets the scholarly focus on Africa as a continent rather than specific African regions. In addition to the studied approach towards Africa as a physical place, the trans-Atlantic trade played an important role in later facilitation of migrations and creations of African Diaspora in Europe. Recent studies have shifted away from the old diaspora paradigm, which is the trans-Atlantic model, because of its hegemonic dominance as the only diasporic narrative.

Brent Edwards proposes the term Black internationalism in *The Practice of Diaspora: literature, translation, and the rise of Black Internationalism*. His term serves to counter the black Atlantic concept. Gilroy highlights a cultural-political formation that emerges from an inherited experience of the slave trade, which has shaped displaced cultural identities that are not necessarily African, American, Caribbean or British, but all of these simultaneously. In contrast, Black internationalism is a space that looks at specific ethnic (Francophone and Anglophone) and national influences on African diasporic identity (Edwards 301). Edwards examines African descendant lives such that, subsequently, highlight individual cultural diasporic circulations rather than one trans-Atlantic migration. He sees Black internationalism as an ongoing contemporary phenomenon for older and younger African descendant

generations (Edwards 303). In addition, he frames Africa as a compilation of multiple African heritages while he sees the continent's contribution towards the diasporic networks across the World (Edwards 303). Black internationalism considers the individual African diasporic movements outside and part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which positions them in relation to each other and the continent.

Diverse African diasporic movements subvert and re-inscribe the traditional trans-Atlantic model as the old African Diaspora. Jayne Ifekwungiwe proposes the term "African diaspora" to signpost a scholarly shift towards various versions of African diasporic movements around specific localised spaces, rather than specific European countries in relation to Africa as a single entity (320)<sup>1</sup>. Although Edwards discusses particularity in diasporic identities and culture, he elaborates only on the African diversity in Western spaces not their influence on specific African countries. The change from an upper to a lower case 'd' in Diaspora does not address the conception of Africa, as either an encompassing place or an accumulation of multiple locations. I put forward that the diasporic definition of "African" is the issue in African Diasporic studies.

### **Temporal debates on African Diaspora**

Isidore Okpewho, a notable African Diasporic scholar, proposes the term "new African Diaspora" to account for contemporary migrations and emerging diasporic groups. After the 1960s' late colonial era and early post-independence period, people from Africa began to partake in voluntary migrations because of socio-economic instabilities in their African countries (Okpewho 10). From the 1980s onwards, most African diasporic groups had no plans of returning to their ancestral homes but slowly integrated into their local environment (Okpewho 10). The old diaspora focused on anti-colonial solidarity, but 'after colonialism' new African Diaspora redefines the African. Okpewho suggests how new African diasporic individuals should model themselves:

African descendants need to abandon their old status as objects of imperial gaze and control to assume the position of subjects defining the world and their place in it from their own perspective (22).

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<sup>1</sup> Ifekwungiwe changes the capitalised 'D' in African Diaspora into a lowercase letter, because he believes that the semantic meaning indicates an acknowledgement of more existing diversity in diasporas rather than one homogenous diasporic movement.

“New” denotes a temporal distinction between the two diasporic periods, as colonial and post-colonial eras, which shifts African’s perception of themselves. Globalisation and internationalism<sup>2</sup> play a more prominent role in shaping African diasporic identity, rather than the racial and colonial experiences inherited from the old African Diaspora. Okpewho finds a fitting label for the new African diasporic people as “citizens of the world” (22). These individuals introspectively reflect and position their specific African roots within a global network.

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza is another contributor to new African Diaspora scholarship, who discusses African descendants’ construction of Africa. He claims that diasporic groups negotiate their identities in relation to memories that engage personally, communally and temporally with their historical connections to African countries (Zeleza 32). Their different forms of engagement suggest that a specific African origin acts as a reference point to construct the diasporic self. In contrast to the old diaspora’s singular perception of Africa, the new diaspora looks at individual African countries in relation to each diasporic groups. New African Diaspora scholarship offers a detailed cross-comparison of the individual’s relationship between their ancestral place and their present residence. Zeleza defines the new diasporic person as someone who possesses a multi-national identity that opens further interaction with their African heritage (33). This thesis argues that both new and old diaspora take African diasporic identity as a mediatory channel between the global network and Africa or an African country, which Zeleza or Okpewho do not acknowledge.

“African” in the African Diaspora implies a diaspora connected to Africa and an individual who holds a heritage on the continent. The scholars, Zeleza and Okpewho, suggest that identity encompasses both aspects of the above definition as a reference to a physical place and as a socio-cultural resource. In addition to the word “African”, diaspora demonstrates that African countries are not the only factor that constructs identity. Other countries influence the diasporic person’s understanding of self and belonging. Amadu Kaba claims that African diasporic groups have “hyphenated lives”, as they negotiate their lifestyle and existence between two affiliated places, where they combine two seemingly separate ways of living (110). For example, the hyphen in Senegalese-American or Kenyan-American identity highlights two nationalities that affect the diasporic individual’s perception of the World. The African country takes a slight precedence since African Diaspora focuses on African

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<sup>2</sup> My mention of internationalism refers to Edward’s interpretation. I take globalisation as a phenomenon where the increase of interactions and connections encourage cultural integration.

descendants, and therefore it indicates a particular experience of an African identity. Nationality links a cultural idea and perspective to a physical place.

Oshadi Mangena, an African diasporic Feminist, argues that nationalism marginalises the perspective of gender. Masculinity underpins the idea of an African nation and governed the direction of black liberation struggles. Although the new African Diaspora shifts away from anti-colonial concerns, the male experience in the African Diaspora sidelines the female experience and does not account for the nuances in different ways of living. Mangena sees the importance in the preservation of continental connections for people on the continent and in the diaspora. Therefore, she argues that experiences of African diasporic women are similar to the women in Africa and, all women should fight against patriarchal oppression irrespective of whether they live in or outside the continent (Mangena 99). Her theoretical approach is a branch of African diasporic Feminist studies that supports and promotes a global sisterhood.

Ruvimbo Goredema represents another side of feminist scholarship. She cautions against a sisterhood concept. Sisterhood is a community where different women are united based on their gendered experiences. Contrary to Magena's point, Gordema claims that sisterhood imposes a homogenous experience on all women and, subsequently, erases the variance between different socio-economic backgrounds and distinguishable versions of feminism in each African region (19). She does not group African diasporic women with African women, which shows that she prefers difference and diversity over unity. Her argument does not provide a method, in contrast to Mangena's solution of sisterhood solidarity, to combat or make visible women's experiences.

Both Feminist scholars use their arguments as a counter to the nationalist framework of African Diaspora, but they fail to consider the exploitation of females living abroad. In her article on Nigerian sex workers in the Italian sex industry, Jayne Ifekwunigwe states that African diasporic women experience double stigmatisation for their status as illegal migrants and sex workers (403). Her research proposes that being in diaspora maintains gender, social, and class discrimination despite a fight for self-determination and agency. This tension underlines the need to examine the social conditions that inform the African women's livelihoods.

## **The African diasporic individual as the ‘native informant’**

Iman Mersal criticises the issue of social roles imposed onto diasporic artists. She calls them “ready-made identities”: the person is depicted as having a difficult relationship with her country of origin, or who socially comments and compares her multiple places of affiliation, or who investigates her hybrid identity (Mersal 1581). Her term implies that the global markets commercialise these pigeonholed roles for international consumption. Specifically, the art curator’s interpretation of diasporic artworks is always about the tensions and politics between different locations. The art world’s emphasis on geographic connections and relationships hides away from an unacknowledged colonial paradigm, as curators frame diasporic art as visual cultural representations (Mersal 1586). As a result, this enforces a priority over other experiences that do not directly engage with the place of origin or of residence. Mersal’s theoretical observation suggests a connection between the ‘native informant’ role and the diasporic artist label.

Gayatri Spivak is a post-colonial scholar who claims that the ‘native informant’ role persists in the contemporary period. The ‘native informant’ historically developed from colonial ethnographic research that studied different ethnic groups’ socio-behavioural characteristics, by which a colonised person provided information to an ethnographer about her community. Spivak situates this definition within the context of globalisation and capitalism; she observes that the ‘native informant’ transforms the post-colonial individual’s knowledge into an object that is used and disseminated as global capital (223). Colonial power relations circulate and structure the relationships between different locations, which help stigmatise and categorise people accordingly. In alignment with Mersal’s argument, both scholars highlight the issue of the post-colonial’s commodified identities within Western spaces. The ‘native informant’ becomes an “auto artifact”, which means their life story is both an autobiography and ethnography, from the global market’s colonial treatment of their cultural identities (Spivak 490)<sup>3</sup>. Ancestry and heritage represent source materials that help validate Western perceptions on previously colonised groups and their lifestyles. Spivak does not explicitly connect the diasporic individual to the ‘native informant’ role, but she paves the theoretical road for my thesis to connect the two entities.

This thesis uses Mersal and Spivak as theoretical supports for my argument positioning the African diasporic artist as a ‘native informant’ in the following art exhibitions: *Looking*

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<sup>3</sup> Autobiography refers to a self-reflective narrative, where someone recalls their life events. Ethnography is a scientific study that observes communities based on their customs, cultures, and social relationships.

*Both Ways: Contemporary Artists from Africa* (2003), *Africa Remix* (2004), and *Flow* (2008). These art shows share two aspects, which are that their inception was in American and European spaces and they emphasised on their showcased artists' cultural relationship with their respective African places of origin. Both scholars offer substantial groundwork in showing how colonial paradigms continue operating in the Western representation of post-colonial individuals. They outline the global market as a key external factor, but they do not further engage in the internal effect on the person's constructed self and subjectivity that I explain in this thesis.

I propose that the 'native informant' exists as a trope identity in the above-mentioned selected art exhibitions, as their selected artists are required to speak about their African origins. Clifford Shearing and Richard Ericson define a trope identity as people constructing their subjectivity out of a particular cultural context, most importantly, but are forced to conform to a set of external expectations concerning their identities (493). In the case of the African Diaspora, the individual's relationship with their African heritage underpins their diasporic subjectivity. They re-evaluate and position their historical connections to the continent, an African country and a global context, which constitute their way of thinking and perception. African Diasporic subjectivity emerges from a spatial position, as the individual exercises a perspective that represents and embodies an African place. Subsequently, this applies a set of expectations onto the artists. The first expectation is that their experiences become visual narratives in which to reflect on a specific African country's past and present social conditions. The second expectation requires their ability to illustrate knowledge about their historical roots and translate them for Westerners. The third expectation links to the previous one; the content produced is recognisable and easy to understand. Overall, they must interpret, translate, secure and validates information about an African region, which then integrates into a global context. This process determines their artwork's creative value.

Overall, this thesis aims to demonstrate how the pervading use of colonial discourse frames African diasporic artists. I argue that their visual practices become synonymous with a lost cultural connection or heritage link. In critiquing such interpretation, I aim to provide a framework that looks at nuanced responses that challenge the ancestral or cultural heritage context. Artists such as Wangechi Mutu, Moshekwa Langa, Ingrid Mwangi, Victor Ekpuk, Emeka Ogboh and Wura-Natasha Ogunji and writers such as Isidore Okpewho, Teju Cole and Chika Unigwe are in the process of rethinking the ideas of representation and belonging which formulate diasporic identity construction.

## Chapter outline

I investigate the ‘native informant’ trope through an interpretative study that examines two sets of visual practice paradigms: an exhibition contextualisation and an individual contextualisation. The first framework examines the various role-players such as exhibition writers, curators and showcased artists who inform and shape the meaning of diaspora in relation to identity, place and culture. In comparison, the second framework introduces a literary analysis on art-making techniques under a shared theme. My multi-disciplinary study aims to highlight new ways of reading people’s experiences of living away from their ancestral home. This research method hopes to provide holistic and multi-faceted views that focus on collective and singular efforts, in which individuals negotiate their creative practice and social position against a colonial understanding of the African Diaspora.

Chapter Two addresses the first set, which examines the dynamic between the exhibition writers, curators and artists, as I argue that African Diasporic art shows understand their artists and the artworks in cultural references which then ignores any resistance against such labelling. I refer to *Flow, Looking Both Ways: Contemporary Artists from Africa* and *Africa Remix*, which rely heavily on visual commentary of the continent as a physical location. Each of them put forward that the journey between multiple places represents the constitutive factor that determines a particular art making style, visual content and experiences. My analysis evaluates specific case studies where the artist and the exhibition writer or curator are at conflict in their contrasting visual interpretations. Therefore, I argue that the interpreters pigeonhole dangerously the selected creative makers into their African origin part of their identities.

Chapter Two introduces the problematic discourse applied to marginalised art production as well as their creators, to highlight the tensions and conflicts that occur within exhibitions. I study the resistant methods of the following diasporic artists: Wangechi Mutu, Ingrid Mwangi, and Moshekwa Langa. Each of them complicates the understanding of belonging in relation to an African heritage, as s/he engages in a self-reflexive art practice that interrogates the social position of being an artist and an African descendant.

The three chapters that follow further explore resistant methods in which challenge the diasporic individual as the ‘native informant’. I compare the representation of diasporic experiences through my devised interdisciplinary methodology, of pairing the novels *Call Me by My Rightful Name*, *Open City*, and *On Black Sister Street* with the visual works of Victor

Ekpuk, Emeka Ogboh, and Wura-Natasha Ogunji. This approach seeks new constructions of identities that redefine a person's experience of living outside the continent.

I propose the themes of language, spatial engagement and self-identification to highlight different ways in which diasporic groups articulate their state of being. Each literary and visual texts offer various subjectivities that go beyond a relationship with an African place of origin. Contrary to an analysis of identity as an indicator of a specific country, the selected novels and artworks examine other aspects of the individual rather than only her geographic background. The three themes reinterpret diasporic experiences based on everyday life events, personhood, agency, community and self-awareness.

Chapter Three discusses Victor Ekpuk's artworks and Isidore Okpewho's *Call Me By My Rightful Name* under the resistant theme of language. Both creators look at a person's linguistic relationship and its (in)ability to extract an African historical connection from a diasporic experience that, subsequently, I term as a semantic experience. Furthermore, they introduce a spiritual element connected to African languages. Okpewho's novel tells of an African American man, Otis Hampton, who suffers from involuntary verbal chants that reference his Yoruba ancestral lineage. Similarly, Ekpuk incorporates the Nigerian nsibidi graphic system to channel a spiritual passage into his drawings. Their interpretations offer a linguistic connection rather than a physical reference to the continent.

Chapter Four examines the resistant theme of spatial engagement in Teju Cole's novel *Open City* and Emeka Ogboh's artworks. I define spatial engagement as the diasporic individual's attempt in finding meaning, situating herself within an uncanny yet familiar environment while assimilating into the host country. *Open City* presents a protagonist, named Julius, who reflects on his sensory experiences and socio-cultural connections to Nigeria, Belgium and America. In comparison, Ogboh's artworks investigate specifically into sounds that trigger a person's attachment to particular places. Both cases use sensory experiences to demonstrate that imagination and self-reflexive mediation reveal an incoherent relationship with and from multiple places of affiliation.

The fifth chapter looks at the resistant theme of self-identification in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sister Street* and Wura-Natasha Ogunji's art performances. I define self-identification as a person's assertion of her body, her story, her voice and her representation. Both creators use storytelling as a critique against the colonial exotic representation of the African diasporic female. Unigwe structures her novel to represent each female protagonist's perspective on her diasporic experience and her sex-worker role in Antwerp. Ogunji examines similarly the Western representation of the marginalised body and, in addition, both works suggest that the

individual's connection to a community validates her existence. Self-identification highlights the contradictions and similarities in experiences that group yet distinguish people.

This thesis concludes that an African origin and heritage represent the over-arching paradigm, in which simplify and reduce diasporic experiences to the relationship with the continent, and subsequently generalise each individual's complicated negotiation of her belonging. I propose three themes that reveal an African diasporic agency that resists the 'native informant's' subscription onto the person's identity, body and narrative. However, any interpretative framework runs the risk of reinstating a new trope identity that I am aware of in this thesis. As a result, I acknowledge that certain aspects of diasporic experiences are uninterpretable. My analysis focuses on three ways that express diverse social conditions, in which do not necessarily define the African Diaspora, but articulates new constructions for African descendant identities and experiences.

## Chapter Two

### **The African diasporic visual discourse**

#### **Contextualisation**

This chapter will focus on selected African diasporic artists who can be defined as part of the African Diaspora. I focus on their role and their participation in the following exhibitions: *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, *Africa Remix* and *Flow*. These art shows have come to represent the cornerstones that have shaped the art world's perception of people who engage with or acknowledge their African heritage. Upon the examination of their curatorial frameworks, I see the need to discuss the tensions that exist between the curators, the exhibition writers, the artists and the reception of their work. I propose that the root of the issue lies with the diasporic artist being placed in a 'native informant' role. Consequently, the artist negotiates a paradoxical position between re-inscribing and resisting cultural and colonial impositions.

African Diasporic art has become a recent focus in Art History and Visual Culture. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, art scholars began to research the prevalence of African cultural influences in diasporic communities across the World. They explore the different visual ways in which diverse African descendant groups see, understand, integrate and represent their historical connection to the continent as part of their lives.

During the contemporary period, the Western art world has increased the visibility and the incorporation of other visual practices. They mostly focus on African diasporic people who are spread across European countries and the US. Consequently, contemporary African diasporic art reflects the artists' experiences of living within these spaces, while considering their African heritage. In other words, they look at the socio-cultural influences from one country to another instead of the colonial aftermath on their identity and their attachment to their place of origin<sup>4</sup>. My thesis follows and investigates the development of African diasporic art from a nostalgic reconnection with an ancestral country to an expressive attempts to merge their African identity with their life in their host countries. I explore how the three exhibitions encapsulate this thematic shift.

In 2003, Laurie Ann Farrell curated and presented the art show *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* at the Museum for African Art, New York. She featured 12 artists from different African regions who live and work in Euro-American countries such

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<sup>4</sup> Thompson 2011, Nelson 2009

as France, Germany, Portugal, the Netherlands, the UK, the U.S. and Belgium. Her exhibition aimed to artistically look at the psychological relationship in living between two places, namely 'the West' and 'Africa'. The themes of identity construction, nationalism, globalism, displacement and cultural attachments inform a diasporic lifestyle which presented themselves in photography, paintings, installations, sculptures and videos. Each of the featured artists expressed their regional perspectives rooted in the continent of Africa while locating themselves within global networks.

On a larger scale, compared to the first exhibition, in 2004, Simon Njami, the curator of *Africa Remix*, hosted an art show that showcased more than 60 artists across 25 countries. The exhibition was displayed at the Museum Kunst Palest in Düsseldorf, then travelled to the Hayward Gallery in London, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and in 2008 it arrived at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Njami created an ambitious international show that was advertised as "the largest exhibition of contemporary African art ever seen in Europe" (Joburg.co.za 1). He sourced 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century artists who reside in Africa or live in Western countries and compared their experiences under the themes of identity and history, body and soul, and lastly, city and land. Within those categories, *Africa Remix* depicted multiple mediums such as painting, sculpture, photography, installation and video work. Njami tried to showcase a chronological overview of African art's evolution from the continent and into the diaspora. In other words, the exhibition suggested that this art genre was a progressive step for African creativity since it demonstrated the dynamism and diversity of African descendant and their art styles. Subsequently, the showcase challenged the Western art world's perception of African artists because, they were able to draw various socio-cultural, environmental and political connections that acknowledged globalisation.

Contrary to the diverse selection of artists in the second show, the 2008 show, *Flow*, featured 20 emerging African-American artists at the Studio Museum in Harlem. This was part of an exhibition series titled *Frequency and Freestyle*; they all explored the themes of human and natural resources, cultures, identity and mobility. Christine Y. Kim, the curator, chose artists who were either born in Africa or to African parents and are now living in the U.S. Interestingly, her exhibition utilised the term "Black" as opposed to "African". The concept of "Black" prevents a geographic pigeonholing, as it refers to a collective body of people who share a connected ancestry, which the exhibition showcases through paintings, photography, drawings, sculptures and installations. Furthermore, Kim felt that "African" denoted a singular position. Her specific manifesto aimed to reflect on the multiple perspectives and

interconnections found across the globe. Overall, *Flow* shows artists who are not confined behind borders, but cross, transcend and engage with them from various perspectives.

I will outline two major similarities between the exhibitions. Firstly, they were hosted predominantly within Western spaces, which suggests that they were oriented towards a group, who had minimal contact with or knowledge about African countries and their peoples. Secondly they emphasised the place of origin as the determining factor that shaped the creative individual's visual practice. This chapter attempts to unpack these common elements found across the three art shows.

To expand, one characteristic that the exhibitions focus on is globalisation's influence on the artist's engagement with their experience of identity and sense of belonging, within both African and Western spaces. Artists' self-identification reveals and compares each location's social, cultural and political impact on their diasporic experiences. Consequently, these exhibitions show artists reflecting on their African heritage, diasporic history, and their present social conditions. Their content reflects on a global phenomenon of crossing and opening borders and boundaries, as countries experience change from human interference. Farrell, Njami and Kim mention that the African diasporic artist contributes towards Africa's identity as a place and highlights its cultural presence within Western spaces. The process of "Africanisation of globalisation" and "Africa's globalisation" begins to occur (Zezeza 55). Simultaneously, African descendants include their African culture into their Western lifestyles while global influences make Africa visible and part of the international networks. The exhibitions portray artists as shifters and movers of ideas about Africa to the Northern Hemisphere and vice-versa.

The diversity among artists constitutes another characteristic that the art shows over-emphasised. Each of the curators draw attention to their selection, as they attempt to capture and encapsulate a holistic depiction of the contributors to the art genre. Subsequently, they implicitly create a checklist to showcase an artist from almost every African region. *Africa Remix* take advantage of their large numbers, and establish themselves as a substantial provider to the African and diasporic art canon, through their inclusion of different African descendant generations. Farrell adopts a similar stand but with a different strategy. She specifically advertises where the artists are from and where they are based. *Africa Remix* has a more homogenous approach towards African Diaspora. In contrast to them, Kim narrows her showcase to only African-American visual viewpoints. Her thought process suggests that she uncovers a particular yet collective experience that make that type of artist distinct from other African diasporic groups. Despite the different degrees of diversity, whether specific or

general, I observe that all of them prioritise artists who live in Euro-American spaces and so they overshadow the existence of other African diasporic relations.

Leon Wainwright speaks about the art world's bias towards curatorship within a Western context, which then perpetuates North-South power relations in exhibitions, despite their claim to be a global reflection that includes 'previously marginalised' artists. He states: "Ironically, globalisation is a form of provincialism that takes the Euro-American space as the universal standard" (Wainwright 7). All of the art shows enforce this idea with their preference to exhibit within Europe and America, even though *Africa Remix* included Japan and South Africa. This reality contradicts the exhibitions' claim to engage with diverse African diasporic artists. Art practices only gain approval and recognition in Euro-American spaces as opposed to African spaces. Wainwright provides a scholarly perspective that questions the curatorial agenda behind the selection and showcasing of artists in some places but not in others.

I argue that the exhibitions chosen artists based on their location networks within globalisation. Specifically, the curators examined the different groups in relation to diasporic migratory patterns. Their experiences marked different stages of migration: their journey's beginning point related to their relationship with Africa, the middle point spoke about their assimilative process into a new space, and the endpoint evaluated the success or failure of the prior stage's outcome. As a result, the exhibitions took the first stage as a product of a regional perspective, in which the artist applied and constructed their identity for the final stage being their integration into a Western environment. Their diasporic journeys produce a lifestyle that inspires their visual practice.

Krista Thompson, an Art History scholar, claims that the main constitutive aspect of African Diasporic art is that it echoes a geographic relation between Africa and the West. The artist uses various mediums to represent and reconfigure their sense of identity within a different location. She writes that the emergence of this art form is a product of "the African Diaspora intimately intertwined with and illustrative of the modern West" (Thompson 20). Her observation implies diasporic content will always be tainted with thematic content: place of origin meets place of residency. I consider her point in my analysis of how the art exhibitions position the artists within diasporic models that exemplify their relationship with their environment.

## Locating artists within African Diasporic models

There has been an ongoing scholarly debate on the application of diasporic models to interpret diasporic interaction. I note three different archetypes that exist: the *homeland-hostland* model, the *diaspora-apart* model, and the *homeland plus diaspora* model. Academics like Gabriel Sheffer, William Safran, Robin Cohen, and Khachig Tölölyan agree unanimously that the homeland is the place of origin and the hostland is the present place of residence. However, their opinions differ on the extent that diasporic models provide the basis to study diasporic groups and their experiences. Patrick Manning compares and contrasts the last two models in relation to African Diaspora. The *diaspora-apart* model looks at the African descendant's navigation between spaces rather than their historical connection to Africa, whereas, the *homeland plus diaspora* model pays attention to regional African origins that contribute towards socio-cultural aspects of various interconnected communities (Manning 500). Overall, these three diasporic models share a common aim to locate the diasporic individual within an explicit geographic relation.

I notice that art exhibitions reference complex terms and ideas but do not unpack extensively their applied theoretical discourse. *Flow, Africa Remix* and *Looking Both Ways* responded to the art trend of showcasing “marginalised” artists, specifically ones from the African continent, but they did not engage critically with diasporic scholarship. They simply referenced the term diaspora without unpacking or explaining its meaning and relevance to their respective ethos. In the case of African Diaspora studies, I observe that my selected shows may utilise the above mentioned diasporic models, although they do not name them as such. The curators encompass the perceptions attached to these models as a contextual basis for their aesthetic visions. Consequently, the artists become characters located within a geographic narrative. When I refer to location, I am evaluating diasporic models' influence in reading artists' participation and presence. Their biographies form part of an encompassing geographic narrative, whereby they highlight the different social relationships between North and South that contextualise their artworks<sup>5</sup>.

I interpret the exhibition *Looking Both Ways* as an example of the traditional *hostland-homeland* model with the geographic reference points being the West and Africa. Farrell discusses how each artist constructs her identity through a balancing act. She envisions that the artists engages in the “activity of looking both ways where they compare and reflect between

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<sup>5</sup> Where they are from and where they live now are the two main aspects that curators are interested in their biography.

and on their psychological attachments” to a place of origin and a place of residency (Farrell 13). The source and destination points are crucial aspects that contextualise the reading and interpretation of the artists and their experiences. *Looking Both Ways* proposes that knowing where they are from and where they live now foreground a cultural amalgamation, which fuels contemporary African diasporic aesthetics.



Figure 1: Mutima, N'Dilo. *Cosmogónicos Masks I-III*. 1997. *Looking Both Ways* exhibition catalogue.

An artist N'Dilo Mutima from the exhibition *Looking Both Ways* presents a series of aluminium c-prints<sup>6</sup> that depict him wearing different masks. His work titled *Cosmogónicos. Masks I – III* (fig. 1) explores discomfort and fragility, which are symptoms of his condition of being in self-imposed exile. Each mask symbolises the artist undergoing an adaptation and adjustment to the different changes between living in Angola and relocating to Portugal. Moreover, he highlights the damaging effects of discrimination that diasporic people face, as they force themselves to change drastically within their host environment. They reside in an unstable state of being, where they are unable to leave the hostland or return to their homeland.

*Looking Both Ways* depicts their artists as mediators between two places, whereby they integrate, reconcile or hide parts of their African background through their transition into their

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<sup>6</sup> C-prints are chromogenic prints, which is the colour negative or slide version of a photograph.

new home. I argue that the *homeland-hostland* model prioritises an Africa to the West interaction rather than a West to Africa interaction<sup>7</sup>. The featured creative makers must visualise the incongruence of African people and culture within Western spaces, as Mutima articulates his alienation with his multiple mask wearing in his self-portrait photographs. The *homeland-hostland* model problematically upholds the unidirectional way of looking that thematically underlines the exhibition. As a result, African countries become fixed and nostalgic spaces, whereas host spaces instigate the artist's conceptualisation of their diasporic experiences.

In contrast to the first exhibition's depiction of the African diasporic relationship, I suggest that *Africa Remix* utilises the *homeland plus diaspora* model and focuses on the artist's historical connections with Africa. Njami, the curator, includes both African and African diasporic artists in his show, and categorises them according to how their visual practices may be associated with a particular socio-political period in the continents' history. The first phase celebrates and affirms African heritage during post-independence. The second phase looks at artists who reject the nostalgic and exoticised response to Africa, which they consider as a problem when people return to their place of origin and romanticise the space based on a colonial discourse. The last phase focuses on existential questions around identity, social position and place in the World. Each of these phases contextualise diasporic people's relationship with their homeland either as an estrangement or engagement with its socio-political context. Consequently, their response is contingent on their emotional or social resonance to the African region.

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<sup>7</sup> The Africa to West interaction suggests a linear progression that the West is the desired endpoint.



Figure 2: Barrada, Yto. *The Strait Project*. 1997. *Africa Remix* exhibition catalogue. Johannesburg Print.

Yto Barrada was one of the featured artists in the *Africa Remix* exhibition whose work is part of the exhibition theme: City and Land. Her work is also part of Njami's second phase because she challenges the colonial perception of Morocco as a mystic and exotic space. She showcases a c-print series called *The Strait Project* (fig. 2), which captures the living in the Moroccan city, Tangiers. The artist does not portray the North-Western part of Morocco in a nostalgic manner. Instead, she looks at it as a space that contains diverse stories about the space and its people. According to the Education Guide on the *African Remix* digital version catalogue, Barrada reveals Tangier as a "city on the move", while being "a place of unfilled dreams of people who fail to cross the border or depart" (Africa Remix 1). Her artwork title gives away the diaspora she is referring to, which is the one from Morocco to Spain across the Strait of Gibraltar<sup>8</sup>. Tangiers represents one of the places where diasporic migration occurs from the continent to the West.

My concern with *African Remix*'s model is that it traps any discussion about African countries in relation to other spaces. In relation to Barrada's work, she focuses on Tangiers but also her work needs to consider its role as part of a larger diasporic network that exists in the World. Njami strategically creates conformity amongst the artists through his multiple layers of categorisation, into themes and stages. This form of categorisation enables his argument that

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<sup>8</sup> This is the section of the sea that connects the Atlantic Ocean and the peninsular close to Spain.

an aesthetic lineage emerges out of and develops from visual engagements with the continent. The *homeland plus diaspora* model assists the exhibition in drawing out the same geographic pattern that underlines all diasporic experiences. As a result, the exhibition homogenises art-making based on the artist's relationship with Africa and another country.

The exhibition, *Flow* takes a different approach to *Africa Remix* and locates diasporic artists outside a homeland relationship. This then makes them an example of the *diaspora-apart* model. I sense that the exhibition fears any form of essentialism associated with attachments to places. As a result, Kim looks at expressions of fluidity, instability and liminality in self-discoveries. Contrary to *Looking Both Ways* and *Africa Remix* acknowledging Africa as the contextual foundation of people's work, *Flow* sees the continent as nothing more than a geographic and historical link that connect all the artists. Thelma Golden, the Studio Harlem museum director, states that the featured artists progress towards a "post-black" identity (17). She defines this as African descendants who see themselves within a global network opposed to a relationship with the continent, which subsequently sets them free from any obligation to perform the 'black' artist label or explore the notion of blackness (Golden 17). Her comment verifies the exhibition's deliberate attempt to exclude any political undertones within identity construction or geographic relations. Their *diaspora-apart* model does not look at the place of origin, but studies the individual artists' efforts to fashion themselves in more individual ways across multiple spaces.



Figure 3: Maluka, Mustafa. *I'm not going anywhere, this is home.* 2006. Mikael Anderson Gallery Collection. 1 May 2018.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/04/arts/design/04flow.html>>.

One of the exhibition artists, Mustafa Maluka paints portraits of “invented heroes” (fig. 3), which portray a group of people who are multi-ethnic, multi-hued, and multi-textured. He describes his artworks as representations of “characters [who] are migrants to different cities around the world... [who] all bear ‘accents’ of where they originally came from” (Maluka cited in Ojo 80). Paradoxically, they do not exist or belong to one place despite their accents because they claimed every place as their home. According to the *Flow* writer, Oluronke Ojo, the artist’s work is an expression of globalisation’s effect in creating and mapping out new relations between unknown spaces and places. He understands Maluka’s work to be an exploration of the diasporic person’s contribution to the establishment of new migratory patterns.

I argue that the *diaspora-apart* model does not divorce the exhibition from essentialism. Evidence for this is the geographic map that pinpoints and traces each artist’s place of origin and their country of current residence, in one of the catalogue’s introductory pages. Although their version of essentialism is not restricted to one space, migratory patterns become a type of

essentialism that is unique to each diasporic group. They showcase the artist's diasporic interaction as a novelty experience closely linked to her diasporic journey. Each individual differs from the rest based on her different *homeland-hostland* positions, which then supports *Flow's* vision to reveal a multitude of geographic backgrounds and various cultural ways that circulate within global networks.

All of these exhibitions build their thematic content around the diasporic models I have mentioned. *Hostland-homeland*, and *diaspora-apart* models contain geographic markers that govern their featured artists' ability to contemplate, to shape, to appropriate and to incorporate various socio-cultural aspects that affect their diasporic experience. This approach enforces a dominant discourse that defines the curatorship and direction of African diasporic exhibitions. Consequently, the artists find themselves entrapped in a geographic-oriented content, where such visual language potentially contradicts or suppresses their own creative intentions and visions for their works. Their participation requires their art to conform to exhibition narratives' larger goals. I take this dilemma as a starting point, where I examine the dominance of the curatorial framework that filters into the exhibition writer's interpretations of the artists and their creations.

### **Defining the 'native informant' trope: the curatorial agenda**

Another aim of my research is to interrogate how a diasporic model rooted in a geographic perspective informs curatorial analysis. The three shows I have discussed place the artists' visual practices on a spectrum between Africa and the World. In other words, there is an implicit requirement that African diasporic art should only focus on socio-cultural and political themes related to Africa, the World or both spaces. The geographic framework defines a particular curatorial agenda that appears in exhibition writers' commentaries that often insist on emphasising a location of origin on the African continent.

I claim that the three exhibitions see the artists as 'native informants', as the writers or curators connect their work to a specific African region in which they then cross-compare it to other places of attachment. The art analysis becomes more about cultural aspects than the art technique and form. Specifically, they provide a basis for Western audiences to make connections between the artists' geographic relations and their diasporic experiences. My argument builds on the art theorist and artist, Iman Mersal, who touches on the same issue even though her focus is on general diaspora rather than African Diaspora. Mersal problematises the

art world's commodification of diasporic experiences within<sup>9</sup> exhibitions, as she argues that they turn diasporic art into an “informant document” which supplies information about post-colonised people and their ‘native’ cultures (Mersal 1586). Furthermore, her scholarship aims to demonstrate the embedded colonial frameworks that underline curatorial agendas. Following on her argument, I identify and outline two curatorial themes that expose the selected exhibitions’ schemes that position the artist as the ‘native informant’.

The cultural symbol is a common curatorial theme that is prevalent in *Africa Remix* and *Flow*. Although they are different in their diasporic models, they both imply a fundamental cultural source that inspires a particular art-making technique. They interpret the artist to be a cultural crafter, who involves the theme of culture in a non-critical way. I examine the exhibition writers’ use of language to describe their interpretation while indicating their problematic perspective. In addition, I reference the artist’s opinion and commentary on her/his work as a counter against the curatorial analysis. My approach demonstrates a clash between two perspectives that further reveals the pigeonholing effect<sup>10</sup>.



Figure 4: Toguo, Barthélémy. Wooden sculptures assortment. 2002. *Africa Remix* exhibition catalogue. German Print.

In *Africa Remix*, the artist Barthélémy Toguo showcases three sets of work named *Virgin Forest*, *Innocent Sinners*, and a variety of wood sculptures. The first set, *Virgin Forest*, comprises of three paintings that connect the human body with nature. *Innocent Sinners* similarly contains paintings and includes mixed mediums such as collages, photographs and

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<sup>9</sup> When the thesis refers to an individual that explicitly encapsulates both gender identities, I will use “s/he” and “her/his” pronouns else I will simply use the “she” and “her” pronoun.

<sup>10</sup> The pigeonholing effect is the problem of curators immediately associating the artist’s work with their socio-cultural background without any further engagement.

video. However, the second series' content is different from the first series, as it explores in-depth the socio-political themes of war, social inequality, human violence and psychological trauma. A prominent event that the artist references, is the non-signing of the Kyoto Treaty on climate change agreements by the US, in his various mediums<sup>11</sup>. Interestingly, his artistic approach balances the disturbing content with the beauty of his art forms, such as his light watercolour paintings of damaged bodies. For his last work, his wood sculptures (fig. 4) express flamboyant models of different identities linked to a lifestyle such as “Donkey Rider”, “Bhang Smoking”, and “Looking for Water in the Village”. The artist presents an assortment of works that are unconnected by an overall theme.

One of the *Africa Remix* exhibition writers, Jean-Hubert Martin contemplates the embedded cultural meaning of the artist's selection for wood as his medium. He writes: “it is not clear whether his attachment to his material has to do with his original culture” (Martin 37). When he refers to “original culture”, he insinuates that a place of origin inspires the artist's visual practice. The specific phrase indicates his immediate yet undeclared cultural assumption about Toguo and his African heritage. Martin is hesitant in his statement because he is aware that it might come across as problematic, and perhaps anticipates being accused of seeing the African artist as only a cultural crafter rather than an artist<sup>12</sup>. Nevertheless, his interpretation suggests that Toguo does not contribute towards a progression in art-making instead he uses aesthetics to reflect on his culture. These implied meanings about the creative individual's capability reveal the undercurrents of a colonial discourse within the writer's visual analysis.

Martin is not the only one guilty of indulging in problematic stereotypes. I argue that Toguo presents questionable wood sculptures, irrespective of whether they are caricatures or satire. He creates anthropomorphic beings with hippo faces, bird beaks, elephant trunks and hyena ears and titles them with real human life stories like “Looking for water in the village”, “Life in the Ghetto”, and “Trying to Get Assistance through Cellular Phone”. Is he saying that these people who live these experiences are sub-human or living in sub-human conditions? His artistic approach is indeed ambiguous especially since the works are categorised under the theme Body and Soul. According to the *Africa Remix* catalogue, the Body and Soul artists discuss the concept of the other from different contradictory viewpoints. Does the artist satirise the Western perception of African people and their lifestyles or simply imprint the colonial

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<sup>11</sup> The Kyoto treaty involves the compliance of states to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and further promote environmental sustainability.

<sup>12</sup> During colonial period, Western museums displayed African cultural objects that set in the colonial idea of the African individual as a crafter. Subsequently, any medium that does not conform to Western forms, is met with the above colonial art discourse.

discourse onto these bodies? My belief is that the artist executes the latter because he explicitly indicates his intentions rather than performing subversive techniques. Furthermore, his wood sculptures are inconsistent with his overt focus on socio-political themes in *Virgin Forest*, *Innocent Sinners*, as well as another independent wood sculpture series *The New World Climax*<sup>13</sup>. There is strong evidence that proposes Togo caters to different visitors, who are critical, ignorant, or enjoy sensationalism.



Figure 5: Andrianomearisoa, Joël. *The Fabric of The Dreams*. 2004. Tyburn Gallery Collection. 1 May 2018. < <http://www.tyburngallery.com/artist/joel-andrianomearisoa/> >.

Joël Andrianomearisoa is a *Flow* artist who receives a similar interpretation of his artistic material. He exhibits a series of black fabrics titled *The Fabric of The Dreams* (fig. 5). Black is a significant symbol that the artist integrates into all his work, and states that it articulates “an attitude that does not exclude the rest [of the colours]” but embodies all of them (Andrianomearisoa 40). Moreover, the colour represents paradoxical connections such as the emotional attitudes of being disturbed or in awe, being everywhere and nowhere, and expressing oneself in certain ways because of austerity or deliberately embracing minimalism. Andrianomearisoa shows off these qualities, as well as the fabric’s fluidity and malleability,

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<sup>13</sup> *The New World Climax* is an installation of oversized wooden seals that resemble passport stamps. He speaks about the hurdles and hostilities in moving across borders between countries.

with different shades of black that create a material language where the splits, folds and creases demonstrate the complexities and nuances in his series.

Virginie Andrianmirado does not elaborate on Andrianomearisoa's play with form, but instead focuses on the meaning behind the artist's choice to use fabric as a medium of expression. The exhibition writer claims that the material "echoes the traditional lamba", which is a rectangular length cloth wrapped around the body and worn by females and males. His cultural reference brings forth his connection to Madagascan culture (Andrianmirado 40). Similar to Martin's analysis of Togo, Andrianmirado associates the artist's African heritage with his artwork. I observe that his peculiar verb choice "echoes" gives away his underlying assumption about Andrianomearisoa's visual style. He implies that the fabric technique utilises a form of nostalgia, which helps the artist uncover his African roots, and highlights its cultural relevance in his contemporary social circumstances. Therefore, his interpretation is more concerned with the diasporic context.

In his artist's statement that features in the *Flow's* catalogue, Andrianomearisoa provides a contrasting opinion about his work. The artist talks about his work as an expression of time and body, rather than of his Malagasy background. His medium articulates the flow of time through the various folds that symbolise his replay, negation, assertion and erasure of past events. Furthermore, he states: "What frightens me most is never to be on time, to be outdated. My ways of answering this are permanently against the current of time" (Andrianmirado cited in Andrianomearisoa 40). I argue that his work are metaphorically pieces rather than literal translation of his interest in time. It seems strange that the writer looks only at the material's origin and fails to acknowledge the artist's strategy. Although Andrianmirado does acknowledge that Madagascar is a notable supplier of textiles and fabrics, which contributes to his knowledge about those materials, he relies more on his architectural skills to advance new techniques that interrogate his medium beyond a cultural context to an aesthetic utility<sup>14</sup>. The artwork series sincerely conceives of time's intangible meaning through a sentimental and visually pleasing manner.

Another common curatorial theme is the artist's engagement with their affiliated African country's political history, which occurs in *Looking Both Ways* and *Flow*. These exhibitions put forward that diasporic visual practitioners reshape and reinvent the continent's identity through their rediscovery of their ancestral connection. In other words, the diasporic

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<sup>14</sup> I define this concept as a type of aesthetic that is beautiful or pleasant because of its functionality. An example is vintage furniture which embodies functionality while expresses an artistic style.

interaction creates a symbiotic relationship through which both parties gain a positive benefit. The artists reflect on their backgrounds which influences the social, historical, and cultural relevance of Africa in contemporary diasporic lives. My concern, however, lies with the artist role in the above-outlined relationship. I argue that the curatorial agenda positions the visual practitioners as historical spokespeople or documenters, who are carriers of information opposed to creative yet critical individuals.

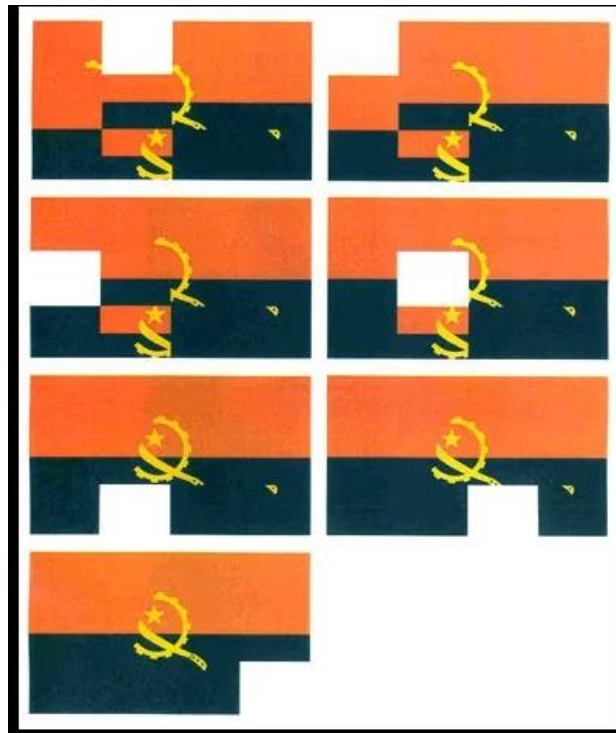


Figure 6: Alvim, Fernando. *Flag Puzzle*. 2003. *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* exhibition catalogue.

In the exhibition *Looking both Ways*, Fernando Alvim showcases artworks mainly from his *Emotional Geographies* series and one digital print called *Flag puzzle*. His first series encompasses mixed-media images where he combines oil paint, cardboard, sewn fabric and digital collages that articulate the same thematic content. The construction of nationhood is a key focus in his work, as he references a flag either explicitly in the title or as visual content. For example, “A flag life” is one of the pieces from his *Emotional Geographies* that portrays four rectangle fabrics with the following phrases sewn on: “loved flag”, “murdered flag”, “ex-flag”, and “hated flag”. Each of these responses comments on the political instability of an established or upcoming nation. On a larger scale, his art collection speaks about the psychological connotations attached to a political symbol.

Simon Njami is the *Looking Both Ways* writer who interprets Alvim’s work to be a nostalgic search for Angola. He argues that the artist is deeply connected with his African

origins and describes these as part of him: “Angola flows through [his] veins” (Njami 43). This deeply ingrained relationship enables Alvim to create artworks that reveal his memories of Angola’s past. Furthermore, Njami goes on to say that the artist “dreams of visionary nations and emotional geographies inscribed not within fixed borders but in an elsewhere to be invented” (43). He presents two ideas about the artwork, one being a revival of the past and the other being a progression towards a transcendent utopia of a place that has no boundaries, as he uses the words “dreams” and “visionary” to describe the series. I notice that his description portrays the artist to be optimistic rather than interrogative of his visual response to his African origins.

If Alvim takes his experience of Angola as his work’s foundation, which Njami suggests, then I argue that he applies a critical imagination where he intermeshes the concepts of what has happened and what can happen. He builds and reflects on his flag themed series through his manipulation of their forms. In support of this, *Flag puzzle* (fig. 6) mimics the structure of the shuffling puzzle game where the player deciphers the image by sliding horizontally or vertically the puzzle pieces. Each move the artist makes, he then screenshots and constructs his artworks from documenting his different tries. This process becomes futile because he is unable to complete the flag image and it remains distorted. Alvim’s artistic approach illustrates Khachig Tölölyan’s appropriation of a “sociological imagination”<sup>15</sup>. He defines this as an integral part of diasporic interaction whereby the person creates imaginary social or historical ties to an ancestral community (Tölölyan 5). Despite his ability to imagine possible relationships, he is aware that they are futile and unfulfilled but nevertheless important in understanding identity and sense belonging. The artist’s work demonstrates his (in)ability to reconcile his distant past with his imagined reality.

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<sup>15</sup> The sociologist C.Wright Mills first termed and defined the concept as the individual’s ability to mediate their identity between the poles of history and biography (4).  
Mills, C Wright. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.



Figure 7: Magma, Michèle. *In Grace Ndiritu's Desert Storm*. 2004. *Vimeo*. Uploaded by Grace Ndiritu. 2013. < <https://vimeo.com/60238613>>.

Michèle Magma exhibits the following videos for her *Flow* submission: *Overseas Stories*, *In Grace Ndiritu's Desert Storm*, and *Oyé*. The first video screens a woman dressed in white, who arranges flowers as she walks down a road. Her choice of flowers alludes to the French national flower emblem, the *fleur de li*, and symbolically associates it with colonial oppression within numerous African countries. In contrast to her specific commentary on the socio-political entanglements across geographic relations, her second video shows a naked woman barely covered with a cloth, staring at the camera while she lies on top of listed countries that have the highest rape statistics in the World (fig. 7). She shifts her focus to a global issue concerning violence against women. Lastly, for her third video, she installs a two-channel installation, where one screen shows images of her marching and the other screen shows historical footage of Zaire Mobutu Sese Seko<sup>16</sup> overseeing a commemorative Congolese cultural parade. In these set of works, she taps into her own social context of being a woman, an African descendant and a French citizen.

Amanda Alexander argues that Magma critiques the nation-state from her own perspective. According to this exhibition writer, the artist draws from her memories, as well as her knowledge on national symbols to challenge the methods that both France and the Congo

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<sup>16</sup> Mobutu was a Congolese president who ran the country under a military dictatorship from 1965 to 1997.

use to construct their ideas of nationhood. Her work reveals the two nations' historical and political connection. Moreover, her diasporic status is a manifestation of these two countries long line of colonial history. Alexander suggests that the artist plays a vital role in uncovering, unpacking, articulating and synchronising the countries' violent past in relation to the present. I notice that the exhibition writer is more concerned with the artist as a mouthpiece who explains the ongoing interrelationship between colony and metropole. Consequently, I argue that she pays little attention to Magma's concern with gender and rather writes about a generalised understanding of colonial and postcolonial violence.

In contrast, Magma forefronts the female body as an inscribed entity that reveals more about political history than the typical nationhood perspective. Her videos uncover complicated and tangled histories of the oppressed black woman's body and voice. She uses "historical facts that [she interprets] through the production of scenes" or filmmaking (Magma cited in Alexander 79). According to her website, her key focus is the exchange between individual stories, collective memory and history. She sees the person's experience as a doorway that interrogates intricate colonial relations, which not only applies to France and Angola but to any coloniser and colonised countries. In using herself as an example, she further describes the intention behind her work: "I expose my body that I use as a metaphor for the relationship between the human being and the world at large"<sup>17</sup>. Magma looks at herself as the source material for her artworks, but the subject matter is not confined to her identity, as she stipulates it is related to larger human issues and struggles.

The various exhibition writers attempt to forge a type of Africanness from the two curatorial themes. I take my understanding of Africanness from Paul Zeleza, who defines it as individuals who apply their African heritage to evaluate and construct their identity within host countries. Simply put, it is a perspective rooted in an African way of thinking that the diasporic person metaphorically locates her mindset inside the continent. From the above artist examples, I demonstrate the exhibition's over-emphasis on African origin or homeland-hostland relations as the defining factor that determines their art practice or visual content. Each of them provides various contradictory responses and techniques that conform, combat, or challenge the curatorial agenda.

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<sup>17</sup> Jephumba. "The Video Artwork of Michèle Magma." 2016. 1 May 2018 <<http://africandigitalart.com/2016/01/the-video-artwork-of-michele-magma/>>.

My analysis contrasts and compares the exhibition writer's and the artist's viewpoint, in which I suggest that intricacies and nuances emerge from the artist's relationship with her/his creations. The art shows expect the visual content to embody noticeable cultural or historical ideas, which therefore positions their featured artists as ambassadors. However, I argue that these visual markers do not engage in a simple one-to-one translation. In other words, their art is not simply a manifestation of their identity. Instead, they process their experiences in relation or in contradiction to the notion of African Diaspora. I conceive their art practice as small sparks of resistance and tension that have not fully ignited.

*Flow, Looking Both Ways* and *Africa Remix* possess curatorial agendas that steer them toward a geographic and cultural interpretation of their artists and artworks. Due to the international exposure and acclaim, the artists were subjected to problematic discourse as well as given a platform to display their creative innovations which was reserved previously for only Euro-American artists. Such visibility brings forth the challenge that post-colonial individuals are confronted with, which is to re-define their identity construction within a dominant colonial framework.

### **The paradoxical entanglement of the native informant position**

African diasporic artists find themselves in a paradoxical position, where on one hand they are expected to perform a cultural-show-tell, and on the other hand, they self-reflect on the repercussions of that imposed role. These two ideas entangle the artists into a larger political web that goes beyond a rudimentary artistic portrayal of their experiences. Thus, diasporic visual practice contributes to while countering a colonial paradigm about 'the cultural other'. I examine artists who critically communicate the intentions of their art, their position in the exhibitions and their understanding of the colonial politics inside the Western art world.



Figure 8: Bamgboyé, Oladélé. *Unmasking part 3 release point #1*. 1999. *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* exhibition catalogue.

Oladélé Bamgboyé presents parts of his ongoing *Unmasking* series in *Looking Both Ways*. The series is a collaborative effort between himself, computer programmers, scientists, and cultural scholars, as they create a system that examines and manipulates catalogued cultural artefacts specifically of colonial cultures, stored and found in European museums. He scans an artefact into a computer which then produces a 3D image of the object that users are able to view, alter as well as interact with its virtual version (fig. 8). *Unmasking* takes an anti-archaeological approach. Bamgboyé does not preserve the object's original state. Nor does he situate it in a cultural timeline. Instead, the artist looks at technology's ability and capability of deconstructing the physical and cultural context imbued in each artefact.

The concept of "Unmasking" is crucial to understanding the project's goal and intention. Before I begin, I define unmasking as the action of revealing or uncovering something that is concealed. This chapter suggests that multiple levels of unmasking occur: the artist interprets and selects specific objects for his series; the system transforms the object into a 3D image; the viewer interacts with the virtual object. Bamgboyé speaks about this process: "You destroy those features [and] strip those objects of their references", such as "making the Benin object look less African" (Bamgboyé cited in Byvanck 70). As a result, the cultural artefact loses its socio-cultural connotations and becomes an abstraction. However, he claims that the viewer is in charge of the amount of abstraction the object undergoes. They must strike a balance between manipulation and obliteration, since "Part of the work is to assume control

of those destroying elements of that technology” which then produces “a strategy for a critical point of view” (Bamgboyé cited in Byvanck 70). Fusion between technology and aesthetics interrogates the cultural artefact’s original purpose and its housing in Western museums.

I argue that Bamgboyé’s approach does not omit political implications by peeling away cultural references. Instead he exemplifies them. His work responds to the paradoxical position of being an African diasporic artist. Contrary to the exhibition’s expectation for diasporic individuals to cultivate and employ their African heritage, he concentrates on the deconstruction of that socio-cultural construct and further questions what purpose they serve and which knowledge paradigms they uphold. The artist provides a refreshing tactic where he is unable to be pigeonholed, but may be accused of being “un-African” (Bamgboyé cited in Byvanck 69).

He acknowledges his historical connection to Nigeria but he does not let that define his work. In his artist’s statement, he states, “I don’t consider myself as an intellectual cultural exile from Africa” (Bamgboyé cited in Byvanck 63). Bamgboyé immediately disassociates himself from any type of artist categories, even though he is aware that curators already label him as the African artist working in global networks. He writes:

Certain curators find it attractive to place me alongside artists born in Africa, who never moved, and maybe have no intention of living anywhere else, and to say that we have a common cause. That is the way to stimulate the development and progression of African art as a genre (Bamgboyé cited in Byvanck 63).

The artist makes insightful points on the mechanics and operations that run in the art world. His work reflects his precarious position in being part of an African community, whether an artistic or cultural one. His manipulated artefacts problematise the development of African aesthetics based on an African origin. *Unmasking* does not address the usual diasporic content such as the diasporic experience or identity in relation to belonging.

Mersal discusses the theoretical cues that clump diasporic artists together and generalise their experiences. A few popular examples are “alienation”, “isolation from a cultural distance”, “reconnection to the past”, and “uncertainty towards belonging” (Mersal 1583). Curators thrive on these themes and place them at the forefront of their exhibitions, as they market the diasporic position as an unstable state in which the person reflects on her insider/outsider status towards multiple cultures and societies. In other words, the artist occupies a platform where she needs to contemplate an identity in relation to a geographic

attachment. This scholar worries about the art world's dominant way of thinking that labels artists in accordance with their art practice.

Bamgboyé touches on the politics around the artist's identity, as one of the topics in his catalogue interview. He talks about the tensions that occur in exhibition participation and the establishment of a name in the art world:

Only recently have I been listed in the directory of living British artists. At the same time, I'm participating in the wider discourse of contemporary African art with which I have a mixed relationship. I think it is good to give visibility to Africa. Yet, everyone seems to focus on the diaspora, which is safe, they don't know what to do about the "true" Africans (Bamgboyé cited in Byvanck 67).

The artist references these multiple identities, such as British, African and African diasporic, which restrict and impose obligations on him as an artist and the role of his art-making. Each of these labels indicates different times in his life, as he associates each identity with a different time phrase like "[o]nly recently", "[a]t the same time", "yet", which therefore suggests that he constantly plays in and out of them during his involvement in various shows. He makes a crucial point that African diasporic artists replace African artists.

I interpret his statement as a window into the art world's use and portrayal of African diasporic visual practice. When Bamgboyé uses the word "safe", he implies that curators consider diasporic artists as more integrated into a Western living compared to the African artist, because the former group demonstrates themes that support European thinking. They symbolise progressive and global players, whereas the latter group is still in their 'artistic development' process. Moreover, his comment highlights the art world's caution towards the featuring of African artists alongside Western artists. Their attitude illustrates an embedded colonial mentality in their feelings of desire and repulsion in getting too close to or accepting the 'cultural other'.

Spivak discusses the 'native informant's' complicit role of speaking in a discourse that oppresses them. Ironically, their communicative ability gives them visibility within the West, yet they are forced into a constant negotiation between what they perceive and how they should perceive themselves. Their self-reflective process involves the act of "recoding" and "appropriating" their message, as their diasporic perspective must mimic the 'native informant' perspective (Spivak ix). However, Spivak considers that the post-colonial person possesses an agency in which, they create different techniques that challenge and resist their position within

the colonial framework. A complicit role reveals a complex chain where moments of conformity as well as resistance arise simultaneously.



Figure 9: Yiadom-Boakye, Lynette. *All that we may afford*. 2006. Gowen Contemporary Gallery collection. 1 May 2018 < <http://www.gowencontemporary.com/artists/lynette-yiadom-boakye/>>.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, one of the *Flow* artists, showcases a portrait series of black men and women in minimalist or dark backgrounds. Her painting subjects are fictitious people inspired by her imagination, scrapbooks, drawings or photographs, who confront the viewer with a direct gaze. Furthermore, her simple backgrounds position these subjects outside of time, where the viewer is unable to discern any information about them. But, her paintings have titles that allude vaguely to some context (fig. 9). She situates her paintings between reality and fiction especially in her engagement with the Western art history canon. Although her art style draws significantly from old painting masters such as Édouard Manet and Francisco Goya, she

foregrounds black people as the main painting subject instead of white people<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, the artist humanises the representation of black bodies while interrogating a visual discourse.

Her works visualise a marginalised group, which she believes is erased from art history. She gives them visibility despite their minimal or non-existent social context, and her reason for this is because she is familiar yet unfamiliar with her subjects, since they are fictitious. When the exhibition writer asks about her feelings towards her figures, she replies:

Although they are not real, I think of them as people known to me. They are imbued with a power of their own. They have a resonance-something emphatic and otherworldly. I admire them for the strength of their moral fiber. [...] I don't like to paint victims. You don't recognise them because have no allegiance to anywhere (Yiadom-Boakye cited in Kent 102).

She does not see her painting subjects as her creations, but as ordinary people whom she imagines and admires. When she mentions that viewers are unable to “recognise them because they have no allegiance”, her intention is to portray black figures who escape any social circumstances that impose and enforce categories or stereotypes onto their identities and lifestyles. The paintings illustrate the artist's balance between depiction and control over the subjects' visual stories, as she acknowledges her separation from and her affection towards them.

I argue that Yiadom-Boakye does not appoint herself with the duty of representing black lives. Instead, she brings them into existence. Her paradoxical relationship with her figures prevents her from being a spokesperson for black people, since she perceives their lives independent of her own life. Although she does not directly engage with a real-time socio-political situation, she disrupts Western art discourse through her inclusion of visualising marginalised people. Simultaneously, she is aware of hypervisibility as a problem in reflecting on her own diasporic position in the art world.

Her paintings voice her own attempt to transcend any constraints imposed on her identity as an individual and as an artist. During her interview with the exhibition writer, she is confronted with the reality that her geographic background gives her the speaking platform to talk about her work process. She does not reject nor accept the association:

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<sup>18</sup> In tradition Western art representations, the black person is painted in subordination to the white person. For example, they are painted in positions of servitude where they have no direct eye contact with the viewer or the other painting figures.

I am British but my roots aren't here and in Ghana, I am foreign even though the whole of my ancestry is there, not feeling anchored intensifies the need to keep making, where a lot of making and destroying happens (Yiadom-Boakye cited in Kent 103).

She is mindful of the diasporic model way of thinking, when she is asked to comment about her diasporic experiences in relation to her connections with Britain and Ghana. Her answer quickly moves onto her art-making technique. I interpret that her response does not delve into specific details. Instead she restricts the amount of influence that her background has on her work.

This subsection introduces and theorises the concepts “describer” and “described” to explain that Yiadom-Boakye’s self-reflection entangles her resistance with complicity. Before I begin, I define “describer” as the position of an active participant who provides insight into an unknown topic. “Described” refers to the position of a person who becomes the subject matter for others to interpret. For the interview, the writer places the artist into the describer role. She describes her own homeland-hostland relationship that underlines her visual practice. However, at the same time, she transforms herself into the described role for the exhibition. The curators see and interpret her ambivalence towards her place of belonging as the source that contextualises her work. Yet, she admits the separation between herself and her subject matter. I claim that the describer-described positions demonstrate the internal dynamic between the ‘native informant’ and their role. They become a cultural specimen that forms part of the informant document.

Resistance and complicity happen in multifaceted layers, which exist between the artist’s relationship with the artwork and their self-reflection on their contribution towards the shows. Bamgboyé questions the social connotations of cultural objects, which indirectly comments on the meaning and purpose of diasporic artworks, whereas Yiadom-Boakye evaluates the invisibility/hypervisibility of black bodies within a diasporic exhibition and as subject matter. Similarly, each artist expresses their resistance through a disassociation with either their subject matter or diasporic background. Despite their visual strategies, their exhibition participation adds another complex layer where they are susceptible to the writer’s assumptions and ideas about them being part of the African Diaspora. I see that Bamgboyé and Yiadom-Boakye strategically play within and outside the exhibition confinement to expose its internal structure.

## **A narratological analysis of the African diasporic artist identity**

I put forward that the narratology concept of focalisation can analyse the dynamic between the artists, their artworks and their responses to the reception of their art. Although focalisation is used in film and literature studies, I find it applicable to visual art based on two reasons. Firstly, all art disciplines focus on how form impacts the representation of an experience<sup>19</sup>. Secondly, artists who partake in exhibitions can be compared metaphorically as characters in a novel. The idea of focalisation enables me to uncover the internal conflicts and tensions which artists experience within themselves and towards a ‘native informant’ role in the art shows.

Mieke Bal is a narratologist who sees the overlapping connections between visual art and narratology. She has written extensively within her field, but I mainly focus on her theorisation of focalisation that she uses for her analysis of old Western paintings. Her work supports my interdisciplinary approach in studying diasporic people, their experiences and their stories. In addition to Bal’s examination of the relationship between the artwork and the artist, my method considers another layer of interaction which involves an exhibition’s impact on the artist as well as the viewer. I outline the intricate engagements that occur amongst these three layers based on her scholarship.

She defines the concept of focalisation as a viewpoint of either the character or the narrator that governs the narrative’s storytelling (Bal 161). Following that, she breaks down the concept into two types: internal and external focalisation. The former is the character’s perspective, whereas the second is the perspective of the omniscient or third person narrator. (Bal 161)<sup>20</sup>. I integrate her definition and suggest that artists and their artworks account for both focalisations, as their subject matter represents their internal focalisation and their self-reflection on their art, and the viewer analysing the work represents the external focalisation<sup>21</sup>. Another layer of focalisation happens, where the artists themselves embody the exhibition’s perspective. They are actively aware of being a cultural symbol. These various focalisation coatings inform a multitude of entwined relationships, which I argue construct, determine, impose, challenge and reject the meaning of an African diasporic artist. This segment investigates three artists, whose visual practices indicate their hyper-awareness in reflecting on

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<sup>19</sup> Books, films, videos, sound pieces and artworks are examples of different forms.

<sup>20</sup> I interchange focalisation with viewpoint and perspective.

<sup>21</sup> The subject matter is the artist’s internal focalisation because it provides insight into the artist’s perception and conception of the World, whereas the external focalisation looks at the outsider’s interpretation on a topic that is unfamiliar with her.

their diasporic position within their works and the exhibitions. It also looks at their agency to disrupt a definitive understanding of their identity.

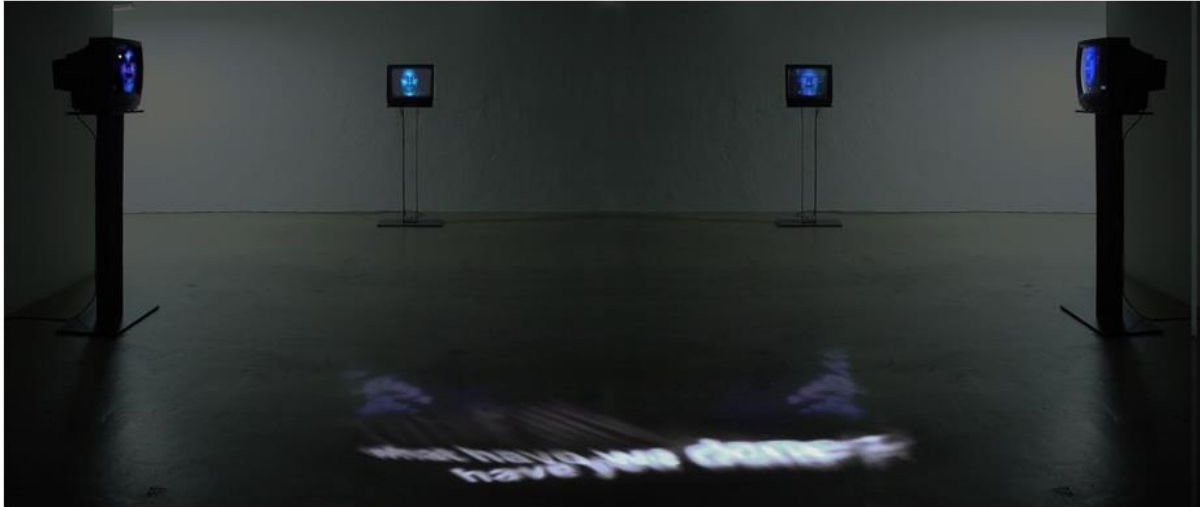


Figure 10: Mwangi, Ingrid. *To be in the World*. 2002. *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* exhibition catalogue.

Ingrid Mwangi exhibited five artworks for her *Looking Both Ways* exhibition, out of which I analyse only two. The first piece called *Coloured* installs a video projection, red soil on top of a table, and four monitors that screen parts of Mwangi's person. The second piece named *To be in the world* includes a video projection, as well as six flat screens with surround sound (fig. 10). Each flat screen records the different viewers' reactions towards watching violent images. Mwangi's art speaks about her relationship with herself and the conditions of her belonging.

I suggest that her videos indicate that her self-reflexive practice comes at the cost of her body's objectification. Mwangi presents herself as a character and becomes her own subject matter, through which she performs reactions and behaviours that complement or contradict her personality. I therefore observe that this dynamic represents her internal focalisation and the viewer's response to her work is the external focalisation. *Coloured* and *to be in the world* illustrate the cohesion between the two outlined focalisations. For the first installation, the viewers are confronted with multiple screenings of Mwangi doing actions that contrast with one another. She purposely disorients their watching of her body and her movements. However, her second installation uses a different approach where she reverses the role of the viewer and artist. The audience's viewpoint substitutes the artist's viewpoint. In other words, she sees the viewers' reactions as her own and performs temporally a form of mimicry that allows her to adopt the external focaliser position. As a result, the outsider plays an important role in

facilitating the artist's shift from one perspective to another and her internal to external engagement with her art.

In response to her artistic approach, the exhibition writer Simon Njami describes her work as a fictional autobiography. He argues that Mwangi's awareness of being watched underpins her creation of self-reflexive layers for her video content. Subsequently, he contemplates whether or not he understands her artistic intentions:

We think we know about her but in fact, she is making fun of us. Lead actor in and director of her scenarios, she uses images as a succession of signs and symbols, an enigma that she invites us to decode by constantly leading us down the wrong path (Njami 150).

Njami states that the artist is purposely deceiving the viewer and himself, but he does not elaborate on the agenda behind her strategy. I propose that Mwangi ironically deflects attention from herself and instead forces the onlooker to consider her position and coerced reaction in her work.

I argue that Mwangi applies the strategy of de-familiarisation to herself and the audience. She states that her goal is to adopt many identities which represent yet do not represent her, as she increasingly "[takes] the place of the other, in order to feel, to understand" (Mwangi cited in Njami 147). I interpret her attitude as enabling fluidity between the internal and external focaliser positions that, according to the artist, instigate her analysis of the emotional responses that arise in *To be in the world*. Furthermore, her method distances her from the outsider's opinions about her video identity. Consequently, the artist uses focalisation as a tool of empowerment, where she assesses her work from multiple viewpoints without directly dealing with the people who analyse and interpret.



Figure 11: Mutu, Wangechi. *Figures!*. 2002. *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* exhibition catalogue.

Contrary to Mwangi, Wangechi Mutu shows resistance in her visual content rather than a complex dynamic between the portrayed and the real self. She creates collages from media images, as well as texts to create grotesque, mutilated, and hybrid humanoid creatures for her *Looking Both Ways* and *Africa Remix* setup (fig. 11). Each artwork conveys different degrees of mutilated flesh, beauty, charm and disgust. The mismatch between the face and the figure accentuate the constructed nature of her collages.

I claim that her art demonstrates the perversion in representing humans as tokens of difference. She does not perpetuate or reproduce stereotypes in her critique, because her figures do not allude to any socio-cultural categories. In support of my observation, the *Looking Both Ways* writer Lauri Firstenberg views the artist's work as a "perverse form of anthropology" (137). Her comment implies that viewers experience an uncomfortable, perhaps disturbing contact with the images. They study and analyse the humanoids, but they are unable to grasp or deduce any traces of culture, appearance or lifestyle, and thus they are simply looking for

the sake of looking. It is a form of anthropology that fails to provide any information about the studied subject.

Mutu disrupts the subject-object power relation between the viewer and her collages, since the act of looking provides the onlooker with no socio-historical insight. She forces the viewer to reflect on their mixed responses towards her work. I interpret the works as representing external focalisation, because they attempt to make sense of or understand what they see. As a result, Mutu places them into a position where they must dig deep and realise their socialised colonial minds that, she triggers with the materials that construct her humanoids. The artist sources visual and textual snippets that propagate a Western perspective and imaginary on the 'cultural other', which I take as the internal focalisation that influences the onlooker's viewership. She situates herself between the two focalisations, being the viewer and the collages, as she mediates their colonial interaction.

I put forward the idea that Mutu's artistic strategy examines the artwork's effect on its viewers. Her collages highlight hegemonic language and canonical visual images that speak about and frame post-colonised groups. Such discourse is not negative for everyone. *Africa Remix* writers state that her work celebrates hybridity as a positive by-product of globalisation rather than as a marker of difference. Mutu is mindful that her work can be read both as positive and negative but, essentially, these evaluations emerge from the same circulated linguistic and visual discourse that reveals itself through people's reactions towards her work. Her artistic approach articulates Bal's connection between focalisation and direct or implied context. This scholar claims that the context type delimits how much the individual knows, does not know, or purposely hides. When they encounter information that contradicts their own knowledge or expectations, they are confronted with disillusionment which exposes their ignorance. In relation to the collages, Mutu discerns the artwork's effectiveness by the viewer's ability to understand the ideology behind her collage style, whether they interpret it as hybridity or a socio-political commentary on marginalised representations in Western spaces. Any reaction places the viewer in a complicit role, where they accept and normalise the discourse. She creates complex connections between her art, her viewer and herself through a confrontation of human representation.

Moshekwa Langa highlights another intricate relation, apart from Mutu's analysis of the viewer and the artwork, which is the exhibition writer and the artwork. He creates a floor installation from random, as well as normal everyday objects, thread and yarn. This work, *Temporal Distance, (With a Criminal Intent) You Will Find Us in the Best of Places*, originally featured in the second Johannesburg Biennial in 1997 and now, it is one of his common

installations for his group exhibitions (fig. 12). The installation resembles a small scale town or city, as the objects look like buildings and the multiple yarns or threads that run across them mimic the tracing of different routes within the space. Although he creates an imaginary playground version of a human settlement, Langa keeps the installation devoid of any references to real places. His overall intention is to minimise his interference or control over the space, as he states: “I didn’t try to impose order onto the arrangement as I thought that leaving it to chance would be interesting” (Langa cited in Mercer 102). Subsequently, he leaves the onlooker to contemplate the possibilities of exploration through his imaginative space.



Figure 12: Langa, Moshekwa. *Temporal Distance, (With a Criminal Intent) You Will Find Us in the Best of Places*. 1997. *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* exhibition catalogue.

During his *Looking Both Ways* interview with Kobena Mercer, the artist becomes aware of the exhibition writer’s projection onto his work. Mercer interprets the installation (Fig. 12) as an expression of diasporic themes such as mobility, belonging, and migration. I note that the two focalisations are present in the writer-artwork relation, as the writer represents the external focaliser who sees the artist’s internal focalisation of his diasporic experiences. He sees Langa’s visual practice as a social commentary on diasporic lifestyles. Consequently, he orients his interview questions around the above assumption, as he asks Langa, “What does diaspora mean to you?” to which the artist replies, “Oh, but I didn’t know I was in the diaspora.” (Mercer 105). Langa pretends to be oblivious of the implied meaning behind Mercer’s enquiry, which is that all exhibited artists commit to the diasporic label and visualise their concept of the diasporic experience.

The artist creates a disjuncture between the external, the writer's interpretation, and the internal focalisation, the artwork's meaning. I argue that his artistic strategy exposes the contradictory ideas between the two viewpoints, as he adopts temporally the external focaliser position and forestalls the interview's direction towards an attempt to pigeonhole him into the African diasporic artist label. In other words, Mercer imposes his subjectivity onto the artist and his work. Bal talks about this issue when she observes that each and every description conceals a biased perspective. I see the similarities between her comment and Langa's remark towards the writer. He rejects while drawing attention to Mercer's prejudiced understanding or misguided assumption about his artwork in relation to his identity. Langa evades any imposed narrative description of the installation except his own.

Each artist finds her/his own resistant method that challenges either the exhibition writer's or the viewer's perspective on African diasporic identity and art. Mwangi and Langa tackle the construction of an African diasporic self, but they approach the theme differently. The first artist explores the multiple versions of her portrayed self that confuses the outsider as to which is the real and fictitious representation. Whereas, the second artist takes a more explicit strategy and challenges the exhibition writer's underlying preconceptions about the African diasporic artist. In contrast to these two, Mutu relies on the viewer-artwork to address the colonial connotations that permeate in any art about or made from marginalised groups. I observe these artists occupy the roles of doing and being, where the former is the physical act of generating art and the latter refers to being the exhibition's subject matter. They create constant clashes within their exhibition participation and prevent themselves from being subjected to the diasporic label.

## **Conclusion**

The three art exhibitions, *Looking Both Ways*, *Africa Remix*, and *Flow* have shaped and contributed towards a visual art discourse that draws on a colonial legacy. Various diasporic artists are positioned into the 'native informant' role, as their works represent cultural documents that supply information on an African origin to a Western audience. I suggest not all of them conform to the exhibition diasporic models since some resist cultural interpretation or reduction to their diasporic backgrounds, whereas others reinforce or perpetuate problematic colonial discourse. These multiple yet contradictory visual representations debunk the exhibitions' homogenous grouping of artists' art-making style, subject matter, and use of their diasporic identities.

I have outlined three diasporic models that reflect the position of the selected showcases and their artists. *Looking Both Ways* referenced the traditional *homeland-hostland* model, which emphasised the diasporic interaction between the place of origin and the current place of residence. *Africa Remix* utilised the *homeland plus diaspora* model that prioritised an African origin, compared to the first model that attributed equal importance to both spaces. *Flow* attempted to erase any form of geographic attachments in the use of the *diaspora-apart* model. This exhibition looked at the artists' negotiation of a global identity rather than a specific African heritage, yet ironically they only showcased African-American diasporic experiences. All cases demonstrated an embedded geographic emphasis in diasporic visual discourse. Consequently, the African diasporic artist is expected to conform to cultural connotations attached to locations.

The exhibition curators and writers pigeonhole the artists and their works into a cultural framework, whereby they link their art-making style to a diasporic background. I interpret their interpretations as resurrecting the 'native informant' trope with a diasporic identity based on two curatorial themes. The first one interpreted the artist as a cultural symbol and the second interpreted her/his art-making as an engagement with her/his affiliated African country. Both cases interpret the artwork as an informant document that linked the artist to a specific cultural background. Exhibition curators and writers therefore used the artists' aesthetics instrumentally rather than reflecting on their creative execution.

African diasporic artists are in paradoxical entanglement between their creative vision and the exhibitions' interpretations of cultural context. They must resist the discourse within its internal structures. I outline artists who disassociate themselves from either their subject matter or diasporic background, as a resistant method against the pigeonholing of their identities to their African heritage. Consequently, they reflect on their diasporic artist position and interrogate its selling point in art shows based in Western spaces.

I extend further into my analysis of potential resistances that surface within the relationship between the artist, the artwork and the onlooker's response, and apply a narratological reading to explain the contradicting nuances that emerge from multiple perspectives. The three entities embody three different viewpoints on the same African diasporic story, which also represents the 'native informant' document. Mwangi disassociates from her identity that then becomes her subject matter for the participant to indulge and impose their cultural interpretations. Similarly, Mutu considers the viewers' complicit involvement in the perpetuation of colonial discourse on the cultural other, as her collages depict grotesque yet alluring images of fetishised bodies. Langa takes a more explicit approach and openly resists the

labelling of his work during his interview with Mercer. The artist ensures that his work cannot be reduced to his cultural background or his African origin. A narratological analysis provides an alternative framework that highlights the artist engagement and acknowledgement of an existing visual discourse.

Chapter Two has unpacked artists and their investigation into the African diasporic visual discourse and language that cage their visual practice. Their various forms of engagement interrogate the definition of a diasporic position, attached to an identity, a place of origin and belonging, which subsequently brings into question its relation to the concept of a diasporic condition. This enquiry is carried over into the subsequent chapters. I examine further the relations between condition and position, specifically how it initiates and illustrates nuances to diasporic experience.

## Chapter Three

### A semantic experience of the African Diaspora

#### Introduction

In Chapter two, I examined how the art exhibitions *Flow*, *Looking Both Ways* and *Africa Remix* utilise a problematic visual discourse that pigeonholes the artists in relation to their geographic background. An external interpretation from the curators and writers reveal how the relationship between identity and creation is determined. I analysed selected case studies where various artists have resisted or challenged the idea of “native informant”. Chapter Three challenges the connection between the diasporic individual and a cultural spokesperson, as I put forward that Victor Ekpuk’s drawings and Isidore Okpewho’s novel *Call Me By My Rightful Name* complicate a cultural reading of the ‘native’s’ attachment to their ancestral home.

Chapter Three puts forward the idea that the African diasporic person’s encounter with language reinterprets her relationship with an African origin. Language may come to hold a personal and spiritual connection to a transcendent realm, which subverts typical diasporic visual discourse’s emphasis on cultural and historical aspects. I introduce Victor Ekpuk’s drawings and Isidore Okpewho’s novel *Call Me By My Rightful Name* as illustrative examples that use language in this way. Each of them demonstrates language’s role as a communicative channel that facilitates a form of spiritual enlightenment that grounds an individual’s sense of belonging. Both the artworks and the novel offer an alternative understanding, which challenges the ‘native informant’ role as a cultural interpreter of their place of origin, as well as on being part of those who live abroad.

I propose the concept of semantic experience, as a thematic lens through which a personal encounter with language induces a form of spiritual transcendence. Semantics is indeed a loaded term but the overall consensus is that it studies the relationship between words and meanings<sup>22</sup>. However, my chapter applies this concept differently. I examine the artist and the writer’s meaning-making process through an engagement with written symbols or systems<sup>23</sup>. The term semantic experience refers to language’s influence to govern and

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<sup>22</sup> Kreidler 1998, Frawley 1992, Enfield 2003, Löbner’s 2002, Thomson 2012

<sup>23</sup> I draw inspiration from Enfield’s argument that the phrase “what do you call it” suggests a process in connecting a social context with a word (102).

Enfield, N.J. “The Definition of WHAT-d’you-call-it: semantics and pragmatics of recognitional deixis.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 35.1(2003): 101-117.

shape an individual's understanding of herself, her environment and social circumstances. Simply put, this can be defined in relation to a diasporic position and a condition. Semantic experience demonstrates an engagement with language that underpins a social context, which denotes position as an ascribed social role attached to a specific form of identification, as well as informs a particular condition that determines the individual's state of being within an environment.

This chapter references Victor Ekpuk's art and Isidore Okpewho's novel to demonstrate a diasporic discourse that focuses on a language based interaction with their place of origin. I argue that they redefine the diasporic position and condition, as they highlight an experience which does not rely on geographic spaces or movement across spaces. Instead, their work constitutes an encounter with a higher-order realm. Consequently, they undermine the African diasporic person as a 'native informant' who provides cultural information based on a 'native' space. Rather, Okpewho and Ekpuk are interested in forms of 'enlightenment' unrelated to a point of origin.

Victor Ekpuk, a Nigerian-American artist, evaluates his diasporic status in his large-scale drawings of the *nsibidi* writing system and rewrites his socio-cultural link to Nigeria. For his 2017 exhibition at the North Carolina Museum of Art, titled *Divinity*, he presents a wall to wall chalk drawing that explores spirituality, language and meaning-making through a unique diasporic interaction. I argue that he challenges the 'native informant' role because his evaluation of the diasporic position and condition are not concerned with cultural accuracy. Instead, he focuses on his own personal relationship with cultural symbols. His semantic experience provides insight into an artistic process that takes and incorporates his own message into each written character, which he then uses as a communicative channel to contact the divine. Consequently, his visual works transform his diasporic experience into a spiritual encounter.

In comparison to the artist, Isidore Okpewho is Nigerian-American scholar who specialises in the historical and oral aspects of the African Diaspora. His novel *Call Me By My Rightful Name* encapsulates his two diasporic interests. He introduces language as a pertinent factor that shapes the main character Otis Hampton's understanding of his position and condition of being an African-American. His family lineage dates back to family members being slaves who were brought from Nigeria to America. The book uses this background to explore the interconnectedness of history that binds the human world with the spirit world rather than portraying a cultural re-discovery narrative. I argue that Okpewho challenges the imposed 'native informant' role of the diasporic individual as a socio-cultural

reporter. He shows that language stimulates Otis' personal growth through his contact with the supernatural, which becomes a private experience that the novel struggles to relay to the reader. The protagonist's diasporic perspective encompasses more than a simple homeland-hostland framework, and instead highlights a self-enlightenment that emerges from his encounter with the Yoruba semiotic universe.

The spirit world becomes a theme connecting the literary and visual works, as both art forms orient their semantic experience around an interaction with higher order entities. Filip de Boeck, an anthropologist, states that the spirit world interconnects and is tangible in the real world, where spirits are invisible agents that interfere with ordinary people (116). I claim that the novel and the artworks use language to illustrate the above relationship. In the novel, Okpewho uses the spirit voices to guide Otis towards his enlightenment through which he reconciles his identity as an African-American, and therefore finds his sense of purpose in the World. Contrary to the author illustrating the supernatural as a force of intervention or assistance, Ekpuk initiates his own transcendence through his manipulation and formulation of new semiotic relations with the referenced cultural symbols. Both the artist and the writer show that a linguistically induced spiritual encounter brings forth agency and insight into the social environment.

I observe that Ekpuk and Okpewho consider the reader and the viewer positions in their exploration of language as an experience. They create and situate the audience in a role, whereby they are able to replicate their own semantic encounter through the respective art forms, as they engage with the content based on their own interpretation. My analysis essentially looks at the book and the art piece's influence on the viewership and readership. I break down the audience's interactions into three stages: immersion, distance and interpretation. Viewers and readers enter their own linguistically induced interaction, which requires them to participate in a semiotic system that is different from their own. This in turn allows them to develop a new way of thinking about words and meaning.

Both the book and the artworks offer a unique yet similar engagement with language, the self and the spirit world, as each of the works look at the African Diaspora beyond a simple reflection on a place of origin. I conclude that Ekpuk and Okpewho destabilise the 'native informant's' position, identity, and relationship to the coloniser group who desires cultural information. Most importantly, their linguistic investigations put forward language as a potential medium through which to analyse the diasporic groups and their states of being. The artist and author foreground that each semantic experience as distinct from another, irrespective of it being in the same shared language.

### Victor Ekpuk, the linguistic (anti)translator or creator

Victor Ekpuk is a Nigerian-American artist based in Washington, in the United States. His large-scale drawings explore the visual nature of the Eastern Nigerian writing system (*nsibidi*), which interrogates the distinction between the literary and visual forms. This particular focus gives him the fluidity to operate within various artistic disciplines such as design, textuality and fine art. Most of his works has been exhibited in The Museum of Art and Design, The Smithsonian Museum of Art, The World Bank and The Johannesburg Biennial. In 2017, the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA) invited the artist to create a 9.14 x 5.49 m chalk drawing on the wall (fig. 13) for the opening of the African gallery section.

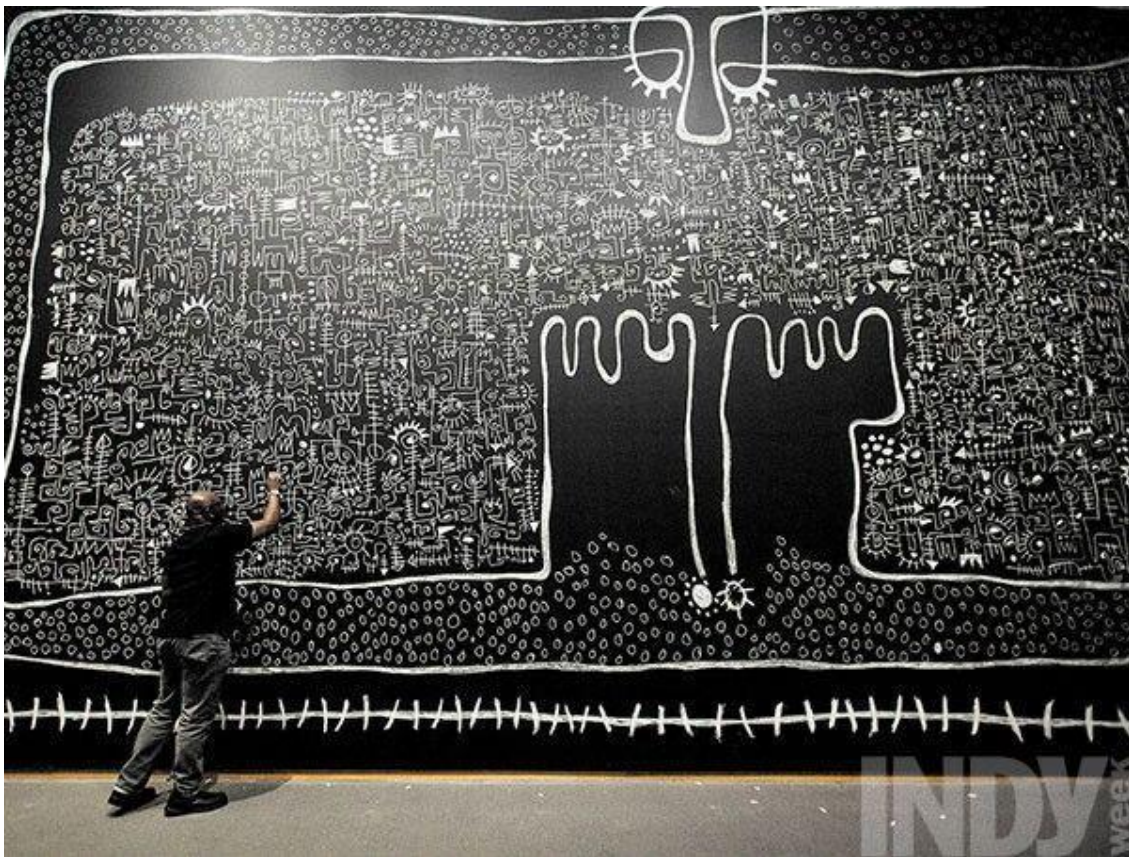


Figure 13: Ekpuk, Victor. *Divinity*. 2017. Site-specific chalk mural drawing in NCMA. <https://indyweek.com/culture/art/victor-ekpuk-s-divine-mural-north-carolina-museum-art-heralds-new-life-african-galleries/>.

Lawrence Wheeler, the NCMA director, states that the institution is interested in African and African diasporic artists such as Ekpuk, whose work bridges the gap between cultural references and contemporary art (Wheeler cited in NCMA 1). His art uses symbols in which he reflects on his connection to African history, as well as highlighting universal

themes such as memory and erasure. The curator Elizabeth Perill exemplifies the contemporary nature of the artist's work as, she explains that the mural drawing is temporary because, after ten days, the chalk drawings will be washed off to create a poetic and ephemeral effect (Perill cited in NCMA 1). Despite the erasure of his *nsibidi* symbols, an art reviewer for *Indy Week*, Chris Vitiello describes how the absence still possesses an overwhelming presence that, mourns the intricate yet dense images which previously left an impression within the gallery space (para. 4). NCMA reflects on this experience during a two-day hosted workshop for tertiary students, as they engage with the potential traces through their own making of mixed-media art. The museum used their building expansion as an opportunity to create conversations about transcultural experiences outside the African continent.

Many art critics, writers and galleries have published scholarship<sup>24</sup> on Ekpuk and his unique art-making style. I observe that their studies have mainly examined the exhibition context rather than paying attention to the artist's overriding visual themes within his creations. He works in a variety of mediums such as chalk on blackboards, oil/acrylic on canvas, chalk, pastel, graphite and paper, cloth materials and metal. This chapter will only examine two of his styles, chalk and blackboard, pastel and graphite, and link these forms with his expression of *nsibidi* symbols.

His reference to *nsibidi*, the Eastern Nigerian graphics system embodies a form of aesthetic philosophy that suggests signs express and describe complex ideas, either a singular meaning or multiple interconnected meanings translated into a single visual symbol. The artist adds another semantic layer when he alters, references or creates something else out of the original sign. I argue that his artistic approach re-imagines and re-interprets the *nsibidi* semantic structure through his cross-interaction between art and writing. In other words, his works transcend any specific artistic genre since, he depicts them as a visual textual form as well as a writing system with an aesthetic appeal. This double perspective on the symbols contradicts their original purpose as communicative linguistic tools.

I argue that Ekpuk and his drawings challenge the 'native informant' role, as his incorporated meaning and interpretation debunks any pure cultural connotations. His artistic interference taints his translator role and his ability to relay culturally accurate information. Although he draws from a specific Nigerian cultural and historical discourse, and

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<sup>24</sup> *Washington Post* 2018, Sulger-Buel Lovell gallery 2016, Okeke 2016, *Artsy* 2018, *Creative Feel* 2015, Kenfack 2015.

acknowledges their influence on his diasporic status, his art facilitates a personal interaction and understanding that the symbols evoke for him. I evaluate his resistance based on his response to his diasporic condition and position. The first context, his condition, shows that his artistic investigation comes in conflict with the museum's reduction of art as related to his place of origin. The second context refers to his position that, in this case, means his translator role for a Western audience. He complicates and prevents himself from becoming a cultural-linguistic ambassador for Nigeria. His engagement redefines his experience that surpasses any delimitation of his diasporic status.

The museum curator and director reveal their thematic interest in the African characteristics of his mural drawings. Both of their comments imply that his diasporic condition, of living abroad and working in the United States, facilitates his cultural background's application within a global contemporary art discourse – which Chapter Two highlighted as a recurring issue when framing African Diasporic artists<sup>25</sup>. In other words, his chalk mural illustrates his linguistic connection to Nigeria. His diasporic experience instigates his search for traces that articulate and remind him of his cultural history. Contrary to their pigeonholing of Ekpuk and his art-making style, I suggest that he is more interested in the writing symbols' dynamic and visual characteristics, as opposed to their socio-cultural origins. Their large-scale nature exemplifies each individual graphic signs as well as drawing attention to their overall collective construction. As a result, his mural drawing creates an overwhelming and innate mystic presence. During an interview for the NCMA exhibition, he discusses how it is difficult to subscribe a conclusive meaning to the symbols, because he appropriates and alters either their original semantic value or visual appearance (Ekpuk cited in Vitiello 10). His upfront statement indicates that he does not directly impose his diasporic condition onto his art-making. Instead, his tampering with the writing system shows his reflective response which he then creates his own personal linguistic interaction that cannot be reduced to a simple cultural framework.

I propose that Ekpuk challenges his diasporic position through his reworking of the *nsibidi* graphics system. He is not a translator but an original creator, who takes inspiration from his personal encounter with the symbols, and invites new meaning in relation to their representations and purpose. This affects the reception of his mural drawing. The art crowd is made up of mostly Westerners and, thus, many of them have little contact nor knowledge

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<sup>25</sup> Most importantly, they perpetuate the problematic discourse on Euro-American spaces being the global and international space for the modern art scene.

about writing systems outside an Anglo-Saxon context. As a result, they buy into the artist's created graphic representations because they assume them to be in their correct form. By convincing them of this fictitious façade, he undermines his 'native informant' role as a being a reliable provider of untainted cultural information. His knowledge of the *nsibidi* symbols establishes a foundation to his own graphics system that includes his own interpretation.

The chalk and blackboard medium echoes the temporariness of his creative art-making. I claim that the mural drawing (fig. 13) acts as a draft version towards his pursuit for a better linguistic system. The NCMA exhibition provides a huge wall surface on which the artist can test out, play with and invent new graphic signs that are erased after a few days. Furthermore, the exhibition opening contributes to his linguistic process. During the showcase, the visitors view and engage with the symbols, which then presents their participation as part of the experiment that examines whether the graphic symbols are viable or uninterpretable communicative channels. Ekpuk anticipates and predicts this interaction: he meta-textually represents it through a large figure whose distended arms gather the chaotic signs (fig. 13). In addition, little circles group some of the symbols together under some unknown collective category. Documentation and erasure indicate the artist's dynamic relationship with language, as he demonstrates that graphic signs possess their own energy source.

Ekpuk does not attempt to control or represent them statically but illustrates their alluring presence in the NCMA exhibition. I observe that his artistic approach challenges the issue of the 'native informant' role, where reportative stagnant information is delivered about an assumed cultural community. This is so because, his mural drawing undergoes several transformations. He takes firstly the *nsibidi* symbols, then changes them to reflect his own interaction with the graphics system. Secondly, he showcases his findings to an outsider who experiences his creation, and thirdly, after her interaction, he erases the drawings from the black wall. A diasporic experience inspires rather than determines his art-making style because he uses the symbols to compile his own new linguistic universe.

### **The diasporic self as a linguistic experience in *Call Me By My Rightful Name***

Isidore Okpewho was a Nigerian scholar, novelist, and distinguished academic based in New York, in the United States, and he dedicated his life to writing about the African diasporic condition and state of being. Before his death, he worked and earned his professorship in Humanities at State University of New York, Buffalo. *Call Me By My Rightful Name* (2004) was his last published novel, which testified to his knowledge and interest in the African

Diaspora, as well as incorporated his scholarship on slavery legacy between North America, the Caribbean and West Africa. Moreover, the book integrates the author's fascination with oral literature. His final literary text encapsulates his diverse yet thematically connected interests, and explores how each of them develops the concept of language as a diasporic experience for a person living in the African Diaspora.

*Call Me By My Rightful Name* tells a story of an African-American young man, named Otis Hampton, who falls into unexplainable verbal chants and is plagued by spirit voices. His coming of age story is structured into three parts and narrated in two styles. The omniscient narrator tell the events for Part One and Part Two, which outline Otis' progression towards discovering the source behind his condition. After many consultations with linguists and psychiatrists, who analyse his verbal outbreaks, they believe that the protagonist recites a corrupted cultural chant that is linked to his Yoruba ancestry. The novel explains Ifa divination is behind his contact with spirits. They introduce him to the Yoruba narrative version for the beginning and existence of human life, where each passage offers moral folktales and lessons to people. Once he returns to Nigeria and learns that his mutterings relate to an unfinished ritual, according to the spiritual healer, Awo Akinwunmi, the spirit voices are calling him to complete Akimbowale's (his ancestor) work and restore the family lineage within the Babalawo community. Otis narrates his story in reported speech in Part Three and describes his tribulations and success in learning the Yoruba language, customs and culture for the ritual. Finally, he succeeds in answering the demands of the spirits and returns to America. His experience in Nigeria makes him a more socially conscious person which then inspires him to join the civil rights movement.

Various literary scholars<sup>26</sup> interpret language as a prominent theme in the novel and attribute it to the protagonist's progressive relationship with his African origin. Otis represents the African diasporic archetype who returns back to his ancestral homeland and rediscovers his cultural and historical roots. This interpretation rehashes a typical diasporic discussion about identity and belonging, specifically situating the African-American within the African Diaspora, which therefore prioritises a geographic point of origin. Adetayo Alabi interprets the character and his story as a symbol for the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which denounces Otis' ability to critique or reflect on his own diasporic history (148). In comparison to the previous scholar's analysis, Isidore Diala focuses on Otis' initial prejudice against African spaces and its people (87). Yet, after his direct engagement with the

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<sup>26</sup> Alabi 2009, Diala 2013, Anyokwu 2009, and Lare 2015.

community, he becomes aware of his ignorance shaped by colonial ideas. In the end, he shows insight that his diasporic position separates his reality from the one he experiences in the village. Both scholars study the character under the theoretical paradigm of homeland-hostland experiences. I note that their studies omit the character's internal dilemma between himself and the supernatural force.

Otis experiences three involuntary verbal outbursts, where he is unable to control his speech and bodily actions. The first time occurs during his drive back home when he hears African percussion on the radio; the second is when he encounters African exchange students communicating in their language, and the third happens during a dinner date at a Caribbean restaurant where he hears Kramanti music<sup>27</sup>. Each of these events pushes Otis towards a path of unearthing the source behind his strange oral responses. The omniscient narrator describes how a supernatural force overtakes his body, like an "invisible hand" that coerces him to speak in an unknown language (Okpewho 7). He is unable to escape, avoid or suppress the voices and their control over him. I observe that his semantic experience becomes the source of his entanglement: his verbal chants attempt to recite an oriki<sup>28</sup> that "establishes and enforces an unbroken cord" between himself, the living, the dead, and the unborn generations (Alabi 148). The book positions the main character as the chosen one, who must perform the praise poem that fulfils his ancestor's incomplete ritual and re-establishes honour to the family lineage.

I argue that Otis challenges the 'native informant' role through his engagement with language through the spirit world. His verbal chanting disrupts his ordinary life in Boston. Furthermore, his unfamiliarity and lack of awareness of the cause of his verbal outbursts discount him as reliable information about his place of origin. His unstable linguistic relationship subverts his ability to articulate, to translate and to grasp his diasporic condition of being an African-American. As a result, the book further explores his double identity's influence on his diasporic position. Despite his completion of the ritual, and his initiation into the Babalawo community, his presence as an outsider causes upheaval within the Nigerian village. His condition and position place him as a disruptive figure rather than a facilitator between his homeland and hostland.

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<sup>27</sup> Kramanti is a cultural group that originally lived in Ghana, but was taken away to work at the Jamaican plantations.

<sup>28</sup> Oriki is a type of Yoruba praise poem that salutes or describes a particular person's attributes. Each family has their own unique poem in which commemorates, pays homage and respect to a living relative or ancestor (Anyokwu 179).

The novel illustrates that his American lifestyle and upbringing disrupt his ability to execute a 'native informant role', as a descendant of a Yoruba group. When Otis visits various linguists to determine his speech's origin, they are unable to fully interpret nor translate his speech because he recites a distorted and corrupted version of the language. His unfamiliarity makes it difficult for them to gain insight into the problem. Interestingly, once he learns and speaks Yoruba, his new linguistic perspective underpins his critical attitude towards the American space he inhabits and its systematic oppression against black people. I observe that his relationship with language initiates an undoing and unlearning process, as he uses his diasporic condition to question and interrogate his immediate environment. His learning Yoruba enables him to reflect on and unravel his African-American identity.

Once he re-corrects the past and performs the long-awaited ritual, he re-establishes a connection that ties him, his family and his ancestors to a common lineage. He takes on his role as a distinguished member in the village, under the name Akimbowale, and accepts his Yoruba heritage that then encourages his social and cultural participation with the community. I suggest the book undermines his smooth integration into Yoruba culture and his depiction as a 'native informant'. Shortly after the ceremony, his position brings about disharmony such as the burning of his family home, the murder of a council member and the villagers' overthrow of the local chief. His double identification as an African-American causes some of the members to see him as an outsider despite his accomplishments. In addition to its disruptive characteristic, Otis uses his diasporic position to create a critical distance between himself and Yoruba cultural encounters that challenge his moral values and ideals<sup>29</sup>. The narrative illustrates that his semantic experience underpins his ability to construct different forms of identification.

Okpewho shows language as a tool in which becomes the catalyst to the protagonist's realisation of his agency and his strategic use of his African-American identity. He undergoes a semantic process whereby, through his learning Yoruba, he discovers and asserts his Nigerian roots but, in addition, his new linguistic understanding inspires his activism against the social injustices in the US. The novel reveals Otis' ambivalence towards the Babalawo community and their way of living. Subsequently, he decides that his home resides in America, even though the country suffers from socio-political and racial problem. I interpret

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<sup>29</sup> When Otis discovers that one of the young girls from the community is going to endure female circumcision, he is unable to be supportive of the practice instead he finds himself in a cultural relative moral dilemma.

the protagonist's actions as a subversion of the 'native informant' role and highlight the flaws in both of his affiliated spaces.

### **Defining the spirit presence within a semantic experience**

Both the novel and the artworks explore the spiritual connection that emerges from a linguistic relationship. They portray language as a communicative channel which allows individuals to contact and interact with an invisible realm, and therefore highlights the interconnectedness between the physical and the spirit world. Okpewho introduces supernatural force as an entity that disrupts the typical exploration of identity in relation to belonging and foregrounds a unique diasporic experience. The protagonist sees his interaction with spirit voices as an integral aspect of his sense of place. In comparison to the book, the artist Ekpuk produces his spiritual engagement with symbols rather than a supernatural force being imposed on him from the outside and, thus, attributes them with new meaning to establish his own symbol system. The literary and the visual texts utilise language as a gateway between the spirit and human realms.

Once the spirit voices initiate contact with him, Otis experiences his daily American life differently. The voices begin to resituate his reality within a framework of Yoruba mythology. The Ifa divination governs, describes, and articulates his emotions and feelings during his social encounters<sup>30</sup>. For example, during Otis' rough encounter with a racist policeman, a supernatural force compares his anger to the fable about the god of anger Ogun who kills blindly both bad and good people. The Ifa verses are intertextual references that connect Otis' life with mythology. As a result, the spirit voices represent an external force that affects his self-perception and connection to an everyday reality.

At first, Otis cannot make sense of the voices that speak to him and he tries to ignore their persistent presence and interference. The more frequent his verbal outbreaks occur, the more unstable he becomes until he finally realises that these innate presences are calling for his attention. He describes his linguistic and mental encounter with the voices: "I know I feel a pull inside, like some unknown power is there, and there's nothing I can do about it" (Okpewho 25). I observe that the protagonist struggles to identify this unknown power. The spirit entities are elusive because they use language to enter into his mind. He recognises that they exist as part of him despite being unaware that they are linked to his Yoruba heritage, and

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<sup>30</sup>Furthermore, Ifa is the Yoruba divination system that enables consultants to see the future and offers prophecies to the people.

therefore, remain temporally foreign to him. Unknown diasporic experience infiltrates into his everyday reality and sets him towards his destiny.

I claim that supernatural force coerces Otis towards his future path in three phases. At the beginning of the novel, the first phase involves the spirits pressuring him into acknowledging their presences using persuasive phrases such as “must find”, “can never be erased”, “if he does not”, and “not for nothing” (Okpewho 3, 31, 5, 37). Otis feels helpless towards their wishes during the first phase, as he is “losing control of the power to decide” on whether to listen or to ignore them (Okpewho 28). According to the theology scholar, Matthew Michael, the material world derives its essence, form and manipulation from spirit forces (710). This evidently occurs in the protagonist’s recital of the Yoruba chant.

A tug of war between two entities pushes Otis towards performing the unfinished ritual. The second phase occurs when he submits to his obligation and responsibility to carry out his ancestor’s request. As the novel progresses, he accepts the circumstances and even responds positively to his destiny. In the third phase, where he follows the voices’ guidance, he experiences a sense of completeness:

Otis feels a gentle flush of calm. It is as if a hidden bolt has been unlatched within him. His instincts slowly yield intimations of self-revelation. *You will feel. You will learn. You will know. You will be strong.* It is no longer a troubling sensation (Okpewho 120).

The protagonist experiences a shift in his attitude towards the spirit entities. Initially, he rejects and negates any interaction with them, but when he arrives and lives in Nigeria, he begins to understand the underlying context of his subliminal diasporic experience. His acceptance of his fate dispels his verbal anxiety, and leaves him at peace. Furthermore, the voices provide a strong foundation for his agency. They supply words of encouragement to the effect that he will learn, will come to know, and will become strong. Okpewho demonstrates that the character’s semantic experience opens him to an alternative way of conceiving his environment.

Christopher Anyokwu, a literary scholar, writes that Otis’ learning of Yoruba enables him to access a new semiotic universe that redefines his reality and experience in America. He becomes cognitively aware that language reveals social issues, historical residues, cultural production and power relations (Anyokwu 171). I expand on his comment in relation to the ‘native informant’ and, argue that Otis’ new bilingualism undermines the ‘native informant’s’ exploitation of that characteristic, because his double perspective reveals the underlying

problems within the coloniser space. So, his semantic experience inspires his decision to participate in socio-political change.

In comparison to the novel's reference to the Ifa divination, Ekpuk draws spiritual strength from the graphics system based on his practice of onaim. This term refers to a branch of Yoruba aesthetic philosophy that teaches people to examine and connect logic with the appearance of indigenous art forms, symbols, patterns and designs. He interplays his subject matter between an image and a writing scheme, as he engages with their spiritual implications yet he evaluates their meaning on a visual level. Furthermore, his interaction with symbols includes his own personal interpretation of the sign's spiritual essence. His artwork undergoes two processes: firstly he studies the representation and then, secondly, he intervenes and plays with representation to unearth other potential meanings.

Ekpuk mentions that his chalk mural drawing (fig. 13) references the Yoruba divination board's structure, and further explains that the wall acts as a tray-like board in which the diviner shakes objects to predict or answer questions based on their relative placement to each other. I interpret this as representing the first process, in which the artist studies and evaluates a typical approach to spiritual communication. The second process takes an interesting turn. Although Ekpuk replicates a divination board, where the wall is the board and the objects are the symbols, he complicates this cultural reference because he crowds the symbols together and prevents any attempted reading of their overall meaning. He avoids being labelled as a qualified spiritual healer. Instead, he focuses on being a creator who excavates and attributes visual meaning to a graphics system. As a result, his creative process develops a visual design that structures and validates the semantic experience.



Figure 14: Ekpuk, Victor. *Composition #1*. 2010. Private Collection. 10 May 2018 <<http://www.victorekpuk.com/victorekpuk.com/gallery/Pages/Drawings.html#0>>.



Figure 15: Ekpuk, Victor. *Sanctuary #2*. 2007. Private Collection. 10 May 2018 <<http://www.victorekpuk.com/victorekpuk.com/gallery/Pages/Drawings.html#0>>.

Pastel and graphite on paper are other art mediums through which he explores his relationship with symbols. Most of these works are titled *Compositions* or *Sanctuary* (fig. 14, fig. 15). No explanation for these names are given. I notice that they all follow similar visual depictions where the artist draws symmetrically, where he uses circles or squares to create the illusion of depth, as well as clumping together the *nsibidi* symbols after each thick line. This approach crops, abstracts, and disrupts the continuation between each symbolic grouping and collection. Ekpuk blurs the transition between the first and second process. He references a graphics system, but similarly creates the same effect as in the chalk drawing (fig. 13) where the sign placements foil any independent reading of their individual meanings. Instead, his art expresses micro-stories filled with a semantic value that are separate yet encompassed within the medium's physical boundaries. The art form formulates a fluid yet dense depiction that interlaces the artist's vision with the original linguistic representation.

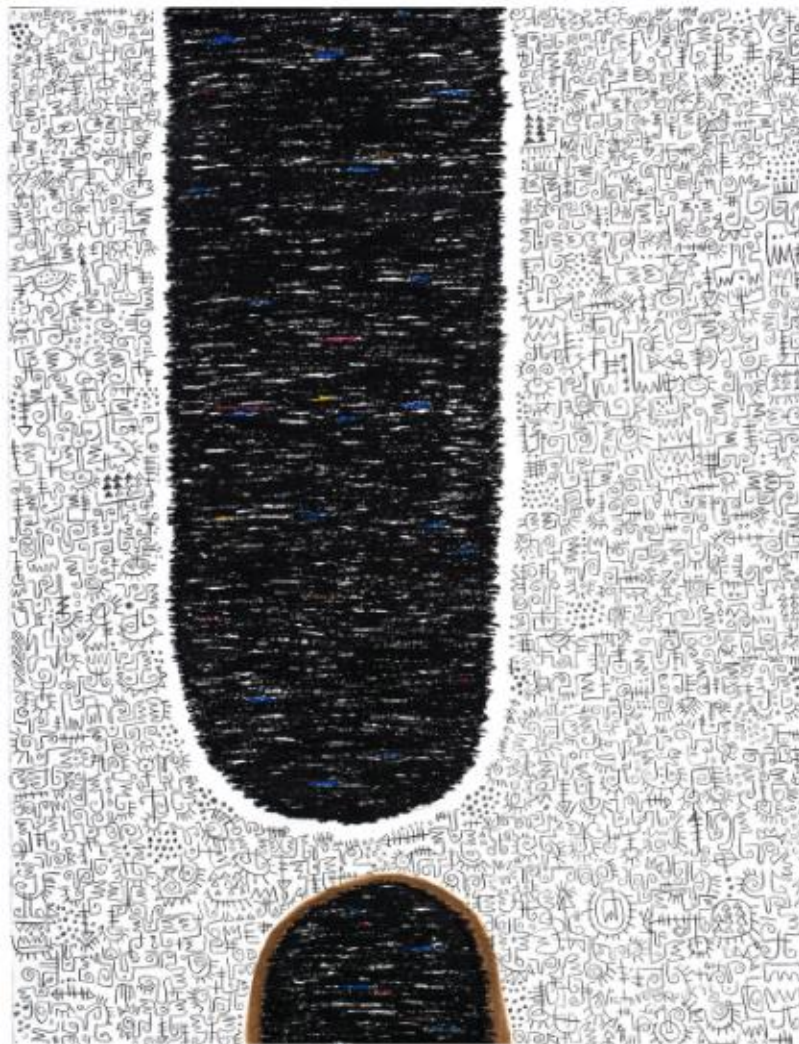


Figure 16: Ekpuk, Victor. *Composition No. 5*. 2007. Private Collection. 10 May 2018 <  
<http://www.victorekpuk.com/victorekpuk.com/gallery/Pages/Drawings.html#0>>.

I argue that Ekpuk creates multifaceted layers of meaning that develop into visual aesthetic stories, where he literally uses a graphics system yet removes the signs from their original textual context and ascribes them with a new visual purpose. At first glance, the drawing depicts a large, bold and black abstract sign. However, upon closer inspection, the dark lines contain sections of intricate and tiny signs in between them (fig. 16). These two visual interpretations constantly redefine the text's relation to the image, based on different distances and perspectives, as the artist experiments with both the symbol's appearance and its integration into the work. Consequently, they provide alternative connotations that bring forth the visual nature of his abstract forms.

The black and white tones are a frequent visual theme that the artist utilises throughout his art pieces. He mentions that white and black are colours which signify spiritual experience. According to African traditional religions where specifically, "white represents access to other realms" (Ekpuk cited in Montgomery College 1:50). The drawings depict the *nsibidi* symbols in white and, therefore, suggest that they are gateways to the spiritual realm and initiate the artist's spiritual encounter through engagement with symbols. I observe that his method bears a similarity with Okepwho's book and his portrayal of supernatural entities that speak through Otis in his verbal outbursts. Both interactions with language as a form of communication look at the diasporic experiences' psychological effect: the artwork is an expression of a personal spiritual journey and the book highlights the infiltration of the supernatural forces into the protagonist's sense of self.

I argue that both of them exhibit a type of "mindstyle" that Monika Fludernik, a narratologist, defines as a writing style that uses specific syntactic and lexical features to portray the narrator's perspective or characteristics (85). She further states that this narrative form ascribes both a subjective and a universal meaning to words. In relation to the artworks, Ekpuk intermeshes original *nsibidi* signs with his own unique representations to express multifaceted "ideas in pictographic writings" (Ekpuk cited in Pierce 1). He imagines, creates, and projects his own interpretations onto an already established visual symbolic system. Okpewho takes a different approach, as he shows that supernatural forces are the source behind Otis' "mindstyle". Otis acknowledges and accepts these ominous presences with its entailed semiotic universe, which consequently unlocks his agency.

Ekpuk and Okpewho link language and its symbolic nature with the spiritual force and as a mechanism that translates their experience into a tangible representation. The artworks exemplify the sign's visual nature through a "Russian doll" effect where smaller symbols are held within an encompassing singular symbol. One conception is dependent on the other and

without the interconnectedness then, the drawing is unable to create aesthetic micro-stories within a larger narrative<sup>31</sup>. In the novel's case, Okpewho italicises the speech of the spirits and their presence to draw attention to them while distinguishing them from other characters' dialogues. His linguistic-visual signpost interlaces the spirit world with the human world. Both creators demonstrate that the intersection of image and writing points towards the semiotic capacity of the human mind.

Marie-Laurie Ryan, another narratologist, claims that language plays a crucial role enabling humans to construct their ideas. It is a tool, which assists people with visual associations and with building relationships between things. It also generates meaning through those relationships. However, this process only works when a set of propositions is verified by a word connected with its connotation. When Ryan refers to propositions, she simply means the conditions that need to be true before any possible meaning is attributed to a tangible or intangible object. The novel helps me to argue that Otis' learning Yoruba is the premise that enables his understanding of spirit intervention, his interpretation of the spirits' actions and the purpose of his Akimbowale role. Similarly, the premise for Ekpuk is his understanding of the *nsibidi* graphic system that consequently, becomes the basis for his subjective manipulation of the signs. I notice that their interventions in language initiate a spiritual connection that is specific to a context, which builds towards a semantic understanding that explains and structures a state of being in the African Diaspora.

The novel and the artwork resist becoming the typical 'native informant' products on colonised's culture. Although they ground their engagements in Yoruba heritage, both works prioritise spirit presences or spiritual experience attached to language systems and use. They formulate their own responses to their diasporic position of living in America and away from Nigeria. Their individual engagements serve their own purposes and understandings of their social realities. Subsequently, outsiders who interact with the two creative forms are unable to indulge in the portrayed semantic experience, because Ekpuk and Okpewho encourage them to forge their own relations with a different semiotic universe.

### **An introspection on the viewer/reader position**

The artist and writer's language based literary-visual approaches produce an immersive atmosphere, where the audience generates their own semiotic connection with the spirit realm.

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<sup>31</sup> Stories within stories is further explored in Chapter Five. I argue that individual narratives connected to collective narratives establishes an empathetic platform.

I argue that the novel and the artworks are examples of Fludernik's "metanarrative statements that help the readers/viewers orient themselves on a discourse level", as they enter into a different semiotic universe that is unfamiliar to their own understanding of language (88). In other words, the two creative forms provide a language guideline that considers someone who does not have background knowledge about culturally referenced context of Yoruba and Yoruba divination. Their consideration positions the audience in a 'native informant' role, as they must endure challenges presented by the works to achieve their own spiritual encounter. My investigation looks at the reader-novel/viewer-artwork relationship, and puts forward the idea that the external participant undergoes three stages in a literary and art engagement.

I claim that the first stage looks at the reader's and the viewer's (in)ability to be immersed in the selected works, as both the author and the artist accommodate for the outsider presence. Although I mention briefly the novel's use of italics, I want to suggest that Okpewho uses this font style to build a communicative "hub" between the reader, the spirit voices and the protagonist, Otis. In comparison to the book, Ekpuk's large-scale drawings generate an overwhelming feeling that captivates the viewer. Both creators break down the boundaries that separate the outsider from the art forms and the outside world from the portrayed inner world. They explore the external perspective's semantic process in making sense of reality.

Okpewho uses italics to help the reader identify when the spiritual voices are active within Otis, as well as to grasp the dynamics between Otis and supernatural entities. The reader sympathises, experiences and accompanies Otis on his uphill struggle against the spirits' disruption of and intervention into his daily life. Interestingly, although the protagonist is unaware of the reader, it seems to indicate that the spirits are conscious of her and make contact with the outside world which then, proposes they cannot be confined to the novel's space but exist on multiple realities. For example, one of the voices directs a contemplative question to the reader: "Ifa says: If we do not bear the suffering that fills a basket, how can we receive kindness that fills a cup?"(Okpewho 30). Otis does not respond or indicate that he hears their enquiry. Instead the enquiry is directed towards the reader. At the beginning of the novel, the spirit voices provide the reader with glimpses into a Yoruba village without explaining its broader significance. I view this initial encounter as laying down the foundation of their relationship. Consequently, the spirits and the reader establish a secret contact that excludes and is unbeknownst to the main character. The supernatural entities adopt many roles such as the moral guide, folktale narrator, conversationalist and a social commentator. But, at times, it becomes unclear whether it is communicating with the reader or Otis.

Similarly, Ekpuk places the viewer in an awkward position where, she is immersed in the artist's semantic experience that she cannot identify with nor understand in relation to the drawings. He incorporates known and appropriated *nsibidi* symbols that provide an indeterminate cultural basis, which encourages the onlooker to question what is known and unknown about language, signs and their associative meanings. I observe that the artist restricts the viewer's ability to unlock his spiritual journey, and only leaves the artwork as tangible evidence of his experience. Ekpuk provides language as a symbol trace that remains indecipherable to external interpretation. As a result, the onlooker is left with the artist's spiritual impression and presence that in turn inspires her construction and formulation of a semiotic experience. Although language is universal and relative, since it transforms into various forms of communicative possibilities, the drawings show how language and its symbols can become meaningful in particular ways to its creator.

The two works create a distance between themselves and the audience. This second stage gives the reader and the viewer limited access to the portrayed semantic experience, since they do not reveal completely its underlying source. The novel shows Otis is the only character who engages with supernatural forces and Ekpuk initiates his own spiritual interaction with *nsibidi* symbols. Consequently, the onlookers can imagine but cannot fully experience what they come in contact with, read or see<sup>32</sup>. Fludernik claims that literary and visual texts are sites of situated imagination and responses as well as places of cultural production and reproduction. She implies these two characteristics co-exist simultaneously within creative productions. Okpewho and Ekpuk share a socio-historical relationship with Nigeria that foregrounds their exploration of language in relation to spirituality, which the reader and the viewer discover based on the book and the artwork's relayed versions of that experience. The audiences' responses and the creators' interpretations contrast with each other, as each member creates their own meaningful and unique relationship with language from the artist's and novelist's articulation of a semantic experience.

Ross Watkins, another narratologist, argues that people are able to bridge their own subjectivities towards an unfamiliar or unknown meaning. They are required to tactically extract the material from its context and fill "the meaning-making gap" specific to their own conceptions (Watkins 7). In other words, the reader and the viewer must examine aspects of the portrayed experience that they grasp and build their own semantic framework from it. Such

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<sup>32</sup> Although imagination and experience are intimately connected, I distinguish the former as a simulated or hypothetical experience that is possible or impossible whereas the latter is a real-time sensory encounter with the World. My Chapter Three goes more in-depth into these two concepts.

a process acknowledges that they can never emulate the artist's/author's original meaning, but only relate and apply it to their own lives. His study implies that interpretation involves a mental challenge, which I now take as a point of discussion.

I propose that a third stage of interpretation indicates the relationship status between the reader and the novel, and the viewer and the artwork. Okpewho incorporates two narrative styles in his novel that reinforce a distance between the reader and the narrated events. Similarly, Ekpuk prevents the viewer from having any easily interpreted contact with the art, as he tightly packs symbols together which, makes them indecipherable irrespective of whether one is close or distant from the image. Both creators play with perspective, as well as positioning the audience into a self-reflective stance. They are able to think about whether their outsider position hinders or supports their ability to attain something and learn from the two art forms.

*Call Me By My Rightful Name* uses two types of perspectives: the third-person/omniscient narrator and reported speech. The two sections, Part One and Part Two, utilise the first approach and the third section, Part Three, employs the second style. In the beginning, the reader experiences the events from an omniscient perspective, where she occupies a privileged position and gains insight into the plot's details before Otis discovers them. This narrative layout makes the reader feel important and builds her confidence in knowing and foreseeing the future. Suddenly, at the start of Part Three, the narrative style shifts from third-person perspective to reported speech, which then restricts access to the protagonist's experiences in Nigeria. I argue that Okpewho deliberately and strategically changes the viewpoint. He creates a climax as Part Two ends, which fuels the reader's anticipation, and Part Three provides Otis' narrated accounts. As a result, the novel downgrades the reader's position from being all knowing to be an onlooker from the sidelines.

The reader accompanies Otis during the beginning stages, where is confronted with supernatural forces and Yoruba cultural teachings linked to a language expression. At times, the book presents a language barrier that tests both parties – that is Otis and the reader. Otis learns and practises Yoruba when he communicates with the local people but, during his initial learning stage, they laugh and describe him as “butchering the language” (Okpewho 126). Contrary to this social method, the reader must refer to footnotes for the English translations to the Yoruba phrases and words. Each of these instances contributes to Otis and the reader's learning processes. I argue that Okpewho severs the reader from sharing Otis' experience for the last section, and places each party on their own transformative journey. Part Three becomes a test that evaluates the accumulation and application of their knowledge, as the reader reflects

on his conception of language, connection with the spirits and self, while the narrative shows that Otis contemplates his social purpose in contributing to his social environment.

Contrary to the novel's approach that assists the reader along in her understanding of language and cultural context. Ekpuk situates the viewer in an uncomfortable state when she attempts to read the symbols in the artworks. The artist draws tiny and delicate signs that pack densely into each other, as they intertwine and intermingle on the paper. As a result, the onlooker cannot make sense of one thing set apart from the rest. Instead, she must evaluate it as a chaotic yet ordered collection and respond to the work without any definitive framework. The artist incorporates both fictional and real *nsibidi* graphics that trick the viewer. He comments on the difficulty to interpreting his symbols:

I know it teases your brain to think that you could read it, but it's not writing that tells you A or B or C. I never try to analyse them or say that they are any one particular thing. I open it up so that people can just see what they see in it (Ekpuk cited in Vitiello 1).

Ekpuk gives the audience freedom to attribute their own meaning to the symbols rather than relating them to his Nigerian background or ideas. Ultimately, Ekpuk's artwork intends to produce or coerce an unconventional experience with language that, is not confined to a cultural or institutional form of linguistic learning like the alphabet. I see Ekpuk's artistic approach as a type of alternative way of thinking, where the onlooker loosens a strict tie between symbols and textual meaning. This undoing process opens up the outsider's experience to other representational possibilities. The artwork offers her a sense of empowerment and enlightenment.

Vitiello states that Ekpuk launches a "semiotic openness" through his visual interaction with a graphics system, which I further discuss in relation to the onlooker's understanding of his drawings (1). I perceive that the artworks are an ironic form of semiotic openness, since the artist draws signs that are unreadable and indecipherable, yet offers opportunities for the viewer to attribute fluid meaning to them based on her own experience of the symbols. Ekpuk elaborates on this independent interaction with his work: "It forces you to abandon what you know and have an opportunity to be aware of something else. Not everything has to be explained" (Ekpuk cited in Vitiello 1). When he refers to "something else", he admits indirectly that he cannot conceive of the source that enables the outsider to interpret the symbols because it is unique and specific to each individual. Viewers engage on a self-reflective level where

they dig deep into a vault of memories, histories, social circumstances and experiences. However, the idea of “openness” suggests that the person lacks control over interpretation which, according to Ekpuk, reveals the presence of unseen powers beyond the human comprehension. The viewer experiences, like the reader for Okpewho’s novel, her own induced spiritual exploration.

Both the novel and the artworks provide a foundation in the symbolic meanings of language that enables the reader and the viewer, to create their own semantic experience based on their own interpretations of the language signs. I note that their fictitious relationship debunks the ‘native informant’ role. The literary and visual texts shift the role to an outsider, which therefore challenges the identity and qualification of the cultural reporter. Although the language derives from a Yoruba cultural background, the creators extract and exemplify the spiritual aspect that develops into a personal encounter opposed to a viewership/readership of an African cultural reality. Thus, the audience undergoes their own diasporic experience rooted in the alternative semiotic universe rather than a Nigeria-America journey.

## **Conclusion**

Both the novel and the artworks introduce a new interpretation of language that undermines the ‘native informant’’s use of it. In contrast to its purpose to convey and carry cultural information, the two art forms develop a semantic experience whereby they use language to connect with spirit voices on a personal and exclusive level. Their appropriation ultimately questions who the informant’s role is for? Each of the works utilises their cultural connections for the creators themselves, as a starting point for a transcendent exploration, rather than for a communal exposure.

Ekpuk’s visual practice takes *nsibidi* symbols and re-interprets them according to his own understanding. His large-scale drawings represent drafts of his pursuit of a language system that articulates and represents his semantic experience. The viewer is confronted with indecipherable and unconventional symbols. Her sense of uncomfot and confusion breaks down the ‘native informant’ and coloniser audience relationship. Ekpuk exposes his own narrative presence in the artworks. As a result, the onlooker cannot indulge in any cultural information about the other since she is excluded from the entire process and experience.

Similarly, Okpewho isolates Otis from the reader during the final stages of his undergoing ritual and the reclamation of his ancestral name. His intimate experience is not narrated but the outsider only reads the effects it has on the protagonist. The novel proposes

that the experience brings forth a self-reflexive transformation, with the guidance of supernatural forces. These steer Otis towards his self-discovery and development. He becomes socially aware and makes changes in both America and Nigeria. Moreover, his actions resist the 'native informant' role and becomes an active participant into what he witnesses in both the coloniser's and colonised space. Subsequently, he advances a critical agency that subverts the role of cultural-reporter.

Audience members are encouraged to step out of their normal receiver role and to occupy the 'native informant' role, as they attempt to replicate and access a linguistic induced spiritual encounter. I observe that Okpewho and Ekpuk consider the viewer/reader position and, thus, create a complex 'native informant'-coloniser relationship. Each party examines and evaluates their own semantic engagement, in isolation, rather than communicating or translating their experience to the one another. In other words, the literary and visual representations propose that the readers and viewers' experience rather occur on a self-reflective basis than through a social exchange.

This chapter has examined how one could use a literary text and visual works to show how language can be used as a tool to unsettle the 'native informant' relationship with the colonial spectator. I argued that the author and the artist undermine the hierarchical relations between the coloniser and the colonised, as the "native" does not relay cultural information but introduces the outsider to a language that challenges and tests their spiritual understanding. Okpewho and Ekpuk show language as an alternative theme that, not only destabilises the 'native informant' role and its relation but, redefines and structures the diasporic person's state and sense of being outside the typical focus on the African origin. Their visual-literary experiences inspire Westerners to initiate their own spiritual connections rather than indulging in the difference between the two cultural domains.

## **Chapter Four**

### **A spatial interaction: the excavating of cities**

#### **Introduction**

In Chapter Three, I have suggested that a diasporic experience is not reliant on a physical location, but it is linked to a relationship with language and the spirit world. This personal interaction undercuts a generalised ancestral connection to a place of origin, as it emphasises complex and ambivalent responses to belonging and home. Similarly, Chapter Four explores the social and psychological aspects that emerge from engaging with an African origin. The idea of belonging represents both feelings of security as well as anxiety.

Chapter Two highlights a visual discourse on African Diaspora as presupposing an unbroken cord that connects diasporic people to a region within the African continent. The three art shows pinpoint artists based on their geographic tie. Their art practice is seen to either strengthen or weaken their bond with a place, as their works underline a social, physical or mental manifestation of their cultural identities. However, I argue that this engagement is more than simply a reflection of the diasporic self. This chapter refers to the phrase “spatial interaction” to denote my study into the dynamic engagement with various parts of the psyche in relation to multiple places of affiliation. In other words, my use of “spatial interaction” is to indicate the process of projecting and rejecting certain memories, connotations, associations and emotions attached to a particular environment.

This chapter examines the diasporic individual’s emotional and psychological engagements with different spaces, in reference to Emeka Ogboh’s sound installations and Teju Cole’s *Open City*. Both the artwork and the novel investigate into the diasporic relationships with the environment, as they explore the multifaceted yet contradictory interactions that occur between the space and individual. Their findings provide a nuanced interpretation on a diasporic experience.

The artworks and novel refute the simplicity of estrangement to describe the feeling of being disconnected. They consider spatial interaction, as self-revelatory moments that reflect on the diasporic condition and position<sup>33</sup>. In other words, the diasporic person’s feelings of

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<sup>33</sup>This chapter follows the same definitions outlined in Chapter Two: diasporic position is an ascribed social role attached to a specific form of identification and responsibility, whereas diasporic condition is the external environment’s impact on a state of being.

being away from home is connected to her social relationships. Her sense of discomfort arises from the external environment challenging a sense of belonging.

Emeka Ogboh is a Nigerian multi-media artist who lives in Lagos, but travels regularly to European countries to exhibit his sound installations. His subject matter focuses on how senses connect humans to various places. Specifically, he draws audio inspiration from Lagos' vibrancy in terms of its cultural references and ordinary daily activities that occur within the city. I argue that his sound installations convert the native informant information into a disruptive tool that unsettles the diasporic position and condition. He sets up and exhibits his work in a gallery space or public area outside of Nigeria. As a result, the Lagos audio footage invade and disrupt the hosted space, and consequently, confront the listener with a first-hand experience of being in an unfamiliar place.

Teju Cole is a Nigerian-American writer whose novel *Open City* looks at the diasporic interaction between the United States, Belgium and Nigeria. The literary representation unravels the interconnections between cities, as it introduces a protagonist named Julius who explores New York City and Brussels, and he projects his Lagos memories onto each of these locations. I argue that the author uses Julius' ambivalence towards the three different areas to interrogate the diasporic position and condition. The protagonist highlights multiple layers of cultural and historical value in each as well as ascribing his own social meaning to these spaces as he interacts with them. These two responses shed light on his attempt to integrate himself within the various places.

Both creators utilise sensory experiences to unpack the diasporic individual's spatial interaction: the sound installation uses sound whereas the novel focuses on descriptions of the visual. I argue that they develop an archival aesthetics, in which they capture and record day-to-day events through their individual focus on a particular sense. Ogboh draws from sounds of human activities that happen at Lagos' motor parks and markets. Cole examines nature/weather rather than human presence in the environment. Archival aesthetics refers to the documenting of an encountered event's beauty or aesthetic appeal. In the case of the artist and the author, they interpret and immortalise the ordinary in their different mediums, yet their depictions demonstrate that archival work is a response to an anxiety towards controlling space. Thus, I propose archival aesthetics become a coping mechanism against alienation from the surroundings.

Archival aesthetics brings forth an investigation into the human cognitive process that underpins people's engagement with different spaces. Yi-Fu Tuan, a human geographer, writes about the relationship between human beings and their environment. He introduces the term

“mythical conception space” (Tuan 400), which refers to a person’s uncanny experience that creates a space outside of real-time and exists in-between pure cognition and sense perception. In other words, his concept represents the bridge between a sensory experience and interpretation. I put forward that Tuan’s concept of a “mythical conception space” represents the tension between a sense of place and a sense of belonging, which I explore in my analysis of the sound installation and the novel. The two works highlight that knowing a location is different from understanding and being part of that location. Subsequently, the bridging of the two concepts requires the individual to delude herself into believing in any connection.

The audio and literary works excavate the city’s sounds and visual aspects that trigger memories and emotional attachments. Ogboh unravels the multiple connotations that redefine the daily Lagos noises. Whereas, Cole looks at social relationships that trigger the protagonist’s association with his surroundings. I argue that Ogboh and Cole demonstrate that an interaction with space unhinges the diasporic person from an associated environment, as they introduce the psychological barrier that prevents assimilation. I observe that their works are more concerned with their own meaning-making process, rather than a social integration into any city. The individual evaluates her sense of (dis)placement as an existential crisis.

### **Emeka Ogboh’s Lagos soundscapes**

The artist subverts the connection between the ‘native informant’ role and the informant document. He dislocates the two entities from another: his art embodies the cultural information but he ascribes the informant role to the viewers that experience his soundscapes in the exhibition space. Specifically, this occurred during his famous participations in *Documenta 14* (2017), the 56<sup>th</sup> edition of La Biennale di Venezia (2015), and Dakar Biennale (2015) and Seattle Art Museum (2015).



Figure 17: Ogboh, Emeka. Recording set-up in Yaba, Lagos.

<<https://www.anotherafrica.net/art-culture/in-conversation-with-emeka-ogboh-on-lagos-and-listening-to-the-world-in-a-musical-way>>.

His audio footage documents a real-time sensory experience that takes place in Lagos. The stage of his creative process involves his selection of a specific place in Lagos, usually either the motor parks or the marketplaces. He then sets up microphones around the area to capture the sound movements which take place on the public streets (fig. 17). After a long recording period, he exhibits the raw and unedited version in either a gallery or a designated public space outside of Nigeria. Ogboh states on his website, *14<sup>th</sup> May*, that his art examines the intersections between the “private, public, collective memories and histories” that sound is able to translate, transform and encode their interrelations (para. 1). Ogboh seeks an auditory framework that encapsulates people’s understanding of their micro and macro environments. I observe that the artist sees the potential for sounds to extract and create associative meanings linked to a specific place. However, he experiments the limits of this auditory experience when he transports and relocates Lagos sounds into a different environment and, thus, creates a disruption in the hosted space, as well as for the locals who occupy it. Sounds help the artist express the meeting point between human presence and space.

Art writers<sup>34</sup> and visual art scholars<sup>35</sup> interpret Ogboh's work to be a commentary on diasporic living, immigration and globalisation, as they claim that his audio installations unpack people's socio-historical relationships to various locations. His art offers an unconventional perspective that highlights yet reflects on the meaning of home and belonging. Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi writes about the artist's keen insight into particular sounds that encapsulate the Lagos experience such as the danfo buses, the yelling bus conductors and the street hawkers (para.1). Massa Lemu analyses similar components in his 2013 essay and states that the installation embodies a unique and specific African diasporic experience (5). However, the scholarship on Ogboh's soundscapes omits the subtle alterations that he makes in his different set-ups. Instead, writers speak about the general components of his work and fail to consider the nuances that shape audio experience.

Ogboh's various sound installations consider the subject matter and location that underline interaction with space. The first aspect, subject matter, refers to his decision on whether to record and exhibit an explicit cultural reference or ordinary daily sounds; the second aspect refers to his selection of an exhibition location. Whether the artwork is inside a gallery or installed in an accessible public area. This Chapter looks at the combination of a cultural reference inside a gallery space in the 2015 exhibition *Egwutronica* that took place at the Seattle Art Museum as well as, the combination of ordinary sounds showcased in public spaces such as Cologne's Zentral Bibliothek in Germany and the collaboration piece *LOS-HEL: Possible Cities* in Helsinki<sup>36</sup>. He experiments with these two components, subject matter and location, to replicate and exemplify a realness of a landscape. I interpret his work as conforming to Emily Ann Thompson's definition of soundscapes. She defines a soundscape to be an aural version of a landscape that alludes to a physical place's cultural and human life (1). Soundscapes represent an alternative representation to the typical visual portrayal of an environment. Audio creates a simulation that attributes another sensory dimension onto the hosted space, which creates and unsettles the individual's experience of it.

I analyse Ogboh's 2015 exhibition piece, *Egwutronica*, which showcased a Lagos soundscape at the Seattle Art Museum and provided Americans with a sensory feel of the Nigerian city. The audio material replays Ogboh's recording of Igbo musicians performing traditional masquerade music that happened in a public setting. Contrary to his typical set-up

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<sup>34</sup> Artsy 2018, Brown 2018, Russeth 2017

<sup>35</sup> Taylor 2018, Nzewi 2013, Lemu 2013

<sup>36</sup> The last two art shows will be discussed under the Chapter Section *Archival Aesthetics: remembering another memory*.

of a sound system and the lack of interactivity, he attaches sensors that activate sound footage by the visitors' movements within the gallery space. The artwork extracts a cultural event outside its physical space and transports into a different setting.

His work challenges the diasporic individual's stable rooting within a place of origin. The soundscape complicates the exhibited space and the identity of the informant at the same time. I argue that he undermines the diasporic condition in its portability, as he uproots, transports and integrates Igbo cultural sounds into another environment, and uses the installation to unsettle the American audience's sense of place. Although his diasporic experience underpins his work, he gives up his role and places them into the diasporic position when they visit his art show. The disruption of the condition and position suggest that a diasporic experience can be imagined without knowing the physical location.

*Egwutronica* displaced the Igbo musicians from their original environment and presented their performance in a museum. Ogboh shows that sound possesses and carries connotations of other places, which challenges the stagnant concept of a diasporic condition, as his art packages, transports and manipulates different spaces. Furthermore, his work debunks Chapter Two exhibitions' use of diasporic models to structure and to define the artists in relation to their geographic ties. He uses instead the exhibition space as a threshold and facilitator between the meeting of Lagos and Seattle. The viewers transition between the two spaces dependent on their entry or exit of their building. They encounter an audio snapshot of Lagos when they enter the exhibition, but once they leave, they return to their habitual socio-cultural environment. As a result, the Seattle Art Museum creates and establishes a space within a space. I claim that this phenomenon is undermining the diasporic condition because it collapses the physical distance and distinction between the homeland and hostland. An overlap occurs in the same building, as the artist brings a Lagos-Seattle oriented interpretation to the experience, whereas the viewers provide a Seattle-Lagos oriented interpretation.

Ogboh's diasporic response induces an uncomfortable sense of place for the visitors. His soundscapes captivate and transport them to an African city while being physically present in Seattle, but their senses interfere with their sense of bearing and transports their existence into a different environment. They transform into Lagos locals who are experiencing a cultural event. Moreover, the interactivity suggests that the viewers become the 'native informant' and narrate the experience for themselves. Their walking and bodily movements trigger the sound sensors, which then activate the recordings that instigate a mental projection of imagining a life outside of their city. Their spatial interaction is a catalyst for their agency to experience a

different environment. As a result, they redefine the hostland into the homeland space and carry out a pseudo-‘native informant’ role.

Kenta Murakami, an art writer, observes that the show develops shifting experiences within one space. He interprets it to be a “paraspace”, which Sondra Perry (cited in Murakami para. 7) defines as a realm that exists parallel to or outside of ordinary life, since the soundscape facilitates the viewer’s teleportation from the U.S. to Nigeria. Perry’s definition also suggests that a paraspace becomes allusive because it is both accessible and inaccessible. I claim that the audience cannot provide an accurate account, even though they experience the cultural event, because they rely on imagination, as opposed to life experience. This simulated version of Lagos discounts their legibility to assume the ‘native informant’ role. Ogboh creates a space outside of time that ironically references a real-time experience of Lagos through an audio format exhibited in Seattle.

I argue that Ogboh’s precarious engagement with colonial fantasy is a type of paraspace. The coloniser would see new continents and countries as places of wonder, scientific exploration, domination and curiosity in difference. His sound installations present themselves as isolated spaces of enjoyment and intrigue to Westerners. At the same time, however, the Lagos’ loud sounds interrupt any exertion of mental control and understanding of that space. The listeners are unable to establish a mental map, which then leads to their inability to create a distance for othering between their own and the other’s place, through the installation’s multi-faceted set-up. Subsequently, the artist creates a paraspace that complicates any colonial distinction.

The soundscapes balance the blurring between physical boundaries and the retention of cultural distinction between two places. Ogboh uses Lagos city sounds to disrupt an American space, as the viewers are introduced to an alternative aural landscape. I interpret his work as challenging the typical ‘native informant’ approach, because he introduces a soundscape rather than the African individual as the narrative source. Consequently, his Lagos recordings disrupt the listeners’ rootedness within their own city. They begin to conceive of themselves within another different location. His installation replicates and simulates successfully a different mode of being, which demonstrates that sensory experiences determine and shape people’s spatial interaction.

### **Diasporic lineages in *Open City***

Teju Cole is a photographer, as well as a writer, who was born in the United States and raised in Nigeria. After high school, he returned to America and completed his tertiary studies at

Western Michigan University, and currently he resides in Brooklyn. Although *Open City* reflects a protagonist who undergoes a similar movement between Nigeria and America, the author's biography serves only as inspiration to discuss the relationship between people and cities rather than to depict a memoir of his African diasporic life. Similarly, his previous book *Every Day is for the Thief* examines an unnamed narrator's return to Lagos after living in New York for fifteen years who finds her/himself alienated from the changed city. Each of his books follows the same thematic thread, in which he explores the interaction with spaces.

*Open City* is narrated from the perspective of the protagonist, named Julius, who in walking around cities and reflects on his real-time experiences in NYC and Brussels, while at times recalling his childhood memories in Lagos. He views the various cities as backdrops that instigate his search for traces of a genealogical or social belonging. Constantly, throughout the novel, Julius attempts to link his identity to a city, and at one point, he visits Brussels in search of his German grandmother, but ultimately, fails to locate her. The novel links his different spatial interactions to his ancestral lineage: his maternal line derives from Germany; while his paternal line is from Nigeria; his current place of residence is the United States of America. Furthermore, on his walking expeditions, he tries to integrate himself with the locals and to establish a connection between himself and a community. I observe that the plot provides no resolution to the character's assimilation into one place because he fails to find his grandmother. He gets brutally assaulted and mugged on the streets of New York, his strained relationship with his mother taints his childhood memories of Nigeria. Cole presents a complex narrative about a character's conflicted engagement with multiple affiliated places.

Many literary scholars have argued that the novel portrays the various cities as socio-historical palimpsests<sup>37</sup>. Julius uncovers and reveals the history behind Brussels and NYC through his physical and social engagements within the two locations. For instance, most of them analyse NYC as a multi-ethnic hub that embodies traces of individual, collective as well as historical narratives in which surface in the character's walking expeditions. I notice that their critical commentaries position Julius as an archetype for the typical diasporic discourse, where the migrant excavates each location's social and historical culture. They disregard his psychological negotiation or rejection of the three cities.

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<sup>37</sup> Gérard Genette coined the term palimpsest to denote a piece of writing, whose original text was replaced by another without having completely vanished, remaining readable under the new one (back cover). Many schools of thinking have interpreted this term as a metaphor rather than a physical text. Scholars such as (Krishnan 2016, Cumpsty 2017, Afshar 2018, Steckenbiller 2013) have made connection between Genette's concept and the novel. Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

One academic writer, in particular, Karen Jacobs, studies Julius' self-imposed trauma as well as his dissociative response to his encounters with the various cities' histories. She introduces the concept of afterimage, which refers to the secondary image that occurs after the initial perceived image<sup>38</sup> (88). In other words, it is the subliminal thoughts or unacknowledged connotations that the brain creates from an emotional response to a visual object. I apply the concept and interpret the city as triggering Julius' experience of various embedded connotations. These underpin his ambivalent response towards his position in relation to place. Each encountered city presents an initial image, and after a retrospective analysis of the space, the protagonist produces his own afterimage and draws attention to those unsettling traces. His interaction with space reveals yet suppresses aspects associated with his diasporic lineages.

I argue that Julius' afterimages destabilise the 'native informant' role because he creates a shifting distance between himself and his background. He develops conflicting relationships with NYC, Brussels and Nigeria, where he associates them with certain socio-historical aspects of his diasporic condition that evokes emotional reactions. Cole demonstrates that Julius' fragmented spatial relationships undermine his diasporic position. Although he poses as a cultural reporter, who shows familiarity with each of the city's socio-cultural history, and appears well connected to the places, he is unable to integrate himself with a sense of social belonging. His multifaceted diasporic background becomes the source of tension.

The book undermines the notion of an African origin, as the main contributor to structuring Julius' diasporic condition. His strained relationship with his mother taints his childhood memories of Nigeria, and as a result, he develops an ambivalent response to the space because he is unable to see the country separate from his painful recollections. Ironically, he develops a strong bond with his German grandmother from his mother's side and identifies more with his European, as opposed to his Nigerian ancestry. His fondness towards the elderly woman underpins his over-identification with the Holocaust. During his viewing of Martin Munkácsi's exhibition on traumatic Jewish history, he converses with an elderly man about Berlin and instantly feels a connection with him. Julius informs the reader that, in fact, his mother and grandmother were war refugees and, thus, "in this distant self he is also a Berliner" (Cole 153). Contrary to his empathy towards the Jewish Diaspora, he disassociates himself from the old African Diaspora despite his historical knowledge on the slave ship ports in certain parts of New York. He suppresses an emotional response to this historical context. Julius

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<sup>38</sup> Jacobs introduces the notion of afterimages from her comparison between WG Sebald's study on traumatic displacement post WW2 and the novel's glimpses into traumatic narratives. She argues that Cole's interest in photography allowed him to possess knowledge about Sebald's photographic works (92).

distances himself from and yet overplays certain ancestral lineages that form part of his diasporic condition.

Julius' first-person narration places him in a 'native informant' role, who examines and relays his cultural background. Although he appears to be the perfect informant, because he engages with his African origin, his matter-of-fact tone reveals his suppressed feelings towards his interaction with different social spaces. I argue that the narrated scenes are the initial image, but that his aloof or bitter engagement with them represents the afterimage and undermines his reliability as a trustworthy narrator. As a result, his story cannot be interpreted as a 'native informant' document. This is because he creates a façade where he appears to be in control of his multiple places to which he is affiliated to, but his social interaction disproves those asserted connections. The novel highlights the fact that no one directly validates his belonging. Julius never tells the man at the exhibition about his maternal ancestry; he never meets his grandmother in Belgium. His diasporic position is disconnected from his various diasporic communities.

I suggest that Julius' afterimages are the emotional responses to his relationships encapsulated within the three different cities. He suppresses yet indulges in those memories and experiences. He suddenly becomes hyper-conscious in his own behaviour, and then shifts away from his own reaction to adopt an objective narrator role. This tension indicates his struggle to acknowledge and reconcile aspects of his diasporic background. Consequently, he occupies a strange position, where he feels part of yet excluded from his interaction with different locations because, he never engages with the events he reports or witnessed, especially those that trigger memories or emotions.

### **Archival aesthetics: remembering another memory**

Both the novel and soundscape apply an archival aesthetics in their spatial interaction. I define archival aesthetics as an imaginary process, whereby the individual uncovers, categorises and documents a stimulating event. As a result, this enables her to remember and attach a certain connotation. The first part, archival, refers to the recording of a real-time experience and, the second part, aesthetics denotes the sensory modality which helps to recall that specific experience. Simply put, the concept looks at the environment as an index to an associative memory. Cole demonstrates that the weather triggers and transports Julius back to a past event, as he analyses and re-interprets the scene. In comparison, the artist Ogboh takes Lagos' city sounds to reimagine an alternative space outside its original physical location. Archival

aesthetics examines the person's connection to the environment and its re-inscription onto space.

Julius uses the weather to structure and order his memories that overlap with his real-time experience. I argue that the environment becomes a template for the protagonist to embed his own story within the city, as he projects and attributes new meaning that re-inscribes the physical place. His spatial interaction adds another layer to the palimpsest imagery of the city. Consequently, he transforms the ordinary event into a visually detailed description that shifts attention away from his emotional response and reinforces an objective position.

During his Brussels holiday, he notices that the city is experiencing a long rainy period that reminds him of his childhood in Lagos. His remembrance creates an overlapping moment whereby the rain triggers a past event. He begins to inscribe these memories onto to his current experience of the weather based on an experience from another place. Julius records, as well as replays another rain incident while he witnesses the Brussel's rainy season:

It was the seventh day of rain, which had been nagging, trickling, falling without biblical grandeur. But its longevity reminded me of the only other rain I could recall that had lasted for a day. There must have been others, but only that solitary incident stood out now in memory. I was nine at the time, so it was the year before I was sent away to boarding school (Cole 131).

The protagonist adopts a reportative tone in his narration and avoids revealing any emotional response to the recollection. I observe that he attempts to highlight the accuracy and factual nature of his storytelling, as he locates the specific memory into its exact place and time when he was nine years old. His narrative style mimics the typical archivist role in which he needs to balance documentation and entertainment. Specifically, this is evident in the first line where he describes the seventh day of rain but rejects any biblical interpretation. His close attention to his narration suggests that he deliberately records and replays two different rain incidents. Both of them share the same denominator, being the weather, and thus the overlapping commonality allows the protagonist to suppress one undesirable memory behind another.

Julius vividly recalls the Nigeria rainy day where he returns from school and entertains himself until his mother comes home. The entire scene alludes to his strained relationship with his mother. He decides to drink coke out of defiance because he is only allowed fizzy beverages on weekends and, when she returns from the market, he is forced to run in the rain and open the front gate for her to park the car in the garage. As a result of this unenjoyable memory, he seeks out another memory to replace it. His documentation of Brussels' rainy day attempts to

replace a previous association with the same weather. When he encounters it again, then he will remember his Belgium holiday rather than his Nigerian past. I observe that his re-inscription of the environment mirrors his own re-inscription of the self and memories. Thus, the protagonist reveals his underlying motive behind his factual narration of a seemingly ordinary event.

I argue that he shows anxiety towards his archivist role because, after recalling his Nigerian memory, he reveals his ambivalence. He devalues the incident, as he muses that this “childhood rain” has no importance for the present and is simply a “good private joke”, flickering through his mind (Cole 136). His nonchalant tone creates a façade that he has disassociated himself from the event. Contrary to his initial feelings, his second reaction challenges his apathetic attitude and highlights his paranoia over his narrative style. This is explicit in Julius’ statements such as “my memory couldn’t have invented such details” or “I have been tempted to over-interpret the events” (Cole 136). Julius’ two contrasting behaviours suggest that he is unable to reconcile himself with the past.

His archival aesthetic facilitates multiple responses to his recollections that are triggered by the rainy weather. His memory of the childhood rain unsettles him despite his attempt to portray himself as a factual reporter who engages objectively with his material. This reveals his inability to control and coordinate aspects of his diasporic condition. Cole demonstrates that the characters’ interaction with different spaces ironically becomes an excavation procedure that attempts to bury the unwanted memories.

In comparison to the novel’s use of the weather, Ogboh adopts sound as his archival aesthetic method to capture a sensory experience that encapsulates an association with Lagos and its daily happenings. The archival part occurs when the artist records and documents the city sounds such as the exchanges between the hawkers and customers, people catching transport and the overall movements of humanity through public streets or markets. According to the artist, the aesthetic part of the soundscape is the “Nigerian vibe that cannot be replicated elsewhere since it is quite unique” (Ogboh cited in Jauhianinen 4). Hearing the audio footage, the listener experiences an aural landscape that reflects Lagos’ diverse population with its religious and socio-economic diversity.

Lemu, an art scholar, and the online art magazine *C&* have mentioned the artist as a documenter who takes the city’s human essence and presents it in audio form. Lemu refers to the soundscape as “an index to an urban ambience” (16), through which Ogboh references a particular real-time experience of Lagos. In other words, the installation becomes an audio

package of a portable city. When he exhibits his art in a different space outside Nigeria, the soundscapes undermine the static nature of archival work and reignites its relevant existence.

This chapter examines two of his exhibitions that have showcased Ogboh's soundscapes in public spaces: the first one happened outside Cologne's Zentral Bibliothek in Germany and the second one was a collaboration titled *LOS-HEL: Possible Cities* in Helsinki. In contrast to his gallery space installations, these two outdoor pieces adopt a more aggressive approach and disturb the ordinary Western public in undertaking their daily errands in the city. People are unable to decide whether they want to engage with the exhibition. Nevertheless, they are confronted with intrusive, loud and noisy recordings. I argue that the imposed sounds open up the potential to reimagine, as well as re-inscribe the audience's understanding of social space. Therefore, the artist demonstrates that the soundscapes encourage the outsiders' interaction and reflection on their city's socio-history.

Ogboh installed a soundscape for his 2012 outdoor exhibition outside the Zentral Bibliothek in Cologne, where the locals could hear the sounds as they walked past the public building. According to the arts organisation, *We Face Forward*, the public experienced a "split-second sensation of dislocation", as the soundscape of Lagos disassociated them momentarily from their known surroundings (para. 2). They experienced initially confusion and then afterwards, they either searched for the reason behind the audio disruption or ignored it and quickly walked away from the area. His exhibition uses the concept of pop-up installations effectively, where temporarily displayed works disrupt and unsettle ordinary living space. Although some people who moved past the public building and disregarded the soundscape, its invasiveness left an audio impression on locals that encouraged them to recognise life beyond their own city.

The soundscapes relocate and integrate the aural within a location that possesses a different city sound. The aural contrast immediately hijacks a local's sense of hearing and temporally alienates them from their own surroundings. However, the onlooker's uncanny state allows her to imagine an alternative understanding of her city inspired by the context of another location. I claim that Ogboh creates intersecting audio narratives that invite mixed responses. He acknowledges the negative response to his work, where its intrusiveness elicits hostility and rejection, as he mentions briefly that a man broke the loudspeakers due to his annoyance with the disturbance. Ogboh explains that European people were accustomed to their cities being quiet compared to Lagos' loudness (cited in Nzwei para.11). I note that this cultural shock goes beyond a mere disturbance of public places but, it reveals an anxiety over the lack of control within them, especially with the increase of immigration in European countries.

I argue that the vandalism is a reaction against the soundscape's interrogation of a suppressed socio-history. The "strangely" different aural landscape interrogates the post-colonial interrelationship between European countries and an African country. It unnerves locals and their attempt to preserve their understanding of public space as sacred. Lemu argues that Ogboh highlights the North-South's problematic "asymmetrical cultural and economic exchange" (12). Moreover, I add to his point and propose that the artist takes the Lagos sounds as an aesthetic archive to evaluate and cross-compare the socio-economic differences between the Nigerian loudness and the European quietness. Ogboh uses sounds to develop a multi-faceted narrative that excavates the two places' interconnection.

His collaborative project with Ilpo Jauhianien titled *LOS-HEL: Possible Cities* in Helsinki imagines the meeting threshold between two cities. The unusual title is an abbreviation for Lagos and Helsinki, and thus the abbreviation represents a new architectural blueprint for a fictitious fusion city that occupies and shares the same space. Contrary to his previous exhibition which focuses on people's spatial interactions, this collaboration looks at the two cities' amalgamation and production of a "disruptive harmony". I interpret the phrase "disruptive harmony" as a clash between two places that results within a new environment. Jauhianien writes about depicting a "world that could juxtapose the culture of colourfulness and the chaos of Lagos with the politics of order and simplicity of Helsinki" (2). His vision imagines a chaotic order that combines each city's unique and distinguishable character, as the underlying foundation to their hypothetical place. The two artists extract each location's sound essence and, then intermix their local music with the images and texts that allude to the different locations. Consequently, their creative process positions them as aural city designers who construct an open hospitable environment. *LOS-HEL* represents an archetypal city that nurtures distinction through unity.

Cathy Caruth writes about how experiences reveal complex and estranged temporalities, subjectivities and suppressed knowledge in engagement with them (24). The individual enters a process where she confronts her position of being a witness to events, which subsequently shapes and governs her understanding of time and place. Caruth's argument suggests that experiences underline different ways of interacting with the environment.

Ogboh's soundscapes coax various responses which vary from apathy to vandalism. He attributes a different audio experience to various Western cities and destabilises the public's attachment to their habitual location. I observe that the sound recording imprints Lagos' presence onto the European space, as well as re-inscribing the local's real-time experience. The viewers enter an unknown space that forces them to re-establish their sense of bearing. During

that process, they become the archivers who document and record the socio-cultural change to an amalgamated city.

Similarly, the novel demonstrates that an individual's sensory experience instigates her self-introspection about her relationship with the environment. The rainy weather helps Julius interpret and link his real presence in Brussels to his Nigerian childhood memory. He enters a process of projection and internalisation, as the rain triggers his recollections that, distracts him from the present, and leaves him in a disoriented state. I notice that his introspection positions him in a space outside of time, as his real-time experience of a rainy day in Brussels overlaps within his past remembrance of Lagos' rainy season. Cole shows that these overlapping incidents creates a diasporic experience that is not linked to a singular physical location.

Ogboh and Cole adopt a similar archival aesthetics process. They provide a sensory experience that triggers a memory of Lagos which then becomes projected onto another location. Although the soundscape and the novel focus on different sensory triggers, both of them highlight the relationship between the personal and the city's socio-cultural history. The individual uses archival aesthetics to negotiate a trans-dimensional web that incorporates the present, the past, the experience, and the event into one location with another location. Consequently, similar to the author and the artist from Chapter Three, they demonstrate that each individual develops a unique relationship with her environment based on her own spatial and social context.

### **The experience behind the hearing and seeing of cities**

Yi-Fu Tuan claims that pure cognition and sense perception contributes to a human being's experience within a "mythical conception space". I observe that the novel and the soundscape examine the in-between stages that occur in the transition from sense perception to pure cognition<sup>39</sup>. The first stage is the initiation of a spatial interaction that involves a sensory perception of either hearing or sight. The second stage looks at negotiating a position within the city. The final stage is disillusionment that results from an inability to validate or affirm a sense of belonging. Ogboh and Cole put forward the idea that people endure mental conflict in their attempt to resolve their outsider status.

The first stage proposes that sense perception enables an immersion into the environment. Sight, hearing, taste and touch are immediate responses that happen during the

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<sup>39</sup> Each stage defines the concept of integration process but, overall, it refers to the person's attempt to become part of their environment through either a social, cultural or historical identification.

initial contact with a spatial domain. The sensory experience underpins contact between the human body and the immediate surrounding, which then coerces an emotional attachment associated with that particular sense. Ogboh and Cole focus on different senses that influence the individual's spatial interaction. The artist foregrounds hearing, as a significant component that shapes the viewer's interaction and understanding of the new environment. In contrast, the author depicts how the character uses sight to take in the different cities, as well as to search for traces that affirm his belonging. I claim that sensory experiences are essentially mapping techniques that outline and contextualise an encountered space.

Ogboh creates soundscapes that use hearing to integrate the viewer in a simulated version of Lagos. His motor park recording contains the sound of bus conductors, who perform verbal mapping by calling out bus routes and stops to attract potential customers, as each of them creates unique vocal patterns that are distinct from one another. The artist interprets this phenomenon to be an "acoustic cartographic mapping" (Lemu 8) which is only found in Lagos. His phrase suggests that the conductors narrate and draw out verbally the various paths between local regions. When the viewer enters the gallery or public space, the conductors' verbal mappings transform her role as a listener to participant in which position her as a fictitious person who enters the motor park and plans to take one of the buses for the first time. The senses respond to the navigation presented in the aural landscape.

In contrast to the artwork's sensory experience, the novel adopts the visual approach where the protagonist, Julius, shows his obsession with a city's surroundings. During his Brussels holiday, he pays attention to buildings and investigates their historical significance, as well as notices the local population's demographics. His frequent walking trips through the city build his spatial awareness, and once he returns to his rented apartment, he reflects on his daily observations and his social encounters. I notice that he engages in a mapping of Brussels and uses his sight to draw a mental cartography. Most importantly, his social and historical analysis attempts to excavate potential traces that affirm his family connection to the city since his search for his grandmother was the purpose behind his holiday. He admits that "being in the same country" as his "oma" brings him "comfort" (Cole 100). Thus, his city sight-seeing and exploration becomes an opportunity to reunite with his family member.

Fredric Jameson discusses the notion of "cognitive mapping" (10) in relation to a person's integration into communities. He looks at cognitive mapping as the mental activity that conceives of a place within a multi-faceted social system specific to a physical place. Furthermore, he argues that an individual must find an identification point that establishes a sense of belonging. I observe that his argument outlines the tensions that result in trying to

integrate socially within a location, which I take as my point of departure and analyse the oscillation between being part yet separate from a chosen identification.



Figure 18: Ogboh, Emeka. *[dis]connect IV / Fractal Scapes*. 2011. Private collection. 10 June 2018 <<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/emeka-ogboh-ala/>>.

The second stage examines the person's negotiation of a social position within the environment. His sensory experiences introduce him to various forms of identification that link to different communities. According to the physician, Paracelsus, human beings manifest their inner realities through social interactions through which, their desires and wishes are projected onto the environment (Cole 188). Moreover, external events can trigger suppressed emotions. Cole shows that Julius exhibits this behaviour when he travels to Brussels in the hopes of being reunited with his grandmother. Ogboh captures the human-space relationship in his video series *[dis]connect IV: The Fractal Scapes* (fig. 18), as he visually reflects the viewer's sensory experience and identification with Lagos. The novel and the artwork indicate that a spatial domain always involves mental projection.

At the beginning of his holiday, Julius tries to locate his grandmother through different methods. He consults the phone book, considers visiting different nursing houses and occasionally searches for an elderly woman in the streets. I argue that he entertains the idea of carrying them out but admits that they are aimless and ineffective. His passive approach suggests that he is aware of his futile attempts and despite that he indulges in the possibility that he will find her and imagines their heartfelt reunion. The book highlights the fact that he becomes hyperconscious of his projection onto the city: "I suspected, that the paths I mindlessly followed through the city followed a logic irrelevant to my family" (Cole 116). Julius' desire

to find his grandmother causes his over-identification with Brussels, as he originally believed that the space would reveal or affirm his social tie to his maternal lineage. Cole keeps the woman as an enigmatic symbol, as well as the source of the character's struggle for a historical attachment and claim to a lineage within a European country. Their relationship exists as an imaginary connection yet also a disconnection that affects his tie with Brussels.

Ogboh similarly makes use of identifications linked to spaces, as his soundscape tricks the visitors into believing that they exist in Lagos. I argue that they project their presence onto the soundscape and imagine themselves as locals, who listen out for bus conductors' verbal mapping until they hear the call for the specific bus route. The aural landscape blends a fictitious identification with a real-time experience of people who live in Lagos. I interpret that the artist's video installation series, *[dis]connect IV: The Fractal Scapes* (fig. 18), as being the visual metaphors for a collapsing and forming sensory experience of the motor parks. The footage records the everyday activities of people catching a danfo bus, buying items from vendors and people crossing the road. Furthermore, the artist applies fractals and mirror effects that split and merge the moving images. I claim that this visual manipulation mimics an unstable fictitious identification with the city, as the onlookers' presences are in constant flux. Artificial yet real simulation traps them into a self-made psychological projection onto an unfamiliar environment.

Cole and Ogboh put forward that mental delusion bridges the gap between sense perception and pure cognition, as the person must imagine and assert her position within a real or simulated city. The novel shows Julius sightseeing and exploring Brussels and, thus, uses his visual experience to assess the city, as well as to insert his presence into the space. In comparison, Ogboh suggests that the viewers undergo a sensory process to deceive themselves into believing in a simulated life through the video installation series (fig. 18). I argue that the novel and the art installation reflect on the human consciousness. It does not mirror the external world but evaluates the environment's impression onto the human body. As a result, the interaction with space is both an internal and external activity.

In temporal and spatial detachment, the individual experiences disillusionment in relation to a sense of belonging. The third stage looks at the integration or connection to a city, but at the same time, this action highlights a spatial exclusion. Ogboh presents soundscapes that establish the onlookers' belief in a pseudo-connection or social attachment to the audio recordings. However, once they exit the sound space, they begin to doubt whether such a sensory experience occurred. In comparison to the art installation, Cole shows that the character is responsible for his own self-delusion, and believes naively that his Brussels trip will reveal

a physical sign of his relationship with a grandmother. Both creators suggest that disillusionment brings about a new understanding.

The Lagos audio validates and negates the viewer's position and existence within the soundscape. According to the artist, the (un)familiar city noises become familiar because it has the ability to reference "the places where we once lived, but the minute we hear them again, it's like they were always lodged in our brains" (Ogboh cited in Lemu 13). I interpret this as meaning that the viewer undergoes an uncanny experience, where her brain creates neurological pathways that replicate a pseudo-suppressed memory<sup>40</sup>. As a result, it creates a belief in that connection rooted in the listened sounds from *[dis]connect IV: The Fractal Scapes*. However, the cognitive process is constantly conflicted because the city audio is unfamiliar and dissociative. Yet, it becomes alluring to the extent that the brain builds a context for this new sensory information. Ogboh shows that the viewer exists as a citizen only within a simulation that is separate yet connected to the original Lagos.

Cole similarly explores a person's relationship with recollections, as he demonstrates that Julius' memories remind him of his unresolved family ties. He recalls his only memory of his grandmother, when she visited the family in Nigeria. Shortly after that his mother and grandma severed their relations and this resulted in his loss of contact with her. Consequently, his childhood memories for the woman inspired his Brussels trip. He imagines the possibility of salvaging their lost relationship and re-living his childhood enjoyment of their family bond. I notice that Julius deals with his memories through using future possibilities to alter past events. In the case of the grandmother, he tries to move past that single encounter with her in Nigeria and hopes to produce new memories of togetherness in Brussels. Julius' spatial mobility mirrors his attempt to change his social relationships for the sake of his own sanity. The book articulates his self-alienation in the phrase "I have searched myself", which approximates the typical saying "I have searched for myself" (Cole 186). The omitted "for" implies that Julius fails to find the answers within himself that explain his difficulty in forging connections with people and different cities.

The author and the artist use disillusionment to push the limits of experiential knowing. Paul Rodaway, a human geographer, defines this term as, "research that seeks not to verify an a priori theory but authenticate a particular knowledge of a place" (266). In other words, experiential knowing involves a first-hand experience where the person uses sense perception

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<sup>40</sup> This is called the Mandela effect when the mind believes something to have been true but in reality it never existed.

to understand and conceive of either a hypothetical or real environment. Ogboh demonstrates that the soundscapes educate the viewer about Lagos sounds through which recognition or recalling occurs. Similarly, Cole illustrates that Brussels represents a space that allows Julius to imagine and indulge in a hoped for connection to his grandmother. Experiential knowing provides an alternative version to reality rather than an overriding truth.

I introduce and apply the three different stages that explain a person's transition from sense perception to pure cognition. The novel and the soundscape construct a "mythical conception space", as they investigate the human-environment relationship, and claim that the mind projects an identification with a social collective belonging that asserts and validates his presence. Cole demonstrates that Julius develops a complex response to his Brussels vacation. He imagines that the city represents a common ground where he is able to reconnect with his grandmother. Unfortunately, this never happens, and thus, his failed opportunity further reinforces his sense of isolation despite his multiple kinship relations across several countries. Similarly, Ogboh's soundscapes explore fictitious and real connections to spaces. The viewer becomes a pseudo-Lagos citizen, who experiences and develops an emotional attachment to the city for the first time but, outside the exhibition, her connection is immediately dissolved. The two creators show that a mythical conception space allows for multiple identifications triggered by a sensory bodily response to an environment.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter Four has introduced the notion of spatial interaction, as a conceptual framework, to reveal some nuances concerning a diasporic individual's engagement with different locations. The sound installation and the novel highlight emotional, psychological and social tensions that emerge from the human-spatial relationship. I have argued that these works humanise the 'native informant'. They examine the social relationships and resist fulfilling the role of a cultural interpreter. Cole illustrates that Julius is unable to reconcile his connections with Nigeria because of his memories located there. In contrast to a genealogical tie, Ogboh constructs the viewer's link to Lagos and therefore, he undermines the 'native informant' identity in having a Westerner rather than a Nigerian descendant occupy the role. Each of the works considers the person's cognitive process, where she must delude or convince herself, to forge a tie to a real or fictitious geographic affiliation. The two creators show that spatial interaction ultimately reflects the individual rather than generalised assumptions of diasporic background validity.

I argued that the visual and literary works re-imagine the ‘native informant’ within a Western setting opposed to an African setting. The native’s presence investigates the homeland within the hostland environment, which breaks down the physical boundaries that delimit the colonised from the coloniser. Ogboh and Cole implant Nigerian traces within European cities to undermine the mediatory role of the ‘native informant role’, as two different locations are overlapped into one space. Ultimately, this interaction destabilises and reverses the Western control over the ‘third’ world.

Ogboh creates soundscapes that produce a simulated version of Lagos that disrupts the Europeans’ way of life and experience of their city. They are forced to adapt into a position, where they contemplate and reflect on a contrasting socio-cultural context. I claim that this sensory process alters the colonial relationship. The native informant typically denotes the colonised as the one who relays cultural information, but the artist places the sound installation as the cultural source that ironically disrupts and de-familiarises the comfort of the colony. Furthermore, the Westerner is unable to stop the audio contamination in the city. This psychological pervasion facilitates an uneasiness that potentially leads to an openness in understanding the subjected position. His soundscape facilitates new form of knowledge, understanding and knowing that introduce new contexts that underpin an individual’s spatial interaction.

Similarly, Cole highlights Julius’ two different reactions towards his affiliated cities. He firstly shows his familiarity towards the Euro-American history, and secondly, he shows understanding of those spaces based on his social relationships. The novel demonstrates that the protagonist inserts his own diasporic narrative into the various cities. For instance, he ascribes multiple layers of meaning onto Brussels that overlap with his memories of Nigeria. As a result, the literary work (re)assembles different relations between the individual and the place that highlight alternative realities uprooted from a location’s physicality.

A diasporic individual’s interaction with space looks at the social, emotional and psychological factors that construct a connection with an environment. The sound installation and the novel suggest that the mobility of places and the person’s interpretation of them are disruptive tools, which re-imagine the ‘the South’ and ‘the North’ political binary. I introduce the terms archival aesthetics and mythical conception space to outline the complex process of interacting with space: it is not stagnant but constructed, malleable and transportable by the senses. The human body and psyche blend various associations that coordinate the disparate ties amongst multiple cities rather than rely on a predetermined social and historical lineage.

Ogboh and Cole illustrate a diasporic position that evaluates the 'sense' aspect of belonging rather than the heavily emphasised 'belonging' aspect.

## Chapter Five

### **Self-identification as the ‘native informant’: an uncanny understanding of the colonial body**

#### **Introduction**

While the previous chapter looked at the connotations of a diasporic person’s social attribute to an environment, resulting in her uncanny experience from multiple identifications during a spatial interaction. This chapter expands on the notion of identification and understanding the self in relation to others as well as considers the influence of colonial discourse on the individual-community relationship. In other words, I provide alternative social identities, representation and narratives that challenge the colonised as simply a cultural representative.

Many scholars<sup>41</sup> have studied race, gender, sexuality and socio-cultural dimensions as identity components or intersections that enable the marginalised groups to assert themselves, to form a collective to defend against a hostile environment. Most use the term self-identification in their research to denote the various mechanisms that help the individual confirm or affirm her existence. However, according to the psychology scholar, Barry Schlenker, self-identification complicates the sense of self because it considers the interconnection between the private and public self (21). It reveals personal experience, feelings, actions, thoughts as well as the social behaviour and mannerisms. Thus, the term refers to the ability of presenting the self within a particular context.

I apply Schlenker’s interpretation of self-identification and propose that two interactions occur between the private and public self. The first type is the private self’s projection onto the external world, whereas the second type is the private self’s internalisation of the public self. When the individual reclaims aspects of herself such as her body, her story, or her speaking voice, she subsequently engages with either a projection or internalisation of her presence within an external socio-cultural framework. Self-identification is a negotiation over a person’s representation. Although the action does not completely disavow the imposed portrayal, it presents alternative depictions and social connections that reformulate the individual’s image within a community<sup>42</sup>. In the title of this chapter, “the uncanny understanding of the colonial body” refers to my analysis of self-identification as a resistance

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<sup>41</sup> Csepeli and Simon (2007), Galupo, Mitchell and Davis (2015), Dulmus, Sowers, Theriot (2005), Canessa (2007).

<sup>42</sup> Foucault speaks about the individual’s ability to transform themselves through a self-reflection that potentially help others in the process (18). Foucault, M. *Technology of the self. Technologies of the self*. Ed. L H Martin, H Gutman and P H Hutton. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988. 16-49.

and subjection. I argue that imaginary and fictitious self-reinventions of identity can debunk the coloniser's lack of agency in determining their self-image. The "native informant" uses moments of ambivalence and contradiction to assert and disassociate from certain parts of herself.

Chapter Five looks at self-identification as a complex action that exemplifies yet challenges colonial discourse's portrayal of the 'native informant'. Their body and their narrative are reduced to a cultural framework of being the other. I argue that Wura-Natasha Ogunji's art performances and Chika Unigwe's novel *On Black Sisters' Street* present an African diasporic agency, which asserts a speaking position and reclamation of the body that engages with the 'native informant' role. The artist and author interconnect the two, as a form of resistance, which ultimately humanises the marginalised within Western representation. Yet their engagement reveals tensions in identity construction. The novel depicts a diasporic journey from Nigeria to Belgium where the characters endure the experience of being sex workers, a role that models on colonial exotic imagery. Similarly, the art performances touch on cultural fetish, as well as individual presence within a collective narrative. Ogunji and Unigwe use self-identification to re-think and re-imagine African diasporic women.

Wura-Natasha Ogunji is a visual and performing artist, who was born in the U.S. and presently moves between Texas and Lagos. Her art looks at the human body's movement, mobility and connection to abstract spaces. She expresses these visual motifs through her drawings, videos and performances. One of her interesting projects was her participation in the Berlin ifa-Galerie's *Untie to Tie-On Colonial Legacies and Contemporary Societies*, which interrogated the permeating colonial structures in global culture and modern-day realities. The artist contributed towards this project with her exhibition *Every Mask I ever Loved* (2017-2018), which exhibited a collection of drawings and presented four art performances. However, I focus only on three of her art performances entitled *The Kissing Mask*, *If I loved you*, and *A Place you can never go*. The first piece directly interrogates colonial discourse around cultural objects. In comparison, the last two pieces are read in connection to each other, as they explore the different ways that individuals engage with other people's realities from an outsider and insider perspective. Overall, her works explore the common themes of self-consciousness, intimacy, privacy, empathy, essentially the limits of identification.

Chika Unigwe is a Nigerian author based in Belgium. Her book, *On Black Sisters' Street*, is similar to her previous work<sup>43</sup> that explores diasporic experience of living in European

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<sup>43</sup> *The Phoenix/De Feniks* 2005 tells about a Nigerian woman who marries a Belgian man.

countries. In addition, it provides a specific social realist perspective. Her novel revolves around four female protagonists, Ama, Efe, Joyce, and Sisi, and tracks their journey from Nigeria to Belgium. I examine their intersecting narratives to compare and contrast their resistance against and subjection to sex work. The author creates a complex web between the individual and community that highlights their distinct voices and shared living circumstances in a foreign country.

This chapter argues that Ogunji's art performance *The Kissing Mask* and Unigwe's novel utilise self-identification, as both subjection and resistance against the colonial representation of the black female body. This is a body portrayed as hyper-sexual with exaggerated bodily features which are anomalies in relation to Western standards. The artist and the author reflect on the diasporic position and condition within an exotic cultural discourse, which sexualises women based on their African background. Ogunji's piece entitled *The Kissing Mask* depicts the artist, as identifying herself within an unknown person wearing an African mask, who entices the audience to kiss her. In comparison to the visual work, Unigwe uses the protagonists' interaction with their clients to interrogate the cultural perception of African women and the claiming of their bodies. Both the artist and writer incorporate images that destabilise the stereotyping of the female migrant as the erotic other.

These two creators use two self-identification strategies in their engagement with the native informant role. The first strategy looks at the individual, who occupies a colonial position, and her ability to re-invent her bodily representation and subvert the sexual fetishism. I examine the actions of dressing up and disguising the self, as a connecting motif between *The Kissing Mask* piece and the novel. The second method focuses on the person's reclaiming her speaking voice within a narrative and her experiences outside the colonial cultural context. I analyse individual and collective belonging in the novel and the pieces, *If I loved you* and *A place you can never go*. The two strategies humanise the person behind the 'native informant' role, as well as undermining her existence as a non-entity and purpose as a cultural informant to the coloniser.

I put forward that *The Kissing Mask* performance and the novel use dressing-up and disguise to present alternative bodily representations which are not associated with the marginalised body. While Unigwe illustrates that one of the characters in the novel, Sisi, creates her own social fantasies through which she refutes the representation of her as a sex worker. She redefines her presence in Belgium. Ogunji also uses a disguise in her performance, as she adopts a new identity and transforms her body into a sacred embodiment for a spirit being.

Both cases play with identity's social and physical aspects to dissolve the marginalised's link to the colonial exotic discourse.

In contrast to the first strategy's evaluation of the individual-body relationship, the second strategy explores the act of storytelling in the person's regaining and affirming her connection to other speaking voices. The individual behind the 'native informant' seeks to redefine her community relationship outside a cultural or geographic framework. However, the novel and the performance pieces *If I loved you* and *A place you can never go* complicate communication between the individual and the community. They introduce new possibilities for multi-faceted stories. Unigwe interlaces various narratives that assert individual presences, highlighting points of connection amongst the characters. Her narrative structure seeks to acknowledge, trace and recall the suppressed voices behind the sex-work industry. In comparison, Ogunji's performances adopt a more abstract approach and focus on the viewer's ability to imagine herself as part of a fictitious group. *A place you can never go* reflects on *If I loved you*, a showcase of a group recital on love and loss. Consequently, the literary and visual representations consider the possibilities of people imagining their interconnection which still allows for distinction and integration.

This Chapter introduces self-identification as a resistant theme that re-evaluates the diasporic women as the 'native informant' and reveals their subtle acts of resistances. They reclaim their bodies and their narrative presences from the colonial framework. The performance and literary narratives showcase an agency that manipulates and undermines the ascribed representation, as well as redefining the individual-collective narrative. Their subject matter debunks the coloniser's ability to draw conclusions about the 'native informant' and their community.

### ***The Kissing Mask: becoming the spirit being***

Ogunji's exhibition performance investigates a relationship between the female body and social power in a public space. She draws on a colonial archive that positions the cultural other as an object for enquiry, fascination and curiosity. Most importantly, her artistic approach subverts the colonised-coloniser relations when she transforms her bodily identity. She re-encodes the black female body as a spirit being<sup>44</sup> that resists the 'native informant' role.

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<sup>44</sup> Chapter Two has already discussed the concept of the spirit being and its role in African understanding: the invisible entity controls, manipulates and works miracles in the real world.



Figure 19: Ogunji, Wura-Natasha. *The Kissing Mask*. 2018. Performance. Ifa Gallery Berlin.  
<<https://www.ifa.de/en/events/detail/news/an-afternoon-with-the-masks.html>>.

The artist wears a multi-coloured dress with geometric lines and a mosaic patterned mask over her face. She walks towards a demarcated space that has a white pedestal placed in the middle; she sits down and patiently waits for exhibition members to make physical contact with her. The interactive performance invites them to examine her strange other-worldly appearance, and perhaps to be bold enough to kiss her through the mask.

Ogunji writes on her blog, *GoldenIron*, that her inclusion of a cultural object introduces a disruptive element in her art piece (para. 3). The artefact facilitates an intimate exchange between herself, the mask and the viewer that appropriates its historical purpose. She applies the mask's sacred nature as an extension of her human body. As a result, her strange appearance disrupts the gallery space in three different ways. Her first disruption is of time: she introduces a historical relic into the present and encourages the onlooker to participate and engage with the object. Furthermore, the outsider's interaction with the mask contributes to a second disruption. Their relationship blurs the boundaries between a sacred and public space, as the artist allows the viewers to touch her. The third disruption elevates her status from a human to a spirit being who blesses people with kisses. She gains a social power over the room and the exhibition visitors through presenting the female presence in an epic way that sacralises a usually private gesture of intimacy.

I argue that her art performance interrogates the diasporic position and condition that construct the ‘native informant’. Ogunji operates within a colonial discourse which fetishes, analyses and studies the other and their cultural lifestyles through her wearing a mask that transforms her into an exotic being. Her work speaks to a similar resistance found in Chapter Two’s artists, Bamgboyé and Mutu, who interrogate the colonial archive’s representation of colonial bodies and their artefacts. Consequently, Ogunji’s position precariously imposes colonial connotations attached to a cultural relic and its spiritual characteristic onto her body. Her ahistorical focus subverts the connection between the diasporic individual and her African background. Instead, she looks at the mask’s impact on the viewer interaction with herself. The kissing action represents an intimate interrelation that redefines the coloniser-colonised relationship.

Colonial discourse has positioned the female body as a source of sexual exoticism and cultural othering<sup>45</sup>. The artist’s mask-wearing interrogates her position as a diasporic black woman through the palimpsest imagery: she ascribes multiple contradictory layers of meaning onto her body, which then complicates the colonial body as ‘native informant’ document. I claim that the cultural relic imbues Ogunji’s body with a spiritual aura, and unsettles the exoticised black female body. Her presence calls for respect and homage to an unidentifiable supernatural entity. She inscribes her body’s colonial appropriation with something new. The mask gives her social power and a higher status in relation to the audience that contrasts with the colonial depiction of African women as sexual erotic objects to be consumed by the coloniser. Although her mask wearing exemplifies her cultural otherness, her performance shows that her disguise elevates her social position, which influences the viewer interaction with her. Ogunji puts forward that their kissing disregards cultural differences and dissolves the initial alienating experience from not understanding the performance’s purpose. The intimate moment between the artist and a participant prioritises a ritualized, sacred exchange, as opposed to a cultural informant exchange.

Ogunji’s work evaluates the mask’s potential to redefine colonial relations rather than reiterating its colonial appropriation as a cultural object. African artefacts were previously stored and displayed in museums for their eccentric appeal. European citizens interpreted them based on their face value or indulged in them as evidences to successful colonial conquest. In

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<sup>45</sup> Sarah Baartman is a famous example of a Khoi-San woman, who was showcased in European countries for her contrasting bodily features. In contrast to her story, Josephine Baker exemplified European voyeurism for black bodies in her *banana dance* performance.

other words, the objects and their display reaffirmed a power hierarchy between the coloniser and the colonised. Ogunji transforms the way in which the mask in the European museum has been converted into a historical relic. Instead, she activates its innate power and foreboding presence in the process of the onlooker's interaction with her. The mask wearing transforms the mask from being a static object of curiosity to being a social tool. Consequently, the performance disrupts the object's association with a particular spatiotemporal context. The mask surpasses its past colonial connotations and becomes a vital contemporary component for an art piece.

I observe that Ogunji's resistance against the relic's socio-historical context prevents the pigeonholing of her identity also. The viewers, review writers or curators cannot make links between her mask wearing and her African background, and therefore the performance is not an indicator of her diasporic condition. She undermines her ascribed role to provide insight into the mask's original meaning. Its lack of context results in people's hesitation in approaching her. They are afraid of the unknown consequences of coming into contact with the mask as an archaic object. The mask's mysterious presence prevents any reduction to its rationalised, cultural essence. Neither does it provide information about the artist's African heritage, but she examines the power structures that contextualises the object.

*The Kissing Mask* reflects on colonial discourse that constructs and dictates the coloniser-colonised relation, as well as the nature of the two positions. Ogunji complicates her role as the cultural other, as the fetishised object, through the mask's powerful presence that unsettles the Westerner's placement at the top of the social power hierarchy. Thus, I argue that her repositioning of the coloniser and colonised impacts on the treatment of the marginalised. In contrast to its original portrayal as a controlling-oppressive exchange for which cultural information about the other is conveyed in a one-way direction, the performance's kissing interaction symbolises the Western viewer's respect, acceptance and commitment to following the artist's guidance. She inserts the mask as a challenge to difference and separation, through promoting human contact between the coloniser and colonised. Her art performance introduces an empathetic connection between the audience and herself that then undermines the coloniser's purpose of reinforcing a 'native informant' role.

### ***On Black Sisters' Street: resistance against the sexualised black body***

Chika Unigwe focuses on the African diasporic woman's experience, as well as her negotiated sense of self in Belgium. During her interview with Edozie Udeze, Unigwe explains that her motivation for writing *On Black Sisters' Street* was because she felt "a story was waiting to be

written, waiting to be attended to. It was a story that [needed to be explored] and the only way was to write about it” (Unigwe cited in Udeze 1). She states that her own culture shock, in witnessing the red window displays in Antwerp after her immigration from Nigeria to Belgium, inspired her subject matter. The novel blends fiction and facts, as the author researched and conducted interviews with Antwerp sex workers, to gain an understanding of their lives and to reflect on their stories. Her controversial subject exposes the sex industry’s darkness yet, it humanises those who work in the business.

The novel provides an accurate depiction of human trafficking operations based on a social hierarchy. Senghor Dele, a character in the book, exists at the apex of the hierarchy and acts as the pimp, who scouts for Nigerian women and pays for their trips to work in Belgium as sex workers. Once they arrive, they must pay him instalments every month to pay off travel and housing costs. A woman named Madam occupies the second level of the hierarchy and manages the women in Belgium. She trains them in the business, schedules their client meetings and houses them for their duration of their time as sex workers. Segun, a male character, carries out Madam’s orders and occupies the next level of the hierarchy above the position of the sex workers themselves.

Unigwe presents this elaborate setup through a series of a-chronological events from an omniscient perspective that narrates the four female protagonists, Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce. I provide below a short summary of each woman’s story:

Sisi is a Lagos university graduate who is unable to enter the job market, and because of financial frustration, enlists as a sex worker and travels to Belgium in the hopes to attain financial independence. At the story’s beginning, the reader discovers that she is murdered for not paying her monthly instalments to the pimp, Dele. Her tragic ending becomes the catalyst that begins her story and those of the other three women.

Efe enters economic transactions in exchange for sex with a Nigerian weave merchant due to her poverty state, and then becomes pregnant at sixteen. She takes Dele’s offer to be one of his working girls, in order to provide financially for her son and her two siblings.

Ama comes from the upper-middle class and experiences a childhood trauma of being raped by her stepfather (Brother Cyril). Her parents disown her and she is forced to live and work with her aunt at her cafeteria. In contrast to Efe’s economic motivation, she desires an escape from her monotonous life and becomes a sex worker to help redefine herself.

Joyce/Alek is similar to Ama, as she experiences rape and the loss of her family due to Janjaweed militia during Sudan's second civil war. She moves to Lagos with her boyfriend, whom she meets at a refugee camp. He later betrays her when he enlists her as one of Dele's working girls without her consent.

The characters are diverse in their backgrounds, appearances and motivations, but they all endure living in a foreign country that subjects their bodies to various discourses.

Literary scholars<sup>46</sup> have analysed Unigwe's book within two theoretical frameworks. The first paradigm examines how Lagos and Antwerp shape the four women's identities and perceptions of their bodies. Specifically, these scholars<sup>47</sup> apply the migration and globalisation discourse to discuss the characters' social hardships in being part of the human trafficking circuit. Contrary to a geographic-political analysis, the second paradigm studies the women's social relationships as well as their struggles against the patriarchal discourse. According to certain scholars<sup>48</sup>, each of the women sacrifices her body to improve her socio-economic status and circumstances for either herself or loved ones. Both paradigms examine exoticisation in colonial discourse. In the first framework, scholars observe that providing marginalised bodies for sexual consumption in European countries is strongly linked to past colonial economic relations. Similarly, in the second framework, scholars argue that colonial stereotypes imposed on African women enable the characters' financial opportunity but at the cost of their subjection.

I argue that the protagonists resist and conform to the exotic cultural other in their engagement with their profession. The novel depicts the black female body as an object, through which the coloniser gains access to a sexual colonial fantasy and experience. The characters must navigate their identities and bodies within Western historical depictions and imaginaries. Unigwe shows the characters' complex responses towards their diasporic position and condition. Ama and Efe rebrand the black body's erotic appeal and harness its socio-economic power, as they demonstrate active agency within their narratives. In addition to appropriation of their positions, the novel highlights their distinct diasporic conditions that undermine the homogenisation of African women. Their contrasting backgrounds individualise each female's experience.

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<sup>46</sup> Tunca 2009, Savonick 2015, Kamalu and Ejezie 2016, De Mul 2014, Eze 2014, and Otu 2016

<sup>47</sup> Tunca 2009, Savonick 2015, Kamalu and Ejezie 2016

<sup>48</sup> De Mul 2014, Eze 2014, and Otu 2016

Before any of the women travel and work in Belgium, they must pass the pimp Dele's requirements that they must have large breasts, rounded buttocks, and be tall and slim. His idea of a desirable woman draws from colonial discourse that attributes exaggerated and contrasting features to black bodies. I suggest that Ama and Efe contribute towards the exotic branding of themselves and, perform what Graham Huggan calls "strategic exoticism"<sup>49</sup>. They exploit the marketable and financial benefits in their attribute role as exotic other, where they begin to interpret their bodies as a means to greater success. In other words, they are reclaiming agency and control during a process of submission and conformity. Ama sees her diasporic position as a socio-economic opportunity, where her clients are "tools" that help her become a "big woman" whom "people back home [will] respect her, even [her stepfather] Brother Cyril" (Unigwe 169). Similarly, Efe desires better financial status, as she saves up enough to pay off what she owes to the pimp, and opens her own Antwerp brothel. She exploits her own position as an African woman and her knowledge of the industry. She therefore focuses on the market for African women and profits from Western man's desire for the exotic other. Ama and Efe demonstrate that their complicity in reinforcing Western stereotypes ironically undermine the colonised's subjection because of their willingness to operate within the colonial discourse.

The omniscient narrator highlights that, in addition to their actions, the protagonists' different diasporic conditions challenge the idea of the 'native informant' and a singular cultural background. Unigwe creates characters who are from different locations in Nigeria or outside of the country and, furthermore, she considers how their socio-economic class influences their various conditions. Both Sisi and Efe grow up in Lagos but, Efe lives an impoverished life and struggles to meet her daily needs. Sisi, in contrast, lives in a tiny apartment with her parents. Ama is from an upper-middle class family from Enugu, and then relocates to Lagos after she accuses her stepfather of raping her. In contrast to Sisi, Efe and Ama, Joyce is a war refugee from Sudan, and then, years later, moves to Lagos with her partner. The novel incorporates financial standings, childhood upbringing and individual trauma that reject a diasporic condition based solely on an original geographic location.

Unigwe shows that each character's diasporic relationship differs from one another. I argue that these differences discredit any attribution of the 'native informant' role to the characters, as each of them undermines a collective and consistent narrative, portraying a

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<sup>49</sup> Graham Huggan defines this term as the postcolonial subject being aware of their complicit engagement with the discourse that subjects them within its framework (32). Subsequently, they are consumers and producers of the colonial exotic.  
Huggan, Graham. *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing The Margins*. London: Routledge, 2001.

submissive, sexually exotic other from a specific African location. Ama and Efe use their position to strive for improved socio-economic status. Their motivation derives from aspects of their diasporic background such as their family relations, financial circumstances and upbringing. The book illustrates an interconnection between their position and condition. Consequently, their individual narratives allow them to create identities within their specific social contexts.

### **Dressing-up and disguise: finding and losing the self**

The first self-identification strategy examines the individual's relationship with herself through the representation of her body. I have outlined in the above section, resistance against depictions of the culturally exotic other in the literary and visual works. However, this segment specifically looks at how the artist and the writer transform and destabilise stereotypes through the process of dressing-up and disguising the self. The novel and *The Kissing Mask* (fig. 19) play with multiple identities to challenge the sexualised black woman. I argue that their fictitious or real self-portrayals prevent their gender identities being reduced to colonial assumptions or functions, concerning the submissive and passive object ready for the colonial man's sexual pleasure and domination. *On Black Sisters' Street*, Sisi dresses up as different characters to transform her identity from being a sex worker to being an ordinary person, experiencing Belgium when she is not doing sex work. Similarly, the performance piece illustrates a transformation whereby the artist becomes a sacralised being, co-existing with humans. Paradoxically, both creative forms demonstrate that self-transformation is bound up with forms of self-destruction.

Rasul Mowatt, Bryana French and Dominique Malebranche argue that the black woman's sexual commodification deprives her of the privilege of feeling beautiful (651). The novel tackles this issue in referring to Sisi's inner conflict between performing her job and living a normal life. Her profession robs her of any other bodily identification, as her physical features become the selling points that draw customers. In other words, the women are forced to represent and embody the cultural exotic other as part of their identity. Her bodily interactions shaped by society continue to remind her of her job. For example, when she buys more clothes to wear for work than for her own fashion style. Thus, her behaviour shows that her sex-worker role intrudes on her leisure experience, as she cannot see herself outside its framework.

I argue that Sisi develops hyper-awareness during her client sexual interactions. She attempts to dissociate her mind from her body. She expresses her uncertainty, anxiety, denial,

embarrassment and shame. During her first day at work, her uncomfortable sexual engagement forces her to separate herself from her actions: “This is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping in my bed. [...] This is somebody else. Another body” (Unigwe 212). Her descriptions indicate a social, mental and bodily self-estrangement. She struggles to distance herself completely, because she identifies as the “I” but not with the “me”. Therefore, her (dis)association from the first person pronoun alludes to her fractured psyche. “I” acknowledges her role as a witness to a sexual encounter but her rejection with the “me” absolves her from any accountability for taking part in that scene. Her mind-body split is a form of resistance against her own bodily participation. Furthermore, her two contradictory responses split parts of herself, whereby she isolates and separates her personal identity from her sex-worker role. As a result, this mental-bodily estrangement underlines her desire to transform her outward appearance.

Sisi starts dressing up in different disguises to counter her body’s representation as the colonised exotic other. She fabricates alternative lifestyles that temporarily overturn her objectification. Her dress games allow her to experience Belgium through playing different social roles that contrast with her profession. She enjoys being either a local citizen, the rich housewife or the adventurous solo traveller. I observe that her make-believe fantasies provide her control yet fluidity over her identity-bodily persona. She remains anonymous since she can be “anyone from anywhere” (Unigwe 255). Her multiple disguises accompany fabricated stories that relate to a bought item and that reinforces her ordinary fantasy life in the city. For example, she buys baby socks and lies to the saleswoman that she is expecting her first child. The material item brings her comfort, a temporary escape from her profession through which she suppresses negative thoughts about herself, as she plays out her role without its entailed responsibilities. Her ordinary identity helps her forget her body’s subjection and commodification.

The narrator shows that her ultimate play of personas is her decision to change her name from Chisom to Sisi, when she accepts Dele’s offer to become one of his working girls in Belgium. The name marks a transition into a new life of her own choosing despite her work. Sisi becomes the name associated with her identity as a sex worker. The name Chisom is associated with an old identity untainted by her present way of earning a living. Chisom is her shadow personality, her unconscious, and her past self that is hidden and suppressed. I observe that these two self-identifications are intimately connected, as a coping mechanism against the exotic other to help her live out her reality. She also identifies as Sisi to counter memories of her Lagos life. In contrast, when she has a bad day at work, she hides in her room and reminds

herself that her name is Chisom. As a result, she allocates aspects of her life to different categories that reflect her two conflicting selves.

Daria Tunca states that her behaviour is an example of “subjection through subjectivity”, as she tries to combat and reverse her choices that lead to her objectified condition (12). Her own misguided decisions bring about her suffering, as well as her death, because of her desire for a better life, and her naïve understanding of the requirements of the job. Despite her exercise of agency and mobility during her shopping and playing out of different personas, she cannot erase her original purpose in Antwerp nor erase the body’s subjection to a colonial exoticised discourse. Her fractured self-identity is a result of her unsustainable attempt to reclaim her identity and body.

Tunca’s argument suggests that Sisi’s transformation leads to her destruction. Her various self-appropriations draw attention to her body’s sexual exploitation, even though her dress-up games and name changes help her cope with her work duties. Her Chisom to Sisi transition articulates the transformation-destruction cycle: she snuffs out her identity as Chisom and then later in the novel she is murdered under the name Sisi. Despite her tragedy, the other three protagonists remember and recall their fond memories with her and, subsequently, restore the fractured Sisi within their own storytelling. She undergoes another transformation whereby her presence remains alive in her friends’ recollections.

Similarly, Ogunji demonstrates a metamorphosis in her self-body relationship during her performance art. *The Kissing Mask* explores the entanglement between a person’s transformation and her destruction. Her mask wearing signifies and facilitates her dressing-up and disguise game. I propose that the artist undergoes multiple transitions: her original identity changes into the exotic cultural other and then shifts into a spiritualised entity. Her new supernatural identity replaces her artist identity. As a result, her transformation-destruction cycle introduces a different social and power relationships between herself and the viewer.

The first transition, from artist to a fetish symbol imbued with power, is an example of Tunca’s notion of “subjection through subjectivity” (12). When the artist places the mask on her face, she invokes the colonial discourse surrounding cultural objects, and yet transforms herself into a living mouthpiece for a colonised culture. In contrast to the example of the novel, Ogunji’s ability to overcome her body’s subjection may be challenged based on two characteristics that the artist includes in her work. Firstly, Ogunji draws attention to how the exhibition visitors are made aware of its own construction as a bearer of ideas about the other. Secondly, they indirectly interrogate the discourse that shapes her identity and presence within the space because they are unable to simply view her as an exhibit of the past. Her new identity

reveals that the mask inaugurates a transformation accompanied by a spiritual aspect, through which the artist re-inscribes her body as a spirit guide.

I claim that the performance complicates the mask's purpose, as a cultural object, because Ogunji utilises it for its spiritual power. She refutes its instrumental role and instead focuses on its innate qualities that transform her into a higher-order being. After her absorption of the mask's power, Ogunji transforms the artefact into a kissing screen. As a result, her destruction of the self, read as a representation of a cultural other, brings forth an elevated status that provides her with social power and agency. She attains a new authoritative identity that subverts her body's representation as the submissive cultural other. She presents herself as a pure forceful spirit entity that blesses humans with her kisses.

Ogunji states that beauty emerges out of destruction because the two concepts are interconnected with transformation (para 5). She sacrifices her artist identity for an elevated spirit status and begins to live out her new-born existence through her generous interaction with viewers. In addition, her transformation changes the gallery space into a sacred temple that facilitates her interactions. The artist subverts the 'native informant' relationship through a particular use of the mask.

Dressing-up and disguise provide a multitude of fictitious façades that enable individuals to perform alternative roles to that of the 'native informant' role. Sisi adopts different personas that help her cope and exert some control over her social circumstances, as she engages with her bodily identity. At times, she submits to an exotic cultural role and provides her clients with a fetishised sexual experience. At other times, she ascribes to herself ordinary everyday roles as she explores the city. Similar to the way in which the novel shows resistance to colonial discourse, Ogunji shows that *The Kissing Mask* subverts the colonial fetishism of foreign cultures. She sacrifices her positioning as cultural other to become an entity imbued with power that may enter an intimate spiritual exchange with viewers. Therefore, her performance recodes typical interaction between colonised and coloniser. Both cases premise a transformative-destructive process as a resistant strategy against the 'native informant'. The novel demonstrates that Sisi tries to deflect her experience as a sex worker with her fabricated identities. In comparison, the artist uses the mask, an object that the West often perceives as a cultural relic, to transform herself into a spirit being for her own altruistic purpose.

### **Finding a voice among others**

I argue that storytelling, the second self-identification strategy, helps people to reclaim parts of themselves as well as their stories. The novel and the art performances highlight narratives that

draw attention to agency, presence and action, as they challenge the non-identity of the ‘native informant’. Paradoxically, colonial discourse presents the informant role as a cultural mouthpiece with a suppressed speaking voice. *On Black Sisters’ Street* focuses on the characters’ connection with each other over a social bond in their current lives, as opposed to a shared Nigerian past. Similarly, Ogunji emphasises empathetic access to another person’s story in her two interconnected pieces *If I loved you* and *A place you can never go*. The novel and the performances re-imagine the native informant position in relation to the past and their community.

Goredema observes that women’s sexuality has determined their access, social purpose and mobility in public spaces. Specifically, African feminism is shifting the visual perceptions of black bodies from sexual to human beings (Goredema 36). Her essay highlights spatial and social constructions that define and shape the female presence. The novel humanises this problem and presents diasporic women as people with speaking voices, who attempt to share, listen and connect their individual narratives.

In the novel, after hearing the news of Sisi’s death, the other three women remain silent until Efe decides to break the stifling silence and tells the story of how she became pregnant at a young age. Her act of talking and sharing her personal narrative establishes a vulnerable space, and as the novel progresses, Ama and Joyce also speak about their pasts. Their storytelling becomes an emotional release and comfort that allows each woman to self-identify with her own speaking voice. In support of this, the chapters’ titles of the novel are named after each of the characters to denote a reclaiming of her story and an owning of her experience. Each woman’s narrative agency highlights her corresponding points of connection with others, as well as her presence within the main plot.

I argue that Joyce’s act of storytelling restores her identity and reconciles her with the past. The novel documents her name transition from Alek to Joyce. The first part of her story entitled Alek, recalls her childhood trauma in Sudan. The second part, named Joyce, explains Dele’s replacement of her original name which symbolises the silencing of her speaking voice. After hearing her story, Ama and Efe are unable to respond verbally. Instead, Ama touches Joyce’s cheek as a gesture that acknowledges and accepts her presence and her story. Their intimate contact helps Joyce reclaim her old identity, as the narrator describes that this “warm touch” enables “Alek to smile through Joyce’s tears” (Unigwe 239) – sharing her story brings her existence into relief and facilitates emphatic connection with the other characters.

In addition to the narratives of the four main protagonists, the novel mentions minor stories and shared bonds between anonymous sex-workers. Sisi exchanges anecdotes with

other female immigrants working in Antwerp. They often told fake stories about their childhood memories and the past. Despite the fact that their conversation was built on lies, the “act of talking meant a lot more than what was talked about. It meant someone still saw them as more than a toy to pass the time with” (Unigwe 237). Their story sharing provides the women with an alternative socio-cultural context that was untainted by their profession. Consequently, their sincere form of lying and listening restores one another’s humanity. Unigwe interlaces various fictitious and real stories to redefine a legitimate community that is not based on validity or accuracy, but it is built on acknowledgement and recognition.

The main and minor narratives show that the act of storytelling places equal importance on all human presences within the novel. Ama, Efe and Joyce recall the past and assert their speaking voices to reconnect emotionally with themselves and to build a support system. Similarly, the unnamed sex workers fabricate stories to create rapport between one another. The women identify with other hidden aspects of their identities that distinguish them from being sex workers and that link them to an underlying social network.

Ogunji examines different ways to access and activate connections amongst people in her two art performances *If I loved you* and *A place you can never go*. Her first piece uses chanting and thread wrapping, as one approach, to assimilate each hired performer into a collective belonging. Her second piece looks at imagination as another approach that the viewer uses to bridge a connection between herself and the first performance’s community. I claim that the viewer becomes the ‘native informant’, who tries to forge her belonging rather than relay cultural information to the coloniser. The artist interconnects these two performances: the second one transforms the first one’s fictitious community into a real and valid collective group.



Figure 20: Ogunji, Wura-Natasha. *If I loved you*. 2017. Performance. Ifa Gallery Berlin.  
<<http://untietotie.org/en/documentation/artist-talk-wura-natasha-ogunji/>>.

*If I loved you* (fig. 20) presents a variety of people who take different coloured threads and wrap them around their faces, as they chant and repeat the following speech: “If I loved you, it was because of your beauty. Now that you are no longer beautiful. I do not love you” (Sigmund 1). Their shared actions initiate their community formation based on the threads and their group monologue. Ogunji sets up their formation at the center of the gallery space, which allows the viewers to see each and every participant, as well as the entire party. Her play with proximity influences the performance’s viewership.

She uses close and far distance to express access metaphorically to individual and collective narratives. Each participant asserts her/his own speaking voice within a shared story about love and loss. S/he holds different associations and experiences in which s/he is unable to vocalise fully or deviate from her/his collective role. Ogunji explains further this underlying tension:

I am thinking about how people who are different from us access certain spaces and histories. [...] How can we be supportive without being involved? How do we make space in our societies and nations without having someone become like us? (Ogunji cited in Sigmund 1).

Her comment contemplates what represents an empathetic connection between various individuals. In particular, she points out that the issue exists as a diasporic dilemma of integration versus assertion of the self within a community. Her work looks at the outsider's acceptance of the community rather than the community's acceptance of the outsider<sup>50</sup>, as she inverts the us-versus-them relationship with her emphasis on "we", "our", and "us" as opposed to a "them" and "their". As a result, she redefines the native informant's role between the colonised and the coloniser groups. The informant rejects their cultural reporter role and embraces their outsider status within the community. Furthermore, they may facilitate an empathetic interaction between the colonised and coloniser that allows each party to be "supportive without being involved" (Sigmund 1). They acknowledge one another's narrative presence for a self-narrated story. Her performance highlights each individual's contribution towards an overall thematic narrative.

I argue that *If I loved you* embodies a multifaceted story about love and loss. Although the participants recite the same speech, the various coloured threads represent their individual narrative voices within the collective story. Each person wraps the thread differently around her/his face, in which the different styles uniquely distinguish her/his narrative strand from the others, while being able to empathetically connect with a community. The sewing material reconciles the participant's self-identification and her/his collective role during the performance.

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<sup>50</sup> Outsider's acceptance of the community suggests that the individual does not give up her differences instead, she attempts to assess the community's worth before she joins them.



Figure 21: Ogunji, Wura-Natasha. *A place you can never go*. 2017. Performance. Ifa Gallery Berlin. <<http://untietotie.org/en/documentation/artist-talk-wura-natasha-ogunji/>>.

*A place you can never go* (fig.21) is a post-performance, which refers to a work that reflects or pays tribute to a previous work *If I loved you*. It utilises imagination to access the different traces that allude to the love-loss communal gathering. The title evokes metaphorically an inaccessible place. Ogunji installs a thread curtain from the ceiling that demarcates the original performance space from the rest of the gallery space. She leaves two traces for the viewer to discover and explore. The first trace is leftover thread bits lying on the floor behind the veil, and the second trace is the installation itself since it indicates a past activity. Both traces coerce an intrigued response in the viewer towards the restricted space, as she begins to ask questions about what happened, what she missed, what the performance was about, and how she might access what has already occurred. Consequently, the onlooker relies on her imagination to bridge the spatio-temporal gap between the second piece and the first performance event.

Ogunji's second piece is an interactive installation that encourages the viewer to investigate the two different spaces, as she moves in and out of the two demarcated sections, either through or around the thread curtain. The viewer attempts to uncover past events from

the evidence left behind, yet her physical presence indicates that she arrives too late. As a result, she must imagine and replicate her own version of the love-loss event. The artist mentions that the onlooker's outsider status underlines her desire to access and connect with the first performance's community (cited in Sigmund 1). Despite the viewer's attempt to comprehend a sense of belonging, the two traces ironically remind her that her experience is an after-effect of another experience.

I observe that the post-piece provides paradoxical access to the outside participant since she is unable to access the first performance's event yet, she can walk physically within that performed space. Ogunji explores access and restriction in a contradictory temporal-spatial context. According to *Contemporaryand* art writer, Theresa Sigmund, the spatial meanings are ascribed to the two different spaces, where one is accessible and public whereas the second is restricted, sacred and private (para. 6). *If I loved you* turned a gallery section into an exclusive space that hosted an event that not everyone was able to witness and experience. The temporal aspect underpins the spatial connotation behind the demarcated space. However, Sigmund omits the thread structure's potential to disrupt the two distinctions. The viewer's presence revives an imagined version of the event that occurs in present time.

Ogunji's thread curtain acts as a time-lapse that overlaps with what has happened and with what can happen again. The realm of possible connections activates once the viewer enters through the curtain, which represents the threshold between her own sense of reality and an imagined space. The viewer begins to search for a link between herself and the love-loss community. During this process, she replaces her outsider status for a self-proclaimed community member. She earns her new title because of her efforts to imagine the past fragments left behind from *If I loved you*.

The act of speaking establishes the person's connection to herself, as well as to a community. A narrative agency undermines two qualities attached to the native informant role: firstly, it re-ascribes an identity to the informant and secondly, prioritises the speaking position rather than accurate narrative content. I observe that the novel and the two art performances evaluate the speaking position to be a form of self-identification. *On Black Sisters' Street* promulgates the idea that the four protagonists bond over a recognition of one another, instead of their diasporic narratives' content. This reasserts their humanity and living presence in Antwerp. Similarly, the two art performances explore storytelling as the basis that governs connections between people. Ogunji looks at repeated actions of chanting and imagination, as methods that access and explore the ties between individual identities and collective belonging.

The two art forms demonstrate that narratives allow the understanding of other people's realities and their possible interconnections with one another.

The art performances and novel redefine the native informant and the community outside a shared cultural context or background. Mangena proposes that collective groups should go beyond a national or ethnic affiliation (100). Goredema shares a similar concern during her discussion in the potential of feminism becoming an exclusionary club, when African female experiences are linked to particular forms of affiliation to the continent (35). Consequently, diasporic women are marginalised from any collective belonging in their current places of residence because of the multiple geographic attachments to the African continent associated with their pasts. In response to this issue, Ogunji and Unigwe use individual narratives to intersect and acknowledge others as thinking and feeling beings despite any differences in positions.

A strong characteristic that allows the combination of distinction and integration is their use of multiple identifications. In *A place you can never go*, the viewer imagines her part in *If I loved you* collective group. Although her status remains illegitimate, as she does not receive affirmation and acceptance in reality, her willingness shows the person's ability to think beyond her socio-cultural context for the sake of understanding. Similarly, the novel demonstrates the fact that the characters' different experiences strengthens their bonds rather than alienating them from one another. In following Chapter Three's thinking on multiple identifications to create new experiential knowing, Ogunji and Unigwe also suggest that different modes of being can be accessed through understanding them within their own context.

My chapter proposes that experiential knowing involves imagining unlikely interconnections between the individual and the collective, based on empathetic understanding rather than an accurate insight into another's experience. The act of storytelling evaluates the 'native informant's' relationship with their own story and its link to their community. In other words, the social exchange between two groups presents the opportunity to find other forms of identification through storytelling that affirm and validate their interaction. Each social relationship is unique and, therefore, it cannot be pigeonholed within specific frameworks such as gender, ethnicity and nationality.

## Conclusion

The art performances and novel show the diasporic individual, who occupies the native informant role, in relation to a self-identification with her body and her narrative voice. I argue that the two art forms interrogate colonial discourse that affixes the exotic cultural label onto the female black body and silences her speaking presence. Ogunji and Unigwe interlace multiple voices that undermine a coherent cultural narrative, linking the 'native informant' to their community. They explore the contradictions, the possibilities and inconsistencies within the various stories. Consequently, self-identification resists the coloniser in knowing and not knowing the 'native informant'.

Ogunji presents the performance *The Kissing Mask* to appropriate the diasporic position and condition that constructs the 'native informant' role. She transforms herself into an African spirit being, which then challenges the black body's colonial representation. Her elevated social status comes with the social power to change the coloniser-colonised interaction from one of control and oppression to a respectful spiritual exchange. In addition, she draws attention to the fact that the mask has no relationship with her particular diasporic background. As a result of this missing context, viewers must interpret her work based on her performed presence rather than the notion of an African origin. The artist reverses and alters her informant interaction with Westerners. So, instead of providing cultural information about the mask, they seek out the performer for guidance and blessings.

In comparison to the above piece, the novel takes up a more subtle resistance against the exoticisation of the black female body. The four protagonists find themselves in a difficult position, as they rely on their physical features and sexual appeal for income but do not see themselves as victims of their social circumstances. Unigwe shows Ama and Efe performing a strategic exoticism, whereby they appropriate this form of stereotyping for their own socio-economic gain and power. Their complicit agency ironically reverses the 'native informant'. This is so because the 'native informant' is oriented towards the coloniser and their wish to know the other. But here, the two women use the knowledge for their own goals. Contrary to focusing on a single individual, as shown in the performance piece, the narrator in the novel shows that the four women form their own community based on different rather than a shared diasporic condition. Their various diasporic narratives prevent any conclusive definition of them as a collective group defined by similar characteristics.

The chapter proposes that the performances and the novel provide two self-identification strategies that contest the colonial subjection of the informant's body and

narratives about it. The first one offers alternative representations that challenge the sexualised depiction of the marginalised woman. In contrast, the second one explores storytelling to access the individual's relationship with collectives through integrating and connecting single narratives. Both strategies overturn the person's suppressed narrative presence, attached to the 'native informant' role. This reversal affirms the individual's own sense of reality.

I interpret that the novel and performances as preventing a simple assimilation that potentially homogenises various experiences, which typically occurs with the 'native informant' and their community. Their distinct voices provide contradictory perspectives and challenge their conformity to the 'native informant's' coherent and encompassing narrative. *A place you can never go* creates a platform where the viewer creates their own version of *If I loved you* and its communal event. Despite the fact that the onlooker was never part of the original performance, her (in)correct imagined scene adds another layer to an encounter within a different and unfamiliar context. Similarly, *On Black Sisters' Street* emphasises the importance of imagined links, whether they are validated or not, through the four women's views, interpretations and their understanding of one another. They narrate and share intimate moments of their life stories and experiences. Both creative forms introduce imagined links amongst people as a defence against any subscription or limitation imposed onto their relations.

Chapter Five introduces the concept of self-identification as a form of resistance against the coloniser deducing cultural information from a person's diasporic experience. Such a deduction only scratches at the surface of her identity, existence, circumstances and background. Ogunji and Unigwe suggest that distinct voices exist within collectives. A person creates new imaginary social positions, governed by possible and impossible connections with others, which emerge from a transformative-destructive process. Specifically, the African descendant woman engages in ambivalent self-representation that shifts power relationships, as she reclaims parts of herself, either through her body or her narrative presence. She works towards an empathetic connection, whereby she finds herself as well as others.

## Conclusion

### **Reconceiving the African diasporic individual**

This thesis has highlighted the ‘native informant’ trope as a concern in the studying, analysing and interpreting of African diasporic people and their experiences. African Diaspora struggles to relinquish itself or address the colonial discourse that has defined the continent as a geographic entity with one culture and ethnic group. An African origin becomes an over-determining factor that contextualises the descendant as a cultural representative. Subsequently, her narrative converts into an informant document which perpetuates the cultural other within their environment.

I have argued for a nuanced reading on the diasporic person’s interaction with her affiliation to an African country based on a spiritual, psychological and social evaluation on the environment, the self and the community. The “African” aspect in diasporic identity does not guarantee that the individual retains a connection to her place of origin rather, it embodies a unique connotation specific to her. This thesis sets out to introduce new understanding on the diasporic condition and position. Individual members in a diasporic collective is distinguished from each other rather than grouped under a common geographic background. A lack of homogenisation debunks the diasporic individual’s connection to a singular group and space.

My chapters extract and interrogate four components that construct the ‘native informant’ role. The first component is the informant’s ability to relay cultural information to the coloniser. For this to succeed, it requires the second component – the historical or ancestral lineage linked to an African origin. The third component is the informant’s immediate affiliation to their ‘native’ place. Upon critical examination, the previous aspects further involve an analysis on the fourth component – the informant and their community. In addition to outlining the four aspects to the ‘native informant’, the last three chapters provide alternative discourses of language, spatial interaction and self-identification to articulate the diasporic person’s resistance against the colonial role. My three themes identify, contextualise and humanise the subject behind the ‘native informant’.

I began by arguing that the three art exhibitions, *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, *Africa Remix* and *Flow* pigeonholed the showcased artists and their art-making according to their African origin. The curators and writers apply the first component in their interpretations, as they expect the artists to illustrate their African heritage in their subject matter, materials and art techniques. Their visual discourses utilised the diasporic models to structure their exhibition themes. *Flow* used the *diaspora apart model* to

suggest artists are devoid of any geographic attachments, yet their particular selection for African-American experiences contradicted their non-emphasis on places. In comparison, *Looking Both Ways* adopted the traditional *homeland-hostland model* in their depiction of artists who cross-compared their multiple places of affiliation. *Africa Remix* used the *homeland plus diaspora model* to build their African aesthetic canon that included both African and diasporic artists. Consequently, the three diasporic models set a predefined geographic context that positioned the diasporic artist as a cultural interpreter.

The second chapter drew attention to the problematic link between a geographic affiliation and a cultural insight, which I further examine as part of the second component being the ancestral or historical lineage. The third chapter focused on Isidore Okpewho's *Call Me By My Rightful Name* and Victor Ekpuk's drawings as case studies that examined the diasporic individual's relationship with an African cultural group. They define cultural interaction as a spiritual and personal journey rather than the physical and communal engagement, which then re-contextualises the 'native informant's' source of information. Furthermore, the novel and the drawings encode the communication between the supernatural world and the individual. As a result, the informant document is redundant because the coloniser cannot gain from or understand its content.

I introduced language as an alternative discourse to interpret the diasporic experience outside a colonial framework. Okpewho and Ekpuk use language to access a spiritual and cultural encounter. Ekpuk creates large-scale drawings that reference the *nsibidi* symbols, in which he unlocks their spiritual connotations to initiate contact with a higher realm. He focuses on their symbolic appeal rather than their place of origin. His cultural reference provides a basis to produce his own semiotic universe. In comparison to the artist, Okpewho illustrates that the protagonist learns a pre-existing language rather than re-create his own language system. His learning Yoruba introduces him to a new perspective as well as a channel to facilitate his communication with the spirits as well as develop his sense of self. Both cases depict a diasporic experience that does not rely on a geographic connection instead, it reflects a language link to an African heritage.

Cultural engagement separated from a physical location suggests a socio-mental barrier between the self and the environment. The fourth chapter argued that this disjuncture complicates the third component of the 'native informant' construction: their connection to their place of origin. Emeka Ogbah's soundscapes and Teju Cole's *Open City* look at the person's actions rather than the location, which undermines the colonial discourse's representation of the informant as a geographic symbol. They present the 'native' as an agent

who questions and interrogates the interrelations between multiple spaces through a process of internalisation and projection. Consequently, social and psychological tensions generate distinct diasporic conditions that cannot be homogenised.

Ogboh and Cole's works establish the foundation to an alternative discourse that prioritises the diasporic person's spatial interaction over the space itself. It looks at the conflicted engagement that surfaces and suppresses memories, connotations and emotions attached to a particular place, which explains the diasporic feelings of alienation, isolation and estrangement. Spatial interaction evaluates more of a personal emotional encounter than a generic response to a diasporic state. Ogboh records, transports and then exhibits the Lagos sounds in either a gallery or public space. His soundscapes reflect his associations with Nigeria, but his recalling of the place disturbs the host spaces and its local inhabitants' sense of place. Cole similarly uses sensory triggers in his novel, as the protagonist mentally projects and rejects his social attachments to New York, Brussels and Nigeria. The novel and the soundscapes redefine the diasporic experience as an internal rather than an external activity.

Each person negotiates her diasporic relationship differently, which then debunks a shared heritage as the criteria to forming a belonging. The fifth chapter proposed that people living abroad forge unlikely social bonds based on empathetic storytelling rather than a common migrant condition. Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Wura-Natasha Ogunji's performances re-evaluate the fourth component, the native informant-community relationship, through their focus on a contribution to the collective narrative. Typically, colonial discourse defines the 'native informant' as a non-entity that serves as an insider link to the colonised group. In contrast to this, the novel and the performance ascribe an identity to the informant and present them as an active speaking voice who also empowers the community members. They articulate and represent an inter-web of persons within the collective identity.

I proposed self-identification as an alternative discourse that acknowledges individuality within diasporic collective narratives. Unigwe and Ogunji adopt two strategies that resist the 'native informant' interpretation on African descendant women. The first strategy looks at the reclaiming of the body from the colonial exotic representation on the black female; the second strategy uses storytelling to recover the various suppressed voices and interweave them together. Consequently, their narrative tells about the interconnections amongst one another opposed to a depiction of their cultural lifestyle. Each community member asserts her speaking voice and imagines various social positions, in relation to one another, which are real or fictitious connections that reflect a complex and intricate social system. Their diverse network re-interprets diasporic relations on non-geographic relations.

The African diasporic experience should be more about the individual than the knowing of a space. Contrary to the colonial discourse that labels the cultural other as a signifier of their physical location, I introduced visual and literary works that examine the person behind the native informant role and her linguistic, psychological and social understanding of living abroad. In other words, the chapters look at the diasporic response to a social position and social condition. My interdisciplinary analysis emphasises that experiences manifest as narratives that are unique and specific to each person's own identifiable context.

I claim that the selected visual and literary representations incorporate a mysterious aspect in the story about African descendants. In contrast to an 'objective' cultural reporting associated with the informant duty, the various chapters highlight novels and artworks as literary-visual narratives that allow for incoherence and lack of resolution in their subject matter. They present diasporic experiences as self-reflections based on multi-faceted engagements with similar yet different circumstances. Ekpuk and Okpewho demonstrate that language initiates an exclusive spiritual experience. The diasporic person undergoes a semantic experience, which she enters a transcendental state and feels connected to a higher-order that cannot be accessed from an outsider perspective. Similarly, Ogbob and Cole demonstrate a disruptive form of nostalgia that unsettles the self from their immediate environment. Their works allude to suppressed subliminal connotations, memories and socio-historical contexts. In comparison to an introspection on the various discourses associated with a specific space, Ogunji and Unigwe expose the effect of internalising the colonial discourse that subjects the diasporic woman's identity and body to the exotic other. They show that self-identification offers a contrasting context that allows marginalised people to re-imagine themselves as narrative agents. My three literary-visual representations provide new meanings to studying those living in the diaspora.

This thesis has introduced a paradigm shift away from the colonial conception of Africa as geographic entity to a socio-cultural hub. I have presented three alternative discourses that challenge the typical diasporic discourse, which studies experience as a commentary on the moving between places, whereas I interpret it as a symptom of various coping mechanisms that position the subject within a tailored framework. People (re)define their relationship to an African country based on their own context opposed to simply possessing a genealogical tie. As a result, they overlay numerous realities onto the homeland space and (re)mark new social imaginary connections that reconceive the continent as a multi-faceted vessel.

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