

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: TRANSATLANTIC DISBELONGINGS:
LOCATING LIBERATORY
WORLDMAKING PRACTICES IN
NIGERIAN DIASPORIC WOMEN’S ART

Patricia Abimbola Akinbola,
Doctor of Philosophy, 2018

Dissertation directed by: Dr. Mary Corbin Sies, American Studies
Dr. Renée Ater, Art History

“Transatlantic Disbelongings: Locating Liberatory Worldmaking Practices in Nigerian Diasporic Women’s Art” examines how women artists of the Nigerian diaspora use contemporary visual art, performance, film, and literature to contest and redefine their familial, cultural, and national belonging in Nigeria and its diasporas. Foregrounding the work of five women artists: Wura-Natasha Ogunji, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Zina Saro-Wiwa, ruby onyinyechi amanze, and Nnedi Okorafor, who straddle multiple geographies, identities, and allegiances, this project analyzes how they resist popular understandings of what has been deemed proper conduct for women in Nigeria and its diaspora—a process I call “disbelonging.” My use of disbelonging refers to the process by which female diasporic artists embrace and employ anti-respectability and queerness to recode, remix, and resist oppressive

colonial legacies surrounding gender, sexuality, and national belonging in a Nigerian context. Their works depict visual and literary landscapes where women move freely through time and space, engage playfully with one another, prioritize their own desires, and unapologetically embody contradiction and taboo. This dissertation argues that their artmaking is worldmaking, which creates opportunities to reconfigure understandings of transnational flows and unsettles oppressive conceptualizations of community and family to embrace a range of affiliational tensions.

TRANSATLANTIC DISBELONGINGS: LOCATING LIBERATORY
WORLDMAKING PRACTICES IN NIGERIAN DIASPORIC WOMEN'S ART

by

Patricia Abimbola Akinbola

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2018

Advisory Committee:

Associate Professor Mary Corbin Sies, Co-Chair
Associate Professor Emerita Renée Ater, Co-Chair
Associate Professor Psyche Williams-Forsen
Associate Professor Michelle Rowley
Associate Professor Faedra Carpenter

© Copyright by
Patricia Abimbola Akinbola
2018

Dedication

For Kaleena

Acknowledgements

I could not have written this dissertation without the overflowing insight, love, and support I received from my expansive community.

I am first and foremost grateful to Wura-Natasha Ogunji, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, and ruby onyinyechi amanze. Thank you for being so generous with your time and agreeing to be a part of this project. I have learned so much from your fearless and unapologetic artmaking.

To my committee: Thank you for the rich conversations, the hard questions, and your continued support as this project has developed.

Dr. Sies, your close eye and thorough feedback have been invaluable. Thank you for continuously asking me to articulate why this project matters. I am inspired by your dedication to your students and your rigorous advising. My work is absolutely stronger as a result of your mentorship.

Dr. Ater, I am so grateful for all you have taught me about the importance of slow, deep looking. Thank you for the time you spent closely reading each early draft, and for your encouragement and support over the past 6 years.

Dr. Williams-Forson, Thank you for your comments on the earliest formulations of this project in your material culture class. I am so grateful that you pushed me to write about Nigerian women when I was worried it would seem too personal.

Dr. Rowley, Thank you for asking the hard questions that radically changed my approach and rejuvenated my scholarly spirit. You remind me not to pull away from messy complexity.

Dr. Carpenter, your joy, enthusiasm, and frankness has been a gift. Thank you for always believing in this project. Each of our conversations excited me and encouraged me to keep going.

I am also deeply beholden to my cohort and my colleagues and collaborators at the University of Maryland. It has been a joy to be a part of such a dynamic and brilliant academic community. I am particularly indebted to Izetta Autumn Mobley, Tony Perry, Cristina Jo Perez, and Jessica Kenyatta Walker. Thank you for sharing your genius, for your encouragement, and most importantly, for your friendship.

To the Mellon Mays Initiative Program and my Mellon family: I am grateful for each and every one of you, and for the mentorship, rich conversation, and intellectual nourishment being a part of this program has provided. To my wonderful mentor Dr. Nikki Green, thank you so much for your care and relentless support throughout this process.

To my family at Dance Exchange: Thank you for being my intellectual and creative home for the past 6 years, for allowing me to experience the life changing and worldmaking impact of art, and for pushing me to grow as an artist and an educator in ways I never could have imagined.

To all of my kin, blood and chosen: I love you and appreciate you. Thank for you for loving, supporting, and celebrating me.

Mom and dad, you have never doubted my ability to complete this journey. Thank you for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself.

Bunmi, thank you for being my one and only partner in diaspora, and for understanding the struggle and illuminating its beauty with your laughter. You inspire me.

Melissa, I am grateful for your unconditional love and support (and for all of the times you copyedited my papers and gave me pep talks). I couldn't have done this without you. Thank you for the last 13 years of sisterhood and friendship.

Kyera, when we became friends on Facebook the summer before our freshman year at Macalester, I did not know you would stay by my side. I am so grateful to have you as a friend and colleague. Thank you for bringing me along for all of the joys and pleasures this journey has offered.

Anders, I could not have made it through my first three years of graduate school without the laughter, adventures, and boundless creativity you brought into my life. Thank you for your friendship.

Elise, your support through this final stretch has kept be grounded, soft, and smiling. Thank you for seeing me and believing in me. I am grateful for your timely arrival in my life and for your love.

Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Go Fetch It!: Dreaming Unruly Narratives of Return in the Art and Performance of Wura-Natasha Ogunji	25
Chapter 3: Erotic Agency and African Diasporic Intimacy in the Work of Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Zina Saro-Wiwa	79
Chapter 4: Play, Leisure and Kinship as Queer Worldmaking Practice in <i>The Adventures of Ada the Alien</i> and <i>Akata Witch</i>	122
Chapter 5: Conclusion	163
Bibliography	175

List of Figures

- 1.1.....Ogunji, *Dancer (Three birds)*, 2007
- 1.2.....Ogunji, Still from *The return*, 2007
- 1.3..... Ogunji, Still from *Ife head walks on water*, 2009
- 1.4.....Ogunji, *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?*, 2013
- 1.5.....Ogunji, Still from *belongings*, 2007
- 1.6.....Ogunji, *beauty*, 2013
- 1.7.....Ogunji, *Queens*, 2013
- 1.8.....Ogunji, *Oyibo vs herself (That's not the Atlantic. There's a disco ball between us.)*, 2013
- 2.1..... Akunyili Crosby, *I Always Face You, Even When It Seems Otherwise*, 2012
- 2.2.....Akunyili Crosby, *Thread*, 2012
- 2.3.....Akunyili Crosby, *The Bridge*, 2010
- 2.4.....Akunyili Crosby, *Re-branding My Love*, 2011
- 2.5.....Akunyili Crosby, *Nwantinti*, 2012
- 3.1..... amanze, *Ogbonno Soup is Sweeter Since We Met*, 2014
- 3.2.....amanze, *Kinfolk [Diptych]*, 2015
- 3.3..... amanze, *The Divers*, 2016
- 3.4..... amanze, *10 Litres of Air [The Divers II]*, 2016

Chapter 1: Introduction

Why am I compelled to write?... Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and anger... To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit.¹

-Gloria E. Anzaldúa

I've been thinking about this question for a few weeks now: Do we shape the world? And in the context of drawing, I wonder if the mark on the page has reverberations in the world? The question is significant for me in this moment, because for a long time I've held the belief that artists have a responsibility to do more than just reflect something about the world, that there should be a kind of shaping or making, an expansion, a making of theory.²

-Wura-Natasha Ogunji

“Transatlantic Disbelongings: Locating Liberatory Worldmaking Practices in Nigerian Diasporic Women’s Art” examines how women artists of the Nigerian diaspora use contemporary visual art, performance, film, and literature to contest, redefine, and reimagine their familial, cultural, and national belonging in Nigeria and its diaspora. Historically, scholars of diaspora have overemphasized the importance of national and cultural belonging for diasporic subjects, and in doing so have overlooked how women in diaspora complicate and expand the very meaning of this concept. Echoing Anzaldúa and Ogunji’s sentiments about the ways women render themselves legible and shape their worlds through their art and writing, I

¹ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, “*Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers*,” May 20, 1980.

² Wura-Natasha Ogunji and ruby onyinyechi amanze, “Paper as Body: A Conversation,” *The Offing*, January 19, 2016, <https://theoffingmag.com/enumerate/paper-as-body/>.

argue that for these women artists, their artmaking is worldmaking, which creates opportunities to reconfigure our understandings of transnational flows as it unsettles oppressive conceptualizations of community and family to embrace a range of affective tensions. My project foregrounds the work of five women: Wura-Natasha Ogunji, Zina Saro-Wiwa, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, ruby onyinyechi amanze, and Nnedi Okorafor, who straddle multiple geographies, identities, and allegiances, and analyzes how they resist popular understandings of what has been deemed proper conduct for women in Nigeria and its diaspora—a process I call “disbelonging.” My use of disbelonging is inspired by Jose Muñoz’s theory of “disidentification,” which refers to the ways in which marginalized queer people resist “the politics of impossibility” generated by dominant culture by appropriating and recycling cultural components for their own use. Muñoz writes, “Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of those who do not conform to normative citizenship.”³ In my project, disbelonging refers to the process by which these artists use their art to remix, recode, and queer hegemonic conceptualizations of cultural and national belonging in order to embrace the liberatory potential of their liminal positionalities. Their works depict visual and literary landscapes where women move freely through time and space, engage playfully with one another, prioritize their own desires, and unapologetically embody contradiction.

Miranda Joseph and Zygmunt Bauman’s critiques of community, as well as

³ Jose Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

Carol B. Stack and Michelle V. Rowley's meditations on home have helped guide my thinking about the complications and limitations of these concepts. Joseph writes, "Community is almost always invoked as an unequivocal good, and indicator of high quality of life, a life of human understanding, caring, selflessness, belonging"⁴ and yet this is often not the full story, as communities also require members to make sacrifices in order to make their belonging legible. To this point Bauman writes:

There is a price to be paid for the privilege of "being in a community"—and it is inoffensive or even invisible only as long as the community stays in the dream. The price is paid in the currency of freedom, variously called "autonomy," "right to self assertion," "right to be yourself." Whatever you choose, you gain some, you lose some. Missing community means missing security; gaining community if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom."⁵

The idea of home is equally implicated in these logics, as Stack writes, "Home is a hard fact, not just a souvenir of restless memory, and for the people I know who made the journey away and back, home is in a hard land—hard to explain, hard to make a living in, hard to swallow."⁶ In a similar vein, Rowley asserts that, "the idea of 'home' becomes (remains) a place where we have no guarantee of safety, a place where we may at times have to make peace with a sense of feeling unsafe."⁷ It is

⁴ Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), vii.

⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 4.

⁶ Carol B. Stack, *Call To Home: African-Americans Reclaim The Rural South* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 18.

⁷ Michelle V. Rowley, "'It Could Have Been Me' Really? Early Morning Meditations on Trayvon Martin's Death," *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 519-529.

this anticipated loss of freedom, understanding, and safety that the artists I write about attempt to resist and creatively circumvent.

There are numerous stories chronicling the pervasive disappointment felt when descendants of the slave trade return to the continent only to find the same complicated feelings of non-belonging they hoped to leave behind in the United States.⁸ While the contentiousness of community has been taken up by a number of scholars in Black Studies, there is a tension between this knowledge and the romanticization of the type of belonging that *may* have been experienced on the African continent prior to colonization and even still today. In this dissertation I ask how these theories are complicated by the work of Nigerian artists who take up questions of community, family, and kin for those who were born and raised on the African continent.

This dissertation asks: How does the creative work of Nigerian diasporic cultural producers elucidate the ways in which black diasporic women theorize their own diasporic subjectivity through the lens of disbelonging? Specifically, how do these women embrace and employ anti-respectability and queerness in order to re-imagine and resist oppressive colonial legacies surrounding gender, sexuality, and national belonging in a Nigerian context? Which visual and literary approaches do these women take in order to express their own black female agency?

Methods

This dissertation takes an interdisciplinary approach to questions of national belonging, diasporic desire, and creative worldmaking as an act of resistance and

⁸ Examples of these narratives include *Lose Your Mother* by Saidiya Hartman, and *A Map to the Door of No Return* by Dionne Brand.

historical reinterpretation. Pulling from postcolonial theory and black feminist thought, I deploy the methods of visual analysis, interviews, archival research, and literary analysis to consider the works of art from numerous vantage points, particularly as they relate to the creators and their social contexts.

My methods of visual analysis are similarly hybrid in nature, combining formal analysis, socio-historical and cultural contextual analysis, and the words of the artists themselves. My decision to center the intentions of the artists alongside my own experience of their works is inspired by the work of art historians Cherise Smith, Renee Ater, and Margo Machida.⁹ Citing the work of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Smith identifies the autobiography as a site of female agency writing:

Autobiography is a significant site where women assert and give form to their subjectivities, revise concepts of women's life issues, and make visible formerly invisible topics[...]. Following Smith's and Watson's lead, I consider [Adrian] Piper's, [Eleanor] Antin's, and [Anna Deavere] Smith's written texts as well as Nikki S. Lee's spoken texts to be performative so as to analyze how the artists assumed the agency to present themselves, their art, and life actions as they chose.¹⁰

Moreover, Ater contends that "[o]ne deeply troubling aspect of critical theory's insistence on an unknowable subject is that too often it renders men and women of

⁹ Similarly, in *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance*, Faedra Carpenter calls for a shift towards considering artists' intention writing, "The inclusion of artists' voices is a valuable element in this study and, moreover, their perspectives help keep us mindful of the importance in acknowledging artistic intention when analyzing audience reception or formulating scholarly opinions. Well known is the fact that creators cannot ensure how audience members will receive any, single message. This, is in part the wonder and frustration of art; the impact and meaning of its reception is shaped by its audience as well as its devisers. Quite often, however, our focus is placed on a spectator's judgment with relatively little attention paid to the art maker's vision" (14).

¹⁰ Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham: Duke Press, 2011), 23.

color invisible in art historical texts and excludes them from the construction of art history.”¹¹ In a project specifically concerned with the ways in which women speak their truth and represent their stories, I argue that it is methodologically critical to consider the multiple sites where these artists produce meaning about their artmaking practice including internet articles and interviews, personal blog posts, and my personal correspondence with them.¹² Moreover, arguing that a work of art is, “an intentional manifestation of mind,” and that the meanings embedded in cross-ethnic and intercultural work are rarely transparent, Machida advocates for scholars of art to practice interpretation as a collaborative act with the artist when possible. She writes:

As an artist and an arts activist, I have come to view interpretation as a collaborative act in which access to living artists offers unique opportunities for direct inquiry about the ideas and circumstances that drive their visualizing practices, bodies of iconography, symbolic systems, and uses of media.¹³

Machida’s assertion resists notions that “the human subject is unknowable, decentered, and dispersed” and a successful work of art should be able to be fully interpreted by anyone with no input from the artist.¹⁴ Furthermore she contends that for racialized subjects doing cross ethnic and intercultural work, the meanings behind their work are not intended to be deciphered easily, and a full and nuanced understanding comes vis-à-vis collaboration with the artists. The meanings I draw and extrapolate upon come from a combination of my own formal analysis and

¹¹ Renée Ater, *Remaking Race and History: The Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 7.

¹² Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 9.

¹³ Ibid, 8

¹⁴ Ater, *Remaking Race and History*, 6.

observations, and the knowledge gathered from the artists themselves, which together offer a multifaceted perspective of the myriad ways their art speaks to the themes of gendered diasporic experience and belonging.

To analyze the performance pieces in my dissertation, particularly the works of Ogunji in my second chapter, I also look to Diana Taylor's, *The Archive and the Repertoire* in order to understand Ogunji's body as an archive of diasporic experience and her works as site of diasporic community. I specifically analyze Ogunji's performance art as radical street performance defined by Jan Cohen-Cruz as "acts that question or re-envision ingrained social arrangements of power."¹⁵ Following Cohen-Cruz's definition of radical street performance and Taylor's analysis of Abuelas and Madres de Plaza de Mayo and their performance protest, my analysis considers what is being protested, the greater significance of the tactics and props used by the performers, how and why the protesters disrupt particular spaces with their performance, and the cultural significance of those places. My analysis also extends to the video recordings of the performances, which I analyze as an extension of the original work.¹⁶

I also bring to this project my own lived experience and investments as a first generation Nigerian American woman, artist, and scholar who has found alternative sites of belonging and wholeness in not only my own artmaking, but in experiencing the works of art produced by other diasporic artists. Furthermore, my

¹⁵ Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1998),1.

¹⁶ I do this because in many cases this was primarily how the performances were received and viewed by individuals.

interest in using art stems from my own personal investments in centering the visual as a legitimate lens through which to study and theorize the slippery affective and everyday experience of diaspora.

This project has also grown from a genuine investment in understanding the creative choice making and methods used by these artists to help them navigate their complex identities as artists and as black diasporic women. In a Facebook post from February 11th, Ogunji professes:

...to be an artist in this world is a decision that requires great integrity and personal strength as it is something that rarely happens with much, if any, support from friends, family or institutions. To be an artist means to jump into a beautiful abyss, to trust what you know deeply in your heart + soul before it is manifest, to see oneself completely, to know the power of the impossible. To be an artist is to think differently, to act and move in constant contradiction to so-called realities, to history, to what other people tell you is correct or right or necessary. The decision to become an artist is a brave and important and necessary act. Few in history have the courage and conviction to make that choice. We are, of course, imperfect and human. Not everything we make is complete or resolved or even good. In fact, it may take a lifetime to make that one perfect piece, to resolve all the parts and language of our existence... To those of you who are not us, to those of you who do not make art: What can you do to support and engage with and participate in all the beauty and messiness of our creations? Let your questions and curiosities emerge from a desire to genuinely understand (rather than critique with the aim of hearing your own speeches and put downs.)¹⁷

To her point, I want to make explicit that this dissertation is not concerned with evaluating or critiquing the success or failure of the artists and the work that I analyze. Instead I seek to identify the tools and tactics utilized by these artists for their own survival and elevate art as a theory-making practice. While examining the work of these artists may seem marginal in some ways, in the words of Gayatri Gopinath, “it is precisely at the margins[...]and in relation to sexuality and desire,

¹⁷ Wura-Natasha Ogunji’s Facebook page, accessed February 11, 2018.

that the most powerful and indispensable critiques of dominant formulations of diaspora are taking place.”¹⁸ My dissertation argues that methodologically foregrounding the cultural production of these artists provides us with a strong framework for mapping, visualizing, rethinking, and redefining diaspora as a subjectivity and series of processes. Moreover, while I occasionally discuss reception as it relates to the experience of the performers, I am primarily concerned with the significance of the works of art and performances for the makers.

My project makes four key interventions. First, I foreground the role of visual art, performance art, and film in producing some of the most acutely instructive theorizations of how black women experience and embody diaspora. This project also reinserts women into conversations about migration, expatriation, and return, acknowledging that we cannot talk about diaspora and belonging without considering gender and sexuality. I argue that national belonging for black diasporic women is always contested and is negotiated via interpersonal connections, which manifest in the cultural production of the artists I discuss. Furthermore, I use the concept of disbelonging to think through how diasporic women use outsidership as a position from which to aspire towards attaining freedom from cultural expectations, sexual regulation, and familial burdens. Lastly, this project unsettles homogenous characterizations of national diasporas by focusing on a single diaspora and highlighting the nuance and complexity of Nigerian identity, considering the ways that Nigerian diasporic identity becomes

¹⁸ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Diasporas: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke Press, 2005), 28.

fluid and porous as it crosses, intersects, and overlaps with other diasporas in Nigeria, Europe, and the United States.

Focusing on the Nigerian Diaspora

In his pivotal essay “The Uses of Diaspora,” Brent Hayes Edwards offers a rich history of how “diaspora” has been used in Black Cultural studies beginning with shifts towards internationalism and Pan-Africanism in the 1950s and 60s. Central in Edwards’ genealogy is the work of George Shepperson, credited as being one of the first scholars to consider the limitations of Pan-Africanism and introduce the concept of diaspora into the study of black culture and history. In “African Diaspora: Concept and Context,” Shepperson makes a clear distinction between “diaspora” as it has been used to refer to the forced dispersal of Jewish people, and “African diaspora,” where diaspora is actually used metaphorically. Shepperson argues that while in the Jewish tradition, *galut* implies a forced dispersal; diaspora, in fact, “has always included some form of voluntary exile.”¹⁹ Shepperson’s emphasis on the metaphorical nature of diaspora as it applies to individuals of African descent is key here as it pushes us away from static definitions, or a list of traits to apply to the African diaspora, and asks us to understand it as a malleable concept and framework, which serves different purposes at different times, even occasionally contradicting itself. According to Edwards, unlike Pan-Africanism, diaspora has the potential to account for the “unavoidable dynamics of difference.” Explaining how the meanings and uses of

¹⁹ George Shepperson, "The African Abroad or the African diaspora," in *Emerging Themes of African History* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Publishing House, 1968), 46.

diaspora for black scholars have changed between 1970 and 2000, Edwards writes:

Like Pan-Africanism [diaspora] is open to ideological appropriation in a wide variety of political projects, from anti-colonial activism to what has long been called ‘Black Zionism’—articulations of diaspora that collapse the term into versions of nationalism or racial essentialism. Unfortunately, some of the most celebrated work on diaspora in the past thirty years has served to undo this complex history of emergence.²⁰

With this quote Edwards addresses how the idea of diaspora has been used to unite black people across the globe with little consideration for the multitude of ways diaspora is experienced by black people in different parts of the world, particularly when considering the implications that diaspora might have on the African continent.

Given Nigeria’s heavy representation in the United States and Europe today, and the growing body of work on migration, diaspora, and the contributions of first and second generation immigrants, surprisingly little scholarship has been produced about subject formation within the Nigerian diaspora. A possible reason for this is proposed by Michelle Wright, who has critiqued the way that scholars like Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak have “recreated the wheel” by focusing exclusively on postcolonial subjects of South Asian descent and “bypassing those African diasporic works of theoretical significance in favor of dialoging with their colleagues in post structuralism.”²¹ Wright’s assertion stresses the point that work of the African diaspora has been devalued and

²⁰ Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Uses of Diaspora,” *Social Text* 66, vol. 19, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 54.

²¹ Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 26.

underutilized, even within postcolonial theory, which she argues should be especially concerned with the African condition. I build upon the work of Wright by considering how black theories of subjectivity “both differ and remain the same across the diaspora.”²² Wright calls for a more inclusive history of subject formation in the diaspora, writing, “Until all Black peoples in the diaspora, regardless of their marginalized status, can find representation within a theory of the subject, we cannot attach too much importance to Black subject formations that rely on and/or ignore the exclusions they perform.”²³ While I do refer to the “Nigerian Diaspora” in this dissertation, by focusing solely on this diaspora my goal is to consider how a “micro” study of the African diaspora brings to light the minute negotiations, cultural exchanges and border crossings that are often looked over when we conduct large scale surveys of African diasporic art in order to provide a fuller understanding of black subject formations that are not solely beholden to colonial understandings of place and space.

Nigeria is the most populous country on the African continent, consisting of 250 difference ethnic groups and languages, the three most popular being Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa-Fulani. With this in mind, it is important to remember that the land called “Nigeria” and the people called “Nigerians” did not exist until the twentieth century.²⁴ April A. Gordon writes:

²² Wright, *Becoming Black*, 7.

²³ Ibid, 231.

²⁴ The name Nigeria is said to have been suggested by Flora Shaw, the wife of British colonial ruler Lord Frederick Lugard. Nigeria officially came into existence in 1917 when the Northern and Southern protectorates were combined.

Nigeria is the result of British colonial conquest rather than an African creation that reflected the affiliations and sentiments of the people living there. Before becoming a British colony, Nigeria was a loose geographical area made up of many diverse groups with widely varying cultures and political systems. Their societies varied from highly independent, small villages to large, complex states. Boundaries shifted as a result of population movements and warfare. In many cases, peoples in Nigeria are related to groups in surrounding countries. This reflects the mixing and movement of people over the centuries and the arbitrariness and recency of today's nation-state boundaries.²⁵

This quote illuminates the ways in which a discussion of national diasporas that takes for granted the violently constructed nature of nation is inherently flawed and reductive, as it presumes homogeneity and sameness where there is great diversity.

Significant migration out of Nigeria began in 1960 when the country won its independence from England. Between 1950 and 1970 colonial ties drew Nigerian elites to England to further their education, but it was also common for those who had emigrated to return and assume jobs with the civil service or within the private sector of the booming oil economy. Starting in 1970 and continuing through the 1980s, growing political tensions increased the number of emigrants who also began flowing into the United States. Unlike the emigrants of the 1950s and 1960s, these Nigerians stayed abroad longer and some never returned. By 1978, an estimated 30,000 Nigerian graduates from higher institutions in the United Kingdom were living outside of the country and between 1974 and 1995 Nigerian migration grew from 670 to 6,818 in the United States—an increase of over 900

²⁵ April A. Gordon, "Ethnic Diversity in Nigeria," in *Nigeria's Diverse Peoples: A Reference Sourcebook* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), http://proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/abcnigeria/ethnic_diversity_in_nigeria/0?institutionId=1210

percent.²⁶ As of 2010 Nigerians were the African immigrant group with the largest presence in the United States with a population of 219,309, and Europe is also home to a significant Nigerian diaspora of approximately 200,000 legal residents with the largest number living in the United Kingdom, followed by Italy, Germany, and Spain.²⁷

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau proclaims, “What maps cut up, the story cuts across.”²⁸ By focusing on artists all uniquely situated within the “same diaspora,” this dissertation calls into question the construction of diasporas and how we understand them, and disrupts the ways diasporas have been homogenized, pointing to the deep complexity and range of experiences that exist within diasporas. Although the artists that I write about are technically situated within what we call the Nigerian diaspora, their experiences are incredibly varied. Moreover, each of these artists uses their art form to speak to a wider community of African diasporic women, considering the ways in which their blackness and gender identities shape, inform, and disrupt their lived realities in all of the places they attempt to call home. I ask: What are the *presumed* similarities between a “half Nigerian” girl raised by her white mother in the Midwest, a fair skinned Igbo girl who moved to England with her family at the age of 7, and a young woman from the Nigerian country side who moved to the United States, alone at the age of 16 to

²⁶ John Arthur, *Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States* (Praeger, 2000), vii.

²⁷ "Nigeria: Multiple Forms of Mobility in Africa's Demographic Giant," Migrationpolicy.org, accessed May 16, 2014.
<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/nigeria-multiple-forms-mobility-africas-demographic-giant>.

²⁸ Certeau, Michel de, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998).

study medicine? What about nation presumes a shared experience and why do we take this approach when talking about diaspora? What universal truths can be revealed when we allow the nuance of diaspora to unfold? In *Black Europe and the African Diaspora*, Alexander Weheliye writes:

Diaspora offers pathways that retrace layerings of difference in the aftermath of colonialism and slavery, as well as the effects of other forms of migration and displacement. Thus, diaspora enables the desedimentation of the nation from the 'interior' by taking into account the groups that fail to comply with the reigning definition of the people as a cohesive political subject due to sharing one culture, one race, one language, one religion, and so on, and from the 'exterior' by drawing attention to the movements that cannot be contained by the nation's administrative and ideological borders.²⁹

When we as scholars think that in order to say we are writing about diaspora, we must feature one individual from the African continent, one from South America, and another from the Caribbean, we flatten the important work that the word diaspora leads us towards. By focusing on Nigeria specifically, this project points out the myth of the Nigerian diaspora as a cohesive political or cultural subject, and redefines diaspora as built around a desire to orient oneself on one's own terms. In this dissertation I use diasporic not as a static signifier, but as a way to describe a particular orientation that looks towards the real and imagined homeland in order to decenter and destabilize the West as the primary locus from which to understand and position oneself. In addition, while this project does not attempt to conflate the experiences of the descendants of slaves and those displaced by colonization, I am interested in how the contentiousness

²⁹ Alexander Weheliye, "My Volk to Come: Peoplehood in Recent Diaspora Discourse and Afro-German Popular Music," in *Black Europe and The African Diaspora*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine and Trica Danielle Keaton (Urban and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 62.

of belonging is presumed to be only experienced by those who were forcefully removed from the continent, and less complicated for immigrants and their descendants due to their “blood ties” to one specific place. Gopinath points out that although slavery and postcolonial displacement are distinct from one another we must treat them as intimately connected, writing:

Clearly the traumas and space/time disjunctures precipitated by slavery are distinct from those of indenturship and postcolonial displacement; each of these historical phenomena engenders its own affective tides, traps, and possibilities. At the same time, situating these formations as utterly incommensurate rather than as co-constitutive ignores, in Lisa Lowe’s evocative phrase, “the intimacy of four continents.”³⁰

I seek to name and identify the ways that belonging is not so easily remedied by blood and the meaning we attribute to it, and the ways that colonization and global anti-blackness can create a sense of homelessness for black people.

Gender in Diaspora Studies

The failure of Diaspora Studies to address gender has been exemplified by the masculinist nature of the discourse of diaspora, which largely leaves out the experiences of women, and fails to acknowledge its own reification of the experiences of men. In the words of James Clifford, “experiences are always gendered. But there is a tendency for theoretical accounts of diaspora and diaspora cultures to hide this fact, to talk of travel and displacement in unmarked ways, thus normalizing male experiences.”³¹ Gopinath’s theorization of “queer diasporas” resists discourses that frame diaspora within patriarchal and heteronormative

³⁰ Gayatri Gopinath, “Archive, Affect, and the Everyday; Queer *Diasporic Re-Visions*,” in *Political Emotions (New Agendas in Communication)*, ed. Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, Ann Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2010), 166.

³¹ James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 313.

conceptualizations of nation, home, and mobility and offers an alternative to considering the experiences of diasporic women solely through their roles as wives, mothers, and caretakers. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the epistemological origins of the term diaspora, which is metaphorically linked to the word “sperm.”³² Gopinath argues that attaching queer to diaspora attends to the practices and subjectivities that have been invisibilized within conventional diaspora and nationalist imaginaries. She writes:

The concept of a queer South Asian diaspora, then, functions on multiple levels... First, in situating the formation of sexual subjectivity within transnational flows of culture, capital, bodies, desire, and labor. Second, queer diaspora contests the logic that situates the terms “queer” and “diaspora” as dependent on the originality of “heterosexuality” and “nation.” Finally, it disorganizes the dominant categories within the United States for sexual variance, namely “gay and lesbian,” and it marks a different economy of desire that escapes legibility within both normative South Asian contexts and homo-normative Euro-American contexts.³³

In this context, queer refers to a range of dissenting and non-heteronormative practices and desires that may or may not fall within the sexual identity categories of lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

Rita Nketiah also addresses the limiting and oppressive masculinist discourses surrounding African and African diasporic women and girls in her

³²³² In “Kinship, Nation, and Paul Gilroy's Concept of Diaspora,” Stefan Helmreich writes, “The original meaning of diaspora summons up the image of scattered seeds and in Judeo-Christian...cosmology, seeds are metaphorical for the male ‘substance’ that is traced in genealogical histories. The word ‘sperm’ is metaphorically linked to diaspora. It comes from the same stem [in Greek meaning to sow or scattered] and is defined by the OED as ‘the generative substance or seed of male animals.’ Diaspora, in its traditional sense, thus refers us to a system of kinship reckoned through men and suggests the questions of legitimacy in paternity that patriarchy generates”(245).

³³ Gopinath, *Impossible Diasporas*, 5.

article “Why Respectability Politics is Failing African Women and Girls.”³⁴ She writes, “Respectability politics kills dreams. It forces us to see ourselves not as free and autonomous beings, but always indebted to someone else, always prioritising the needs and expectations of someone else, always upholding the ‘dignity of the family.’”³⁵ Naming the proliferation of the ideas that boys will be boys, women should police their appearance as not to attract negative attention, marriage and children are the most important aspirations women should have, and it is always a woman’s job to serve male elders, Nketiah criticizes the pervasiveness of the patriarchal idea that African women do not have control over their bodies or their futures, and are forever indebted to their families and their culture. She ends the essay asserting, “I am interested in an African feminist vision that moves us away from respectability politics for women and girls. I want us to feel liberated to be our full selves without the demands of ‘culture’ weighing heavily on us.”³⁶

For the purposes of my work I use the idea of queerness to think through the complex gender and sexual dynamics present in the work of the artists whom I observe, and examine how their gender and sexual expression informs their understanding of their relationship to a larger Nigerian diaspora, and influences

³⁴ Nketiah’s essay builds upon the work of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham who coined the phrase “politics of respectability.” Though Higginbotham discusses respectability politics specifically as it related to the work of the Women’s Convention of the Black Baptist Church during the Progressive Era, the emphasis on “sexual conduct, cleanliness, temperance, hard work, and politeness” mirrors the white supremacist colonial logics of respectability that are still emphasized on the African continent today. Still, I intentionally pull away from using respectability politics, which has a history specifically rooted in the United States.

³⁵ Rita Nketiah, “Why Respectability Politics is Failing African Women and Girls,” *This is Africa*, 8.29.16, <https://thisisafrica.me/respectability-politics-failing-african-women-girls/>.

³⁶ Ibid.

their ability to claim belonging in Nigeria. The queer diaspora framework allows me to attend to non-normative and at times “anti-respectable” expressions of African womanhood. It also allows for the consideration of “the everyday,” affective responses, and alternative social networks including non-biological family, homosocial networks, artistic communities, and interracial and interethnic coalition building.

As well, my project counters the masculinist tendency to focus solely on movement and also considers the, at times, quiet acts of settling and dwelling, and local and national rootedness utilizing Tina Campt’s concept of “diasporic homemaking,” which she argues are “practices that are critical to diasporic formation yet frequently overshadowed by an emphasis on diasporic mobility.”³⁷ While Campt is particularly interested in the places diasporic subjects leave and where they arrive, build roots, and attempt to access citizenship, I am interested in the “micro rooting points”—in a performance piece, in a work of art, in a film—where diasporic women find temporary moments of belonging.

While not specifically pertaining to the African diaspora, Marianne Hirsch’s work on postmemory—the deep connection of second generations to traumatic experiences that preceded their birth,³⁸ Cathy Schlund-Vial’s engagement with traumatic memory among 1.5-generation Cambodian artists, and Machida’s work on 2nd and 3rd generation Japanese-American artists writing about internment³⁹

³⁷ Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 52.

³⁸ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 33.

³⁹ Machida, *Unsettled Visions*.

have been of great importance to this project. While the work of these artists and scholars has greatly influenced my work and research questions, my project moves us beyond a preoccupation with how women artists address the trauma of displacement and the assumption that all histories of unwilled migration are internalized by later generations in traumatic ways, and instead considers the types of both willed and unwilled migration that are experienced as not only trauma, but also as possibility.

Disbelonging and Worldmaking

My use of *disbelonging* considers how these artists resist trauma narratives of loss and displacement by illuminating the generative potential of disbelonging to create space for female diasporic subjects to embody complex and (often taboo) identities and offer new representations of Nigerian womanhood. It takes into account the ways in which they stand both firmly within their identities as women and Nigerians, while refusing to be contained by hegemonic conceptualizations of the type of belonging they *ought to* desire. Muñoz writes:

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its working to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority, it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.⁴⁰

Building on Muñoz's theorizing, disbelonging is a strategy and viewpoint that centers anti-respectability as a critical tool in the cultivation of alternate and

⁴⁰ Jose Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.

alternative belongings for marginalized diasporic subjects. I use disbelonging as a theoretical model to trace the relationship between loss, alienation, home, and belonging. My theorization of disbelonging speaks to the ways in which the artists I highlight embrace the erotic, privilege experimentation and play, and cultivate queer social bonds in order to tell new stories about what it means to be a part of a diaspora, imagine alternative embodiments, and cross psychic borders, which allow them to elude the constraints and rigid expectations of geographic borders, citizenship, and nation.

Moreover, I consider the relationship between disbelonging and queer worldmaking, which Muñoz also identifies as a tool of survival used by marginalized subjects to create worlds of “transformative politics and possibilities.”⁴¹ He argues that worldmaking performances have the ability to offer alternative views of the world, which become “oppositional ideologies” and critiques of hegemonic powers. My use of worldmaking in this dissertation is specifically concerned with the act of creating psychic and physical sites of home and belonging. I argue that the artists I examine use a range of mediums to create liberatory worlds where women move freely through time and space as birds, hybrid creatures, and aliens; engage playfully with one another; prioritize their own pleasure; and unapologetically embody contradiction in order to assert their agency as black women and model alternative ways of being for others.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter Two, “Go Fetch It!: Dreaming Unruly Narratives of Return in the

⁴¹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 195.

Art and Performance of Wura-Natasha Ogunji, ” examines the problem of return and belonging in the visual and performance art of Nigerian American artist Wura-Natasha Ogunji. To do this, I look at Ogunji’s mixed media drawings and video work between 2007 and 2010 and her 2012 series *Mo gbo mo branch* —“party crasher” in Yoruba, which built upon her investigation of how connections are created between Africa and the Americas via the black female body. In this chapter I analyze how Ogunji navigates Lagos as a queer, mixed race American national, and argue that her refusal to be denied belonging while in Lagos and “crashing the party” —or “going” despite not being explicitly invited—disrupts easy understandings of belonging, citizenship, and cultural ownership. Utilizing visual analysis and interviews with Ogunji, this chapter argues that Ogunji embodies and represents the ways in which return operates as a state of continuous experimentation, problem solving, (re) imagining, and worldmaking for black women not only in Nigeria but across the African diaspora.

In Chapter Three, “Erotic Agency and African Diasporic Intimacy in the Work of Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Zina Saro-Wiwa,” I examine disbelonging through depictions of love, intimacy, and the erotic in painting and film. To do this I look specifically to Akunyili Crosby’s paintings *I Always Face You, Even When it Seems Otherwise* (2012), *Thread* (2012), *The Bridge* (2010), and *Re-branding My Love* (2011), and filmmaker Zina Saro-Wiwa’s video installation and documentary project *Eaten By the Heart*, which explored intimacy, heartbreak, and love performances among Africans and Diasporans. In this chapter, I argue that Akunyili Crosby and Saro-Wiwa use their respective art forms to mark the black

female body as a site of ambivalent sexual agency and socio-cultural tension, thus simultaneously acknowledging and resisting the burden of cultural norms that hide and dismiss the importance of sexual expression and intimacy in the subject formation of African and African diasporic women.

Chapter Four, “Play, Leisure and Kinship as Queer Worldmaking Practice in *The Adventures of Ada the Alien* and *Akata Witch*,” focuses on the work of visual artist ruby onyinyechi amanze and novelist Nnedi Okorafor, specifically looking at two black girl figures: “Ada the Alien,” a reoccurring character in amanze’s drawings inspired by her experiences moving through Nigeria and “Sunny,” a Black albino American-born girl living in Nigeria who is the protagonist in Okorafor’s novel *Akata Witch*. I argue that the worlds that Ada and Sunny move through and their identities as black girls offer a productive framework for thinking about diasporic outsidership, disbelonging, and displacement through the frames of leisure, play and queer social bonds in a Nigerian context. This chapter identifies speculative investigations of black girlhood as a productive site for diasporic black girls and women to reclaim play, creativity, and leisure as valuable and necessary for visioning liberatory futures. In my conclusion I propose an alternative to centering land within diasporic discourses.

Using a variety of creative mediums, these women render their own spaces of belonging, which are also sites of pleasure, freedom, play, and discovery. It is through these powerful acts of worldmaking that these women demonstrate the powerful potential of art to craft alternatives to the type of belonging that often feels just out of reach for diasporic subjects. By developing disbelonging as a lens

through which to read diasporic women's art, the project contributes to and bridges the fields of Diaspora Studies, American Studies, Women's and Gender Studies and Visual Culture. Disbelonging as an analytical lens highlights the many ways citizenship and nation are enacted onto and through the bodies of diasporic women, and illuminates the creative methods women makers use to resist erasure and radically reimagine home and nation for themselves and future generations.

Chapter 2: Dreaming Go Fetch It!: Unruly Narratives of Return in the Art and Performance of Wura-Natasha Ogunji

This chapter examines the problem of unruly return and belonging in the visual and performance art of Wura-Natasha Ogunji. Looking to her mixed media paintings and video work created between 2007 and 2010, as well as her 2012 series *Mo gbo mo branch*—“party crasher” in Yoruba—I examine how Ogunji captures and communicates her own disbelonging via her refusal to be denied belonging as an outsider. This study is particularly concerned with the tension between the real and imagined experience of return in Ogunji’s work. Not only her psychic renderings of encountering the continent as she blissfully dances under a pomegranate tree or flies like a bird over the Atlantic ocean, but also her physical experience of landing in Lagos for the first time and being called an “oyinbo” on the street while simultaneously feeling completely at home.¹ In this chapter I ask what Ogunji’s strategic use of materials like thread and paper, video, and the live female body tell us about the materiality of finding belonging—the objects, tools and embodiments that make tangible longing and home—for black diasporic women, and what her works collectively reveal about the pleasure and challenges of return and constructing belonging anew.

Though the idea of return to the African continent haunts much of black cultural production, the subject of return has been under theorized by scholars in

¹ “Oyinbo” is Yoruba for white person or foreigner.

Black Cultural Studies and African Diaspora Studies. While by no means an exhaustive list, the work of Saidiya Hartman, Kamari Maxine Clarke, and Michelle Wright have been significant contemporary ruminations on the theme of return. While Hartman and Clarke's explorations are largely autobiographical and ethnographic,² Wright pulls from the field of Physics and argues that the paradox of return for black subjects requires an engagement with both linear and epiphenomenal time, the latter, which recognizes that one is "manifesting the past in the present moment."³ In this chapter I also consider nostalgia as a critical part of return for African diasporic subjects, who may primarily engage the idea of return via their own fantasies, and through familial memories that have been passed down.

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. She writes, "Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship."⁴ Boym's emphasis on the "romance with ones own fantasy" is particularly useful, as it highlights the ways in which nostalgia is ambivalent and primarily based on psychic constructions, making creative mediums an especially rich archive from which to study diaspora and return. Likewise, Carole Boyce Davies and Babacar M'Bow argue that explorations of return by black people have primarily occurred outside of

² Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux Press, 2008) and Kamari Maxine Clarke, *Mapping Yoruba Networks: Power and Agency in the Mapping of Transnational Communities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

³ Michelle Wright, *The Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2015), 74.

⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic, 2001), xiii.

scholarship in the form of “emotive narratives and songs,” which have “testified to the desires of return whether this return be through travel, writings, imagination, or the fostering of political affiliations.”⁵ What Wright, Davies, and M’Bow highlight are the ways in which creative worldmaking via the arts has been instrumental in allowing people to engage with the idea of return and the reality of returning to a constantly shifting and ever evolving home. As Wright proposes, “Because ‘home’ is also the origin in a linear space-time epistemology of a collective, it becomes fixed in time, untouched by change, but only theoretically: the continent of Africa, like every other continent, is always changing and never static.”⁶ In light of Wright’s declaration, this chapter is also concerned with how Ogunji’s work takes on the questions and problems of return. Utilizing visual analysis and interviews with Ogunji, I argue that within her body of work, Ogunji embodies and represents how return operates as a state of experimentation, continuous problem solving and (re) imagining for black women not only in Nigeria but also throughout the African diaspora.

Ogunji is a compelling starting point for this project because her relationship to homeland has been necessarily non-linear and non-static. Born in St. Louis, Missouri and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, and Colorado Springs, Colorado, Ogunji, who is biracial, was raised by her white mother and never met her Nigerian father, although she did speak to him on the phone once in 1991 after he had

⁵ Carole Boyce Davies and Babacar M’Bow, “Towards African Diaspora Citizenship: Politicizing an Existing Global Geography,” in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (Cambridge, MA: South End Press), 17.

⁶ Wright, *The Physics of Blackness*, 83.

returned to Nigeria.⁷ It was not until 2011 after she received a fellowship from the Dallas Museum of Art and following her father's death in 2000 that she would visit Nigeria and meet her father's side of the family for the first time. In many ways her diasporic identity was not a burden or act of obligation to the homeland but something that she chose and pursued, which I argue speaks more honestly to the reality of diasporic belonging for all diasporic subjects –not an authentic process of going back and “fetching” what has been left behind, but an act of making and becoming.

In a 2013 interview, Ogunji describes always feeling a deep connection to her biological father's Nigerian heritage, even as a young girl:

As a child, I felt this connection but I haven't always been able to articulate it, or know what's happening when I see certain things, or know things without being formally taught them. But I think we all have deep knowledge that we can access and do the work of accessing. A lot of the work I make is about bringing that information forward through my body and using the body to ask particular questions. One of the questions I asked before I went to Nigeria was does the homeland long for us, does this place that I've never visited have any desire to connect to me? ...Through these performances, or through the use of video I really try to answer that question and think about, if I'm my ancestor and I'm trying to get to the Americas, how do I get there? I have to fly there, or walk on water.⁸

In this quote, Ogunji names the tension and contradictions embedded in her own sense of belonging. While she echoes the notion of belonging and return as biological and unexplainable, reflecting on her experiences growing up in a predominately white environment and still possessing certain cultural knowledges,

⁷ Peju Layiwola, “Transcultural Conversations: American and Nigerian Art in Dialogue,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 41, November, 2017: 146.

⁸ Antonio C. La Pastina, “A Food Connection: Interview with Wura-Natasha Ogunji by Antonio C. La Pastina,” *Aster(ix) Journal*, October 25, 2013, <http://asterixjournal.com/a-food-connection-interview-with-wuru-natasha-ogunji-by-antonio-c-la-pastina/>.

she also speaks to the labor imbedded in the act of belonging to a place. Her consideration of the tools and mechanisms she needs in order to connect to her ancestors reflects her own understanding of disbelonging as not tragic, but simply a dilemma to be brainstormed. Though in many ways Ogunji finds it difficult to articulate her connection, which is primarily an affective and embodied one, she is unwavering and rigorous in her examination of her connection to the continent. When considered as a whole, Ogunji's body of work over the past decade captures the interplay between fantasy and reality in her imaginings of home. Reading her early drawings alongside her video work and performance art allows for an in-depth consideration of the role that each of these creative processes has played in the creation of an alternative belonging for Ogunji, and the active nature of creating diasporic connection.

Dancer (Three birds)

Ogunji's early drawings are a balance of here and there—a grappling with how one goes about finding home and why. Weightless in material and ethereal in theme, they are most concerned with “the romance with [her] own fantasy and pleasure” to quote Boym, and the pleasure that she derives from that fantasy.

Dancer (Three birds)(Figure 1.1) is a mixed media drawing featuring a woman, modeled after Ogunji with knees slightly bent, and her arms swinging outwards as if she is just about to take flight. The figure is faintly drawn with white pencil or chalk and partially embroidered with bird wings and bird heads emerging from her arms and behind her head, blurring the lines between what we see as woman and what we see as bird. Her tank top and skirt are decorated with embroidered lines

and a geometric flower pattern using yellow, white, black, and light blue thread.

Above the dancer Ogunji has embroidered a tree branch with hanging pomegranates.



Fig. 1.1
Wura-Natasha Ogunji
Dancer (Three birds) (2007)
Thread, acrylic on paper
12¼ x 8 inches

Moreover, the image is suspended on what appears to be almost transparent paper that has been painted a deep red in broad visible brushstrokes, which create the

illusion of ghostly forms and shapes in the background. Her use of the color red and its intensity in this painting almost overpowers the white outline of the figure's form, while contrasting against the yellow embroidered wings. The red also brings to mind heat and fury, separating the scene from the earth realm, and making the figure appear to exist in a dream realm or be lost in an impassioned frenzy of spiritual connection and creativity via dance. The fact that the figure is identified as a dancer is also significant, as dance has longtime been considered by many cultures as a way to connect with the spirit realm. Furthermore, the fact that she dances outside and underneath a tree brings to mind ritual practices.

In a 2008 interview, Ogunji describes the pleasure that she derives from her drawing process and how it serves as a vessel through which her ancestors communicate with the present:

Drawing and work on paper is a world that is completely my own...It's me and the materials and I love that sense of solitude and complete independence from the outside world... I feel like a vessel in many ways...It's also about being Nigerian – that's a huge influence on my work. We get messages in dreams and through our bodies. We're connected to our ancestors, we are them, we get messages from them even if we're not in our so-called homeland, the knowledge of that comes through us.⁹

Ogunji's assertion that she is not only connected to her ancestors but is them is significant. Imbedded in this statement is a disruption of the idea that "home" and "the diasporic subject" exist as two poles that must be brought together. It instead implies that this union always already exists, perhaps imperfectly, within the

⁹ Ana-Maurine Lara, "Wura-Natasha Ogunji, interviewed on February 25, 2006," *The Magic Makers : A Record of the Lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered & Two-Spirit Artists of Color*, February 27, 2008, <http://themagicmakers.blogspot.com/2008/02/wura-natasha-ogunji-interviewed-on.html>.

diasporic subject. As well, she uses the language of “we” referring to black diasporic women more generally, though her particular connection is to Nigeria. In an interview from 2006 Ogunji also speaks frankly about what she sees as the relationship between her queer identity, her mixed identity, her spiritual practice, and her creative process:

Because I’m mixed...when people say that there are boundaries and rules and borders, for me, those are always changing and moving and there’s nothing that’s ever black and white. We’re always pulling from many sources and we’re a combination of sources and we speak many languages and we change languages all the time even if we think we only speak English and I think that that’s totally evident in my work and my combination of materials...That’s totally in my work. I see the work as sacred in that way, as profound and there are rituals to how I do the work. Now, I give offerings to the paper. I spit rum on the paper or offer tobacco or draw a symbol that represents one of the Orisa, one of the gods, so that the paper becomes a sacred space, a sacred grove or an altar... I grew up in the West, I grew up in the U.S. so I have a particular way of doing things that’s from here, but what else...I think there’s something about gayness...I don’t hesitate to say it. I think that gay people are brilliant, and that we’re special...I think that there’s a queer way of looking at the world. There’s a queer way of writing, there’s a queer way of making art and I really think it has to do with drawing from multiple sources that are seemingly not connected, but are very connected and that make a person whole...¹⁰

Ogunji cites her mixed-ness, her own diasporic identity, and her “gayness” as liberating and as magical because of the ways in which they require her to pull from multiple sources and influences. Here my use of magic specifically refers to “the ability to move, change, or create as by supernatural or mysterious forces.”¹¹ I argue that these forces are the aspects of Ogunji’s identity that allow her to construct her disbelonging and practice active belonging through queer worldmaking.

¹⁰ Ana-Maurine Lara, “Wura-Natasha Ogunji, interviewed on February 25, 2006.”

¹¹ Merriam Webster Dictionary, s.v. “Magic,” accessed July 25, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/magic>.

Ogunji also evokes this magic through her incorporation of birds, which are a recurring theme in her thread on paper images from this period. In 2006 Ogunji began a daily ritual of stitching in her studio before she began work for the day. During this time she would stitch mythical birds related to the phoenix and Sankofa, sometimes blending features from each.¹² In a blog post Ogunji describes the daily sewing as a prayer, writing, “It’s amazing how the sketches, the prayers, these birds become the work itself—the sketches have a kind of opening and vulnerability to them—they seem to speak so easily about what it is that I’m working towards, their language flows without being self-conscious.”¹³ Ogunji’s use of hand sewing brings to mind the vital role that women have historically played as producers of cultural critique, both inside and outside of the home. Commonly associated with women’s work and the decorative arts, the inclusion of threadwork in Ogunji’s pieces can easily be seen as resistance to the type of cultural production that has been most valued by the art world and what has been dismissed as craft.

Ogunji has said that the pomegranates in *Dancer (Three birds)* are an offering to Osun, the Yoruba god of love, intimacy, beauty, wealth and diplomacy. Her decision to evoke Oshun is significant for several reasons. Oshun (also known as Osun, Ochún and Oxum) can be traced across Nigeria, Cuba, Brazil, and the United States. One implication of Ogunji’s evocation of Oshun is that she is the source of life. Joseph Murphy and Mei Mei Stanford write:

¹² “Sankofa” in the Twi language of Ghana translates to “Go back and get it.” The idea of return is embedded in its meaning and it is evoked throughout the African diaspora to encourage people to learn about their African origins.

¹³ Wura-Natasha Ogunji, “How Does That Sounds Look?” *This Road Blog*, accessed May 30, 2016, <http://goldeniron.blogspot.com/2007/11/eternal.html>.

The different identities of Oshun may flow into one another or arise spontaneously to the surface ‘from nowhere.’ She is water, river, fish, fan, mirror, brass (gold, copper, coral, yellow, money), honey, pumpkin, peacock, vulture, beautiful hair, comb, perfume, and many other things known and yet to be found.¹⁴

The mass enslavement of Yoruba people in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries meant that Oshun traditions traveled across the Atlantic and redeveloped in places such as Cuba and Brazil with Ochún becoming the patron saint of Cuba.¹⁵ Ochún in Cuba is depicted as a mixed race women who straddles black and white worlds. Murphy contends, “Her liminal status gives her great power and great sorrow for she is at once beyond some of the restrictions of social categories while at the same time without her identity and security.”¹⁶ Ogunji in this sense mirrors Ochún in her constant shape shifting and straddling of many worlds.

While pomegranates are not native to West Africa, historically in western art history pomegranates have symbolized fertility and hope of immortality.¹⁷ Such imagery is fitting for this piece, which explores life cycles, temporal flows, and identity. The tree branch also balances a lit candle, suggesting the presence or welcoming of spirits. One seemingly anachronistic detail is the pair of sunglasses that the figure wears. Sunglasses appear elsewhere in Ogunji’s work where I argue, they serve as gateways to Nigeria’s bright, hot climate, and a different way of looking at the world – initiating a change in perspective which balances outsider

¹⁴ Joseph M. Murphy and Mei Mei Stanford, *Osun across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001): 7.

¹⁵ *Osun Across the Waters*, 5.

¹⁶ *Osun Across the Waters*, 95.

¹⁷ Hildegard Schneider, "Of the Pomegranate," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 4 (1945): 117-20.

and alien status, and offers protection, while also gesturing toward futurity. Ogunji has also said the sunglasses are about representing women as glamorous travelers “enjoying a kind of leisure time that begins with and centers on their desires in all senses of that word.”¹⁸

Although it was not until several years later that Ogunji’s work attempted to answer the question, “Does homeland long for us?” her early drawings assume this much. The understanding that she, even as a queer mixed race Nigerian American, is both connected to and made of her ancestors is at the center of *Dancer (Three birds)* and indicative of the ways in which disbelonging offers the diasporic subject a position from which to imagine and cultivate a queer and holistic understanding of belonging. The birds represent movement, and the longing to travel across time and space in order to experience home in the myriad ways that home is defined for diasporic subjects. *Dancer (Three birds)* is not so much about knowing or representing a static Africa. It is in fact quite confident in its not knowing, and begs the question: What happens when we give ourselves permission to create that which we have been told is lost? Through these acts of interpreting, reinterpreting and imagining, Ogunji connects to homeland in a way that centers her perception and experience.

The Epic Crossing of an Ife Head (2011)

After earning a bachelor’s degree from Stanford University in Anthropology, Ogunji attended San Jose State University where she received a Masters in Fine Arts in photography. Interested in the absence of people of color in

¹⁸ Wura-Natasha Ogunji, email interview with author, October 25, 2014.

her photography curriculum and the act of recovering these histories, Ogunji began using photography, which allowed her to use her own body to fill in the gaps and invoke the missing people and spirits she sought. Her interest in the photographic archive and embodied knowledges led her to begin creating video works featuring her own body in motion.¹⁹

Video art emerged in both the United States and Europe in the 1960s. Also referred to as artists' video, experimental video and artists' television, video art was inspired by the technological advances as well as social and political activism of the 1960s in both the United States and Europe. Influenced by Fluxus, performance art, contemporary art, dance and theatre, and experimental film, artists were initially attracted to the impermanence and lack of "history or identifiable critical discourse" surrounding the medium, which made the art form free of the historical burdens and trappings of mediums such as sculpture or painting.²⁰ Long excluded from fine art discourse, black women especially took advantage of this new accessibility.

Prior to 1968, depictions of black people on television and in film were largely fictional and written and/or performed by white individuals. Following social unrest stemming from the Vietnam War and the assassination of key figures like Dr. Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy, there was a new urgent desire from women artists, particular those spearheading the Feminist Art Movement, to represent themselves and document their work using the video technologies that had

¹⁹ Alec de León, "Catching Up With Wura-Natasha Ogunji," *National Performance Network*, July 20th, 2012, accessed May 30, 2016, <http://nnpweb.org/2012/07/20/catching-up-with-wura-natasha-ogunji/>.

²⁰ Chris Meigh-Andrews, *A History of Video Art* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 8.

become available.²¹ Black women filmmakers, writers, directors, and visual artists were especially drawn to the medium, which offered them the opportunity to resist and reframe popular depictions of black womanhood and center the black female body as both “material and metaphor.”²² Ogunji writes, “My creative works investigate physical, historical and psychic connections between Africa and the Americas via the black female body. Performance is central to the narratives and forms of my work. As such, I use my body to understand and experience acts of return and recollection.”²³ Ogunji embodies and addresses her own unknowingness and the process of tracing and authenticating her connection to homeland in her video works. These alternative histories are, in her words, “Another way of understanding what the narrative is when you are told that there is no narrative.”²⁴ Referring to the significant representational work these early black women artists did with the video medium in order to resist the lies that had been created about them, Valerie Cassel Oliver argues that a metaphysical exchange took place:

Incredible as it may sound, transcending the fiction to arrive at a place of authenticity lies not only in the ability to absorb the fictional (because truth is often interwoven in fiction) but to do so without being reduced to, or rendered as, fiction. This metaphysical exchange has not only defined the black experience historically but also the struggle toward authenticity. The black body is, after all, a nexus of confounding identities composed of layers upon layers of fiction and the anonymity of unknowingness that

²¹ For more about the Feminist Art Movement see: *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* edited by Norma Broude, Mary D. Garrard, and Judith K. Brodsky.

²² Valerie Cassel Oliver, “Between Artifice & Authentic: The Black Female Body in Performance,” in *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and The Moving Image Since 1970*, ed. Andrea Barnwell Brownlee and Valerie Cassel (Atlanta: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art/ Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston, 2008), 38.

²³ Wura-Natasha Ogunji, “Videos,” accessed May 30, 2016, http://wuraogunji.com/section/231339_videos.html.

²⁴ León, “Catching Up With Wura-Natasha Ogunji.”

resulted from slavery. This unknowingness is only counterbalanced by the residual of lives lived, what can be traced and authenticated, as well as through present day existences.²⁵

Echoing Diana Taylor's assertion that embodied expression has always offered alternative ways of transmitting and understanding the histories of the Americas, Ogunji says in one interview, "In the body there is everything, the history of the world, it is not only the archive of our individual, lived experience. We carry our ancestors in our bodies, their gestures, memories and knowledge. Performance allows us to access this information."²⁶ Ogunji's sentiments are also supported by recent studies showing that trauma is passed down between generations through DNA.²⁷

In her video works *The return* and *Ife head walks on water*, Ogunji uses her body to investigate the "physical, historical, and psychic connections between Africa and the Americas" via her black female body. In the statement about her videos on her website she writes:

...I use my body to understand and experience acts of return and recollection. In the performance video *belongings*, for example, concepts of border crossing, migration and immigration emerge as I crawl across the hard earth with water bottles tied to my ankles. I am thinking about the significance, centrality and struggle of the body at a moment when physical belongings are virtually meaningless. With the series *The epic crossings of an Ife head* I investigate homeland and longing. I ask: 'Does homeland long for us?' Taking on the persona of the iconic Nigerian Ife head with painted striations on my face I attempt to walk across water and fly across the land, as would an ancestor from Africa seeking her descendants in the Americas. With awkward movement and truncated sounds I move across land, water, and air in an imagined journey across the Atlantic...²⁸

²⁵ Oliver, "Between Artifice & Authentic," 39.

²⁶ Alec de León, "Catching Up With Wura-Natasha Ogunji."

²⁷ "Can Trauma be Passed Down to the Next Generation Through DNA?" August 31, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/daily-videos/can-trauma-be-passed-to-next-generation-through-dna/>.

²⁸ Wura-Natasha Ogunji, "Videos."

Moreover, by using the video form Ogunji plays with the notion of documenting and creates a record of her imagined journey.

Ogunji captures the quiet and laborious task of forging diasporic connections and what Hartman calls, “recollections of dislocation” in her 2007 video *The return* (Figure 1.2), which considers the mechanisms and tools needed in order to perform the act of return for diasporic subjects. The 50-second video opens with the camera lingering above a greenish brown body of water. Simultaneously, we hear rhythmic splashing footsteps and see a shadowy reflection of Ogunji’s head in the water, and then her whole body moving towards us.



Fig 1.2
Wura-Natasha Ogunji
Still from *The return*
2007
single-channel digital video
color, sound
50 seconds

Her arms swing vigorously, propelling her body forward. Soon her feet appear in the frame and we see that Ogunji, who is wearing a black skirt with ruffles around the hem, has soles fashioned out of bundles of skinny sticks attached to the bottoms of her feet with red string. We see Ogunji's foot muscles and toes strain to grip the uneven and roughly textured bunch of sticks, making her walking stiff and stunted. At the same time the *sloshing* and *plunking* of her feet moving through the water is melodic and soothing, making the sonic experience of *The return* distinctly different from its visuality and creating a multi-sensorial experience. The video ends with Ogunji simply exiting the frame.

Though the title of the piece, *The return*, gestures towards something finite, as many evocations of "return to homeland" seem to imply, there is a sense that the task of walking is a difficult one for this figure, and we do not see her arrive at her final destination. The makeshift nature of the stick contraptions that make it possible for her to travel on water represents the labor of inventing new ways to perform the act of return, as well as the physically painful and precarious nature of return. In the video, the viewer never sees above Ogunji's waist, speaking to the ways in which Ogunji's work is more generally about the black female body beyond her singular experience. Ogunji embraces disbelonging and queer worldmaking in *The return* by shifting away from the trope of the "tragic lost diasporan" and instead performing the act of return as creative, experimental and active. Furthermore, the speed with which she moves is not hurried or anxious, but slow and methodical, indicating a mindfulness and comfortability during the journey.

In the series *The epic crossing of an Ife head* (2011), Ogunji fantasizes about what efforts an Ife head—a traditional bronze sculpture originating in the Nigerian city of Ife—would have to make in order to find her descendants in the Americas. Editing together short clips of herself jumping across land and water, she investigates homeland and longing. Taking on the persona of the Ife head, Ogunji attempts to walk across water and “fly across the land,” as she imagines the journey her ancestors from Africa would take in search of their descendants in the Americas. She writes, “My work explores the deep knowledge of the body—both ancestral and cellular—and works to access and make visual the gestures, memories and histories therein.”²⁹ In the nineteen-second *Ife head walks on water* (Figure 1.3) Ogunji dawns painted white vertical stripes on her face, evoking the use of Kaolin clay in many West African countries as a substance that prepares one to connect to the spirit realm. She choppily jumps across a green body of water, which flows against a grey rock wall shaded by trees, with her arms flailing. Her decision to wear a black skirt and black tank top that reads, “100% Negra,” Spanish for “100% percent black woman,” gestures at diasporic flows and the connection between Black women across the diaspora, as well as her own time spent making art in the Dominican Republic and Spain. Furthermore, the shirt juxtaposed with Ogunji’s mixed racial identity points to the ways her body resists easy understandings of a black community united by sameness, and she uses her biracial body to locate the ways in which what Hartman refers to as “the common set of identifications

²⁹ Wura-Natasha Ogunji, “Videos.”

experienced [by black diasporic peoples]” is not fixed but a “fleeting, intermittent, and dispersed network of relations.”³⁰



Fig. 1.3
Still from *Ife head walks on water*
2009
single-channel digital video
color, sound
19 seconds

In *The epic crossings of an Ife head*, Ogunji uses stop motion filming techniques, originally used to create the illusion of an object moving magically, and glitches as worldmaking strategies, calling to mind Uri McMillan’s theory of “performing objecthood” and Legacy Russell’s consideration of glitchiness as a tool used by black women subjects to resist and circumvent hegemonic societal limitations and expectations. McMillan’s notion of “performing objecthood” describes instances of black women strategically making themselves objects as a way towards their own agency. He writes:

³⁰ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 61.

Wielding their bodies as pliable matter [black women performers] repeatedly become objects, often in the form of simulated beings or what I term ‘avatars.’ I call this process performing objecthood...performing objecthood becomes an adroit method of circumventing prescribed limitations on black women in the public sphere while staging art and alterity in unforeseen places.³¹

By performing as an Ife head, tied to the city of Ile Ife (understood as the spiritual and cultural center of the Yoruba people), Ogunji utilizes experimental methods in order to imagine her body as not tied to the country of her birth or even her present point in her ancestral lineage, thus enabling her to “fly” across land and depict the duality of being both herself and also her ancestors. This evocation of objecthood also comes across in the video’s static filled soundscape. Russell theorizes “the glitch” and considers its revolutionary potential as disruption for women in digital spaces, arguing for the role that digital practice has in “expanding the construction, deconstruction, and re-presentation of the female-identifying corpus.”³² The choppiness of Ogunji’s movement combined with the static is intentionally glitchy, allowing her body to simultaneously occupy the position of human and object or avatar as we see her freeze in time. In the words of Russell, “The glitch is the catalyst, not the error. The glitch is the happy accident.”³³ *The epic crossings of an Ife head* series poses new answers in relation to the problem of the return. By de-centering the lost diasporan and embodying the object of the Ife head who jumps and flies across land and water in search of its ancestors in the Americas, Ogunji’s

³¹ Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 7.

³² Legacy Russell, “Digital Dualism And The Glitch Feminism Manifesto,” *Cyborgology*, December 10, 2012, accessed May 30, 2016, <https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2012/12/10/digital-dualism-and-the-glitch-feminism-manifesto/>.

³³ Ibid.

disbelonging and queer worldmaking complicates the Sankofian “go and fetch it” ideology by depicting the ways that connecting to the homeland is more than a process of retrieving history or community, but also includes imagining, creating, and reinvention for the diasporic subject. In doing so, she positions the continent as more than just the unchanging homeland trapped in the past, but as an active agent consistently involved in the formation of her diasporic subjectivity.

Collectively, these pieces are psychic and logistical explorations of what it might look or feel like to time travel across the Atlantic, and ruminations on the capacity of the black female body. Ogunji addresses the problems of return by exploring the additional possibilities for making connection beyond simply “fetching it.” In *Dancer (Three birds)* she demonstrates the spiritual connection to homeland via-à-vis nostalgia and fantasy, and in *The epic crossings of an Ife head* series, she considers the full potential of her body to make contact, using the video form to manipulate and expand the possibilities of her form. Building upon these investigations, her live performance pieces offered the opportunity to interact and engage with themes of belonging and outsidership in real time within a community of Nigerian and Nigerian diasporic women artists.

Mo gbo mo branch

Ogunji created her first live performance piece *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* (Figure 1.4) in 2011 during her first visit to Nigeria.

Overflowing with feelings, observations, and ideas, and committed to coming to understand Nigeria on her own terms as a queer, mixed race artist, Ogunji elected to engage the landscape with her body in an effort to better understand what she was

experiencing. *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* was inspired by the daily task of fetching water that she and her female cousins were expected to perform during this initial visit to Nigeria. Ogunji used the piece to not only think about the act of fetching water, but also the types of labor women are often asked to perform and the invisibility of that work. The piece posed the questions, “How much is enough? What is the tipping point in a society where people struggle to meet basic needs? When do people have an opportunity to rest, reflect, envision, imagine, and enact another way of being?”³⁴

In the video of the performance, shot by Nigerian performance artist and collaborator Jelli Atiku, Ogunji, wearing a black dress and lying on her stomach, pulls herself along a dirt road with two 20 liter jugs full of water, one yellow and one white, tied to her ankles with scraps of orange and green cloth. She propels herself forward by throwing both arms up to her stomach and dragging her legs forward. In the background, some local adults stand and watch but they quickly lose interest and disappear, leaving mostly children. People walk past without stopping and motorcycles zoom by, inches from her head. Nigerian artist and professor Peju Layiwola describes the live performance writing:

She hauls these containers of water along the dusty, busy streets of Ejigbo, Lagos. Gradually the environment begins to take a toll on her frail body; the grit on the floor creates friction with the artist’s thighs. Slowly and painfully she crawls on her belly to drag this heavy load to her final destination. The fabric tied to her ankles rubs against her skin; she struggles and turns intermittently, looking for the most convenient position to ease the pain of the

³⁴ Wura-Natasha Ogunji, “Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?” *This Road Blog*, Apr. 25, 2013, 20 Dec. 2014, http://goldeniron.blogspot.com/2013/04/will-i-still-carry-water-when-i-am-dead_25.html.

task set before her. In between short breaks during these laborious sessions, the audience is mixed.³⁵

In her 2007 video *belongings* (Figure 1.5), performed three years before her first visit to Nigeria, Ogunji also drags herself across dirt and rock covered terrain resembling the Texas landscape where she was residing at the time. *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* can perhaps be seen as a sequel, as we imagine that once she exits the frame in *belongings* she continues on all the way to Nigeria. The reception to the 2011 piece in the video seems to indicate that although those in the community where she performed were curious about the work, it was not important enough to interrupt their day for longer than a minute or two. This reception echoed Ogunji's observations about the ways in which women's labor becomes invisible in public space and how the need to constantly work in order to survive in Nigeria prevents people from being able to take the time to reflect on the state of society and imagine something new. Moreover, Ogunji's willingness to drag her female body across the dirt-covered broke gendered and classed codes of behavior in such a way that likely made those observing the performance uncomfortable, and contributed to her perceived invisibility.

Beyond the reception of the piece, I am curious about the ways in which the performance was also a ritual for Ogunji. *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* shares an unmistakable similarity to her piece *Sweep* (2011), which Ogunji performed in Abuja, declaring that she "wanted the land to remember her

³⁵ Layiwola, *Transcultural Conversations*, 147.

presence.”³⁶ In both solo pieces, performed during her first visit to Nigeria, she drags her body across the red dirt that covers much of Nigeria in order to mark the land with her body—in order to ensure that the land has a memory of her presence. Through this act Ogunji interrogates whether land, rather than people, may have its own memory or experience its own longing, which in turn may allow it to provide its own sense of belonging.



Fig. 1.5
Wura-Natasha Ogunji
Still from *belongings* (2007)
single-channel digital video
color, sound
3 minutes, 15 seconds

In 2012, Ogunji returned to Lagos with the Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship with the goal of creating a performance series exploring women occupying public space. The series was titled *Mo gbo mo branch* (2012), Yoruba for “I came and branched myself,” and refers to the act of party crashing. The performances built upon her investigation of how connections are created between

³⁶ Wura-Natasha Ogunji, “Sweep,” accessed March 26, 2018, http://wuraogunji.com/artwork/2233005_Sweep.html

Africa and the Americas via the black female body. This refusal to be denied belonging and “crashing the party” — or “going” despite not being explicitly invited— is present throughout Ogunji’s creative projects and collaborations in Lagos, and representative of the side of nostalgia that is at once a sobering and electrifying realization that the home you longed for does not exist so you must build it. In an early blog entry Ogunji writes, “My cousins love me as if they have always known me. Though people in the street call me oyibo[sic]...wherever I go, I don’t feel like an outsider to this place, or even a stranger.”³⁷ In this quote we see the way that Ogunji refuses to understand herself as an outsider or stranger upon her arrival to Nigeria, despite being marked as a foreigner in the streets. I view this declaration as a moment of disbelonging, as Ogunji draws a separation between being understood as an outsider or stranger, and feeling like one. Although it appears that the love from her cousins brings comfort, Ogunji has also stated that it was important to her to build her connection with Nigeria on her own terms, causing her to limit her dependence on family members. By stating that although she is seen as an oyinbo, she does not feel like one, Ogunji calls into question who has the right to assign belonging or insider status, instead privileging her own experience over others’ experience of her. Ogunji’s statement also brings into question which elements make one belong in a place if not those who are “natives” to that place.

Encompassed in Ogunji’s declaration is also Wright’s assertion that “Black African authenticity is also a performance, a nuanced theater that draws on both

³⁷ Wura-Natasha Ogunji, “First Rain in Abuja,” *This Road Blog*, Feb. 5 2011, <http://goldeniron.blogspot.com/2011/02/first-rain-in-abuja.html>.

knowledge and assumptions of its diasporic audience—the desire of so many travelers to be declared honorary natives.”³⁸ While Wright speaks specifically about black people born outside of the continent who may or may not know their specific country of origin, this performance of authenticity and desire for approval in the form of belonging is experienced simultaneously by diasporic subjects who have an identified connection to the continent. Clifford embraces the hyper mobility of diasporans as a state of mind, which he calls “diaspora consciousness”:

[Diaspora consciousness] is about feeling global. ... Suffice to say that diasporic consciousness ‘makes the best of a bad situation.’ Experiences of loss, marginality, and exile (differentially cushioned by class) are often reinforced by systemic exploitation and blocked advancement. This constitutive suffering coexists with the skills of survival: strength in adaptive distinct, discrepant cosmopolitanism, and stubborn visions of renewal. Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension.

For Clifford, diaspora consciousness is primarily a subjectivity constituted by survival, grit, and adaptation. Still he acknowledges the important role of class in who can truly experience this consciousness and feeling of global-ness stating that, “Degrees of diasporic alienation, the mix of coercion and freedom in cultural (dis)identifications, and the pain of loss and displacement are highly relative.”³⁹ Clifford’s declarations point to the ways in which Ogunji’s ability to seamlessly move between the United States and Nigeria and experience a type of belonging is not separate from her class and citizenship privilege which afford her a level of access and protection.

In her 2013 performance of *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* Ogunji and six other Nigerian artists: Taiwo Aiyedogbon, ruby

³⁸ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 95.

³⁹ James Clifford. "Diasporas." *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 313.

onyinyechi amanze, Deola Gold, Odun Orimolade, Mary Oruoghor, and Wana Udobang took to the busy streets of Yaba near the University of Lagos in rompers made of ankara prints in orange, purple, fuchsia, and lime. The rompers featured constructed pointed shoulders reminiscent of bird wings and attached identical hoods, also made from ankara material, which covered their heads like masks with open sides allowing air in. Layiwola points out that the matching material used for the costumes is reminiscent of “aso ebi,” a uniform dress popular amongst the Yoruba and often worn at events like weddings in order to show cooperation and solidarity among certain guests.⁴⁰ Each woman walked with a leaking gold jerry can full of water tied to her ankles, which she slowly dragged behind her, the heavy weight of the jug increasingly evident as they walked approximately two miles between the Center for Contemporary Art, where the performance began, and Ogunji’s apartment, where it ended. Between the women and the cars on the street, young men walked with sticks, there to beat away cars that got too close. Many watching the performance responded with fear and confusion, even speculating that the women were being punished. Muñoz writes that worldmaking practices:

transport the performer and the spectator to a vantage point where transformation and politics are imaginable. Worldmaking performances produce these vantage points by slicing into the façade of the real that is the majoritarian public sphere. Disidentificatory performances opt to do more than simply tear down the majoritarian public sphere. They disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality. Disidentification uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Peju Layiwola, “Transcultural Conversations,” 148.

⁴¹ Jose Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 196.

In *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* Ogunji and her collaborators took and remixed the common act of carrying water performed by women everyday in order to build an alternate reality that felt both familiar to those who watched and also deeply perplexing, as the performance utilized familiar Nigerian symbolic rituals and everyday objects as raw material to further emphasize their point, successfully attracting attention. Fellow performer Wana Udobang wrote about the experience in her personal blog:

When we started, people looked, stared, and some asked what it was we were doing. A gentleman even went as far as dropping a hundred Naira note on my shoulders. We dragged the kegs, leaving trails of water behind. The friction between the plastic and the tarred road had caused for the containers to start to give way. About twenty minutes into our somewhat two-mile journey, people stopped looking, stopped caring, they just went about their business.

The man who gave her a hundred Naira note (equivalent to a dollar) is noteworthy, as the act of dropping a Naira note on someone is a sign of commending his or her hard work. It is a gesture that communicates you have witnessed their labor. His decision to respond to the performance in this way highlights a moment where the cultural customs and rules governing those not involved in the performance collided with the alternate reality created by the women.

The masks used in *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* were designed to mimic those of the Yoruba Egungun Masquerade, a ritualized spectacle of performance that occurs both in public and private places. In Yoruba culture, the term egungun (not capitalized) refers to any masquerade but when capitalized refers specifically to the Oyo Yoruba practice of honoring ancestors.⁴² As well,

⁴² Marilyn Hammersley Houlberg, "Notes on Egungun Masquerades among the

participating in the Egungun masquerade is a status symbol. As Ogunji writes in one blog post about the piece:

Masquerades are quite powerful for both community and performer. The masked dancer is allowed to go anywhere; they are protected. People are not allowed to even touch them. There are men who hold sticks, the cane men (and use them) if you attempt to get too close. ‘Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?’ draws from this tradition by allowing women to occupy a sacred and dynamic space within the public environment.⁴³

Egunguns can go anywhere and are protected, an intentional comment on the limitations placed on female bodies in many Nigerian public spaces. John Willis writes that the majority of scholarship on the Yoruba Egungun Masquerade “portrays it as a male-centered religious-political order and ritual practice used by men to discipline or restrict women” but argues that this is an oversimplification and mischaracterization perpetuated by 19th century missionaries who did not understand the complex gender dynamics at work in the masquerade. For example, while it is true that men are the only ones allowed to wear the masquerade attire and drum during the performance, the performers of the songs or prayers can be women. As well, women can inherit the Egungun mask from family. Scholars like Ulli Beier, Pierre Verger, and Henry Drewal have researched the ritual importance of mothers and motherhood, and Willis focuses on the importance of ritual wives who both hold roles that carry their own power and influence within the practice of Egungun.

Ogunji’s embrace of the Egungun masquerade is another instance of performing objecthood, as the Egugun is not a person but an incarnate spirit that

Oyo Yoruba," *African Arts* 11.3 (1978): 51-61, 99.

⁴³ Ogunji, “Will I still carry water when I am a dead women?”

occupies the form of the masquerade. Furthermore, the costumes in *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* did not attempt to obscure the women's bodies but were tailored around their legs, arms, waist and breasts, revealing their feminine forms. The use of masks in the performance also played with the gaze, as they allowed the women to see but obscured their faces from the public.



Fig. 1.4
Wura-Natasha Ogunji
Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?
2013
Photo Credit: Ema Edosio

In a city as bustling as Lagos and in a cultural context as expressive as Nigeria, Ogunji's use of Quiet in *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* was powerful. In *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, Kevin Quashie argues for the study of Quiet in order to see important moments of surrender, dreaming, and waiting in Black life, writing, "Quiet is antithetical to

how we think about black culture, and by extension, black people.”⁴⁴ I argue that this is even more so the case in Lagos, and Ogunji’s decision not to use dialogue or music is yet another example of her powerful worldmaking, as she uses the absence of sound to reinforce the spiritual essence and otherworldliness of the women performers.

Another significant object used in *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* were the repurposed jerry cans, which held the water that the women pulled. The jerry can was designed in Germany in the 1930s for military use and intended to hold up to 20 liters of fuel.⁴⁵ In the 1970s (during Nigeria’s oil boom) Finnish designer Eero Rislakki created the plastic jerry can, which included a screw top.⁴⁶ Epitomizing the major role oil has played in Nigeria’s history as both a blessing and a curse, jerry cans haunt Lagos’s landscape. Oil in Nigeria accounts for most of the country’s export earnings and 70 percent of government revenue.⁴⁷ I argue that by repurposing the jerry cans, often used to transport oil, painting them gold and including them in the creation of art, *Will I still carry water when I’m a dead woman?* brought to light the extent to which oil as a commodity has controlled Nigeria’s global interactions and also participated in the disenfranchisement of

⁴⁴ Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012): 8.

⁴⁵ Richard M. Daniel, “The Little Can That Could,” *Invention and Technology Magazine*, Volume 3, Issue 1, Fall 1987, https://web.archive.org/web/20070524182038/http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/it/1987/2/1987_2_62.shtml.

⁴⁶ Jonas, “Eero Rislakki – a pioneer in industrial design,” *Forthzine*, December 27, 2012, accessed March 30, 2018, <http://jonasforth.com/eero-rislakki-a-pioneer-in-industrial-design/>.

⁴⁷ “Crude Politics,” *The Economist*, March 28, 2015, <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21647361-broken-oil-industry-source-many-woes-crude-politics>.

Nigerian people. The jerry cans also represent the preciousness and scarcity of water in a country where the tap water is not safe to drink.

The performance also became a microcosm from which the women were able to reflect on their own lived experiences. Udobang writes:

The experience for me went beyond the test of physical endurance, pain, rebellion or even a loss of self awareness, but more of a living and breathing metaphor. Dragging the heavy containers of water through a public space became a symbolism of the expectations, desires and roles society had placed on women. More interesting is how quickly the observers curiosity diminishes and the realisation that you have become owner to the burdens that have been placed on you. There is of course the element of selfishness that brews amongst ourselves, you stop waiting because you become consumed with meeting up with the expectations placed on you and getting to the finish line. At the end of the journey, there was no victory parade, no crowd cheering, no homecoming.⁴⁸

For Udobang, the performance became the moment of reckoning—an opportunity for the performers to see the ways in which it is so easy to normalize the heavy burdens and expectations placed on women. At the end of the performance they realize that it does not serve them at all as attention quickly shifts, and the bar is raised yet again.

The difficulty of the performance itself brought to light the importance of care and support amongst the women in the group. Ogunji reflected on her own experience in an email to a friend that she later posted on her blog, writing:

i think i mentioned this, but this performance was the first time i felt that i might not be able to do this. i was worried about everyone else. i didn't check my mask's eye holes. i didn't test the weight of the water in my own kegs. i didn't take the time to cut thicker pieces of fabric for myself

⁴⁸ Wana Udobang, "Will I still carry water when I am a dead women?" *WanaWana Blog*, April 24, 2013, accessed March 30, 2018, <http://wanawana.net/2013/04/24/will-i-still-carry-water-when-i-am-a-dead-woman/>.

which i intuitively knew i would need. once we crossed the street i thought, oh fuck, i totally fucked up.⁴⁹

Ogunji goes on to describe how the intensity of the act of pulling the water caused her to question the strength of her legs for the first time and how the mask made it hard to breathe, making her wonder if she could finish the performance. What Ogunji describes here is not only the physical discomfort of *doing* the performance, but also what led to her physical discomfort: her preoccupation with the other women involved. Her preoccupation with their comfort and safety within the performance, even at her own expense, is both a feminist ethics of care characterized by attentiveness, responsiveness, and sympathy and also captures Ogunji in the role of ritual “mother,” checking on everyone and making sure that they are comfortable within the performance. Ogunji takes on the role women have traditionally played in masquerade and in doing so she gestures at the complex gender dynamics that have always been a part of masquerade. She pushes it one step further by allowing women to embody the masquerade and making it a site of care and solidarity. Her worry in the blog post is also revealing of the ways in which the care work most often performed by women often prevents women from caring for themselves and ensuring that their own needs are met. In *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* Ogunji performs disbelonging by pulling from a number of Yoruba customs and traditions and boldly queering them. By doing so, she simultaneously pulls from tradition and breaks social norms in order to say something new and call attention to the hardships women face.

⁴⁹ Ogunji, “Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?”

The *Mo gbo mo branch* performances also brought into question Ogunji's status as an American national claiming a Nigerian identity, and how that influenced her collaborations. In "The Politics of Exclusion: The Undue Fixation on Western Based African Diaspora Artists," Ghanaian artist Rikki Wemega-Kwawu argues that African artists living in the West are favored over their counterparts living on the African continent. Blaming well-known Nigerian curator, art historian, and cultural critic, Okwui Enwezor, Wemega-Kwawu writes:

Enwezor and his disciples should know that we cannot all go live in the West. Many of us continue to live in Africa by choice. African artists living in Africa are enraged and incensed by Enwezor's African diaspora bias. They see it as a diabolical strategy against them, calculated to undermine their efforts in Africa and hamstringing their growth. So instead of working in unison for the common good of Africa, African artists in Africa now see themselves pitched in an unholy confrontation against their counterparts abroad: the local versus the Diaspora.⁵⁰

Wemega-Kwawu's interpretation of the diasporic flows to and from the African continent does not account for the type of work that Ogunji is doing, which moves beyond the false "local artists" and "diaspora artists" binary, both realms that Ogunji occupies. Particularly in her two performance pieces, *beauty* (2013) (Figure 1.6) and *Queens* (2013) (Figure 1.7) the line between diaspora is blurred as Ogunji's relationship to her collaborators and the audience is further deepened, complicated, and negotiated.

beauty

The deepening of her relationship with her fellow performers and the contentiousness of space in Nigeria was evident in Ogunji's performance of *beauty*,

⁵⁰ Rikki Wemega-Kwawu, "The Politics of Exclusion: The Undue Fixation on Western Based African Diaspora Artists," *Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam Newsletter* no. 125.

which was inspired by Yugoslavian performance artist Marina Abramovic's piece *Relation in Time* (1977). In the performance Abramovic and her lover Ulay sat quietly with their hair tied together for seventeen hours. Ogunji's adaptation of *beauty* took up the important and controversial topic of hair for Nigerian women. Novelist Ayobami Adebayo points to the importance of the head in Yoruba cosmology stating:

Amongst the Yorubas, the head is seen as the most significant part of the body and its care and that of the hair that grows out of it reflects this perception. An individual's inner head, mythical and therefore invisible to the eye, is believed to control their faith and is often appealed to with words and appropriate sacrifices...Hairstyles do not only beautify they give religious expression, they serve as a means of identification, and are used by women to pass messages they would rather not verbalize.⁵¹

In the performance Ogunji and four other artists (both American-born and Nigerian-born) had their hair braided together and stood in the highly congested transportation plaza of Obalende Park jam-packed with bright yellow buses and street vendors for four hours.

⁵¹ "The Cultural Frontline," *BBC*, March 10, 2017, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04wflhh>.



Fig. 1.6
Wura-Natasha Ogunji
beauty
2013
Photographer: Soibifaa Dokubo

Furthermore, the individuals that regularly buy, sell, and commute through Obalende Park became a part of the performance as audience members and also as participants. In a short film about the performance produced by the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark, we see the beginning of the performance as the five performers sit in a straight line in the middle of Obalende Park having their hair braided by seven different local braiders who are wearing a mix of Western and traditional clothing. They hold bundles of black synthetic hair, swiftly pulling portions off before quickly incorporating the hair into the braids. The hair is braided in cornrows, which gather at the back of the head. Once each of the performers is done getting her hair braided, they all stand in a circle, backs facing each other, and the hair braiders connect the braids. The women are in the sun and people move rapidly around them, some seeming not to notice the

performance. Their bodies are mostly covered—they wear short sleeves but their legs are not exposed, as everyday attire for women is generally modest in nature.

Ogunji writes in her blog:

beauty was an incredible experience because we were in the middle of Obalende Motor Park. Hundreds of people passed by during the four hours that we were performing. They were watching us and we were watching them as intently. As performers we all spoke about that experience. We talked about even wanting to film the audience watching us. It's an incredible feeling, to be witnessed in this particular way by strangers and to also be in a position to really take in another person's presence, someone you don't even know.⁵²

Ogunji writes vulnerably about the experience of being tied to the five other women over the course of the day and the strain of the intense heat on their bodies. Over the course of the day the women bicker, they attempt minor adjustments to ease the pain of their necks, and they rotate the circle so they can change perspectives:

It's a very exhilarating feeling, to stand in Lagos in this very vulnerable manner because you can't run away from anything, and to know that you can do this for 4 hours, and you're kind of protected by the audience but the audience is also probably your biggest um foe...and um...one of the women, I mean an hour and half in, she was like, "This is crazy we need to, I don't want to do this anymore, this is...I'm so uncomfortable!" And it was very uncomfortable...and she's like, "Let's just end it!" and I was like, "Well you can end it!" And it brings out of this anger[...]and then by the end...I just love her so much... because by the end we were interviewed and someone said, "Well what did you do in those moments when you didn't think you weren't going to make it?" and she like, "Oh well I just drew on the power of the other women and I just knew we could get through it." And I just loved how like that was like her memory and reflection of the piece. And it was just so beautiful to me. Like yes, you know, this happened but this also happened. We could get through it and I knew the other women were there but...it's not easy! [...]So that was really lovely too that sort of like experience of knowing that you're setting up the conditions where other people can feel the strength and power of their own bodies and presence.⁵³

⁵² Ogunji, "Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?"

⁵³ Roxanne Bagheshirin Lærkesen, "Wura-Natasha Ogunji: Beauty in the Streets of Lagos," *Louisiana Channel*, <http://channel.louisiana.dk/video/wura-natasha-ogunji-beauty-streets-lagos>.

In the video, Ogunji laughs reflecting on the difference between how her fellow performer remembered the day and the emotions that stirred during the performance. She also comments on how in that moment she experienced doubt about putting the other performers in this position but also came to the conclusion that the piece was as much about the individual performers taking care of themselves as it was about the collective supporting one another.

Beauty also commented on the significance of hair for black women across the diaspora as a both divisive and unifying phenomenon; the importance of hair braiding as the primary way that African women earn money for themselves; and more generally on the burdens that connect women across the diaspora. It spoke to the effectiveness of performance as a way for women to verbally and non-verbally bring attention to their often-unseen stress and discomfort. Both acknowledging the hardship of the women who spend long hours braiding for relatively low wages and their customers who are required to spend money and withstand tedious hair pulling and sore scalps monthly or even weekly in order to be considered beautiful.

In Faedra Carpenter's article, "'L(activists) and Lattes' Breastfeeding Advocacy as Domestic Performance" she analyzes how nurse-ins became domestic performances underscoring feminist concerns that redefined "a women's place" and visually deconstructed concepts of "domestic space." *Beauty* played with these similar themes by bringing the private, highly gendered space of the hair-braiding salon to

the center of one of the busiest bus parks in Lagos.⁵⁴

The decision of the women to stand in a circle facing out was also intentional, as it offered them each a different perspective of the audience and performance. Layiwola compares them to Esu, the Yoruba trickster god writing:

Unlike the audience, however, the five fused performers are able to view all sides of the crowd and pull in more experiences. Like Esu, the trickster Yoruba God whose complex nature presents several attributes, the performers are able to see and capture from their various perspectives the comments and reactions of the audience.⁵⁵

Even though the women were hot and uncomfortable, the performance also created a site of vulnerability and rest, as the women were unable to do anything but stand, connected, for the entire duration of the performance. Furthermore, the fact that they were facing out prevented them from hiding or shielding themselves though they had use of their hands.

Ogunji shares her favorite moments of connection with the audience remembering two 7 or 8 year old girls in blue checked school uniforms, “one [who had] her arm wrapped around the shoulder and neck of the other” who stared from about ten feet away deep in discussion about the performance, and a group of 15 schoolgirls between the ages of 7 and 10 who watched for “quite a long time.” She proclaims, “they give us energy.”⁵⁶ Ogunji also writes about the ways that the presence of two white men temporarily altered the reception of *beauty* in her blog.

⁵⁴ Faedra Carpenter, “‘L(activists) and Lattes’ Breastfeeding Advocacy as Domestic Performance,” *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 16, no. 3 (November 2006): 348.

⁵⁵ Layiwola, “Transcultural Conversations,” 150.

⁵⁶ Wura-Natasha Ogunji, “beauty,” *This Road Blog*, April 13, 2012, http://goldeniron.blogspot.com/2013/04/beauty_13.html.

While one of the men was her good friend Connor, a scholar doing a Fulbright in Lagos, the other man was a stranger who began to film. Ogunji writes about how their presences lead many to believe that the performers were filming a commercial. She also expresses the anger she felt towards the man filming who she felt, did not respect the fact that the piece was not for him as he asked to interview the women before the piece was even over:

I don't want to write about the Australian guy who was videotaping because that is not an important part of the story. and it is not what i want to focus on, though if i let myself his presence will leave a bitter taste in my mouth. he is filming with a huge mic and windscreen. at first i am happy to see more cameras--the archive of all of this is so important. but he doesn't respect the piece itself. he asks to interview me. he is excited. i say, "at 6pm i will talk to you." he is up in our faces with his camera. unlike ema and soibifaa, he does not respect the power of the piece. at one point he says, "i don't know about you guys, but i'm having a great time." no more white people archiving (i did not invite him by the way). connor tells me how the meaning of the piece changes with his own presence as a white man. and also this Australian dude. people think it is a shoot for an advertisement. this is good information. but connor also tells me how one gentleman says, in Yoruba that "this is ours" meaning "this is for us Nigerians, these artists speak to us." this is more important.⁵⁷

In this retelling Ogunji shows how her anxieties about the presence of these white men changing the meaning of the piece were interrupted when Connor reported to Ogunji that he overheard one man say in Yoruba, "This is for us" signaling an understanding that Ogunji's art was legible to the Nigerians in the audience.

Additionally, rather than overly romanticize the engagement of the locals in her performance piece simply as "fellow artists" Ogunji speaks publically about the exchange of money in *beauty*, bringing to light the ways in which her worldmaking bumped up against and melted into the buzzing economy that already existed in

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Obalande Park. For example, Ogunji and fellow performer Nicole Vlado thought that it would be more impactful to have the hair braiding itself included in the performance, but the braiders, upon discovering that they would be braiding in the hot sun (rather than inside their shaded shops) demanded more money, which Ogunji agreed to pay. As well, before *beauty* began there were individuals wanting to collect money in exchange for allowing the performance to occur. As Ogunji explains, “Space is always regulated in Lagos. A lot of people don’t own anything but they will take a space and make it their own and charge for it and regulate it.”⁵⁸ As Ogunji strategized to figure out how much she should pay the men, fellow performer and Nigerian musician, Veronny, exclaimed, “We’re not paying them anything. We have a right to be here. We have the right to express ourselves.”⁵⁹ At the end of the performance the men returned, this time demanding even more money. The performers, tired and hot refused to pay and their videographer, Soibifaa Dokubo, entered into a confrontation with the men demanding money. In Ogunji’s retelling of the day she writes:

i am furious. crowds gather. more uniformed men emerge. soibifaa, the photographer, isn't taking any of this either. he is taller than all of them. he hands his camera to olu (i think). he is beyond ready. people must express themselves. and there are lines that get crossed. i have seen tons of loud arguments here in lagos. people must express their anger. the only actual fight i have seen was among schoolgirls. we must leave this place. we go to freedom park. it is difficult pulling the guys out of the confrontation. i want us all to be safe. i trust olu and soibifaa. i am also angry because i want them to leave this argument and come drink beer. i trust that the performance will not end badly. we take care of each other. nothing can touch us now.

⁵⁸ Lærkesen, “Wura-Natasha Ogunji: Beauty in the Streets of Lagos.”

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Ogunji's decision to speak openly about these exchanges and record them in her blog is important. In her recounting of these exchanges she highlights the politics of worldmaking, which is not always an act of building a utopia but fighting for the right to challenge the status quo.

I also think that it is notable that like Ogunji's 2011 performance of *Will I still carry water when I am a dead women?* many children, and young girls, specifically, had the opportunity to witness *beauty*. *Beauty* specifically was performed between 2 and 6pm, when the performers knew children would be leaving school and adults leaving work, many of whom take transportation from the Obalande Motor Park. By setting a piece explicitly exploring the themes of gender expectations and the burdens of beauty in a highly trafficked place where many young women could see them, the performers gave the young women permission to vocalize their thoughts and feelings about many of the expectations that have been normalized for young girls and also, perhaps, expanded the possibilities for how they could imagine creatively resisting and calling attention to their experiences.

Queens

Queens took place at the once popular Bar Beach and featured Ogunji and other women artists, as well as bystanders who wanted to participate, sitting on raised platforms wearing attached towering crowns of Nigerian *aso oke*, hand-loomed cloth made by the Yoruba people.

In a 24-second video from the performance, recorded by award-winning Nigerian filmmaker, Ema Edosio, Ogunji and friend and collaborator, ruby onyinyechi amanze silently sit side by side on two different raised platforms, which

look like wooden coffee tables, facing the sea. Their chairs are wrapped in thick mustard and rust orange tie dyed fabric and Ogunji wears a white top and pale yellow pants while amanze wears black overalls and navy top, in noticeable but balanced contrast to one another.



Fig. 1.7
Wura-Natasha Ogunji
Queens
2013
Photo Credit: Soibifaa Dokub

Their tall crowns are made of different types of cloth all in various shades of golden yellow and sit high on their heads, waving in the sea breeze and they tilt their heads forward in an attempt to help balance them. The crowns are connected by an additional strip of golden cloth that swings like an umbilical cord between them creating a visual similar to Lorna Simpson's 1991 work, *Same* a photograph of the back of two black women figures, one shirtless and one in a white shirt, with a long braid connecting their heads.

Queens was inspired by amanze, who Ogunji met in 2012 at the beginning of amanze's Fulbright during her first visit to Nigeria. The two quickly became friends, connected by the parallels in their separate stories and began making work together.⁶⁰ The text that inspired *Queens* reads:

I think about worship. What it means to worship something or someone. I think about worshipping oneself. Being god-like somehow. I see a throne. Women can't sit on those here. But what if? And a crown. Something about wrapping your hair with one of those traditional, elaborate, crunchy fabric headwraps. But the fabric is super long. Awkwardly long and maybe heavy. And the wrapping takes forever and makes your arms tired. And then your head gets a little wobbly as a result of the weight. But it's still a crown... Being prostrate is such a beautiful position to be in sometimes. A way to worship something higher...or lower, like the earth. I think about a woman that has a boy inside of her. But I'm not sure how to show that visually. Maybe the wrapping is done by a boy? There is something about a visual balance. Conflict. Duality. The chief eve[sic] is part boy. Graceful but choppy. Abrupt. Heavy. Delicate. Women here are all woman. It's all or nothing. Yes and no. Black and white. But what of a diluted woman? A slightly less woman concentration but still capturing the gentleness. The fluidity. The ability to seduce. And to kill.

⁶⁰ In an interview with the Tiwani Contemporary in London amanze shares, "We've worked together on drawings, and collaborations like this drawing. We commonly exchange emails and half of our written correspondence is around drawing. We speak maybe twice a day. If I'm in my studio and I'm thinking about something or working through something I might quickly send her an email. We have an ongoing conversation."

Amanze's words and the imagery in *Queens* once again bring to mind images of Oshun, often called the goddess of the sea. Amanze's references to the place where choppy meets graceful, where heavy meets delicate, and where seduction meets violence speaks to the many representations of Oshun. Amanze's writing also reflects on dissonance between the complex experience of being a woman, and socially accepted notions of womanhood in the Nigerian context. In wearing a crown there is both honor and difficulty due to its weight.

Once a space available to the public, Bar Beach has been reclaimed by the city of Lagos and a Dutch firm, which plan to turn it into a new island called Eko Atlantic City. Newspapers have reported the project will generate 150,000 jobs and increase tourism to Lagos.⁶¹ According to urban geographer Idowu Ajibade :

The EAC adaptation project is a satellite city located along the Bar Beach shoreline, as an appendage to Victoria Island (VI), one of the most affluent neighbourhoods in Lagos. Its primary goal is to mitigate erosion including storm surges and potential sea level rise. Coastal erosion has long been a problem on the Lagos Bar Beach, occurring at a particularly high rate of 30 m per year. Natural causes are wave tides, littoral drifts, and sediment characteristics, while human causes include harbour activities, beach-sand mining, tourism, shipwrecks, and intensified fisheries activities.⁶²

Fascinatingly, the original cause of the erosion began with the construction of three stone moles by the British between 1908 and 1912; the moles served to disrupt the natural flow of the ocean eroding more than 10km of the Bar Beach shorelines.⁶³

While the discourses surrounding Eko Atlantic City have focused primarily

⁶¹ "Eko Atlantic City project to create 150,000 jobs, Lagos commissioner says," *Premium Times*, April 13, 2013, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/ssouth-west/130208-eko-atlantic-city-project-to-create-150000-jobs-lagos-commissioner-says.html>.

⁶² Idowu Ajibade, "Can a future city enhance urban resilience and sustainability? A political ecology analysis of Eko Atlantic city, Nigeria," 87.

⁶³ A structure, usually of stone, used as a pier between places separated by water.

on containing the violent waves and various environmental initiatives, as Mary Corbin Sies writes in “Introduction: Critical Sustainability Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa,” “If the land matters, it matters not just to Africa’s biodiversity, but to African people engaged in many different land uses and manners of deriving meaning from the land.”⁶⁴ According to Ajibade’s interviews with individuals from Kuramo Beach, which lies next to Bar Beach, many lives have been lost and their businesses have suffered due to the increased number of storms, which have also been more severe. Moreover, in 2012 a fatal surge of the Atlantic Ocean killed 16 people who were mostly women and children, and displaced 1500 residents in Kuramo. Ajibade writes that Kuramo participants “expressed frustrations and anger over the protection of wealthy Lagosians with a massive seawall vis-a-vis their eviction in response to severe weather events. This dispossession of low-income residents from the beach areas and the appropriation of the common-pool resource for elite estate development have served to deepen social inequality and livelihood vulnerabilities.”⁶⁵ Today the beach is only open on holidays. In *Queens* Ogunji created a monument to honor those who had worked and lived at Bar Beach and the lives lost as a result of the Eko Atlantic Project, which she reflects on in her blog, writing, “I have never understood this, the math of people's lives, that you can exchange one thing for another as if they are equal, as if Eko Atlantic is greater than or equal to the dignity of humans, is greater than or equal to homes, is greater than or equal to the efforts of a father who lives on the beach with his family and works

⁶⁴ Mary Corbin Sies, “Introduction: Critical Sustainability Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Africa Today* 61, no 1 (Fall 2014): x.

⁶⁵ Ajibade, “Can a future city enhance urban resilience and sustainability?,” 89.

hard to send his child to the French school because he knows it will make her life better than his own.”⁶⁶

Moreover, by including the *aso oke* crowns and limiting the participants to women, Ogunji once again channels the power of women to create commentary about social issues and playfully disobey the authority of the state. Dolores Hayden argues that, “Urban landscapes are storehouses for these social memories,” referring to both personal memories and connected or social memories, “Even totally bulldozed places can be marked to restore some shared public meaning, a recognition of the experience of spatial conflict or bitterness, or despair.”⁶⁷ In her blog post about encountering the police at Bar Beach Ogunji writes:

There is commotion on the beach. My sister tells me that there is an oga⁶⁸ that is higher than the police officers we bribed. He works for Lagos State and wants us to stop performing immediately. From the raised platforms ruby and I stare at each other. The small arguing crowd comes closer. We hear the oga say, “I don’t want you to get the impression that I’m a bad man.” One of the police officers says it’s time to come down. I look at the non-existent watch on my wrist. ruby and I are still staring at each other and now we are laughing. I’m wondering if we will be physically pulled off of the platforms. It’s about 5:35pm now. I actually thought we might get kicked out much sooner. We continue laughing while also maintaining our composure. We are queens after all. Someone in the crowd says, “They’re praying.” This brings the arguing to a halt for a moment and buys us time. “Oh, they’re praying, well, let them finish praying and then they can come down.” More laughter from the queens.⁶⁹

Unlike *Will I still carry water when I am a dead woman?* and *beauty, Queens* was performed in a less trafficked area making the piece more about the performers than

⁶⁶ Wura-Natasha Ogunji, “Queens,” *This Road Blog*, August 12, 2013, accessed March 30, 2017, <http://goldeniron.blogspot.com/search/label/queens>.

⁶⁷ Dolores Hayden, “Contested Terrain,” *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995): 9.

⁶⁸ Oga means “Boss” or “Big man” in Yoruba.

⁶⁹ Ogunji, “Queens.”

an audience. The piece created a regal embodiment and peaceful meditation with the ocean for each woman who chose to wear the crown. The moments when the performance bumped against hegemonic power structures were telling. While their interactions with the police officers and the Lagos State employees were spontaneous, they helped reinforce the intention of the piece and bring to light the ways in which women taking up public space can be silently disruptive, as well as make a show of the power of black women's pleasure and leisure. Also, although the world of *Queens* was separate from that of the Lagos State government, in the moments that they came into contact the power of the silence in the performance protected it.

The lack of movement and physical attachment in *beauty* and *Queens* became useful tools for visualizing diaspora. In "Performing Stillness: Diaspora and Stasis in Black German Vernacular Photography" Campt asks us to move beyond the binary of movement and immobility, or stillness and motion to engage stasis.

She defines stasis as:

an effortful equilibrium achieved through a labored balancing of opposing forces and flows... They require us to recognize the forms of muscular tension imaged in them as a performance of stillness that is an active attempt to arrest both physical and affective motion. They require us to read the performance of stillness as an active stilling of motion, albeit one that never attains the complete cessation of movement or motionlessness.⁷⁰

Understanding *beauty* and *Queens* as acts of "stasis" draws attention to the tension they held in their necks and shoulders while attached in Obalande park, their fidgeting fingers as they waited in the sun for 4 hours, and their slightly nodding chins as they balanced the crowns on their heads at Bar Beach. According to Campt

⁷⁰ Tina Campt, "Performing Stillness: Diaspora and Stasis in Black German Vernacular Photography," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 26, no. 1 (June 2017), 158.

these are not full moments of stillness, which is not a true reality for the diasporic subject, but representative of the “the delicate labor of balancing the multiple forces and flows that constitute diasporic dwelling.”⁷¹

Furthermore, the use of external materials to connect the performers in *beauty* and *Queens* is an approach which I would argue sets Ogunji apart from the type of community based art projects that often occur in Nigeria. Rather than place Ogunji’s art making practice within the usual framework of “community building practices” in which an artist arrives from the United States, leads a “community art project,” and concludes with a final creation that is left behind as a reminder of the visitor from abroad, I would like to think through how we can read the complexity of diaspora in Ogunji’s work through her artistic community building. Ogunji’s longing and desire to find home in Lagos as a mixed race Nigerian American brought her together with other returnee artists as well as local artists to consider the parallels between their experiences, and gave her the opportunity to construct a chosen family in light of her Nigerian father’s passing. Their participation also validated Ogunji’s observations about a place that she could not completely call home and gave her permission to approach Nigeria as an insider, even suggesting that returnee artists and local artists may have similar things to say. Ogunji affirms this idea in a blog post where she writes about how prior to performing *Will I still carry water?* she was hyperaware of her position as a Nigerian who had not grown up in Nigeria and wary about how her feelings, ideas, and interest in feminism would play out in the performance and whether they would have relevance for other

⁷¹ Ibid, 168.

Nigerians. It was only after she completed the performance that she realized they did. Ogunji's homemaking is a feminist praxis that is invested in an understanding of home that centers women and their desires, particularly in a cultural context where women occupying public space in this manner is out of the ordinary.

Furthermore, both *beauty* and *Queens* focused on what the women communicated without words, both in their bodies and simple presence in the given space, and also through their actions. Quashie writes,

The quiet subject is a subject who surrenders, a subject whose consciousness is not only shaped by struggle but also by revelry, possibility, the wildness of the inner life. Quiet is not a performance or a withholding; instead, it is an expressiveness that is not necessarily legible, at least not in a world that privileges public expressiveness. Neither is quiet about resistance. It is surrender, a giving into, a falling into self. The outer world cannot be avoided or ignored, but one does not only have to yield to its vagaries. One can be quiet.”⁷²

The performance became meditations for the performers who were asked to be fully present in their bodies for extended periods of time, something that can feel impossible in a city like Lagos that requires one to be constantly thinking, strategizing, and watching your back, especially as a woman. Through these performance pieces Ogunji created worlds where she and the women she performed with demanded to be seen in a context of their own creation.

In each of Ogunji's *Mo gbo mo branch* performances she manifests a type of queer worldmaking with her collaborators, which allow her to access feelings of belonging and insert herself into Lagos on her own terms. In one of my email interviews with Ogunji she writes:

⁷² Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, 45.

I first went to Nigeria in 2011. It was amazing. I received a travel grant from the Dallas Museum of Art so my trip was funded by my art. That was really important to me. I went because I wanted to go and I got myself there. After so many years of family saying they would take me, coupled with so many stories about how dangerous it is, I felt so certain about my capacity to make it my own. And my relationship with Nigeria has unfolded in a particular way that is very much influenced and shaped by the fact that I am an artist. I have family--cousins, siblings--but I very much define myself through myself...which is quite different from many Nigerians (not better or worse, just different). Part of this is because my father is no longer living so I have had to do some reconstruction of family in the sense of finding people and making connections. And also deciding the tenor of those connections.⁷³

In this quote Ogunji emphasizes the fact that her art making and personal desire to go to Nigeria is what got her there, and that fact is important to her. She also highlights the ways that family members born in the homeland, who are so often seen as the facilitators of these type of homecoming trips, are often the largest barriers for first and 1.5 generation diasporans, with their false promises of returning to the homeland “one day,” as well as their own internalized fears and traumas from the homeland. Ogunji’s answer to this is to simply trust her ability to make the connection anew and she does, not through seamlessly conforming to what is already happening but by engaging in unruly return and embracing her own disbelonging vis a vis community building.

In *Mo gbo mo branch*, Ogunji performs disbelonging through her hyper visible engagement with Nigeria as an outsider, woman, and artist. I am struck by the fact that during my research trip to Lagos in 2014 most people who I met knew her, speaking to the ways her own disbelonging has not prevented her from building community with Nigerians and connecting but has in fact facilitated those connections. It is difficult to trace how Ogunji’s performances in Lagos have been

⁷³ Ogunji, email interview.

received—the still emerging art world means that there is no consistent art coverage, though blogs are slowly appearing. However when asked about her experiences with audiences in Lagos, Ogunji shares in one interview:

I have found people in Lagos to be very generous. They ask questions. They respect the performance and the performers. They give a lot. But they also require a lot because you can see crazy things here on a daily basis, in any moment. I *am* very interested in interruptions and disorientation. The fact that we are women occupying public space in unexpected ways is an immediate interruption. I want people to stop to look because they are seeing something that calls their attention in a particular way--and not in a violent way. A fight can stop traffic. I want to interrupt someone's daily journey with something different.⁷⁴

Ogunji's 2013 mixed media drawing, *Oyibo vs herself (That's not the Atlantic. There's a disco ball between us.)* (Figure 1.8) depicts a large mass, made up of map-like lines of streets and bodies of water, rendered in graphite and silver thread. On each side of the mass there is a red outline drawing of the same figure, presumably Ogunji, whose body has been replaced with a distorted red and silver map of Lagos. The figure on the left stares at the form contently smiling, while the mouth of the figure on the right is aggressively open with her tongue protruding. *Oyibo vs herself* is a performance of diaspora both in its subject matter and in its creation. After Ogunji returned from Nigeria she experienced, what she calls “a great amount of loss and urgent longing.”⁷⁵ To cope, she began tracing maps of the city of Lagos in an effort to remember and reconnect with the geography of where she had been. In her effort to translate her experience—to reconcile the version of

⁷⁴ Maryam Kazeem, “Performances That Seek to Interrupt: Nigerian Artist Wura-Natasha Ogunji & The Craft of Spectacle,” *OkayAfrica*, May 27, 2013, accessed March 30, 2018, <http://www.okayafrica.com/nigeria-art-wura-natasha-ogunji-visual-performance/>.

⁷⁵ Wura-Natasha Ogunji, interview by author, October 25, 2014.

herself that she was in Nigeria and the version of herself that she was in the United States— Ogunji began to imagine the Atlantic not as a place of loss, but rather as a generative space. By imagining the surface of the ocean as infinite mirrors, reflecting and refracting, she came to the image of a disco ball. In the center of the piece is a rectangular space where Ogunji projected cell phone videos she took during her time traveling throughout the continent. One video was taken at Cape Coast in Ghana looking out at the sea from a slave castle, and the other video appropriately captures amanze, dancing at a bar in Lagos. With this metaphor of the disco ball, Ogunji locates the Atlantic as a site of joy, considering the endless possibilities for “returning” home within oneself, rather than linearly reaching for a forgotten past. Moreover, as I mention earlier in this chapter, the word “oyinbo” or “oyibo” in Yoruba refers to a foreigner. It can be intended derogatorily or used somewhat objectively. In her title Ogunji embraces the term, acknowledging that there is a part of her that will always be foreign, but this is not the entire story. The title is a playful jab at the false binaries of insider/outsider and Nigerian/American, which exist simultaneously and symbiotically within Ogunji, speaking to what Paul Gilroy calls “the processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis) continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents.”⁷⁶

In popular discourses of belonging and community, we are not encouraged to think of belonging as something that takes work. In fact, it is shameful to be “trying to hard” to belong or to connect.

⁷⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 51.



Fig. 1.8
 Wura-Natasha Ogunji
Oyibo vs herself (That's not the Atlantic. There's a disco ball between us.)(2013)
 24 x 48 inches
 Mixed media on paper with digital video (1:24, color, sound)

In *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, E.

Patrick Johnson asks us to interrogate our attachments to the idea of authenticity

writing:

The key here is to be cognizant of the arbitrariness of authenticity, the ways in which it carries with it the dangers of foreclosing the possibilities of cultural exchange and understanding. As Henry Louis Gates Reminds us: “No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world.”⁷⁷

Ogunji’s work brings to light that fact that belonging is continuous work and it is valuable work. By examining her romantic artistic exploration of her innate connection to Nigeria as existing alongside her experiences of marginality when she began living in Nigeria, this chapter brings to light the ways in which returning to homeland necessitates a certain amount of fantasy and idealizing, which can

⁷⁷ E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham:Duke, 2003), 3.

actually help catalyze the material and oftentimes difficult act of creating community and building home. Additionally, this chapter highlights the utility of performance art as a medium able to create empowering sites of disbelonging and as a queer worldmaking practice capable of deconstructing and reconstructing home anew. In the following chapter I consider the importance of expressions of the erotic, and representations of intimacy and vulnerability in negotiations regarding home and belonging for Nigerian diasporic women

Chapter 3: Erotic Agency and African Diasporic Intimacy in the Work of Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Zina Saro-Wiwa

In “Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure” Joan Morgan addresses the tendency of black feminist theory, particularly in its engagement with the erotic, to essentialize the experiences of African American women while ignoring how this might be different for black women positioned throughout the diaspora. She writes, “All the women are white; all the men are black...but are all the blacks African American?”¹ While Morgan contends that Diaspora Studies has much to offer in terms of complicating the African American essentialism present in black feminist scholarship, this chapter argues that black feminist investigations of the erotic and women’s pleasure also have much to bring to Diaspora Studies. I argue that a deeper understanding of the erotic as it relates to diasporic identity and experience brings to light the ways in which diasporic women embody disbelonging by reclaiming their personal power, resisting oppressive social norms, and conceptualizing their diasporic identities through the lenses of vulnerability, desire, and anti-respectability *while* simultaneously acknowledging and navigating cultural norms and expectations.

Audre Lorde defines the erotic as “an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our

¹ Joan Morgan, “Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure,” *The Black Scholar* 45, no. 4 (2015): 40.

lives.”² She argues that the erotic connection functions through the open and fearless underlining of one’s capacity for joy and pleasure, contending that “when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and [allow] that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense.”³ L.H Stallings builds upon this idea in *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* with her concept of “funky erotixxx,” defined as “an acknowledgment that what is profane or obscene has a lineage that exceeds its destructive imperialist mandates within Western Patriarchy, and is sacred.”⁴ Stallings contends, “As a scholar of gender and sexuality and one of many heiresses to trickster traditions, I cannot omit or lessen the significance of these moments in which what is thrilling, erotic, obscene, pornographic, profane, or sexual intersects with what is feminine, sacred, spiritual, intellectual, and nurturing because they are still ongoing moments that form how I read people, culture, communities and political movements.”⁵ In this chapter I analyze representations of love, intimacy, taboo, and pleasure in the work of Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Zina Saro-Wiwa. Looking specifically to Akunyili Crosby’s mixed media paintings: *I Always Face You, Even When it Seems Otherwise* (2012), *Thread* (2012), *The Bridge* (2010), and *Re-branding my Love* (2011), and Saro-Wiwa’s 2012/2013 documentary project and video installation *Eaten By the Heart*, which explored intimacy, heartbreak, and

² Audre Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power” (1981), 339.

³ Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic,” 342.

⁴ L.H Stallings, *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2015), xv.

⁵ Ibid.

love performances among Africans, both on the continent and throughout the diaspora, I consider the role of pleasure and intimacy in how diasporic subjects conceptualize and negotiate their attachments to their homeland and host country. I argue that Akunyili Crosby and Saro-Wiwa perform disbelonging by using their respective mediums to mark the black diasporic body as a site of sexual agency and in doing so, simultaneously acknowledge and resist the burden of respectability and cultural norms and expectations that hide and dismiss the importance of sexual expression, intimacy, and vulnerability in the lives of African and African diasporic women.

“African Sexuality”

Global historian Marc Epprecht contends that the study (and corresponding stigmatization) of African sexuality began with written accounts from Arab Muslim travelers during the ninth century. While the scholarship of Akbar Muhammad describes their observations as generally thoughtful and respectful, Epprecht asserts that the travel logs also included claims pertaining to the “immense potency and unbridled sexuality” of the Africans that they encountered. One example are the travel journals of 21-year old Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta, who describes being shocked by the way African Muslims interpreted the Quran, particularly its teachings on modesty, noting the presence of nude women and married Malian women who met privately with male friends.⁶ Historians speculate that these accounts had reached the Portuguese before they arrived on the African coast in the fifteenth century, and by the late eighteenth century a number of European scholars

⁶ Marc Epprecht, “The Making of African Sexuality: Early Sources, Current Debates,” *History Compass* 8.8 (2010): 770.

were writing about African sexuality.⁷ Unsurprisingly, these accounts were bridled in racism, inaccurate translations, and exaggeration, and once African scholars began publishing in European languages, they prioritized contesting these accounts. Liberal missionaries such as Henri Juno, and pioneering anthropologists Isaac Schapera and E.E Evans-Pritchard, careful not to alienate their potential African allies, blamed what they saw as perverse sexual acts like homosexuality on European racism, rather than on the Africans, who they argued “adapted to the harsh conditions created by European racism.”⁸ This is captured in the work of Jomo Kenyatta, the first known African to be trained as an anthropologist and former prime minister and president of Kenya, who wrote *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), a monograph about his community, the Ginkuyu tribe. In the monograph Kenyatta denies the existence of non-heterosexual intercourse within the Ginkuyu tribe writing, “Any form of sexual intercourse other than the natural form, between men and women acting in a normal way, is out of the question. It is considered taboo even to have sexual intercourse with a woman in any position except the regular one, face to face.”⁹ His use of words like “natural,” “normal” and “regular” embrace a European standard of asserting control via categorization, and his own investments in depicting his tribe in such a way that would be legible to a European audience and appeal to their moral standards at that time. By the 1940s the study of African sexuality had been abandoned for what were seen as more pressing topics

⁷ “The Making of African Sexuality,” 770.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 773.

such as kinship networks and belief systems, and by the 1980s the HIV/AIDS epidemic refocused the study of African sexuality all together.¹⁰

Though in the past decade there has been an increase in the amount of scholarship on African sexuality, love, and pleasure, the same themes of sexual violence and disease have continued to define African sexuality. For example in her article “Shattering and Reassembling Hypersexual Moments: Girls Indulging in the Pursuit of Pleasure,” researcher Ronika Mudaly struggles to move beyond the HIV/AIDS rate and cases of rape as she presents her findings from interviews with ten South African girls about their sexual perceptions and preferences. Though she argues that the intention of the project is to present an innovative research methodology “about girls, by girls, and for girls,” her interpretation of their answers to her questions regarding how they think about sex always seem to circle back to what she sees as relevant data on rape and disease in South Africa.¹¹ As well, Naminata Diabate argues that scholarship and cultural production about the sexuality of Nigerian women disproportionately focuses on reproduction, female circumcision, and rarely, if ever, on pleasure. In her dissertation *Genital Power: Female Sexuality in West African Literature and Film*, she describes how upon entering her program in Comparative Literature at the University of Texas at Austin she became frustrated with how West African women were continuously depicted in her assigned readings:

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ronika Mudaly, “Shattering and Reassembling Hypersexual Moments: Girls Indulging in the Pursuit of Pleasure,” *Sexualities*, 5(2): 239.

I was frustrated with my assigned readings and their images of West African women, continuously caught in the semiotic of cutting (clitoridectomy and infibulation), violation (corrective rape, rape as weapon of war, marital rape), pathology (HIV/AIDS), and over-reproduction, all practices I have come to call the pervasive picture of negative sexualities. To be more specific, an overwhelming number of pre-1990 fictional narratives from West Africa feature a wide spectrum of acts of violence against female bodies. In other words, these imaginings “restage” or “perform” the paradigm of victimization of women’s lives.¹²

Epprecht’s historiography of the evolution of the study of African sexuality illustrates how contemporary African ideas about what constitutes African morality (and perhaps the investment in morality at all) were formed in direct response to European misunderstandings, judgments, and exaggerations of pre-colonial African love, sex, and intimacy. Primarily invested in countering the inaccurate scholarship produced by European researchers, many Africans, a great number who had also converted to Christianity, sought to re-present themselves as respectable, moral citizens in the eyes of the colonial elite.

Ambivalent Longing and Interracial Intimacy in *I Always Face You, Even When it Seems Otherwise* (2012), *Thread* (2012), *The Bridge* (2010), and *Re-branding My Love* (2011)

In the first part of this chapter I will discuss the work of Akunyili Crosby who I argue utilizes her body as an archive of photographs and popular culture, a transitional space between Nigeria and the United States, and a site of sexual agency, thus simultaneously acknowledging and resisting cultural burdens regarding sex, love and desire, and opening possibilities for alternate forms of

¹² Diabate Naminata (2011). *Genital Power: Female Sexuality in West African Literature and Film* (Doctoral Dissertation), 8.

belonging. I use Akunyili Crosby's erotically charged portraits of her and her husband Justin, particularly her works, *I Always Face You, Even When it Seems Otherwise* (2012), *Thread* (2012), and *The Bridge* (2010) and *Re-branding My Love* (2011) to examine how she uses collage, compositions, color, culturally significant objects and sexually charged scenes to comment on the relationship between longing, anxiety, and pleasure for diasporic subjects. In the second part of this chapter, I examine Saro-Wiwa's documentary series and video installation, *Eaten By the Heart* and argue that it is a visual and embodied reclaiming of African sexuality and sexual agency. I contend that by offering viewers the opportunity to hear African and African diasporic subjects, particularly women, speak frankly about love, intimacy, and heartbreak and observe the intimate act of kissing, *Eaten by the Heart* is not only an experimental film but an oral history project that creates space for African men and women to share their stories and embody their sexuality in community.

Akunyili Crosby was born in 1983 in Enugu, Nigeria. Like many other Nigerians her age, in 1999 the country's military dictatorship and financial hardships lead her to the United States to pursue her education. Though she originally set out to study medicine, she graduated from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and, later, from the Yale School of Art where she studied painting.¹³ In the last five years Akunyili Crosby has become one of the most sought after contemporary African artists. In 2012 she sold out at Art Basel in less

¹³ Jean-Phillippe Dedieu, "Njideka Akunyili Crosby's Intimate Universes," *The New Yorker*, accessed May 30, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/njideka-akunyili-crosbys-intimate-universes>.

than an hour¹⁴ and in 2016 she was awarded the James Dicke Prize in Painting from the American Art Museum. As well, she has broken several auction records with her highest sale going for 3 million dollars at Christie's Auction House in London, and in 2017 she was selected as a MacArthur Fellow. She currently lives and works in Los Angeles.¹⁵

Akunyili Crosby describes her work as deeply autobiographical in nature, explaining in one interview:

I use my art as a way to negotiate my seemingly contradictory loyalties to both my cherished Nigerian culture that is currently eroding and to my white American husband. Most of the Nigerian traditions I experienced growing up are quickly disappearing due to the permeation of Western culture and the ensuing opinion that being “too Nigerian” is uncool. I feel dismayed by Nigerians’ unquestioningly valuing anything Western as superior however, my awareness of this problem does not exempt me from it – indeed, I question whether this mentality played a part in my falling in love with my husband. My art serves as a vehicle through which I explore my conflicted allegiance to two separate cultures.¹⁶

In this quote she reveals her own anxiety around what she understands as her problematic affinity for Western culture despite her deep love for Nigeria, even briefly questioning her own romantic relationship with a white American. But it is also within this quote that she locates her work as a vehicle for navigating these tensions, and as I argue, challenging and subverting hegemonic discourses about

¹⁴ Bomi Odufunade, “Primary Colors: Njideka Akunyili,” *Huffington Post*, 8.24.2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arise-magazine/harlem-studio-african-american-artists_b_1827728.html.

¹⁵ Victoria L. Valentine, “Njideka Akunyili Crosby Painting Sells for Record 3.1 Million at Christie’s, Nearly Three Times Her Previous High Mark,” *Culture Type*, 3.12.17, <http://www.culturetype.com/2017/03/12/njideka-akunyili-crosby-painting-sells-for-record-3-1-million-at-christies-nearly-three-times-her-previous-high-mark/>.

¹⁶ Chika Odua, “Njideka Akunyili Crosby: A Nigerian Visual Artist,” *Afrocentric Confessions*, accessed May 30, 2016, <http://chikaoduahblog.com/2012/10/19/njideka-akunyili-a-nigerian-visual-artist/>

respectable Nigerian womanhood and the responsibility that women have over the transference of cultural heritage.

Akunyili Crosby's paintings explore a variety of themes, often all at once: Nigeria's dictatorship, her adjustment from living in the small town of Enugu to the mega city of Lagos, Igbo culture, family memories, and her relationship with Justin. She has likened the environments she depicts in her paintings to Homi Bhabha's "third spaces" defined as spaces of hybridity where new forms of cultural meaning blur essentialist notions of identity, and alternative ways of being are imagined. Third spaces encompass contradictory understandings of culture and identity, and move us away from exclusionary practices of identification and towards "new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation."¹⁷

In order to create the scenes in her works, Akunyili Crosby and Justin pose as stand-ins for the family members she depicts in her paintings. Thus, the worlds in her paintings are created from the conditions of her own outsidership.¹⁸ Her paintings utilize self-representation and the erotic to defiantly linger in the third space between longing for homeland and finding pleasure in making a home elsewhere. In an online CNN interview, Akunyili Crosby states:

If I hadn't left Nigeria, I wouldn't be an artist, I would be a doctor. When I told my parents I wanted to be an artist, they couldn't get their heads around why an educated person who went to college in America would want to be an artist...However, there is a new crop of creative Nigerians who are changing this and others will follow. There's a nice energy about the

¹⁷ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 1.

¹⁸ Although Akunyili Crosby has visited Nigeria since her departure, she has never exhibited there despite her extremely successful career in the United States.

country that's finally coming into its own. I want to be part of that change.¹⁹

By pointing out the fact that she could not have become an artist if she would have stayed in Nigeria and yet still choosing to identify with its cultural shift, Crosby illustrates the ways in which critical distance from “home” has served as a generative space for her, a space that brings diasporic subjects into more nourishing and fulfilling relationships with the homeland, despite feelings of outsidership that accompany the act of migration.

Domestic spaces feature prominently in Akunyili Crosby's paintings where she combines features from the multiple landscapes she has called home in order to capture her dual allegiances to the United States and Nigeria. She uses paint, charcoal, graphite, and images cut from Nigerian lifestyle magazines and the Internet, which she transfers onto paper with acetone, as not to disrupt the smooth surface. In her multimedia paintings, viewers are forced to experience the uneasiness of negotiating multiple cultural universes as she explores her own anxiety as a 1.5-generation immigrant drifting away from her home and culture. Furthermore, Akunyili Crosby captures private moments of love and desire between her and Justin, forcing viewers to simultaneously engage with agency through intimate love, while grappling with her own unease around crossing cultural and racial borders. Gayatri Gopinath argues that within contemporary nationalist and diasporic discourses, home “is a sacrosanct space of purity, tradition and authenticity, embodied by the figure of the “woman” who is enshrined at its

¹⁹ Catriona Davies, “Artist joins Nigeria's ‘cultural explosion’,” *CNN*, accessed May 30, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/10/22/world/africa/nigerian-artist-njideka-akunyili/>.

center.”²⁰ By focusing on domestic spaces created out of her own imaginings and desires, Akunyili Crosby locates the home as a site of productive tension between conservative traditions and deviance.

I Always Face You, Even When It Seems Otherwise

The six and a half foot by six and a half foot, *I Always Face You, Even When it Seems Otherwise* (Figure 2.1) explores the themes of intimacy, anxiety, cultural loyalty, and outsidership. The painting, which is split between two panels, positions the viewer on the periphery of the room, perhaps crouching down just out of view. It shows Akunyili Crosby, Justin and her siblings gathered around a small orange table with a collaged ledge (modeled after the Ikea table in her and Justin’s Los Angeles home). The painting features the recurring colors of blue and orange in various shades—tangerine, rust, teal, navy, and aqua—creating a sense of cohesion amongst the hundreds of collaged photographs of people and artifacts. The photographs fill the window on the left side of the image, the bodies of all of the figures (with the exception of her husband Justin who wears a navy kaftan), and even the floor.²¹

The composition in the left panel is obscured by what appears to be the side of a table or desk. Akunyili Crosby has painted a lime green “glo” sticker advertising the popular Nigerian cellphone provider, and collaged the last four letters of a word: LEFU, intended to be intentionally vague. Behind the desk there is a plush velvet caramel colored lounge chair, inspired by her grandmother’s home,

²⁰ Gopinath, *Impossible Diasporas*, 18.

²¹ A traditional Nigerian men’s top.

which is decorated with three ornate white lace doilies that hang delicately on the back of the chair and the ends of the two arm rests.



Fig. 2.1
Njideka Akunyili Crosby
I Always Face You, Even When It Seems Otherwise (2012)
Acrylic, pastel, charcoal, colored pencil, collage and Xerox transfers on paper
(two panels) Each panel: 6.5 ft. × 6.5 ft.

In the tiny holes of the doilies we can identify photos of her and her siblings from childhood. In the center of the composition, split between the two panels, is a male figure, presumably her brother, who is wearing a red, green, and purple shirt. His muscular chestnut arms hang heavily as he appears to gaze out a window covered with vertical and horizontal black metal bars, a common security measure in Nigerian homes. In the right panel, Akunyili Crosby, who is wearing a yellow and blue dress featuring an intricate fractal design, sits at the table with her sister and brother. Although sitting down, she tilts her head up to kiss Justin, who stands next to the table. The others at the table appear to be looking elsewhere, despite being so close in proximity.

Akunyili Crosby's use of collage in the image tells its own story. On the left side of the window we see traditional images capturing Igbo culture, including artifacts such as a black slender pot with crisscross details on the outside—the Igbo Ukwu pot, one of the oldest artifacts ever found; masks, traditional masquerades covered in raffia, and photographs of political leaders including Odumegwu Ojukwu, who would have been the president of Biafra, and Nnamdi Azikiwe who fought for Nigeria's independence. It is a window into Igbo history and culture. In her brother's form she has collaged photos of her family from the 1980s and 1990s. In his form there are portraits of little girls in white communion dresses and staged family portraits. The right panel of the painting is primarily filled with photos from popular culture and images from her and Justin's wedding, capturing contemporary Nigeria. In one image that we can spot right in the center of her brother's back is an image of Justin in a traditional bright red Igbo hat holding Akunyili Crosby's hand in what appears to be some kind of ceremonial gesture. Details like the white lace doilies, the geometric metal grate over the window, and the "glo" sticker mark the space as distinctly and familiarly Nigerian to any individual who has spent time in the country. In fact, the key detail that differentiates this composition from a traditional Nigerian home scene is the fact that an interracial couple is performing a public act of affection in an intimate space that they share with three other individuals.

The title, *I Always Face You Even When it Seems Otherwise*, reads like an oath of reassurance intended for her friends and family in the homeland, and also for Justin. In an interview Akunyili Crosby explains that the inspiration for the

piece came from Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. In the story, the main character, an Igbo man, is preparing to study in England. Before he leaves there is a meeting and he is advised by others in his village not to return with a foreigner because the affairs never last—the foreigners always leave. The wisest man in the village stands up and states that the problem is not that the foreigner will leave but that the foreigner will make the Igbo man turn his back on his kinsman. Akunyili Crosby explains that this story touched on her apprehension about marrying Justin, writing:

That really hit on the anxiety I had felt around my marriage to Justin—this feeling that you will leave us if you marry outside, especially because the culture passes through men. It's as if my children will not be considered Igbo—I'm not really considered part of my extended family/village anymore. It's almost like making the choice to divorce yourself from your culture.²²

Art historian Tobias Wooford asserts, “A diasporic community is set apart in its present location with its gaze always directed toward the place of homeland.”²³ This inability to fully turn away from homeland is reflected in the positioning of her body where although Akunyili Crosby's head is turned towards her husband's, her body faces her family. Moreover, the fractal design on her dress seems to gesture at the ways she is split between multiple places and allegiances. The letters LEFU also speak to this anxiety. Akunyili Crosby has said that the letters appear in several Igbo words, one being *efulefu*, which appears in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and means “lost one” and more colloquially “sell out” or “traitor.” *Efulefu: The Lost One* (2011) is also the name of another of Akunyili Crosby's paintings that depicts

²² *I Refuse to Be Invisible*, 28

²³ Tobias Wooford, “Africa as Muse: The Visualization of Diaspora in African American Art 1950-1980,” PhD diss. (Los Angeles: University of California, 2011), 9.

her and Justin in a loving but tentative embrace, her legs awkwardly intertwined with his. In *Efulefu: The Lost One*, their bodies are noticeably more self-conscious than the others who kick their legs and flail their arms confidently, but still she stares intently into his eyes. Although in *Things Fall Apart* the word *efulefu* generally refers to men, Akunyili Crosby reappropriates the term creating a Nigerian version of the lost woman who betrays her culture. Other examples of this archetype include La Malinche in Mexican folklore and Pocahontas.

The question of how women take on the responsibility of guarding heritage and passing down stories is addressed in the work of Charmaine Crawford who examines how African-Caribbean women keep Caribbean culture and communities alive abroad while working as foreign domestics arguing that more pressure may be put on women to preserve their cultural heritage due to their, “reproductive role in nurturing and socializing children.”²⁴ What I find most fascinating are the larger implications of what it means for her to share this kiss with Justin. In Nigeria, the same colonial logics of respectability and morality that I discussed earlier have made public displays of affection a taboo act, even between married couples. In most Nigerian homes it is rare to even see parents kissing in front of their children. The ramifications are especially dire for women who may be seen as “loose” or indecent by friends, families, and others in their community. This cultural opinion is reflected on the now defunct podcast, *Waza Africa*, which did an episode on the subject of PDA titled, “Public Display of Affection? Not in Africa.” In the episode

²⁴ Charmaine Crawford, “African-Caribbean Women, Diaspora, and Transnationality,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 23.2 (Winter 2004): 97-103.

one man says he frowns upon PDA explaining, “We know that Africa is known for good moral standard. So this issue of PDA in Africa is still seen as immorality.”²⁵

This came up during my phone conversation with Akunyili Crosby who shared that on her and Justin’s wedding day she gave him the “heads up” that they couldn’t kiss, “I was like you better not do anything because we don’t do this in Nigeria, and he thought I was being dramatic and was like, ‘No we have to kiss! blah blah’ and we did a little quick peck and at the end everyone was like, ‘What were you thinking?’” As she spoke I was reminded that when I watched the VHS of my own parents getting married it struck me as odd that my father only gave my mother a quick kiss on the cheek at the end of the ceremony. Up until my phone conversation with Akunyili Crosby I had thought that it was because he did not want my mother’s lipstick to rub off on him. I share this with Akunyili-Crosby and she laughs, knowingly exclaiming, “You do it on the cheek!”²⁶

The added interracial element of this encounter in *I Always Face You* adds to the stigma, as interracial marriages, particularly between black Nigerians and white others are rarely, if ever, understood as occurring in local Nigerian contexts. This is to say that you may travel abroad and marry a foreigner but you would not bring them back home. This has in fact become a popular Nollywood plotline where the white Westerner has an impossible time adjusting to life in the village.²⁷ In light of this, Akunyili Crosby’s decision to depict a space where this social taboo act can

²⁵ Yima Nalley, “Public Display of Affection? Not in Africa,” *Waza Online*. Podcast audio, May 20, 2014, <https://wazaonline.com/en/speak-up/public-display-of-affection-not-in-nigeria>.

²⁶ Njideka Akunyili Crosby in discussion with the author, November 2016.

²⁷ See *Osuofia in London* 1 and 2, which is one of the highest grossing Nollywood films of all time.

occur is a rebellious act. In this scene, she has made an intentional decision to allow this kiss to happen without turning her back on her family. She instead invites them to gaze upon her and Justin. The inappropriate nature of this kiss in this distinctly Nigerian context is supported by the body language expressed by the three other figures in the composition, who all seem to be intentionally looking away from the kissing couple at a table so small that it almost demands spatial proximity and eye contact. We see one brother's elbows as he gazes out the window, another stares at the table and her sister faces straight ahead directing her attention to the end of the table. It is not unlikely that this type of public kiss would garner this response in a Nigerian context. Furthermore, we can extend this conversation about PDA to Akunyili Crosby's decision to represent this scene at all, as a transgressive act in and of itself. Appadurai contends that global labor diasporas involve immense strains on women, as marriages become "the meeting points of historical patterns of socialization and new ideas of proper behavior."²⁸ While Appadurai speaks specifically of families who migrate together, this can also be the case for female members of households who move away but are still accountable to elders in the homeland and responsible for preserving the reputation of the family abroad. In *I Still Face You, Even When it Seems Otherwise*, Akunyili Crosby captures an uncomfortable moment where tradition and female sexual agency meet, gesturing at the ways in which national allegiances are read onto the bodies of diasporic subjects, particularly women, who carry greater responsibility as cultural reproducers.

²⁸ Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference," 42.

Thread, The Bridge, and Re-branding My Love

Thread (Figure 2.2) depicts Akunyili Crosby mounting a white male body whose head is just out of the frame. Her lips pucker over the figure's lower back, the silhouette of her breast clearly visible. Her body is densely filled with collage images including photographs of young fashionable black women and movie advertisements. Streaks of the white canvas are left bare in order to highlight her back muscles, communicating that she too is naked. The two lay on a vibrant yellow and royal blue patterned comforter, which also has photographs collaged into it, although these images are harder to make out, as they are obscured by the paint. Behind her is a pale green window with a light brown border filled with black and white colonial era pictures of Nigerian officials and other elites.

In this image Akunyili Crosby has collaged family photographs, images from Nigerian lifestyle magazines, advertisements for Nollywood movies, and photos of her and Justin onto her own skin. The pictures are densely concentrated on her body and appear on his body in the form of shadows, the forms obscured by his skin tone. The only recognizable human touch is her hair, which she has rendered so realistically with oil paint that it jumps off of the surface. The lack of recognizable skin tone or facial details make her look not quite human, calling to mind Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu's otherworldly depictions of the female form. Akunyili Crosby's collage choices seem to make a point to identify her own ambivalence about being in an interracial relationship at two points in the painting. Where her lips touch Justin's skin, she has collaged her own painting *The Bridge*, another intimate painting of the two of them, which I discuss later in this chapter.



Fig. 2.2
Njideka Akunyili Crosby
Thread (2012)
Acrylic, charcoal, pastel, color pencils and Xerox transfers on paper
4.33 ft. × 4.33 ft.

At the second point of contact, where her right hand snakes underneath his chest, there are images of Nigerian lawyers in white powdered wigs, a relic of colonialism in many African countries and perhaps an allusion to Nigeria's adoration of all things Western and her curiosity about how much of a role Justin's Americanness and whiteness played in her falling in love with him. The window, which peeks out from behind her body, seems to represent the colonial legacies of respectability and morality that hang over her.

The title of the piece *Thread*, points to a key instance of disbelonging that Akunyili Crosby depicts, her hairstyle, which she says she was teased about when she moved from the rural city of Enugu to the megacity of Lagos. While a common

hairstyle in rural areas, Akunyili Crosby says that the style earned her the name “bush girl” when she arrived in Lagos. Bush girl in Nigerian vernacular is a playful name used to tease individuals seen as unsophisticated. It draws a line between those raised and socialized in rural areas and those with cosmopolitan sensibilities. I read Akunyili Crosby’s hairstyle in *Thread* as an indication of the ways that she has experienced outsidership in Nigeria. By reclaiming the style, which brought her ridicule, she creates an image that speaks to the various ways she is seen as unrespectable.

Moreover, Akunyili Crosby’s treatment of the shadows on Justin’s pale skin illustrates Stallings’ assertion that “Women’s bodies and sexualities are their canvases and creative tools...the process of creating out of the body and sexuality is in and of itself evidence of power that exceeds the human.”²⁹ Gopinath writes in her discussion of South Asian nationalism, “Gendered constructions of nationalism are reproduced in the diaspora through the figure of the “woman” as the boundary marker of ethnic/racial community in the “host” nation. The woman also bears the brunt of being the embodied signifier of the past of the diaspora.”³⁰ Gopinath’s words ring particularly true here where we see the figure of the woman as the boundary-marker of ethnic/racial community and the embodied signifier of the “past” or the authentic culture of the diaspora. Their bodies make an impression on a richly patterned blue and yellow fabric, reminiscent of traditional Nigerian ankara fabric, which creates a feeling of vastness and a rippling water effect. The color of the back wall is a familiar pale green, a wall color common in many Nigerian

²⁹ Stallings, *Funk the Erotic*, 150.

³⁰ Gopinath, *Impossible Diasporas*, 14.

homes. While the scene offers less details about the setting, the painting is reminiscent of her 2010 work, *The Bridge* (Figure 2.3) and her 2011 painting *Re-branding My Love* (Figure 2.4), which capture the same scenes. In *Re-branding My Love*, the view is from a different angle as we see the top of both Akunyili Crosby and Justin's heads. Akunyili Crosby's hair is threaded in the same style, and the same patterned comforter covers the bed. Her figure mounts Justin, and her right knee, which pins down his right leg almost seems to melt into him. She kisses his back, one hand in his hair and the other grabbing his buttocks.



Fig. 2.4
Njideka Akunyili Crosby
Re-branding My Love (2011)
Charcoal, acrylic, collage and Xerox transfers on paper
5.5 ft. × 4.5 ft.

Justin's eyes appear closed, his arms peacefully tucked under his head. His skin is stark white except where his body is affectionately touched by Akunyili Crosby's figure, which cast orange tinted collage shadows.

The collaging in Akunyili Crosby's skin is tinted brown, allowing it to blend into her skin. Moreover, the intensity of the tangerine orange wall and the gold in the comforter is striking. Her style in *Re-branding My Love* is less technical, making it feel more emotional and sensual. In the image we see the visual effect acetone creates when mixed with oil paint, and the new ways Akunyili Crosby cuts and arranges the photographs.



Fig. 2.3
Njideka Akunyili Crosby
The Bridge (2010)
Charcoal, ink, acrylic, Xerox transfers, lace and paper collage on paper
5 ft. × 7 ft.

Outside of the oranges and yellows the collage hue is darker and utilizes more blues and purples. There is a dresser ledge that is painted hyper realistically further emphasizing the painterly style of the rest of the painting. *The Bridge* captures the

same scene but from slightly further away, allowing more details to fill the frame. The colors are pale and dark grey, white, and royal blue with pops of orange and yellow in their forms, and the collaging is far less prominent making it easier to see small details in the face and skin. Moreover, there are visible charcoal lines around the back window and even in the forms. The window lets in bright white light that fills the rooms and bounces off of their bodies. Akunyili Crosby has delicately painted her own face in grey, her eyes lowered with love and attention. The painting's color gives it a perhaps somber tone and the style is less bold and more tentative than many of her other paintings. Placed side-by-side, *The Bridge* and *Re-branding My Love* are almost compositionally identical and yet the color and style of the two paintings communicate very different emotions, which we might understand as representative of her own ambivalence about marrying a white man.

Thread, *Re-branding My Love*, and *The Bridge* all disrupt patriarchal gender norms that are invested in constructions of Nigerian women as pure, pious, and virginal. Akunyili Crosby pushes back on these cultural norms by shamelessly centering her own naked body and employing collage images of fashionable, confident women from Nigerian media, countering 21st- century conversations surrounding African women and their sexuality that discuss sexuality in terms of sin or exploitation and fail to engage pleasure and choice.

Epprecht writes that when the Catholic church arrived on the African continent, they were preoccupied by the practices of polygyny by African rulers who offered their daughters, junior wives or slaves to Portuguese visitors. The practice continued and by the eighteenth century this practice had created a

Christian aristocracy of *mulattas* or *signares*, mixed race men and women. In these three paintings, Akunyili Crosby is the key actor, in both cases on top of a submissive white body, which she kisses and grabs, unsettling the trope of the “efulefu” conquered African woman who falls victim to the perverse pressures of the West and betrays her culture. Furthermore, in *Thread*, *The Bridge*, and *Re-branding my Love* the various elements of the environment, the patterns and her use of collage, compositionally bleed into Justin’s body. I read this as the visualization of her anxieties about what it means to envelop and be enveloped by an “outside culture.” In these paintings, “culture,” represented by the images of moments from Igbo history, pop idols, and family photos, does not move unilaterally, but envelops them both. Akunyili Crosby represents this transfer as a type of contamination that seeps into Justin’s skin. Moreover, the images that are present on her own skin are perhaps also a comment on the ways in which whiteness and Western culture have already transferred to her, by way of historical legacies; thus, the battle over losing her culture has in many ways already been lost.

For example in *Thread*, we see an advertisement for the Nollywood film, “Beyoncé & Rihanna 2” where actress Nadia Buari dons a straight blonde wig, a photo of Kris Okoye who Akunyili Crosby has referred to as the “Nigerian Michael Jackson,” and a photo from her own wedding, which shows Justin with her and four other Nigerian women in traditional attire. Akunyili Crosby states in one interview, “I grew up on Madonna, Michael Jackson, MC Hammer, The Cosby Show, Sesame Street. As Nigeria got rich and oil money started coming in, the country was able to purchase programs from the United States, so that they became part of the fabric of

Nigerian life.³¹” I am fascinated by Akunyili Crosby’s decision to render this scene, which is one of her most erotically charged images over and over again. Her decision to revisit this imagery repeatedly confirms the power of the erotic to form how we read the particularities of “people, culture, communities and political movements” in relation to diaspora, to reiterate the words of Stallings. In this scene Akunyili Crosby asserts herself as a sexual agent, prioritizes her pleasure, critiques her anxieties regarding losing one’s culture, and proudly claims her Nigerian heritage and relationship to its geography as a home. Akunyili Crosby asserts this point where she contends:

I’m Nigerian, I grew up under too many dictatorships, but I think that coup is a word I have in my head about my art. It’s subtle and slips in there before you even know, so it turns out the image is changing your perception of a place before you even know what is happening. But political can refer to things beyond the government. I’m thinking of images I didn’t see, but I wanted to see more—thinking of a woman of color and a white man in a very loving intimate relationship, being depicted in a very ordinary way; this is a power structure that is different from what I’ve seen before.³²”

Akunyili Crosby performs disbelonging as she positions herself both within and against “her community” by experimenting with visualizing how culture is expressed, transferred between individuals, and unconsciously rejected. This process appears in her painting *Nwantinti* (2012) (Figure 2.5), which is inspired by French painter Edgar Degas. Rendered entirely in shades of reds, maroons, and pinks, the painting captures Akunyili Crosby sitting at the foot of a bed, locked in an intimate gaze with Justin whose head she holds in her lap. There is a pink open closet door behind them and a door or window covered in dark purple metal bars.

³¹ *I Refuse to Be Invisible*, 22.

³² *I Refuse to Be Invisible*, 29.

The walls, bedspread, and their clothing feature photo transfers of Nigerian music icons from the past and present. The painting is a celebration love. The title of the painting, *Nwantinti*, comes from the popular 1976 love song, “Love Nwantinti” with Crosby remembers from when she was growing up. In her words, “It became slang for cheesy, sappy love,” she said.³³



Fig. 2.5
Njideka Akunyili Crosby
Nwantinti (2012)
Acrylic, charcoal, colored pencil, collage and Xerox transfers on paper
5.57 ft. × 8 ft.

The painting is not only a formal exploration of color and composition, but also a homage to Nigerian popular culture and Nigerian romance, which sit delicately

³³ Jan Sjostrom, “Nigerian-born artist explores expatriate identity at Norton Museum,” January 30, 2016, accessed March 30, 2017, <https://www.palmbeachdailynews.com/entertainment/arts--theater/nigerian-born-artist-explores-expatriate-identity-norton-museum/QP9dOQAAiNz5igo3IA99N8I/>.

juxtaposed against her own interracial relationship. On the material tied around her body, Akunyili Crosby has created a print that features wedding photos of a black heterosexual Nigerian couple in traditional attire. In this painting, she is quite literally wrapped in representations of a relationship ideal that does not resemble her own, while in a literal embrace with her white partner. Justin's Western attire, highlighted by his Jordan-style sneakers, further emphasizes his outsidership in this scene.³⁴

Akunyili Crosby's paintings range in size but she generally works large, creating paintings that are six and seven feet tall and wide. As a result her works have a visceral effect on viewers who are consumed by her worlds and the dense imagery. There is a sense that we are both in her worlds and also just outside of them, looking in on intimate scenes that we wouldn't ordinarily have access to. And there is also a sense that Akunyili Crosby wants us to notice our own response to the images of her and Justin together. Akunyili Crosby's visual rendering of fearless pleasure and joy invites her viewers to linger with her in the space of her "deepest and non-rational knowledge" about the nature of her own longing to be whole, and yet the pleasure she derives from being divided between multiple geographies and cultures. A kaleidoscope of color and texture, her paintings are archives full of figures and memories from her personal life and Nigerian popular culture, which she invites viewers to carefully excavate. By representing her erotic self and intentionally marking herself as someone intimately tied to Nigeria while doing it, Akunyili Crosby re-renders her diasporic reality as one where all parts of her,

³⁴ Also the fact that Justin is wearing his sneakers inside a bedroom, an act that is not the norm in most Nigerian homes, marks him as an outsider.

especially the aspects that are the source of her alienation can co-exist. Where her erotic does not defy, but in fact defines her Nigerian-ness. Furthermore, her commitment to the home space is an instance of “diasporic homemaking,” which Tina Campt describes as “practices that are critical to diasporic formation yet frequently overshadowed by an emphasis on diasporic mobility.”³⁵ For Campt this focus on *settling* and *dwelling*, and local and national rootedness counteracts studies of diasporic migration, which tend to focus on movement. Akunyili Crosby’s visual worldmaking asks viewers to psychically travel with her across “multiple universes,” rendering them as domestic sites of leisure, play, and conflict. In doing this she creates a sense of movement and dislocation while simultaneously emphasizing the reality of settling and forming roots.

Eaten By the Heart

In 2012 Saro-Wiwa premiered a 62-minute video of African and African diasporic couples making out at the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas.³⁶ The video opens with a rust orange screen and background sounds of people speaking in an indistinguishable dialect, the heavy bass of afrobeat music playing in the distance, and cars honking. The background color combined with the soundscape brings to mind a familiar African market scene, particularly the red clay colored ground. At the 9-second mark, a kissing black couple suddenly appears in the middle of the screen. The black static between them and along the edge of their foreheads captures the mediated quality of the scene—it appears that they are in

³⁵ Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 52.

³⁶ Zina Saro-Wiwa, “Eaten by the Heart: The Installation” directed by Zina Saro-Wiwa (2012, Houston: ZSW Studios, 2013).

front of a green screen. The woman's hands rest firmly on the man's shoulders (his hands are out of view) and both of their eyes are closed as they kiss using ample tongue, and seemingly unaware that they are in front of a camera. After 4 minutes of kissing they pull away from one another and stare into each other's eyes before disappearing from the screen as quickly as they appeared. This video performance and installation was a part of a documentary series entitled, *Eaten by the Heart*, which used a documentary style to film individuals reflecting on intimacy, love, and relationships. It was shown as part of group show titled *The Progress of Love*, a collaboration between the Menil Collection, the Centre for Contemporary Art in Lagos, and the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, which explored modern representations of love by African artists.

Saro-Wiwa was born in Port Harcourt in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. When she was one year old she, along with her mother and two siblings, moved to Sussex, England, only visiting Nigeria during school holidays. Mounting political tensions involving her father, environmental rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, made it increasingly dangerous for the family to visit and in 1995, when she was 19, he was executed. Saro-Wiwa did not visit Nigeria again until she was 24 when the government finally released his remains. In her description of her 2011 video installation, "Sarogua Mourning" she reveals that she did not mourn her father's death for ten years:

I did not cry for ten years after my father was killed. I found his very public death difficult to mourn partly because his legacy and story belonged to the wider world and not to me, but also due to a profound dissatisfaction with

the Western mourning rites I found myself having to draw on at the time of his death and the death of my younger brother before him.³⁷

In 2009 Saro-Wiwa moved to New York where she lived for four years. During this time she also traveled to Lagos to make her films *Phyllis* (2009) and *The Deliverance of Comfort* (2009). In 2013 she moved back to Port Harcourt and opened an art gallery, Boys Quarters Project Space. Like Ogunji, Saro-Wiwa used her identity as an artists and her connection to a community of artists to anchor herself to Nigeria:

As soon as I arrived in Port Harcourt I had the idea of an art gallery – within 24 hours the building was emptied and we began the process of transformation...I get ideas and I want to follow them through without thinking too much. Actually it turned out to be quite profound because I was able to turn my father's office into more of a museum site. We are injecting a whole new energy back into that space.

Aware of the fact that her father's story and legacy was one that many associated with a national trauma, Saro-Wiwa set out to reframe her father's story and legacy, instead attempting to make it about possibility and hope. In her words:

From my father as political statue who symbolizes only pain and victimization, I want to expose his legacy as one that is, in fact, generative, reflexive, cultural and full of vitality. I don't want people to be depressed when faced with the issues confronting the Niger Delta. I want people to see possibility. It is through art that I hope to begin that journey.³⁸

Saro-Wiwa's work, which includes photography, documentary film, short film, and curatorial work, all strives to reframe her migration story and the migration stories of Africans across the continent, considering how geography maps itself onto bodies in the form of emotional landscapes and gesture. In 2016 she was recognized

³⁷ Zina Saro-Wiwa, "Sarogua Mourning," *ZSW Studio*, <http://www.zinasarowiwa.com/video/sarogua-mourning-2011/>.

³⁸ Ibid.

as one of Foreign Policy Magazine's Global Thinkers as a result of her work in the Niger Delta and in 2017 was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for Fine Arts. Though primarily trained in England and in the United States, Saro-Wiwa's video art and filmmaking pulls heavily from and engages African cultures of the everyday, tradition, customs, popular culture, and Nollywood (she has coined a genre called Alt-Nollywood). As well, her films and video art are most often set in Nigeria and her works have been shown in South Africa several times.

In *Postnationalist African Cinemas* Alexie Tcheuyap historicizes the emergence of African cinema, which was originally introduced as a colonizing mechanism by Europeans. Tcheuyap writes that these early films were designed to “manufacture otherness, disseminate colonial propaganda, market the ‘civilizing mission’, and convey ideologies of superiority.”³⁹ In the Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes (FEPACI) an association of filmmakers, emerged in response to this mission. Although the association began as a liberatory project, they quickly became prescriptive in their approach to film, defining African cinema as exclusively concerned with cultural struggles, education, information and consciousness raising. Manthia Diawara writes that within FEPACI:

The commitment to the liberation of Africa meant for the filmmakers the creation of aesthetics of disalienation and colonization. Filmmakers were told to use semi documentary forms to denounce colonialism where it existed and to use didactic fictional forms to denounce colonialism where it existed and to use didactic fictional forms to denounce the alienation of countries that were politically independent but culturally and economically dependent on the West.⁴⁰

³⁹ Alexie Tcheuyap, *Postnationalist African Cinemas* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), 3.

⁴⁰ *Postnationalist African Cinemas*, 40.

Tcheuyap argues that up until recently, these definitions worked to exclude certain forms from the category of African cinema, particularly explorations of allegedly frivolous topics such as laughter, joy, pleasure, sexuality, and experimentation. Saro-Wiwa's work is both political in its consideration of religion, cultural survival, and gender, and also concerned with affect and experimentation within the video form more generally. *Eaten By the Heart* consisted of a three part video series, all shot interview style, and a 62-minute film installation. All four videos feature individuals in front of solid colored backgrounds and facing one camera. While the series was three parts, for the purpose of this chapter I will be focusing on *Part I: Interview Excerpts or How Do Africans Kiss?* and the video performance installation.

Part I: Interview Excerpts or How Do Africans Kiss?

Part I of the series begins with a single question, "How do Africans kiss?"⁴¹ The 11-minute film captures interviews with a number of individuals from all over the African diaspora answering the simple question. At the beginning of the film, we see a young black woman sitting in front of a white background with her hair in Bantu knots staring directly into the camera. We hear Saro-Wiwa (who is off camera) ask, "How do Africans kiss?" and the girl raises her eyebrows slightly as she repeats, "*How* do Africans kiss?" There is a quick cut to a young man in front of the white screen whose lips are in an exaggerated pucker, before the screen cuts back to the same young woman who hesitatingly answers with a smile, "I don't

⁴¹ Zina Saro-Wiwa, "Eaten by the Heart: How Do Africans Kiss?" directed by Zina Saro-Wiwa (2012, Houston: ZSW Studios, 2013), <http://www.zinasarowiwa.com/video/eaten-by-the-heart/>.

know. I don't really see Africans kiss. ” The answers offered at the beginning of the video repeat this sentiment: that Africans do not kiss, that Africans kiss badly, that Africans kiss secretly—that kissing is not a part of African culture. An older woman in a deep red headress with a Nigerian accent bluntly states, “I’m not comfortable seeing Africans kiss. I think that comes from the environment where I was raised”; while a younger woman interviewee expresses that while she does not find black people kissing strange generally, when she sees Nigerians kissing in Nollywood films she experiences physical discomfort. Reflected in all of the responses is the feeling that for Africans, and especially Nigerians, the act of kissing is strange and troubling.

As the film progresses the interviewees begin to consider why they might have these views on kissing. Two themes emerge: the difference between how kissing in Africa is perceived in rural areas versus in the city; and how where in the diaspora one is positioned determines their comfort with the act of kissing. To the first point, a couple that appears to be middle age explains, “...I think it all depends on the exposure...outside exposure...where you live, how you were brought up and everything. In the rural areas I didn't see any kissing going on...in the city parties and stuff like that we see kissing...but in general we hold our emotions in. We don't express it as much as it needs to be expressed.” In this quote exposure to certain public displays of affection becomes a marker of geography, with the countryside being more conservative than the city. This adds yet another dimension to how we understand Akunyili-Crosby's work which often uses the small town of Enugu as a backdrop, a place where we can assume the moments she paints

between her and her husband would be even more shocking to locals. The interviewee also speaks to a type of repression where she says, "...we hold our emotions in. We don't express it as much as it needs to be expressed." By using the language of "need" she reveals that Africans are not naturally unaffectionate or expressive, but that it is a detrimental act of restraint.

The theme of geography comes up again where another interviewee explains that where in the diaspora one is located is also a key factor when considering whether and how Africans kiss:

With the younger generations I think...um...there's definitely a little bit of spice when they kiss. Um...they're not shy about kissing anymore. They're a little bit expressive depending on what continent they're on. I think it's important to showcase that. I know I don't see that many couples in Nigeria of my generation kissing in public or whatever...it's just a kiss on the cheek but I do see couples here in the states who are a little bit more expressive.

Supporting her point, a male interviewee shares that he did not become a good kisser until he came to the United States:

I became a good kisser when I arrived here in America. I became a good kisser. My first time... its almost like I have a tongue in my mouth...it's like a meat in my mouth...and after like two three times trying to educate myself...you know about tongue in my mouth...you know it's almost like you want to throw up...but today it's a pleasure but it takes time with mind and with body to accept.

For both of these interviewees, sexual intimacy and expression is something that happens in a more liberated fashion outside of the continent. This view also helps us better understand Saro-Wiwa as the interviewer. Both the location of the interviews (in the United States) and her identity as a diasporan make her an ideal interviewer. Her distance from Nigeria perhaps means that she has internalized less shame as a woman about talking about sex (which enables her to create the documentary series

in the first place) and acknowledging sexual desire, and yet her connection to Nigeria also means that she is still aware of these silences in African spaces and desires to break them.

Saro-Wiwa then asks interviewees, “How do you like to be kissed?” The first person to answer is a middle aged man who hesitatingly says, “Hmmm ummm...probably on my lips...probably on my cheek.” The uncertainty in how he answers the question reveals his own unpreparedness to answer that type of question and also is reflective of how many African men, though often seen as the initiators of sex are rarely put in a position where they are asked to articulate their desires, particularly around the tender act of kissing. After him, a young woman laughs and asks, “Are my parents going to see this video?” again referencing the shadow of familial expectation and cultural burden African and African diasporic women must consider. With this question Saro-Wiwa pushes the interviewees to not only talk about “Africans kissing” as a reality, but actually name and articulate their own sexual desires, acknowledging the erotic within themselves. In the final parts of the film Saro-Wiwa asks, “When was your heart last broken?” The mood within the film shifts from playful to somber as we see a young man pause for several seconds, smiling uncomfortably, and then averting eye contact with the camera, as if to shield his actual emotions before saying, “I guess like...um...maybe nine months ago.” He finishes the sentence and nods a few times, as if relieved to have gotten the words out. We then hear Saro-Wiwa asking, “What happened?” from behind the camera. He pauses again and takes a breath,

“Well...um” he shakes his head and smiles again, “...I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“When did you last feel loved?” Saro-Wiwa asks. Again he pauses, nervously licking his lips and averting his gaze, “The same time my heart was broken...nine months ago.”

“Can you tell me about that?” She asks again. “Um no...I really don’t want to talk about it.”

The camera lingers on him while he struggles to stay composed and speak without breaking down, though his voice trembles. By asking him to elaborate, Saro-Wiwa pushes the interview to a place where he is forced to articulate that not only does he not want to share but also that he cannot share his last heartbreak. This is the only moment in the film that we hear Saro-Wiwa speaking to the interviewee multiple times. She sits behind the camera as a woman asking him, an African man, to be vulnerable in front of her and does not back down in the face of his tears. In doing so, she creates more space for his vulnerability by normalizing his experience through her performance of a feminist ethics of care.

Still, his refusal to elaborate speaks to the limits of the format. It is a safe space, but not entirely safe. It is likely that his gender plays a role in how much he feels like he can reveal. Immediately following his interview we see the same older woman from earlier with the red headdress. We do not hear Saro-Wiwa ask a question but we can gather that it is the same, “When was your heart last broken?” The woman speaks deliberately, “I can smile now when I tell you that it was when my kids were buried. But the reason why I smile is because I feel strengthened by

the love my husband has for me and by my faith in God. So that was when my heart was last broken, when I buried my children.” She says it all very matter-of-factly with a neutral look on her face. It is clear to the viewer that she is well practiced in sharing this difficult truth. After she speaks we hear a sob from Saro-Wiwa. This is perhaps the most powerful moment in the documentary, as the interconnectedness between everyone interviewed is illuminated. We see the ways in which the lack of vulnerability in many African families is often stifling and traumatic, and also the way it protects us, and has protected our mothers and grandmothers from crumbling under the pressure of difficult experiences. By editing the film in such a way where we see this woman share something so devastating without so much as a voice tremble, particularly after the interview with the young man, Saro-Wiwa brings to light the burdens African women carry and inherit, and the struggles African women in the diaspora experience as we reconcile our desire to be seen as whole complex individuals with our desires to perform the roles that are expected of us and the roles that have been modeled by the women in our families.

The people Saro-Wiwa chose to interview have a range of skin tones, hairstyles, accents, and attire and very rarely do they identify where in Africa they are from and whether they are “locals” or “diasporans.” Tcheuyap examines the ways in which nation building has become a less prominent motivation in African cinema, arguing that the early postcolonial goal to “write back” to colonial forces has given way to an interest in depicting what has historically been considered ‘non-representable’ subject matter.⁴² Although Saro-Wiwa is Nigerian, her project

⁴² *Postnationalist African Cinemas*, 33.

is primarily a diasporic one, concerned with shared experiences and understandings of intimacy amongst African subjects. In this sense, “African” as an identity is a unifying principal for everyone who has chosen to participate and yet it does not erase their differences. Because the project is by Africans for Africans, it goes without saying that Africa is a diverse continent.

How Do Africans Kiss is not only about kissing. The film also actively disrupts discourses that have framed Africans as unemotional and unaffected, not only by asking individuals to speak frankly about love and intimacy but also by allowing viewers to see it in real time. The video ends with the man who learned how to kiss in the United States:

Everything is love in Africa starting from birth...even when you pass away...it's love. If I [think like of Ghana] I can take an example about funeral [sic]. It's amazing how many days it takes to get the body ready. That person is gone but you see the love and the connection there and uh all of the colors and seeing that body going underground 6 feet under and its so much love so much passion and the elders are never forgotten they're there, they're part of the young generations life, they are everything and it's love.

The power in this video is its raw unfiltered vulnerability. I have watched it many times and each time it evokes a new emotion. I have watched it and only laughed and I have watched it and wept. “How Do Africans Kiss” is permission to be a deeply emotional, feeling human African subject, and a reminder that the violences of colonialism did not strip the ability to love, to feel, to be soft. In remembering this, we are able to cultivate it within ourselves, within our families, and within our communities.

Eaten by The Heart: The Installation (2012)

The 62-minute video installation referenced at the beginning of this section was a video performance and installation. The video features a diverse group of couples ranging in nationality, age, and sexual orientation. Each scene is specially curated to evoke a particular emotion. The couples were asked to stand in front of a green screen, which varied in color. In the third video a man and a woman stand against a blue background with the sounds of birds chirping. They are both wearing pink and the man digs his hands into the woman's Afro as they kiss. There is a push and pull between the two of them, both of them expressing an equal amount of craving. When they are done they stare at each other, and then at the camera, breaking the fourth wall. What is captivating about the piece is all of the ways we see African women exert sexual agency. They pull hair, they bite lips—they appear to be genuinely enjoying themselves. There are a couple of moments in the film where at the end of the kiss the men appear slightly embarrassed or ashamed, whereas the women always seem self assured. The piece ends with two women. In an article by the Houston Press, Meredith Deliso writes, "It's a sweet concept, but I don't think most people can stand to watch an hour of other people making out. By the third couple, I had had enough."⁴³ Deliso's review speaks to the ways in which the all-consuming nature of video installation forces viewers to encounter their own visceral responses. Isolde Brielmaier breaks down this relationship between the video installation and the visitor's body writing:

⁴³ Meredith Deliso, "The Menil Hosts a Big Show on Love," *Houston Press*, 1.16.13. <http://www.houstonpress.com/content/printView/6365778>

The visitor's body is essential to the structure of video installation and the articulation of ideas. Within the context of the installation space, the visitor negotiates the specific site of the artwork as a way of experiencing and, in turn, creating meaning from the art. He or she quite literally and figuratively, takes a position vis-a-vis the work. The very quality of video installation makes the visitor intensely aware of his or her body, and all of its sensory functions form a complex entity that is intertwined, engaged, and capable of perceiving.⁴⁴

The performance video is intense and uncomfortable. It feels almost intrusive. As a Nigerian American, it is also the most I have ever seen Africans kiss in my entire life. The kissing is long and passionate. Sometimes it includes lots of tongue. The couples vary in age, some appearing to be in their 20s and others seeming much older. Two of the couples are in same sex relationships. In my view, the performance's objective is simple. While there is so much writing that claims to be about African sexuality and intimacy only to pathologize it, Saro-Wiwa's performance video throws us directly in the midst of hot, passionate, sometimes sloppy making out. It presents African intimacy and love with no pretense. It does not allow us to overly intellectualize it. Instead the colors and sounds consume and transform us. Perhaps this is the reason Deliso could only stand to watch three of the couples. Tcheuyap writes in his chapter on how postcolonial African films have addressed sex that "neither open intimacy or sentimental confession is popular in African cinema." He argues that in African films, the body and sexual organs in particular "seem to avoid and be avoided by the camera."⁴⁵ *Eaten By the Heart* plays with this trope by taking an act as "PG" as kissing, and allowing the viewer to

⁴⁴ Isolde Brielmaier, "Transformers: Video Installation, Space, and the Art of Immersion," in *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and The Moving Image Since 1970*, ed. Andrea Barnwell Brownlee and Valerie Cassel Oliver (Atlanta: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art/ Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston, 2008), 57.

⁴⁵ *Postnationalist African Cinema*, 194.

experience it emotionally, visually, and intellectually. Saro-Wiwa pushes the act of kissing as far as possible and in doing so, reveals a great amount about sexual intimacy and agency without the use of nudity.

On the theme of “sentimental confessions,” the style and content of *Eaten by the Heart* is exceptionally confessional in nature. Confessional art has been defined as “a form of contemporary art that focuses on an intentional revelation of the private self. Confessional art encourages an intimate analysis of the artist, artist's subjects’, or spectator's confidential, and often controversial, experiences and emotions.”⁴⁶ While Irene Gammel argues that calling this type of art “confessional” is inherently problematic as it brings to mind its patriarchal history, particularly the image of the confessional and the priest, I argue that understanding *Eaten by the Heart* as a group confessional speaks to the power of the piece, as well as the cathartic nature of the act of confessing.⁴⁷ In *Eaten by the Heart* the subjects do not confess sins in a dark room to a hidden man, but are given an opportunity to release a range of repressed thoughts and feelings one has been conditioned to carry as shame publically and in community, and have it shared as part of a project dedicated to creating a safe space to practice vulnerability.

Saro-Wiwa’s films create new worlds and temporary communities where Africans can discuss sex, intimacy, and vulnerability openly, and connect across ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age, free from judgment. *Eaten by the Heart* is a space of radical intimacy and vulnerability and Saro-Wiwa’s disbelonging is

⁴⁶Ronald L. Jackson II & Michael A. Hogg. *Encyclopedia of Identity* s.v.

“Confessional Art” (Sage Publications, 2010).

⁴⁷ Irene Gammel, *Confessional Politics: Women’s Sexual Self-Representations in Life Writing and Popular Media* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1999): 3.

precisely what allows her to approach people with the mission of filming them at their most vulnerable. She creates a community within *Eaten by the Heart* as we see the same individuals appear in all three parts. They look like African aunties, mothers, uncles, and cousins but in a way that they are so rarely seen.

In this chapter I have discussed how Akunyili Crosby and Saro-Wiwa perform disbelonging through their deep engagement with the erotic. By exploring taboo and centering the erotic in their work, both artists demonstrate what a careful attention to love, sex, and intimacy can reveal about the types of negotiations African diasporic women have to make in regards to how they see their bodies and their relationships, what parts of themselves they reveal and to whom, and how obligated they are to the needs and expectations of their families and communities in the homeland. A consideration of the erotic allows scholars of diaspora to understand how the internal decisions made by diasporic subjects are shaped by outside influences. As well, it shows how female diasporic subjects embrace taboo and live fully within their cultural heritage by not allowing the belief that certain stigmas will prevent them from accessing full belonging to deter them from living as whole complicated beings and prioritizing their own joy and pleasure even when it conflicts with tradition, oppressive colonial logics, and social norms. The work of these two artists illustrates Stuart Hall's assertion that representational art serves not as simply a mirror but presents new possibilities that constitute new kinds of subjects. In his words, "I have been trying to speak of identity as constituted, not outside but within representation; hence of cinema, not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exist, but as that form of representation which is able

to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover who we are.”⁴⁸ The art of Akunyili Crosby and Saro-Wiwa helps us to visually map these connections, see African diasporic women living in their truth rather than censoring their authentic selves, and actually imagine and envision landscapes of wholeness and unconditional acceptance that they create for themselves and their communities. In the following chapter I examine the queer worldmaking potential of play, leisure, and kinship in two speculative explorations of black girlhood.

⁴⁸ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 80.

Chapter 4: Play, Leisure and Kinship as Queer Worldmaking Practice in *The Adventures of Ada the Alien* and *Akata Witch*

“It's as much about beauty and make-believe, as it is a commentary on cultural hybridity. This isn't social science, it's magic-realism and the power of drawing to invent worlds for ourselves. I'm a story-teller, not an advocate.”

-ruby onyinyechi amanze¹

In this chapter I take on the question of disbelonging and return through the lens of black girlhood. Looking to the work of visual artist ruby onyinyechi amanze and novelist Nnedi Okorafor, I examine two black girl figures: “ada the Alien”— a reoccurring character in amanze’s drawings inspired by her experiences navigating space as a returnee in Nigeria; and the protagonist in Okorafor’s young adult novel *Akata Witch*, “Sunny,” a Nigerian American girl with albinism who has moved to contemporary Nigeria with her family. This chapter considers what both characters tell us about African diasporic girlhood and the complicated act of return, and play and leisure as worldmaking and world changing practices.

Although both ada the Alien and Sunny are inspired by the stories of black girls who have “returned” to Nigeria and must contend with their outsider status, through their storytelling amanze and Okorafor disrupt easy understandings of time and space in order to complicate linear notions of return, and simplistic ideas of belonging. In doing so, they highlight the full potential of diasporic subjectivities. I

¹ ruby onyinyechi amanze, “Biography,” *Morgan Lehman Gallery*, “<http://www.morganlehmangallery.com/artists/ruby-onyinyechi-amanze2>.”

argue that these representations identify the tension inherent in the act of return and carve a space for the black girl characters to find ease and play within and through that tension. Wright speaks to this in the *Physics of Blackness* where she calls for us to look to black speculative fiction for more complex theorizing of return in the Middle Passage. She writes, “In creative discourse, it is Black speculative fiction that most often takes on these questions and problems of return brought about by a Middle Passage epistemology, sometimes to surprising effect.”² Wright argues that while return is accommodated easily by what she calls, “nondiasporic epistemologies”—the epistemologies of Western civilization that uncritically chart a march forward—diasporic theorizing of return is far more self-reflexive in its approach, engaging the past ambivalently and ambiguously. Moreover, she contends that within diasporic theorizations of return “progress is often deconstructed; origins are often shifted and rendered fluid; and agency and Otherness often haunt textual expression, obliquely or directly.”³ In this chapter I examine how amanze and Okorafor use speculative investigations to imagine alternative pathways and journeys for their black girl characters, who come to discover and embody their disbelonging through play and leisure.

Encompassing genres such as science fiction, horror, alternative history, and magical realism, speculative fiction is concerned with the question, “What if?”⁴

² Michelle Wright, *Physics of Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 73.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman, “Introduction: The Black Imagination the Genres: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative” in *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Black Speculative* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 2.

While many scholars use the language of “speculation” to refer to utopian futures, my use of the term also allows space for fresh considerations of the present. I consider speculation as a lens through which black girls alter their perception of their realities, while also looking towards the future. In this chapter I attempt my own type of worldmaking by putting *Akata Witch* into conversation with amanze’s drawings and pondering what Sunny and ada the Alien—as two diasporic black girls navigating connected diasporic realms— can teach us about worldmaking. While Wright speaks explicitly about speculative fiction in writing, in this chapter I consider how amanze’s body of visual art and *Akata Witch* jointly accomplish liberatory worldmaking.

In the first part of this chapter, I look at amanze’s mixed media drawings: *Ogbonno Soup is Sweeter Since We Met* (2014), *Kinfolk[Diptych]* (2015), *The Divers* (2016) and *10 Litres of Air (The Divers II)* (2016), which feature ada the Alien and her kin community of aliens, hybrids and ghosts. I argue that amanze utilizes compositional negative space, collaged hybrid creatures, and scenarios of play and leisure to offer new visualizations of diasporic girlhood set outside of frameworks of trauma. In the second part of this chapter, I shift to examining *Akata Witch*, which I argue centers diasporic outsidership, play and leisure, and queer kinship as critical to black girl survival and social change. This chapter identifies speculative investigations of black girlhood as a productive site for black girls and women to understand play, leisure and queer social bonds as valuable and necessary for visioning liberatory futures.

Black Girlhood

In *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*, Ruth Nicole Brown visions Black girlhood, as freedom writing, “Black girlhood makes possible the affirmation of Black girls’ lives and if necessary, their liberation. Black girlhood as a spatial intervention is useful for making our daily lives better and therefore changing the world as we currently know it.”⁵ Brown’s work emphasizes that we must celebrate black girlhood and affirm the experiences of black girls and their liberation if we are to support them in effecting positive change in their own lives and in their communities. Because Black Girlhood Studies is still an emerging area of study, the theorizing of the importance of play and leisure in particular for black girls is limited.⁶ As a result of this gap in the literature, the Internet has emerged as a key site for theorizing black girl subjectivity with the hashtags “Carefree Black Girl” and “Black Girl Magic” which both emerged in 2013.

“Black Girl Magic” was created by CaShawn Thompson who intended it to be a celebration of the achievements of black women. The phrase has since exploded into a movement. In one interview Thompson says, “I say ‘magic’ because it’s something that people don’t always understand. Sometimes our accomplishments might seem to come out of thin air, because a lot of times, the only people supporting us are other black women.”⁷ Here Thompson speaks to the

⁵ Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois Press), 1.

⁶ See: Aimee Meredith Cox's *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*. Durham: Duke, 2015.

⁷ Dexter Thomas, “Why Everyone’s Saying ‘Black Girls are Magic,’” September 9, 2015, accessed March 30, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-everyones-saying-black-girls-are-magic-20150909-htmllstory.html>.

ways the perceived magic of black girls is oftentimes a result of the ways they have been underestimated, ignored, and erased. In Linda Chaver's article, "Why I Don't Love Black Girl Magic" she writes:

Black girl magic suggests we are, again, something other than human. That might sound nitpicky, but it's not nitpicky when we are still being treated as subhuman. And there's a very long history of black women being treated as subhuman by the medical establishment, in spite of the debt Western medicine owes to them. It doesn't begin or end with Henrietta Lacks and the cancer cells taken from her cervix without her or her family's knowledge or permission. It doesn't begin or end with black women receiving less anesthesia, if at all, in surgeries because of the widely held belief that black women felt no pain. It doesn't begin or end with black women receiving improper and dangerous prenatal care or compulsory sterilizations.⁸

Chavers' comments point to the importance of knowing the difference between imaging oneself as beyond human and being denied humanity. Because this project centers the experiences and perspectives of black women and girls, I am concerned with the ways imagining oneself as non-human and superhuman provides opportunities to resist, challenge, and overcome societal barriers and expectations.

While many have argued that Black Girl Magic is primarily a celebration of the productivity and achievements of black girls, "Carefree Black Girls" was created by pop culture blogger Zeba Blay as "an assertion that black women also get to be unabashedly themselves in the world that's constantly putting them into concrete boxes."⁹ The concept encompasses the ways that black girls express individuality, freedom, and joy in the face of oppression and stereotypes. The

⁸ Linda Chavers, "Here's My Problem With #BlackGirlMagic," January 31, 2016, accessed March 30, 2018, <https://www.elle.com/life-love/a33180/why-i-dont-love-blackgirlmagic/>.

⁹ Kaylen Ralph, "Beyond the Black Girl Nerds Hashtag," *The Riveter Magazine*, March 10, 2015, <http://www.therivetermagazine.com/beyond-the-black-girl-nerds-hashtag/>.

Carefree Black Girls hashtag has also received backlash from black women who argue that the term ignores the struggles that black girls and women face, flattening their livelihoods into shallow depictions of wealthy black women participating in leisure activities. YouTube video blogger Philogynoir, who speaks on issues about black women, also argues that the Carefree Black Girls hash tag is exclusionary, classist and ableist, stating, “every black isn’t carefree, in fact especially black girls aren’t carefree.”¹⁰ I argue that this interpretation inherently misunderstands the work of the term. My evocation of the Carefree Black Girls hashtag does not attempt to dissociate from the struggles that black women face, or separate black women into respectability categories—it understands that being carefree for black women is an active resistance to the social burdens that attempt to destroy and stifle black joy. Carefree in this context means free from the cares assigned to black girls and women by white supremacist structures. As Cree Summers writes:

I don’t know a single black girl who’s carefree because it ain’t easy being a girl of color, period. God, I wish we were carefree. A lot of political things would have to dramatically change in this planet for a woman of color to be carefree. But I think what they mean by that is more of an aware black girl, a conscious black girl. The more conscious you are, maybe the less cares you have and maybe the more cares you have as well—it kind of goes hand in hand. Self-awareness and more self-love and also the ability to care for other black women. It has something to do with being politically aware of where you stand on this planet and I think it has to do with not accepting the definition that’s been given to you by designing yourself.¹¹

¹⁰ Philogynoir, “Why I’m Not A Carefree Black Girl,” *Philogynoir*, June 5, 2016, <https://philogynoir.tumblr.com/post/145487408857/why-im-not-a-carefree-black-girl-see-the-way>.

¹¹ Elle D., “Cree Summer: “I Don’t Know a Single Black Girl Who’s Carefree,” Sep 7, 2016, <https://blackgirllonghair.com/2016/09/cree-summer-i-dont-know-a-single-black-girl-whos-carefree/>.

In this quote, Summers names being carefree as its own kind of work. It is black women advocating for freedom of self-expression despite outside expectations.

In this chapter, I apply my understandings of Black Girl Magic—as an acknowledgement of the oftentimes invisible worldmaking potential of black girls— and Carefree Black Girls— as a type of easeful disbelonging that centers play— to Sunny and ada the Alien who utilize carefree play and leisure, as well as magic to reorder and reimagine their realities, and create worlds where their differences and peculiarities are not only acceptable but needed.

Queer Social Networks

In this chapter I am also interested in the ways amanze's drawings and *Akata Witch* feature and center queer kinship ties absent of a nuclear family. I borrow Alexis Pauline Gumbs' use of "queer" as an intervention into how we think about "the social reproduction of the meaning of life."¹² Amanze's drawings and *Akata Witch* feature queer kinship ties absent of a nuclear family. For example, amanze's worlds depict hybrid figures that span space and time, all co-existing, and in *Akata Witch*, Sunny finds belonging amongst a motley crew of friends primarily bonded by their magical powers. The families where both Sunny and ada the Alien find belonging are chosen and include individuals who are part-human and superhuman, and serve as gateways to self-discovery for both black girl characters. Lauren Berlant discusses the importance of alternative understandings of family in order to create queer worlds, writing, "Making a queer world has required the kind of intimacy that bears no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the

¹² Ibid, 131.

couple form, to property, to the nation.”¹³ I interrogate representations of queer intimacy in amanze’s drawings and *Akata Witch* that respectively blur the familial, platonic, and romantic, and generational hierarchies, in worlds which exist somewhere between utopias and what Foucault refers to as “heterotopias”— spaces of otherness that exist in non-hegemonic conditions unlike utopias which are most often imagined perfect worlds. In *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization* Roderick Ferguson and Grace Hong write of heterotopias:

Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy syntax in advance and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to “hold together.”¹⁴

Most importantly, heterotopias are localizable, examples being cemeteries, ships, and gardens. Amanze in particular is explicit about her works not being utopias, but actual representations of the here and now.

The Adventures of Ada the Alien

Amanze was born in 1982 in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Following her birth, her family relocated from Nigeria to the United Kingdom where she resided until the age of 13. In 2004, amanze earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University, and in 2006 she earned her Masters in Fine Arts from Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. In 2012 amanze was the

¹³ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Intimacy (Winter, 1998): 558.

¹⁴ Roderick Ferguson and Grace Hong, *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5.

recipient of a Fulbright Scholars Award in Drawing to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. While in Nigeria, she found that her outsider identity extended beyond her fair skin, freckles, and British accent to her chosen medium of drawing:

I quickly discovered that drawing's role in contemporary Nigerian art is a second-tier one. There is a very clear-cut hierarchy of mediums, and drawing just doesn't carry the same weight as something like painting. It exists, and is very much a part of the history of art in Nigeria, but if you're talking about what is being exhibited, bought, and generally respected in Nigerian art, it isn't drawing. That's an almost laughable idea.¹⁵

For amanze drawing as a medium opens up possibilities. Its position as a less respected medium in Nigeria gives her space to push the boundaries of the form. It is also an ideal place to explore girlhood since drawing, for many, is the first way they learn to make art as children. Furthermore, amanze embraces mistakes and stains on the paper's surface, seeing them as evidence of her human-ness, "I'm not a machine. I'm not trying to be a machine. That human-ness, including mistakes and failures, is something that I am open to and it is part of the conversation between me, and the materials, and the process."¹⁶ Amanze's embrace of mistakes and failures speak to a carefreeness that extends to her characters, who she also allows to be messy, flawed, and easeful.

Amanze created ada the Alien in 2012 when she arrived in Nsukka.

Although ada the Alien's features are almost identical to amanze's and she shares

¹⁵ Rachel Corbett, "Curator and Artist ruby onyinyechi amanze on the Ancient, Universal Language of Drawing," *Artspace*, http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/expert_eye/ruby_onyinyechi_amanze-51862

¹⁶ Yvette Greslé, "ruby onyinyechi amanze: a story. in parts," *Writing in Relation: Interviews, Essays and Dialogues about Art*, <https://writinginrelation.wordpress.com/2015/02/24/ruby-onyinyechi-amanze-a-story-in-parts/>.

amanze's dreadlocks and distinct geometric line tattoos on her arms, amanze describes ada the Alien as borrowing her likeness but not *being* her. In a process of magical transference, she created a figure who likewise is forced to navigate a complicated return, she explains, "I wanted to tell stories about my time in Nigeria and my experiences and how I was moving through this space as an alien even though it is also my home. This is why I developed this character: to use her and her voice to tell this story."¹⁷ Ada the Alien is florescent yellow, her color inspired by western images of glowing green and yellow aliens, which amanze applied to her own experience in Nigeria for a number of reasons, most noteworthy her fair complexion, which she experienced as an immediate marker of her outsidership. Over time, amanze created additional characters to fill in the magical universe ada the Alien navigated, and this became her series, *Aliens, Hybrids, and Ghosts*. In her artist statement for *Aliens, Hybrids and Ghosts* she writes, "These drawings are part of an ongoing, non-linear narrative that exists between constructed realities, memory and make believe. Ada the Alien and her cohort of kindred creatures[...]fluidly navigate their self-imagined, chimeric universe- simultaneously positioned between nowhere and everywhere."¹⁸ In addition to ada the Alien, recurring characters in the series include: audre the Leopard, Pidgin, Twin, Tritón, Ofunne and the army of Ghosts, Unidentified Colored Blobs, and Zebra. As the title of the series suggests, the characters fall into the three categories: aliens, hybrids or ghosts. Amanze utilizes worldmaking in her drawings in order to reject a narrative

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ amanze, ruby onyinyechi. "Statements." *ruby onyinyechi amanze*. <http://rubyanmanze.com/statements>.

of displacement as trauma, which she has said viewers of her works often place upon the images. Nelson Goodman writes of worldmaking:

Much but by no means all worldmaking consist of taking apart and putting together, often conjointly; on the one hand, of dividing wholes into parts and partitioning kinds into subspecies, analyzing complexes into component features, drawing distinctions; on the other hand, of composing wholes and kinds out of parts and members and subclasses, combining features into complexes, and making connections. Such composition or decomposition is normally effected or assisted or consolidated by the application of labels; names, predicates, gestures, pictures, etc.¹⁹

Amanze practices worldmaking in her drawings through her method of taking familiar forms (animals, the green alien, the astronaut) and scenarios (travel, leisure, thinking) and remixing them in unfamiliar ways, using Xerox transfers to create new hybrid forms, naming and categorizing her characters by their habits and history, and linking forms and figures according to diasporic logics. These tactics make her worlds legible as fully-fledged realities with their own set of rules and a particular order, which privileges queerness and hybridity.

Amanze insists on the playfulness and ease of her characters, who she says exist comfortably and most importantly, playfully:

I do think we (humans) figure things out by playing. But I also think, play in a certain context is a privilege reserved for a few, and I don't just mean children...My African-packaged body embraces the freedom of play in this America that says otherwise- that says I should be traumatized or anguished or cautious or angry. But joy is a birthright...an entitlement that cannot be stolen. I play in life and I play in art, and I've stopped apologizing for not being sad. To invent feels like the ultimate freedom. To claim space to pleasure feels like revolution."²⁰

For amanze, play is a political act, an act of defiance in the United States where her black African body is expected to be primarily a site of trauma and anger.

¹⁹ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hackett Publish, 1978), 7.

²⁰ amanze, "aliens, hybrids, and ghosts."

Furthermore, her drawings utilize a vast amount of white space and compositions that disrupt firm ideas of time or place and often show her characters flying or falling. They are infinite landscapes of play, leisure and queer community.

Ogbonno Soup is Sweeter Since Meeting You (2014)

Amanze's argument about the political and revolutionary potential of pleasure and play for queer subjects is evident in her tender work, *Ogbonno Soup is Sweeter Since Meeting You* (Figure 3.1). The 38 by 50 inch drawing shows ada the Alien laying with audre the Leopard who embraces her from behind. In the mixed media drawing Audre the Leopard is rendered as a black and white photo transfer head of a leopard with the body of a human. Amanze has described audre the Leopard as ageless (but appearing older and androgynous). Audre is queered not just by her leopard head and human body, but also in their use of "they" pronouns. She has also said that audre the Leopard's character is Wura-Natasha Ogunji. Audre's body appears to be under a plush comforter done in black ink wash, making only her arms visible. Their right arm, which is drawn in pencil is filled in with yellow giving them an alien glow, drapes over ada the Alien's torso, while their left arm supports their head. Ada the Alien lies in front of audre the Leopard in a black tank top. Her legs and feet, drawn in graphite, are exposed and appear to belong to a small child—perhaps a baby—and her arms are tucked underneath her head as she stares straight at the viewer. On ada the Alien's arm we see one of amanze's tattoos, two parallel lines that circle her forearm. The two figures float on top of an intricate network of lines connected by drawings of black eyed peas—the

black eyed peas, which can be found in dishes across West Africa and southern parts of the United States, call to mind diasporic connections.



Fig. 3.1
ruby onyinyechi amanze
Ogbonno Soup is Sweeter Since We Met (2014)
Pencil and ink, photo transfer
38 x 50 inches

The piece conjures feelings of rest, safety, and security. Ada the Alien's figure is both woman and child, symbolizing the connection between black women and black girls, and signifying the importance of celebrating, affirming, and healing black girls for black women. Amanze writes in one interview, "My niece called me a Woman-Child. Something in her recognizes me as her kindred, only taller and able to do more things. When we enter other worlds, she knows I am believing in

full.”²¹ Brown argues that Black girlhood is “the presentations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female” and that “Black girlhood is not dependent, then on age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity.”²² In the quote above, amanze acknowledges the black girl within her despite being technically in the body of the black woman. amanze’s decision to render herself as a black girl talks back to the ways black girls are denied childhood, and asserts the innocence and vulnerability of black girls as deserving of comfort and love. This realization is significant given the 2014 study released by Georgetown’s Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, which found that adults view black girls between the ages of 5 and 14 as “less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers.”²³ Furthermore, the fact that audre the Leopard, who represents Ogunji, is the one holding ada the Alien points to the ability of black women and girls to show up and care for one another. The scene evokes for us the ways carefreeness is both magical and work. The title of the piece, *Ogbonno Soup is Sweeter Since Meeting You*, also speaks to the ways experiences of home are altered by and through those that we encounter and connect with. Even the altered spelling of “ogbono” in the piece’s title, to include two n’s, captures the ways language changes and shifts, and new spellings emerge during processes of

²¹ ruby onyinyechi amanze, “aliens, hybrids, and ghosts,” *Anatomía De Una Escena*, February 27, 2017, <http://backroomcaracas.com/escritura-expandida/aliens-hybrids-and-ghosts-en/>.

²² Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration* (New York: Lang Publishing, 2009), 1.

²³ “Black Girls Viewed As Less Innocent Than White Girls, Georgetown Law Research Finds,” *Georgetown Law*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/news/press-releases/Black-Girls-Viewed-As-Less-Innocent-Than-White-Girls-Georgetown-Law-Research-Finds.cfm>.

migration. Through encountering one another, ogbono soup tastes different to ada the Alien and audre the Leopard. In “Other Women Cooked for My Husband: Negotiating Gender, Food, and Identities in an African American/Ghanaian Household,” Psyche Williams-Forsen writes, “Food is a critical expression of cultural identity and an important marker of cultural borders.”²⁴ Although there is no ogbono soup in the image, its distinct ingredients of assorted meat and/or fish, seeds from the bush mango plant, palm oil, and ground crayfish perform a deconstructed cultural reference, giving it a distinct smell, which also informs the scene for those familiar with the dish. In “Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work,” Marjorie DeVault writes, “part of the intention behind producing a meal is to produce ‘home’ and family.”²⁵ The title of amanze’s drawing implies that our social bonds also have the ability to effect how we experience the pleasure of food, either because we have the privilege of sharing it with someone who we feel connected to or due to the shared memory of a particular dish. Brinda Mehta elaborates on the relationship between imaginings of home and food writing:

The migrants’ attitude to food unearths deep association with what I call a “homeland imaginary”...[The] sensory construction of the distant island home is a way of localizing space in the metropolis. Recreating the fragrances of “home” through the culinary occupation of space...symbolizes the act of creolizing dominant space whereby the familiar of the birthland is both conjured and physically actualized through fragrant whiffs of memory....[T]he recipes for these culinary performances

²⁴ Psyche Williams-Forsen, “Other Women Cooked for My Husband: Negotiating Gender, Food, and Identities in an African American/Ghanaian Household,” *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 437.

²⁵ Marjorie DeVault, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 79.

[are where] home is imagined through associative ingredients, flavours, smells, tastes, and colours. In other words, food...delineate[s] recognizable mappings of home.²⁶

While *Ogbonno Soup is Sweeter Since We Met* gestures toward familiar mappings of home, the image also queers those cartographies. Hers are the maps of disbelonging, those that offer us incomplete dishes while magically invoking our olfactory senses. And we are invited to navigate these spaces and ingredients, not with those the state or tradition deem family, but with the chosen family members who reorganize the boundaries of culture as they rework our taste buds. The scene draws new maps on and with our tongues as it offers us new names for our food, for ourselves. Amanze has spoken extensively about and expressed gratitude for the other in-between individuals who have helped her understand her particular experience and story. While ada the Alien and audre the Leopard are the characters in this particular drawing, it is a declaration intended for the many individuals who have helped bring deeper meaning to the seemingly commonplace experience of eating ogbono soup.

Kinfolk[Diptych]

Utilizing graphite, ink, photo transfers, colored pencils, and metallic enamel, amanze's 2012 painting, *Kinfolk[Diptych]* (2015)(Figure 3.2) is reminiscent of a playful family portrait. Split between two 50 by 38 inch sheets, it features several familiar figures from amanze's drawings lounging and playing across an immense white plane littered with houseplants.

²⁶ Brinda Mehta, "Culinary Diasporas: Identity and the Language of Food in Gisèle Pineau's *Un papillon dans la cité* and *L'exil selon Julia*," *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 8, no. 1 (2005): 35.



Fig. 3.2
 ruby onyinyechi amanze
Kinfolk [Diptych] (2015)
 Graphite, ink, photo transfers, colored pencils, metallic enamel
 Each 50 x 38 inches

In the first panel, on the far left side of the drawing is a neon, reclining, nude female astronaut who appears to be *ada the Alien*.²⁷ Her arms are folded behind her head, which rests on a light graphite sketch of a sculptural woman's head, calling to mind bronze artifact heads excavated in Igbo-Ukwu, Nigeria during the 19th century and the Yoruba Ife heads. Sharing the panel with the reclining *ada the Alien* are more sketched portraits of pigeons—bringing to mind the special ability of homing pigeons to find their way back home over long distances—and tiny Xerox photo transfers of houseplants, a lamp, and a light switch. Amanze uses minimalist lines

²⁷ This figure seems to reference amanze's 2014 drawing, '*ada rests in places unknown*,' which shows a nude neon yellow Ada lounging beneath a hanging houseplant with her arms behind her head.

and shading to differentiate spaces within the vast white plane, simultaneously creating a sense of insular domestic space, outer space, and nature. In the same panel, directly opposite the reclining ada is a reclining blue figure. The figure appears to be human but has no face or recognizable features. Its body is filled with blues and dark greys, and it appears pensive with its right arm folded under where the mouth would be and the left arm propping up its body. This figure may be Tritón, who amanze describes as, “a bit of a bore, but for all those who come from the water.”²⁸ In the second panel, two headless figures with ankara arms are potato sack racing with “Ghana Must Go” bags. This is Twin. Amanze describes Twin’s character as an androgynous “they”:

a double-bodied, headless entity, full of mischief, child-like. [They are] Acrobats by profession. This cheeky doer requires supervision. In the narrative, they are usually childlike and adventurous. They climb trees. They do handstands. They’re a little bit naughty. This is part of why they don’t have heads, it’s more to do with their physicality.²⁹

The “Ghana Must Go” bags are named after the inexpensive large waterproof bags that many carried during the mass expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria in 1983. In recent years, a number of African and African diasporic artists, including South African artist Dan Halter and Ghanaian artist Senam Okudzeto, have used them as a material to explore globalization, migration and exile. Amanze uses the Ghana Must Go Bags to signify movement and travel. Between Twin’s legs clad in “Ghana Must Go” sacks, is an okada, the popular name for motorcycles in Nigeria (not drawn to scale) floats between their feet. Above Twin on the page is Pidgin, a pigeon with a blue face and green glittered body suit. His arms are spread as if floating in water

²⁸ amanze, “aliens, hybrids, and ghosts.”

²⁹ Yvette Greslé, “ruby onyinyechi amanze: a story. in parts.”

and he wears floaties also made out of “Ghana Must Go” bags on both arms.

Amanze describes Pidgin as part pigeon and part human:

Pidgin is an in-between character and can be playful and silly like Twin but can also be more serious and take on different responsibilities. The inspiration for the name Pidgin comes from Pidgin English, the Creole language in Nigeria. I am interested in this idea that you can have a language that is essentially a broken, mixed-up, inauthentic language and how you can travel throughout Nigeria (North, South, East, West) and use this to communicate. There are so many official languages and you can’t assume that you can speak the same language to someone two hours away from you.³⁰

Shooting out from one of Pidgin’s hands is a constellation of pencil-drawn black-eyed peas, which form a halo around audre the Leopard’s head. Positioned in the middle of the frame, audre the Leopard stares straight at the viewer, head resting in their left hand and right hand resting on an invisible surface in front of them.

Wrapped around audre the Leopard’s resting fingers is a thin string that connects their form to ada the Alien’s, rendered again, just at the right edge of the panel.

Only partially in view, ada the Alien appears to be wearing a strapless swimsuit, painted in black and grey ink wash. She too looks directly at the viewer, her chin in her right hand, making the thread that connects her to audre the Leopard visible.

The abundance of white space in *Kinfolk*[*Diptych*] makes the piece seem deceptively minimalist, but it is dense with meaning and symbolism. Amanze uses simple accessories such as the astronaut helmet, floaties, houseplants, and Ghana Must Go Bags to capture diverse landscapes and represent temporal shifts. Amanze writes of this:

The magical potential of space (in all of its dimensions) is its malleability: its ability to shift, overlap, take form or infinitely expand. There is a point

³⁰ Yvette Greslé, “ruby onyinyechi amanze: a story. in parts.”

where land and sea invert, time travel happens daily and flying and walking are interchangeable. The drawings embrace these spatial freedoms, and playfully flirt with design, architecture and utopic mythology.³¹

Ada the Alien conveys her agency within the reclining nude position, as she lies naked and unconcerned with who may or may not be gazing upon her body. With her arms folded behind her head, amanze uses the astronaut mask to create a sense of leisure, exploration, curiosity, and freedom. Her nude body combined with the astronaut mask allows us to imagine her in two places at once, both lounging and also exploring outer space.

Amanze has described the disembodied drawings of heads, which appear throughout her drawings as the ghosts who she has drawn from people who share her experience of being in between:

Sometimes that is important to me, pulling in people who I share this story with, and I share it with many people. Sometimes the ghosts are unknown to me. For the ghosts, it goes back and forth, and it is important for me that these characters are reflecting real people that I know and real people that I haven't met yet. These are people, characters in the story that I don't have a personal relationship with. They could be made up, in some way they are made up but they also exist wherever they are.

The ghosts connect amanze's works to a larger community of diasporic women who share her experience of outsidership. By inserting these women as ghosts, amanze addresses the way these women remain with her and within her, an invisible community, as she navigates her own disbelonging. While ghosts often represent trauma or types of hauntings, for amanze the ghosts represent a connectedness with

³¹ ruby onyinyechi amanze, "Statements," *ruby onyinyechi amanze*, <http://rubyanmanze.com/statements>.

those she may not know but share a story with. amanze creates a new narrative around these type of characters:

It isn't trauma in this story at this point. If I tell my story that I am from Nigeria, and the UK and the US very quickly it can go to displacement and loss, and not belonging in a negative way. It is important for me in this story that this is not the energy that is conveyed, that these characters are not lost. They are quite at home. They have created a world for themselves where they exist. They exist comfortably. They exist playfully. They have fights. They have interactions as normal people would but that idea of it being a traumatic experience to be from many places is not the story that I am interested in telling.³²

In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon asserts that the ghost “is not the invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention.”³³ Amanze's treatments of the ghosts in her works make it impossible not to see them, as they are at times larger than the other forms, and though sketched in pencil, drawn quite realistically making them appear as full-fledged characters in her drawings.

In *Kinfolk[Diptych]*, hybridity and queerness is not only embraced but necessary. Modifications to the human form reference the tension black women face in non-humanity and the superhuman but gives us a way out through new possibilities. Pidgin can fly but not swim, so he needs floaties. Twin represents multiplicity on multiple levels—they are two bodies but only one character and travel on foot, hopping in a “Ghana Must Go” bag while also riding an okada. Ada the Alien is at once exploring outer space, day dreaming, staring directly at the viewer, and perhaps even in water. Furthermore, gender and species are of no

³² Yvette Greslé, “ruby onyinyechi amanze: a story. in parts.”

³³ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

consequence. amanze's manipulations of space are also manipulations of time. Her use of the astronaut helmets in particular brings to mind Wright's discussion of the relativity of time depending on space. It is this that allows ada the Alien to be in two places at once in *Kinfolk[Diptych]*. Through her visual queer worldmaking, amanze creates a community of the disbelonged where aliens, ghosts, and black girls thrive in conditions of their own creation, and experimentation, play, and leisure are central.

Pools as Sites of Leisure: *The Divers* and *Litres of Air [The Diver II]*

In *The Divers* (2016) (Figure 3.3) two forms, which appear to be "Twin," with hot pink, green, and electric blue Ankara printed arms and legs and wearing tan swimsuits, dive into a body of water in synchronized fashion on the left edge of the paper. In the center, ada the Alien wears a grey, aquamarine, yellow, and white striped blouse and is represented as just a head, torso and arms. She holds audre the Leopard (also represented as a head, torso and arms but wearing an aquamarine suit jacket and white button up) under her arms. In ada the Alien's hands, which hang below, is what looks like a yellow perspective grid used for animation, as if she is using her hands to create or manipulate the world below. Photo transfer houseplants float in the space above their heads. In *10 Litres of Air [The Divers II]* (2016) (Fig. 3.5) a similar scene is depicted, but this time audre the Leopard appears to be cradling ada, and it is less clear whether ada the Alien, who is dressed in a swimsuit made of the same material as her billowy blouse in *The Divers* and an astronaut helmet, is floating or falling. Ada's left hand is spread, with pigeons and a ghost face just outside of her grasp. Below them is a rectangular blue mass where Twin,

now further into the dive, is mere inches from entering. Low on the left side is a yellow greenhouse. The rectangular blue mass is reminiscent of a swimming pool surrounded by cement and also a portal to outer space or another dimension.



Fig. 3.3
ruby onyinyechi amanze
The Divers (2016)
Graphite, ink, photo transfer, acrylic, colored pencils
38 x 50 inches

The painterly quality of the blues and blacks with clouds of white give the appearance of infinite depth. Pools appear often in amanze's drawings as sites of leisure that many of her characters enjoy. The painterly quality of the blue void make it legible as both water and space, both indicators of diaspora, as water calls

to mind water spirits like Yemaya and Oshun, and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and outer space evokes an Afrofuturistic imagination. Amanze combines them to create a sight of imagining, remembering and leisure. The water is also connected to the birthplace of amanze's mother who is from River State, which is part of the Delta region:

If I am in Nigeria, identity-wise, I am just considered to be from where my father is from. Where my mother is from, and that lineage, is not recognised as part of my identity. But thinking about where she is from, you may hear phrases to do with riverine people, or people from a riverine area, or riverine languages. This fascinated me, the idea that someone can identify with or connect their identity to water, or connect their identity with land in a different way. I remember stories of my mother being in water, swimming, or catching fish, and how present water was in forming her identity. I started thinking about the merman as a riverine creature and then thinking about mythologies and spirits or creatures that come out of the water. There are many of them and they take many different forms, the mermaid and the merman being one.³⁴

Because in Nigeria the birthplace of the father is considered the birthplace of all the children, amanze reclaims her maternal lineage by thinking about her own connection to water. Additionally, in *10 Litres of Air* amanze utilizes simple pencil lines in the style of an architectural drawing, further adding to the worldmaking aesthetic. The viewer is easily able to insert themselves and their ideas onto the paper, which is still a work in process. Her use of blank space and surreal details facilitates queer worldmaking among viewers as she invites us to fill in the gaps, and imagine ourselves reclining in outer space or flying with birds.

I am interested in what it means for ada the Alien to be a character who is in amanze's likeness but who is also not her. This speaks to the double consciousness

³⁴ Yvette Greslé, "ruby onyinyechi amanze: a story. in parts,"

of the carefree black girl who creates various versions of herself in order to capture all of her complexities, and also to survive.



Fig. 3.4
ruby onyinyechi amanze
10 Litres of Air [The Divers II] (2016)
Graphite, ink, photo transfers, florescent acrylic, colored pencils
72 x 72 inches

Ada the Alien, Audre, Twin—may all be in her likeness to an extent, but the goal is to have them each be able to live as their fullest selves. This is critical in my theorizing of disbelonging, which attends to the ways diasporic women find wholeness within cultural marginalization. The relationships that amanze depict seamlessly move between familial, platonic, and romantic, embracing the full range

of dictionary meanings of kin including, “a person's relatives collectively; family relationship or kinship; and a group of persons descended from a common ancestor or constituting a people, clan, tribe, or family.” Amanze writes that her works are not utopian fantastical futures but represent the present. Indeed, her work suggests, as I have argued, that the speculative is not simply a tool used to fantasize the future but rather a lens through which we might see the present. What does it mean to speculate about the present/current condition? How might we imagine not only what we have not become, but also find language to articulate that which already exists but goes unseen?

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz writes, “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing.”³⁵ Amanze’s queer and hybrid characters exist not in opposition to Nigeria or Nigerian culture, but expand how we understand and conceive of culture and identity. Furthermore, her works capture the act of being both here in the present and also in a queer future where we can imagine beyond what already is. In her drawings she uses compositional gaps, mixed media hybrid creatures, and scenes of leisure and play to create fantastical worlds of disbelonging. In doing so, amanze not only rejects trauma narratives but offers an alternative story complete with new characters, and highlights the complex personhood and potential of black girls in diaspora who are able to blossom, experiment, and create through their own process of self-discovery and self-definition.

³⁵ Jose Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1.

Akata Witch

Similar to amanze's drawings, *Akata Witch* does not take place in a far away land but in contemporary Nigeria where Okorafor asks us to re-consider a reality that takes into consideration the endless possibilities for black girls. In the contemporary Nigerian world that Okorafor creates, certain people can move between multiple realms and travel through time, and disbelonging saves the world.

Akata Witch begins one night after the power has gone out. The main character, twelve-year-old Sunny, lights a candle and lies on the floor to stare at it, as she often does, "I lay on my belly and just stared and stared into it. So orange, like the abdomen of a firefly. It was nice and soothing until...it started flickering. Then, I thought I saw something. Something serious and big and scary."³⁶ In the flame Sunny sees "raging fires, boiling oceans, toppled skyscrapers, ruptured land, and dead and dying people," stating, "It was horrible. And it was coming."³⁷ The rest of the novel chronicles her discovery of her magical ability to see into the future and her journey to stop her vision from becoming a reality.

Born in Cincinnati, Ohio to two Igbo parents, Okorafor was raised in the suburbs of Chicago until the age of six. As a child she wanted to be an entomologist, a researcher of insects and their relationship to humans and the environment, and found that the suburbs of Chicago gave her lots of space and

³⁶Nnedi Okorafor, *Akata Witch* (Viking Books for Young Readers, 2011), 1.

³⁷Ibid, 2.

“empty weed filled lots to explore.”³⁸ It was also in the suburbs that she experienced a great amount of racism, as her family was the first black family to move into their neighborhood:

In the 80s of South Holland, Illinois it was like the 60s. My family was one of the first black families to move into that neighborhood. Thank goodness I was a fast runner. I learned early what it was to save my own ass from the bad guys. Then when we moved to Olympia Fields, Illinois, it flipped to experiencing discrimination from black Americans for being African and for “acting white”. I was a sort of outcast in multiple communities. So I grew up with little interest in “fitting in.” I just did my thing. And I’m still doing that.³⁹

Okorafor’s experience on the margins only grew stronger when, at the age of twelve, she was diagnosed with scoliosis. It worsened until she reached the age of nineteen and was told she would need spinal surgery with a one percent chance of causing paralysis, or risk being “severely crippled at the age of 25.” When Okorafor woke up, she was paralyzed from the waist down and spent the summer learning to walk again. Okorafor contends that her paralysis lead her to begin writing:

My experience with paralysis IS why I started writing...being paralyzed forced me to disregard the physical for a while and travel inward. That’s where I found much of the weird stuff you find in my work. That’s where I discovered the storyteller within. Friends of mine say that the whole paralysis thing was fate. Maybe, but it still sucked.⁴⁰

Faced with an abrupt change in how she interacted with the physical world, the once hyper athletic Okorafor was forced to retreat into her own world and imagine beyond the limitations of her physical body. Okorafor has also been candid about

³⁸ Jeremy L. C. Jones, “If It Scares You, Write It: A Conversation with Nnedi Okorafor,” *Clarkesworld Magazine*, December 2009, www.clarkesworldmagazine.com/okorafor_interview/.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Charles Tan, “Nnedi Okorafor Interview on the Nebula Awards Website,” *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog*, January 9, 2009, <http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2009/01/nnedi-okorafor-interview-on-nebula.html>

the barriers her Nigerian identity has created for her creative work. Similar to Akunyili Crosby, Okorafor's family did not take her desire to become a writer seriously. When asked about the biggest hurdle she had to overcome in order to become a writer Okorafor answers:

My family and, I guess, culture. In my family, and amongst Igbo as a whole, the most respected careers are in medicine and engineering. Writing is a hobby. I remember my father scoffing at the idea (he was a cardiovascular surgeon and a Chief of Surgery in Chicago). I definitely had to prove myself. So when I decided I was serious, I knew I had to do more than just get published. I had to get a PhD in writing (Nigerians love degrees) and get published by a top publisher.⁴¹

Similar to what amanze shares about how drawing is perceived in Nigeria, writing is seen as a “hobby” or an act of leisure but is what allowed Okorafor to not only cope with her paralysis and ultimately create worlds in which others could find liberation. Today Okorafor is the author of sixteen young adult and adult novels. In July of 2017 she announced via Twitter that her novel *Who Fears Death* has been picked up by HBO to become a TV series with novelist and *Game of Thrones* producer, George R.R. Martin, joining the project as an executive producer. In October of 2017, Okorafor also announced via Twitter that she would pick up where author Ta-Nehisi Coates left off and write the next three issues of Marvel's *Black Panther* comic book.⁴² *Akata Witch* was published in 2011 as a young adult fantasy novel. Its sequel *Akata Warrior* was published in 2017. The novel has been called “the Nigerian Harry Potter” and celebrated for featuring a strong black girl character and taking place on the African continent.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Alexandra Alter, “Nnedi Okorafor and the Fantasy Genre She Is Helping Redefine,” October 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/books/ya-fantasy-diverse-akata-warrior.html>.

We are introduced to the main character, Sunny, through her complex outsider identities. She declares, “My name is Sunny Nwazue and I confuse people,” a statement that specifically names the ways that she understands her outsidership vis-à-vis how her community receives and responds to her.⁴³ Sunny’s character is “Nigerian by blood, American by birth, and Nigerian again” noting that the process of being Nigerian and returning to Nigeria are actually two separate experiences, and nodding to the ways disbelonging as an orientation requires us to move back and forth. She has two brothers, making her the only girl in her family, and she is also the youngest child in her family. The most glaring feature that marks her outsidership is her physical appearance. Though she has what she calls “West African features” like her mother, she also has albinism making her much fairer than her dark brown family. In her words, “I’ve got light yellow hair, skin the color of ‘sour milk’...and hazel eyes that look like God ran out of the right color. I’m albino.”⁴⁴ Like Ada the Alien’s neon yellow skin, Sunny’s albinism marks her as an outsider in most spaces, a visual reminder that she does not quite belong. Her albinism also makes her sensitive to the hot Nigerian sun and although she is an extremely talented soccer player, she must play at night (when her brother’s will entertain her).

Despite the teasing at school, Sunny soon becomes close friends with Orlu, Chichi, and Sasha. Sunny and Orlu meet at school when he defends her against her classmates. Orlu is described as a nice quiet boy who likes to build things. He is the child of two Leopard People, individuals with magical powers, and neighbors with

⁴³ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁴ Okorafor, *Akata Witch*, 3.

Chichi. We eventually learn that he is dyslexic, which also gives him the power to undo juju.⁴⁵ Chichi is described as “fine boned and elfin,”⁴⁶ and always wearing dirty clothing. She lives in a small hut with her mother, who is also a Leopard Person, and does not go to school. Chichi possesses many talents including time travel. Though she is small, the group of friends suspects that she is actually much older than them. Lastly there is Sasha, a black American boy who was sent to Nigeria after getting in trouble in the States. Throughout the book he speaks frankly about being black in America and dealing with the Chicago police.

Sunny soon learns that she has the ability to shape shift, which allows her to move between the spirit realm and the human realm. Eventually she unites with Orlu, Chichi, and Sasha and the four of them form the *Oha Coven*. Over the course of the book, the Oha Coven along with the older mentors that watch over them become Sunny’s chosen family and amongst them, she is able to find belonging as they learn about the many parts of her. Early in *Akata Witch*, Sunny is called a number of names by her peers at school including, “stupid, pale faced akata witch,” “Stupid oyinbo akata witch,” and *onyocha*. Akata, a sometimes-derogatory name used to refer to African Americans, loosely translates to a jackal or cat, while oyinbo and onyocha are used to refer to white foreigners. While akata is commonly understood as a slur; today it is also used to refer to African Americans generally (in no particularly negative way). What makes it derogatory when Sunny’s classmates use it to refer to her is the fact that Sunny is the child of two Nigerian parents and living in Nigeria, so she “should be” considered Nigerian. Calling her

⁴⁵ Another word for magic.

⁴⁶ Okorafor, *Akata Witch*, 15.

“akata” is supposed to hurt her, and it does. Sunny’s Nigerian identity is used as a bartering chip when her schoolmates and even her brothers are upset with her—if she behaves she gets to be Nigerian, but if she acts out of line it can be taken away. Also notable is Sunny’s difficult relationship with her father who she feels sees her as inadequate –both for not being a son and not being an ideal daughter. She shares, “Sometimes I hated my father. Sometimes I felt he hated me too. I couldn’t help that I was not the son he wanted or the pretty daughter he’d have accepted instead.”⁴⁷ Although Sunny is only twelve years old, she is distinctly aware of the ways that her diasporic identity, her appearance, and her gender prevent her from experiencing full belonging.

While her albinism is cause for teasing and ridicule, it is also a marker of her mutability and connection to the spiritual realm. In Sunny’s early interactions with Chichi, her outsidership is named but we soon learn that unlike Sunny’s classmates, Chichi sees something more in her:

People say stuff about people like you. That you’re all ghost, or a half and half, one foot in this world and one in another. Sunny rolled her eyes. Not this again, she thought. So cliché. Everyone thinks the old lady, the hunchback, the crazy man, and the albino have magical evil powers.⁴⁸

Chichi referring to Sunny as a ghost calls to mind the ghost characters in amanze’s drawings. Sunny is precisely the type of girl that the ghosts in her paintings represent, a diasporic outsider floating in liminality. Sunny also experiences outsidership as a Free Agent, which means that neither of her parents are Leopard People, though she suspects that her maternal grandmother, who her family no

⁴⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁴⁸ Okorafor, *Akata Witch*, 23.

longer talks about, was also a Leopard Person. The fact that she is a Free Agent is occasionally the cause of angst—because the rest in her coven were raised as Leopard People they know much more than her and are more comfortable with the Leopard world. Sunny's feelings about not being raised by Leopard people draw a strong parallel to discourses about Nigerian Americans raised in the United States or by parents who are not Nigerian by birth, as she similarly navigates feelings of inadequacy and not knowing. Over the course of the book Sunny's various outsider traits become an indicator of her connection to her Nigerian heritage and ancestors, which give her the powers needed to fight Black Hat Otokoto. Sunny's identity as a Free Agent is also significant because the connections that she makes in Nigeria and the family she creates as a Free Agent are outside of her connections to her family and require her to embrace a world that her family fears, calling to mind Ogunji's journey creating a home in Nigeria after her father's death.

In *Akata Witch*, Sunny must embrace disbelonging because she never experiences full belonging in the human world or in Leopard Knocks—a marketplace that exists in a realm accessible only to Leopard People. In the human world her powers, albinism, place of birth, and gender make her life difficult. And in Leopard Knocks, although her powers and albinism do not stand out, the fact that she is both Nigerian and American perplexes people and her gender still prevents her from fully participating. Over the course of the book, Sunny does not discover a seamless belonging in any one place, but rather in moving between multiple places and spaces. Like *ada the Alien*, the setting for *Akata Witch* disrupts easy understandings of place and time, and because the characters are able to travel

between Leopard Knocks, where almost anything is possible, and the human realm, they are able to experience the world similarly to ada the Alien and her kin, existing in multiple places at once— moving from water, to earth, to air, and back to earth in an instant—and manifesting reality from thought alone. The experience of girlhood for ada the Alien and Sunny is summed up in the last line of *Akata Witch* when Sunny says to Orlu, “Feels weird doesn’t it?” as she reflects on all they have been through. Orlu replies, “You’ll get used to it...Having two lives is better than none.”⁴⁹ With this line, Orlu’s character asserts that to survive and thrive in multiplicity—to embody the tension between being human and superhuman— is better than the alternative, which is often the case for black girls whose lives are so often devalued.

Throughout the book, Sunny’s embrace of leisure and play paves the way for greater realizations, and shifts in herself and her immediate environment. Her leisure in fact aids in her own survival. For example, when Sunny has the powerful vision of the world ending, an event that ultimately the Oha Coven comes together to stop, she is staring into a candle flame, which she describes as nice and soothing, even recalling the nostalgia of fireflies, “I have always been fascinated by candles. Looking into the flame calms me down.”⁵⁰ For Sunny, the act of looking at the candle flame is a meditative act, and ultimately it creates the conditions for her to access pertinent information. Furthermore, after Sunny is initiated by Antonov, Sasha’s father and the coven’s teacher and mentor, she accompanies Sasha, Orlu, and Chichi to Leopard Knocks. Sunny, exhausted and confused from the

⁴⁹ Okorafor, *Akata Witch*, 349.

⁵⁰ Okorafor, *Akata Witch*, 1.

experiences of the day exclaims, "I thought today was supposed to be fun." Orlu answers, "Would you rather have fun or learn the meaning of your life?"⁵¹ Sunny's adventures in *Akata Witch* are both.

In order to enter Leopard Knocks, the four children are forced to cross a bridge, and Chichi explains to Sunny that in order to cross the narrow bridge, she must transform into her spirit self, described as one's true essence, so vulnerable that seeing someone's spirit self is similar to viewing them in their underwear. Sunny's spirit face looks like the sun and her spirit name is Anyanwu, which means "eye of the sun" in Igbo. This is somewhat incongruous because her albinism prevents her from spending time in the sun, but is also a reflection of the ways in which her spiritual knowledge allows her extend beyond her human form. Soon she hears classical music and feels a levity that allows her to dance across the bridge feeling fearless⁵²:

She felt so good and confident that she laughed, thinking, Man, this is going to be easy. With her peripheral vision she could see golden points radiating from her face. Her spirit face had sunrays too! She laughed again, feeling a wave of pleasure as the classical music hit a crescendo...She felt not an ounce of fear.⁵³

It is only after she is almost across the entire bridge that she realizes there was a river monster waiting for her to fall. It is through pleasure and play that she is able to cross the bridge without falling into the river monster's grip. Sunny's magic represents indigenous knowledges that are feared and stigmatized by the Nigerian mainstream as a result of colonial stigmatization. The sun epitomizes the embodied

⁵¹ Okorafor, *Akata Witch*, 63.

⁵² Okorafor, *Akata Witch*, 68.

⁵³ Okorafor, *Akata Witch*, 69.

experience of living in Nigeria, which her albinism disconnects her from.

Additionally, the inconsistent electricity means that the majority of things must get done during the day when the sun is out. Later in the book, during the annual Zuma Festival in Leopard Knocks, she is allowed to play soccer even though she is a girl and blows everyone away. Despite the ridicule and attention her primary motivation is her pleasure, “By the second half Sunny could barely think straight, she was in such ecstasy.”⁵⁴ At the end of the day her skin is unharmed even after spending the entire day in the sun. It is through embracing indigenous knowledges, which render her outside of the contemporary and mainstream Nigerian culture, that she is able to physically connect with nature.

Lastly, Sunny’s kin networks in the book are necessarily queer in nature, as amongst the Leopard people normative categorizations across age and human/animal affinities seem not to apply (interestingly, gender remains somewhat static). Gumbs defines *queer intergenerationality* as “the practice of being present to what can be generated and shared between moments in time and encounters, that is not necessarily linked to generations in the patriarchal family sense.”⁵⁵ Chichi may very well be an old woman, but her friends cannot know for sure. As a result she straddles the line between sassy elder and peer, disrupting linear notions of kinship hierarchies and order according to age. Furthermore, boundaries between human, plant, and animal are often blurred and as a result, systems of relationality do not follow the same rules of the human world. For example, when they first enter

⁵⁴ Okorafor, *Akata Witch*, 259.

⁵⁵ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “Speculative Poetics: Audre Lorde as Prologue” in *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Black Speculative* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 130.

Leopard Knocks Sunny notices a man made of leaves, “Iroko leaves were falling around her, and as she watched, one of the leaf piles took a humanoid shape. It sloppily cartwheeled over to a man and fell apart, burying the man in its green leaves. As the leaves covered him, the man looked more annoyed than afraid.”⁵⁶ By emphasizing that the man was more annoyed than afraid, Okorafor normalizes this type of human/plant hybrid in the world of Leopard Knocks.

Significant kin relationships that Sunny forms are with the outsider women who mentor her and play a key role in her discovery of self. They are in many ways crucial to her survival, as we are reminded of the ways her parents are unable to fully see and support her in her difference, though her mother tries her best. This is most explicit at the end of the book after the Oha Coven defeats Black Hat Otokoto, and Sunny has a final confrontation with her father. Upon arriving home, her brother asks where she has been and she replies, “Trying to save the world.” When her dad angrily asks where she has been all day she answers with a shaky voice, “I was up to nothing unholy or shameful or dirty. I was with my friends and—”⁵⁷ The way Sunny starts her explanation shows that she is well aware of the regulations and expectations that govern her body and actions. Before she can finish, Sunny’s father lashes out at her and begins to yell, declaring that Sunny will “come to no good” like her grandmother. Speaking to Sunny’s mother he recalls, “Your mother started disappearing at night around this age, no? Didn’t you tell me that? Then one day she came home carrying you in her belly! She’s lucky the guy married her.” He then turns back to Sunny, disgusted, and says, “A beating won’t save you. Look at

⁵⁶ Okorafor, *Akata Witch*, 73.

⁵⁷ Okorafor, *Akata Witch*, 338.

you, you're lost. I can't stand it!"⁵⁸ Although Sunny's grandmother's "strangeness" was because she was a Leopard Person, his inability to understand women outside of their roles as mothers and wives limits his imagination to worries about pregnancy. His investment is in maintaining her purity, even though she is only 12, and he feels the need to police her body with violence. Following the confrontation, Sunny's mother brings her pepper soup and they have a heart-to-heart. Sunny's mother knows that there are things that she cannot know about Sunny but says to her, "I trust you." In a scene built around soup Okorafor makes space for recognition without understanding, as they both see that they cannot and will not fully understand one another, and that is okay.

A key mentor for Sunny is her Auntie Chinwe who exemplifies disbelonging in several ways as the "free spirit" of their family. Auntie Chinwe, who lives in the United States, married an African American man and was considered a disappointment by Sunny's grandfather.⁵⁹ Chinwe is also a disappointment because she chose to study dance rather than medicine.⁶⁰ While Sunny's mother still speaks to her, we get the sense that Auntie Chinwe has been excommunicated from the family. Moreover, it is her Auntie Chinwe that directs her to a box of her grandmother's secrets, which confirm that she was a Leopard Person. Sunny's aunt's decision to marry a non-Nigerian, untraditional career path, and lack of shame about these decisions all encompass disbelonging. Though she has made decisions that relegate her to the margins of her family of origin, she still

⁵⁸ Ibid, 330.

⁵⁹ Okorafor writes that Sunny's grandfather derogatorily called him an akata.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 288.

plays an active role in emotionally supporting Sunny and Sunny's mother in Nigeria. Moreover, by directing Sunny to the box of secrets, she takes the initiative to help pass on the history of the family's matriarchal connection to Leopard People.

Sunny's second mentor is a woman by the name of Sugar Cream. Sunny, first learns of Sugar Cream at a bookstore in Leopard Knocks. She is the author of a book titled, *Nsibidi: The Magical Language of the Spirits*, which Sunny is surprisingly able to read.⁶¹ When Sunny unethically uses her powers in a fight at school, she finally meets Sugar Cream who she has been hoping will mentor her even though Sugar Cream has never taken a mentee before. Despite Sunny's mistake, it is clear early on that Sugar Cream likes her and she shares her story with her. Sugar Cream has severe scoliosis, and tells the story of being found in the forest and raised by monkeys:

When I was very small, I walked out of the forest. A young man found me. I was like a little monkey, wild and feral. Some people think that actual monkeys might have even looked after me for a while. Somehow I'd survived in the bush. I could have been over three years old.⁶²

She receives the name Sugar Cream because the young man offers her tea with "lots of sugar and lots of cream" when he discovers her. The young man raises Sugar Cream as his daughter, and she eventually goes on to be the head of the Leopard Knocks Library Council. Though Sugar Cream does not know who her family is, she is a woman of great self-knowledge and presence, and undeniably Nigerian,

⁶¹ The language of Nsibidi is the oldest written language in Africa and only a select few understand it. On the first page of the book below the title is the Nsibidi symbol for "This is all mine."

⁶² Ibid, 187.

having mastered the ancient language of Nsibidi. Her connection is primarily to the land and animals. Chinwe and Sugar Cream represent a number of taboos and non-normative performances of Nigerian womanhood and are content in doing so. Through them Sunny is able to come to a place of accepting herself. Here mentorship offers a model for loving and supporting black girls and also reveals how critical distance from home allows women to create space of wholeness for others. In *Akata Witch* Okorafor creates a world where a black girl hero reaches her fullest potential by embracing her disbelonging. Through the support and guidance of her queer chosen family, she is able to find comfort within her own body and grow her magical capabilities. Moreover, this occurs through her strategic embrace of play and leisure.

The consideration of diasporic disbelonging, play, leisure, kinship, and worldmaking through the lens of black girlhood is important because, playing on Gumb's definition, "it disrupts social reproduction of the meaning of life," creating an opening for an alternative record of what it has meant to be a Nigerian diasporic girl and what it can mean to be a Nigerian diasporic women for future generations. Amanze's drawings, *Akata Witch*, and the work of the other artists in this dissertation consider the value in imagining beyond our human forms, current realities, and present communities for black girls. In light of this, it is no coincidence that it was children who consistently gathered and lingered at Ogunji's performances in Lagos. Furthermore I am interested in the relationship between the words "akata" and "alien," both words that when used, attempt to deny belonging. In this chapter, the words alien and akata do the work of identifying the ways that

blackness and girlhood are nuanced, diverse, and simultaneously entangled in difficulties and joy. Aliens are a threat because they are not governed by the same rules that govern those on earth. Regardless of where they travel, they operate by their own rules, which humans are incapable of understanding. Discourses around the word *akata* often focus on the rift between Africans and African Americans, and feelings of judgment and misunderstanding on both sides. Both terms have been used to separate and divide in ways that maintain white supremacist hetero-patriarchy. I argue that *amanze* and *Okorafor* reclaim these terms in order to illuminate the complexities of black subjectivity, and the tensions between the non-human and the superhuman. Their storytelling reanimates subjects that are often flattened in identity discourse, and exhibits a disregard for borders and identity labels intended to disempower and limit diasporic girls and women.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

It's Christmas morning and I am slipping into the pale yellow lace and brocade gown that was made for me to wear to my grandfather's funeral in Nigeria two years ago. While packing the dress the night before, I was worried that it would be too much, but as I stand surrounded by my whole family I am grateful to, for once, not be underdressed for a Nigerian function. It has been several years since I was last getting ready to go to church with my family. I look different now. My hair, which I used to wear extremely short, has grown out and on this morning I wear it in shoulder length twists that just barely cover my eyebrow piercing. I also wear make up and perfume now, which has quieted my mother's usual critiques. As I zip up the back of the dress and step into my 4-inch heels, I feel a sense of relief to be slipping into Nigerian womanhood. It is my armor. It is my drag. It feels good to finally get it right. Before I can make it out the door my aunt stops me in the living room. Her make-up is flawless and her *gele* fans out elegantly, framing her face. "I think you should wear a slip under your dress. It's a bit see through." Her tone isn't mean, but there is disapproval and maybe a tinge of judgment. I'm embarrassed. Even though I know that I absolutely did not pack a slip—that it never even occurred to me—I knowingly smile at her and hurry back to my room. A slip. Of course. How could I forget? Kneeling in front of my suitcase as if praying before an altar, I let it sink in that I have nothing that even resembles a slip. Why would I? It's December in New York. Just outside of my door my younger

cousins, Grace and Andrea, who have witnessed the whole situation knowingly sigh and say, “It’s always something.”

In the moments where I am dressed appropriately or kneeling down to greet an elder at the right time, or laughing at a joke told in Yoruba to the surprise of native speakers who assume that my inability to speak means I also cannot understand, I am on Cloud 9—an outsider hiding in plain site. The fleeting feeling of acceptance, of *belonging*, for a first generation Nigerian kid is intoxicating but never guaranteed. In the moments where I accept a drink with the wrong hand, or nervously forget to greet an elder, or dress too boyish or too revealing (or sometimes both), I feel a deep sense of shame that I belong nowhere. Perhaps it is my own anxiety about being culturally disowned that keeps me feeling especially attached to my Nigerian culture—so afraid of not belonging that I don’t mind wearing all of the masks.

And then there are the bad girls. The Nigerian women who are unafraid of screwing it all up, who cut their off and dye it red, who have sex and talk about it, who are queer, who don’t go to church, who drink beer out of the bottle, who have tattoos—who make fearless art and create their own worlds of wholeness. This dissertation is about them.

When Chimamanda Adiche’s *Americanah* came out in 2013, I read it three times that year. It was one of the first popular representations of complicated, nuanced African womanhood that I had encountered, and I could not get enough. Even for my friends who did not love it, they could not deny that it spoke deeply to their own experiences. Today there are more representations of non-normative

African womanhood than there were even six years ago when I began graduate school. Books like *Americanah*, and Taye Selasi's TED Talk "Don't ask me where I'm from, ask me where I'm local,"¹ and the recent play *Familiar* by Danai Gurira have done a great deal to reflect and shift the ways African diasporic women think of themselves and their relationship to homeland. And yet, there is still so much more to be done. It is increasingly clear that it is within the realm of art and literature that the most critical conversations about the nuances of African diasporic subjectivity are occurring. I highlight the work of the artists in my dissertation to bring to light the critical role art plays in subject formation for diasporic women, as a site that reflects back their lived experiences and allows them to imagine and create something new. Furthermore, moving beyond discussions about "African feminism," which can become distracting and alienating, art allows us to focus on the particularities of how life is lived and navigated by African and African diasporic women. It offers a new entryway into the conversation.

By shifting to an examination of how disbelonging is lived and practiced, this project attempts to attend to the everydayness of diaspora and consider what possibilities lay beyond trauma narratives of loss and displacement for diasporic subjects. In Chapter Two, I identify and name the at once tedious and pleasurable labor of constructing belonging in a place where one does not quite belong. The chapter argues that Ogunji performs disbelonging through a collaborative, embodied, and performative engagement with space, which allows her to claim

¹ Taiye Selasi, "Don't ask me where I'm from, ask me where I'm local," *TED Global 2014*, https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local/transcript?la.

Nigeria as home and make it such across time and place. I shift my attention from looking for moments of social acceptance while Ogunji is in Lagos, and instead consider the work her imagination and desires do before and after she lands in Lagos to ensure that she is able to create belonging. This chapter proposes active and fashioned belonging as an equally authentic alternative to the conditional belonging the language “community” evokes. In Chapter Three, I consider representations of the erotic, specifically examining engagements with pleasure and desire as acts of disbelonging. The chapter examines how African diasporic women use their creative forms to mark black female diasporic bodies as sites of sexual agency and softness, simultaneously acknowledging and resisting the burden of respectability and cultural norms that hide and dismiss the importance of sexual expression, intimacy, and vulnerability in their lives. I argue that their works serve as blueprints for a world where African diasporic women live in their truth rather than censor their authentic selves—landscapes of wholeness and unconditional acceptance for themselves and their communities. Lastly in Chapter Four, I extend my methodology to analyze art and literature alongside one another, examining what happens when we do away with attachments to homeland all together and allow black girl magic to lead us to new dimensions and outer space, and guide our imaginings of what counts as home and where belonging can be found. In this chapter I name the liberatory potential of disbelonging via play, leisure, and queer kinship as valuable and necessary for visioning liberatory futures for black girl outsiders.

Studying worldmaking captures the ways diasporic subjects navigate, think about, and construct their identities. In much of Diaspora Studies the main focus is on national boundaries and national borders, which are absolutely important to center, as they have real and oftentimes violent implications for individuals. What I argue is that by considering the everyday, affect, the erotic, and psychic constructions of home, we are able to attend to the ways that people make up for the shortcomings of home and belonging. I argue that the cultural production of these women is its own type of naming practice or “voicing.” As Michelle V. Rowley asserts:

I use the term “voicing” to refer to the varying, articulated levels of consciousness and alienation and inaction which categories of Caribbean women experience. The term “voicing” stems from a need to reflect women’s lived realities within our theoretical frames; it is a response to the challenge issued by Joychelin Massiah that women “speak for themselves, name their experiences and make their own connections.”²

Extending beyond the spoken word, in this dissertation I consider how these women voice their own understandings of who they are through their art, film, performance, interviews, and writing. I consider their acts of worldmaking as a mode of voicing.

The idea of “home” for many 1 and 1.5 generation immigrants is so often a site of disappointment, trapped between nostalgia and the realities of globalization and modernity. So why do we cling so furiously? For many of us, we cling to the idea of home and homeland because we have been told that these are places that will always desire us— that our belonging is guaranteed. But this is a myth. The

² Michelle V. Rowley, “Reconceptualizing Voice: The Role of Matrifocality in Shaping Theories and Caribbean Voices,” in *Gendered Realities: Essays in Caribbean Feminist Thought*, ed. Patricia Mohammed (University of West Indies Press, 2002), 25.

work I highlight in this dissertation offers the option to let go of the fantasy of a static belonging and find comfort in the complexities of in-between-ness. It gives us permission to stop pretending there has to be something traumatic about being in between and accept that this is the very nature of diaspora, as well as consider the ways in which diasporic connections are broken and created anew.

I wonder what art might teach us about embodying the hesitation,

the slipping,

the feeling not enough,

the forgetting,

the not having the right words,

the tension,

the melancholy,

and the overwhelming joy of being in dispersal—from the homeland, from family and within oneself—with ease? Worldmaking allows us to think about how people are creating the conditions for joy and wholeness. Furthermore, art is a key way to study worldmaking, as the visual and literary lend themselves to imaging, creating, and rendering new worlds in a seamless way. By looking to visual art, performance art, and film, I draw attention to the often hidden negotiations made and survival tools used by black female diasporic subjects.

There is much about the experience of diaspora that is difficult to articulate, particularly the day to day affective experience of longing and belonging, and the quiet seemingly mundane compromises made by women everyday as they navigate bringing together their personal needs, desires, and obligations to their beloved

communities. The art of Ogunji, Akunyili Crosby, Saro-Wiwa, amanze and Okorafor each offer unique insights into the diasporic negotiations that are so often invisible in diasporic literature by tending to the messy contradictions and fantasies embedded in the act of return, the power of the erotic, the liberatory potential of leisure and play and their implications for black girls.

Additionally, my focus on the Nigerian diaspora specifically brings to light the limitations of African American and African binaries when discussing diasporic return and belonging. This project bridges the fields of African American Studies and African Studies by underlining the overarching contentiousness and instability of belonging, geography, and even blood lineage for black subjects living both on the Continent and scattered across the Americas. Additionally, by using gender as a critical lens through which to study diaspora, I bring to the forefront issues that have long been considered frivolous or irrelevant but have held revolutionary potential for black women across the globe such as sexual agency, pleasure, play, queer social bonds, and worldmaking, which I argue are and have been at the center of liberation for women, and are critical tools used by women to heal and build home and community. Lastly, this dissertation asks what we might discover when we do not assume that displacement is always internalized as traumatic for diasporic subjects. These women artists demonstrate how art creates the conditions to imagine an affective experience of diaspora beyond trauma, and the possibility of creating belonging anew.

In Thich Nhat Hanh's meditation on generational healing, *Reconciliation: Healing the Inner Child*, he writes, "We don't need to go back to our native land,

to Ireland, to China, to find our roots. We just need to be in touch with every cell in our body. Our father, our mother, and all of our ancestors are present in a very real way in each cell of our body, even in the bacteria.”³ In this quote Hanh decenters land as a necessary component for discovering our roots, or creating belonging and redirects us to the body for answers. Selasi’s Ted Talk echoes this sentiment that a country is an insufficient basis for understanding an individual stating:

To say that I came from a country suggested that the country was an absolute, some fixed point in place in time, a constant thing, but was it? In my lifetime, countries had disappeared – Czechoslovakia; appeared – Timor-Leste; failed – Somalia. My parents came from countries that didn't exist when they were born. To me, a country – this thing that could be born, die, expand, contract -- hardly seemed the basis for understanding a human being[...]. The myth of national identity and the vocabulary of coming from confuses us into placing ourselves into mutually exclusive categories. In fact, all of us are multi – multi-local, multi-layered. To begin our conversations with an acknowledgement of this complexity brings us closer together, I think, not further apart.⁴

This dissertation asks: what might it look like to center a study of diaspora that seeks to analyze how individuals connect with every cell in their body rather than physically rooting in a place? How might this create space for people who have never found home in one place and perhaps never will? And if we can accept that ultimate belonging is not always found in one place, where might that lead our study?

I am left wondering how we might consider a theorizing of home that accounts for the ways we as black women find and make home in our own bodies? One possible answer to this question is by looking for the homes black diasporic

³ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Reconciliation: Healing Your Inner Child* (Parallax Press, 2006), 67.

⁴ Selasi, “Don’t ask me where I’m from, ask me where I’m local.”

subjects create within and through their creative production. The visual gives us new language, not to only more accurately represent diasporic processes beyond a surveying of place of birth and nationality, but also to potentially replace and expand the term entirely. In *Scenes of Subjection* Saidiya Hartman writes:

The significance of becoming or belonging together in terms other than those defined by one's status as property, will-less object, and the not-quite human should not be underestimated. This belonging together endeavors to redress and nurture the broken body; it is a becoming together dedicated to establishing other terms of sociality, however transient, that offer a small measure of relief from the debasements constitutive of one's condition.⁵

I consider Hartman's words alongside amanze's insistence that her work not be read through the lens of trauma and alienation. Each of the artists that I analyze actively rejects trauma narratives associated with their specific diasporic journey.

They are more concerned with the possibilities these circumstances create.

Disbelonging, as an analytic, allows us to see and trace how loss, displacement, isolation, and not knowing shape the ways diasporic subjects seek out and practice belonging. Disbelonging creates an option that is not insider or outsider, but both in a way that is expansive and liberating.

The decentering of home within Diaspora Studies also allows for the study of rhizomatic connections as sites of meaning. I have examined what studying those who do not fit can tell us about the freedom of existing elsewhere, in between and nowhere at all. My dissertation highlights the ways that we cannot take home for granted but must instead make a commitment to being present for all of the ways home comes into being. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use the term "rhizomatic" to describe theory and research that allows for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and

⁵ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 61.

exit points in data representation and interpretation. Contrary to plants like trees which have roots, the rhizome “connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature.”⁶ Jafari S. Allen building upon this writing:

In nature, rhizomes arise from underground or underwater connections/roots/routes that are neither limited to one place nor destined to go in only one direction. The rhizomatic thus represents a queer temporality and sociality that is processual—not teleological or “narrativized in advance.” A rhizomatic conceptualization of relations, space, and time.⁷

Within this framework, we can read each of these networks and works of art that I have surveyed in this dissertation as examples of rhizomatic networks and communities that have little to do with blood lineage or a single relationship to place. I am particularly interested in this where I allow the visual to transition to the literary in Chapter 3.

A shift towards the study of disbelonging is important to the field of Diaspora Studies for a number of reasons. First, it calls for a post-colonial turn away from the stories that have been told by Europeans about who Africans are, an over-emphasis on categorization and borders, and a deep investigation of how there has traditionally been room for our full selves in African societies. Though diaspora is a result of colonization, traditional Nigerian understandings of the relationship between body and spirit have actually always allowed space for full and complex understandings of diasporic hybridity, female sexuality, and queerness. Ogunji, Akunyili-Crosby, Saro-Wiwa, amanze and Okorafor resist neo-colonial African

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “A Thousand Plateaus” (Minneapolis: University Press, 1987), 21.

⁷ Jafari S. Allen, “Black/Queer Rhizomatics: Train Up a Child in the Way Ze Should Grow” in *No Tea No Shade* (Durham: Duke Press, 2016), 28.

notions of respectability or morality by locating themselves in the full complex pre-colonial social and cultural history of Nigeria.⁸ Disbelonging is important because trauma is not the only story we have to tell about being in dispersal. In thinking about trauma, loss and alienation we must also think about what is gained for individuals who exist on the margins. This dissertation calls for scholars of diaspora to interrogate what women and queer subjects are asked to sacrifice in order to gain full cultural and national belonging. Disbelonging as a concept offers language for thinking through how marginal subjects use their anti-respectable positionalities—as displaced, as lost, as too hybrid to belong in one place—as a mode of self fashioning, which gives them a platform from which to challenge oppressive ideologies and vision new ways of relating. Disbelonging also moves diasporic conversations beyond trauma, and towards joy, freedom, and possibility.

Lastly, I argue that disbelonging is a strategy of survival. This dissertation maintains that embracing disbelonging offers opportunities for African diasporic women to lean into their embodied desires, wants, messy contradictions in search of wholeness, while trusting that they will be able to build home and wherever they call home will have room for their whole self. I seek to normalize and celebrate disbelonging as a particular way of bringing ones full self to wherever they call home. So often, we as African and African descendant women are taught that cultural belonging is conditional. That even one slip up may call one's entire

⁸ Oyeronke Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997) and her edited collection, *African Gender Studies: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2005) are excellent ruminations on pre-colonial notions of gender and sexuality on the African continent.

identity into question. This is discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 as we see Akunyili Crosby struggling with the fear that marrying her husband will render her “not Igbo” anymore; and in the ways that Sunny is instantly called “akata” when her classmates are displeased with her. The repercussions of this type of relationship to the places that we consider home are grave. When African diasporic women accept the fact that in order to receive love, protection, and acceptance, we must only present certain parts of ourselves, it is too easy to carry this assumption into all of our relationships—believing that unconditional acceptance must not exist. It conditions us to accept relationships where love and acceptance are bound by rules, regulation, and policing, and it teaches us that belonging can only be experienced in this way. This dissertation argues that we do not have to accept that the conditional belonging that Joseph describes is all there is. A diasporic sensibility that allows for disbelonging is a project of self-love. This is why a consideration of alternate belongings is not just necessary but critical for our survival.

Bibliography

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.
- Ajibade, Idowu. "Can a future city enhance urban resilience and sustainability? A political ecology analysis of Eko Atlantic city, Nigeria." *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 26 (December 2017): 85-92.
- Allen, Jafari S. "Black/Queer Rhizomatics: Train Up a Child in the Way Ze Should Grow." *In No Tea No Shade*. Durham: Duke Press, 2016.
- Alter, Alexandra. "Nnedi Okorafor and the Fantasy Genre She Is Helping Redefine." *The New York Times*, October 6, 2017.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/books/ya-fantasy-diverse-akata-warrior.html>.
- amanze, ruby onyinyechi. "aliens, hybrids, and ghosts." *Anatomía De Una Escena*, February 27, 2017. <http://backroomcaracas.com/escritura-expandida/aliens-hybrids-and-ghosts-en/>.
- amanze, ruby onyinyechi. "Biography." *Morgan Lehman Gallery*.
<http://www.morganlehmangallery.com/artists/ruby-onyinyechi-amanze2>.
- amanze, ruby onyinyechi. "Statements." *ruby onyinyechi amanze*.
<http://rubyanmanze.com/statements>.
- Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." In *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, edited by Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, 25-48. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.
- Arthur, John. *Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States*. Praeger, 2000.
- Ater, Renee. *Remaking Race and History: The Sculpture of Meta Warrick Fuller*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- Bagheshirin, Roxanne Lærkesen. "Wura-Natasha Ogunji: Beauty in the Streets of Lagos." *Louisiana Channel*. <http://channel.louisiana.dk/video/wura-natasha-ogunji-beauty-streets-lagos>.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Cambridge: Polity, 2001.
- Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner. "Sex in Public." *Critical Inquiry* vol. 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 547-566.

- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 1994.
- . "Black Girls Viewed As Less Innocent Than White Girls, Georgetown Law Research Finds." *Georgetown Law*. June 27, 2017.
<https://www.law.georgetown.edu/news/press-releases/Black-Girls-Viewed-As-Less-Innocent-Than-White-Girls-Georgetown-Law-Research-Finds.cfm>.
- Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic, 2001.
- Brielmaier, Isolde. "Transformers: Video Installation, Space, and the Art of Immersion." In *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and The Moving Image Since 1970*. Atlanta: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art/ Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston, 2008.
- Brown, Ruth Nicole. *Black Girlhood Celebration*. New York: Lang Publishing, 2009.
- Brown, Ruth Nicole. *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*. Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Campt, Tina. *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012.
- Campt, Tina. "Performing Stillness: Diaspora and Stasis in Black German Vernacular Photography." *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* vol. 26, no. 1 (June 2017): 158.
- Carpenter, Faedrea. *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014.
- Carpenter, Faedra. "L(activists) and Lattes' Breastfeeding Advocacy as Domestic Performance." *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 16, no. 3 (November 2006): 347-367.
- Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California, 1998.
- Corbett, Rachel. "Curator and Artist ruby Onyinyechi amanze on the Ancient, Universal Language of Drawing." *Artspace*. November 26, 2013.
http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/expert_eye/ruby_onyinyechi_amanze-51862
- Chavers, Linda. "Here's My Problem With #BlackGirlMagic." January 31, 2016. Accessed March 30, 2018. <https://www.elle.com/life-love/a33180/why-i-dont-love-blackgirlmagic/>.

- Clifford, James. "Diasporas." *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994).
- Cohen-Cruz, Jan. *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Crawford, Charmaine. "African-Caribbean Women, Diaspora, and Transnationality." *Canadian Woman Studies* 23.2 (Winter 2004): 97–103.
- . "Crude Politics." *The Economist*, March 28, 2015.
<https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21647361-broken-oil-industry-source-many-woes-crude-politics>.
- D., Elle. "Cree Summer: 'I Don't Know a Single Black Girl Who's Carefree.'" September 7, 2016. Accessed May 30, 2018.
<https://blackgirllonghair.com/2016/09/cree-summer-i-dont-know-a-single-black-girl-whos-carefree/>.
- Daniel, Richard M. "The Little Can That Could." *Invention and Technology Magazine* vol. 3, issue 1 (Fall 1987).
https://web.archive.org/web/20070524182038/http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/it/1987/2/1987_2_62.shtml.
- Davies, Carole Boyce and Babacar M'Bow. "Towards African Diaspora Citizenship: Politicizing an Existing Global Geography." In *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Davies, Catriona. "Artist joins Nigeria's 'cultural explosion'." *CNN*, October 23, 2012. Accessed May 30, 2016.
<http://www.cnn.com/2012/10/22/world/africa/nigerian-artist-njideka-akunyili/>.
- Dedieu, Jean-Phillippe. "Njideka Akunyili Crosby's Intimate Universes." *The New Yorker*, November 5, 2015.
<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/njideka-akunyili-crosbys-intimate-universes>.
- Deliso, Meredith. "The Menil Hosts a Big Show on Love." *Houston Press*, January 16, 2013. <http://www.houstonpress.com/content/printView/6365778>.
- DeVault, Marjorie. *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Edwards, Brent Hayes. *The Uses of Diaspora*. *Social Text* 66 vol. 19, no 1 (Spring 2001): 45-73.

- . "Eko Atlantic City project to create 150,000 jobs, Lagos commissioner says." *Premium Times*, April 13, 2013. Accessed May 30, 2018.
<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/ssouth-west/130208-eko-atlantic-city-project-to-create-150000-jobs-lagos-commissioner-says.html>.
- Epprecht, Marc. "The Making of African Sexuality: Early Sources, Current Debates." *History Compass* 8 (2010): 768-777.
- Ferguson, Roderick and Grace Hong. *Strange Affinities*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Gammel, Irene. *Confessional Politics: Women's Sexual Self-Representations in Life Writing and Popular Media*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1999.
- Gilles, Deleuze and Félix Guattari. "A Thousand Plateaus." Minneapolis: University Press, 1987.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Gopinath, Gayatri. "Archive, Affect, and the Everyday; Queer *Diasporic Re-Visions*." In *Political Emotions (New Agendas in Communication)*, edited by Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, Ann Reynolds, 165-192. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Hackett Publish, 1978.
- Gordon, April. "Ethnic Diversity in Nigeria." In *Nigeria's Diverse Peoples: A Reference Sourcebook*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003. http://proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/abcnigeria/ethnic_diversity_in_nigeria/0?institutionId=1210
- Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Greslé, Yvette. "ruby onyinyechi amanze: a story. in parts." *Writing in Relation: Interviews, Essays and Dialogues about Art*, February 24, 2015.
<https://writinginrelation.wordpress.com/2015/02/24/ruby-onyinyechi-amanze-a-story-in-parts/>.
- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. "Speculative Poetics: Audre Lorde as Prologue." In *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Black Speculative*.

- New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011.
- Hahn, Thich Naht. *Reconciliation: Healing Your Inner Child*. Parallax Press, 2006.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* no. 36 (1989): 68-81.
- Hammersley Houlberg, Marilyn. "Notes on Egungun Masquerades among the Oyo Yoruba." *African Arts* 11.3 (1978): 51-61.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection*. London: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Hayden, Dolores. "Contested Terrain." *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. Cambridge: MIT, 1995.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Ronald L. Jackson II & Michael A. Hogg. *Encyclopedia of Identity* s.v. "Confessional Art." Sage Publications, 2010.
- Jackson, Sandra and Julie Moody-Freeman. "Introduction: The Black Imagination the Genres: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative." In *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Black Speculative*, edited by Jackson, Sandra and Julie Moody-Freeman. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011.
- Joseph, Miranda. *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- Lara, Ana-Maurine. "Wura-Natasha Ogunji, interviewed on February 25, 2006." *The Magic Makers: A record of the lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered & Two-Spirit Artists of Color*, February 27, 2008. Accessed May 30, 2018. <http://themagicmakers.blogspot.com/2008/02/wura-natasha-ogunji-interviewed-on.html>.
- Lærkesen, Roxanne Bagheshirin. "Wura-Natasha Ogunji: Beauty in the Streets of Lagos." *Louisiana Channel*. <http://channel.louisiana.dk/video/wura-natasha-ogunji-beauty-streets-lagos>.

- Layiwola, Peju. "Transcultural Conversations: American and Nigerian Art in Dialogue." *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 41 (November, 2017): 140-152.
- León, Alec de. "Catching Up With Wura-Natasha Ogunji." *National Performance Network*, July 20th, 2012. Accessed May 30, 2016.
<https://nnpweb.org/2012/07/20/catching-up-with-wura-natasha-ogunji/>
- Lorde, Audre. "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power" (1981).
- Machida, Margo. *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- McMillan, Uri. *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.
- Mehta, Brinda. "Culinary Diasporas: Identity and the Language of Food in Gisèle Pineau's *Un papillon dans la cité* and *L'exil selon Julia*." *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 8, no. 1 (2005): 23-51.
- Meigh-Andrews, Chris. *A History of Video Art*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.
- Merriam Webster Dictionary, s.v. "Magic." Accessed July 25, 2017.
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/magic>.
- Morgan, Joan. "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure." *The Black Scholar* 45, no. 4 (2015): 36-46.
- Mudaly, Ronika. "Shattering and Reassembling Hypersexual Moments: Girls Indulging in the Pursuit of Pleasure." *Sexualities* 15, no. 2 (2012): 225-242.
- Muñoz, Jose. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press, 2009.
- Muñoz, Jose. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Murphy, Joseph M. and Mei Mei Stanford. *Osun across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Nalley, Yima. "Public Display of Affection? Not in Africa." *Waza Online* (podcast). May 20, 2014. <https://wazaonline.com/en/speak-up/public-display-of-affection-not-in-nigeria>.
- Naminata, Diabate. *Genital Power: Female Sexuality in West African Literature and Film*. PhD Diss., University of Texas, Austin, 2011.

- . "Nigeria: Multiple Forms of Mobility in Africa's Demographic Giant." Migrationpolicy.org. Accessed May 16, 2014.
<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/nigeria-multiple-forms-mobility-africas-demographic-giant>.
- Nketiah, Rita. "Why Respectability Politics is Failing African Women and Girls." *This is Africa*, August 29, 2016. Accessed May 14, 2018.
<https://thisisafrica.me/respectability-politics-failing-african-women-girls/>.
- Odua, Chika. "Njideka Akunyili Crosby: A Nigerian Visual Artist." *Afrocentric Confessions*, October 19, 2012. Accessed May 30, 2016.
<http://chikaoduahblog.com/2012/10/19/njideka-akunyili-a-nigerian-visual-artist/>.
- Odufunade, Bomi. "Primary Colors: Njideka Akunyili." *Huffington Post*. August 24, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arise-magazine/harlem-studio-african-american-artists_b_1827728.html.
- Oliver, Valerie Cassel. "Between Artifice & Authentic: The Black Female Body in Performance." In *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and The Moving Image Since 1970*, edited by Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, 37-43. Atlanta: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art/ Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston, 2008.
- Oguibe, Olu and Okwui Enwezor. "Between Worlds: Postmodernism and African Artists in the Western Metropolis." In *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, 244-275. London: Institute for International Visual Arts/ Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999.
- Ogunji, Wura-Natasha. "Artists make art." Facebook, February 11, 2018.
<https://www.facebook.com/wuranatasha.ogunji/posts/10155476701408668>.
- Ogunji, Wura-Natasha. "beauty." *This Road Blog*. April 13, 2012.
http://goldeniron.blogspot.com/2013/04/beauty_13.html.
- Ogunji, Wura-Natasha. Email interview with author. October 25, 2014.
- Ogunji, Wura-Natasha. "How Does That Sounds Look?" *This Road Blog*. Accessed May 30, 2016. <http://goldeniron.blogspot.com/2007/11/eternal.html>.
- Ogunji, Wura-Natasha. "Queens." *This Road Blog*, August 12, 2013. Accessed March 30, 2017. <http://goldeniron.blogspot.com/search/label/queens>.
- Ogunji, Wura-Natasha. "Videos." Accessed May 30, 2016.
http://wuraogunji.com/section/231339_videos.html.
- Oyeronke, Oyewumi. *African Gender Studies: A Reader*. New York: Palgrave, 2005.

- Oyeronke, Oyewumi. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997.
- Philogynoir. "Why I'm Not A Carefree Black Girl." *Philogynoir*, June 5, 2016. <https://philogynoir.tumblr.com/post/145487408857/why-im-not-a-carefree-black-girl-see-the-way>.
- Powell, Richard. "From Diaspora to Exile: Black Women Artists in 1960s and 1970s Europe." In *The Migrant's Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, 78-90. Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2011.
- Johnson, E. Patrick. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Durham: Duke, 2003.
- Jonas, "Eero Rislakki – a pioneer in industrial design." *Forthzine*, December 27, 2012. Accessed March 30, 2018. <http://jonasforth.com/eero-rislakki-a-pioneer-in-industrial-design/>.
- Jones, Jeremy L. C. "If It Scares You, Write It: A Conversation with Nnedi Okorafor." *Clarkesworld Magazine*. December 2009. www.clarkesworldmagazine.com/okorafor_interview/.
- Kazeem, Maryam. "Performances That Seek to Interrupt: Nigerian Artist Wura-Natasha Ogunji & The Craft of Spectacle." *Okay Africa*, May 27, 2013. <http://www.okayafrica.com/nigeria-art-wura-natasha-ogunji-visual-performance/>.
- Kaylen, Ralph. "Beyond the Black Girl Nerds Hashtag." *The Riveter Magazine*. March 10, 2015. <http://www.therivetermagazine.com/beyond-the-black-girl-nerds-hashtag/>.
- Quashie, Kevin. *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012.
- Rowley, Michelle V. "It Could Have Been Me" Really? Early Morning Meditations on Trayvon Martin's Death." *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 519-529.
- Rowley, Michelle V. "Reconceptualizing Voice: The Role of Matrifocality in Shaping Theories and Caribbean Voices." In *Gendered Realities: Essays in Caribbean Feminist Thought*, edited by Patricia Mohammed, 22-43. University of West Indies Press, 2002.
- Russell, Legacy. "Digital Dualism And The Glitch Feminism Manifesto." *Cyborgology*. December 10, 2012. Accessed May 30, 2016. <https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2012/12/10/digital-dualism-and-the-glitch-feminism-manifesto/>.

- Saro-Wiwa, Zina. "Eaten by the Heart: How Do Africans Kiss?" *ZSW Studio*. 11 minutes. December 9, 2012. <http://www.zinasarowiwa.com/video/eaten-by-the-heart/>.
- Saro-Wiwa, Zina. "Eaten by the Heart: The Installation." *ZSW Studio*. 62 minutes. <http://www.zinasarowiwa.com/video/eaten-by-the-heart/>.
- Saro-Wiwa, Zina. "Sarogua Mourning." *ZSW Studio*. 11 minutes, 37 seconds. <http://www.zinasarowiwa.com/video/sarogua-mourning-2011/>.
- Schneider, Hildegard. "Of the Pomegranate." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 4 (1945): 117-20.
- Selasi, Taiye. "Don't ask me where I'm from, ask me where I'm local." *TED Global 2014*. https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local/transcript?la_
- Shepperson, George. "The African Abroad or the African diaspora." In *Emerging Themes of African History*, 152-76. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968.
- Sies, Mary Corbin. "Introduction: Critical Sustainability Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Africa Today* 61, no 1 (Fall 2014): vi-xviii.
- Sjostrom, Jan. "Nigerian-born artist explores expatriate identity at Norton Museum." January 30, 2016. Accessed March 30, 2017. <https://www.palmbeachdailynews.com/entertainment/arts--theater/nigerian-born-artist-explores-expatriate-identity-norton-museum/QP9dOQAiNz5igo3IA99N8I/>.
- Smith, Cherise. *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith*. Durham: Duke Press, 2011.
- Soussloff, Catherine M. "The Turn to Visual Culture: On Visual Culture and Techniques of the Observer." *Visual Anthropology Review*. Volume 12. No. 1 (March 1996): 77-83.
- Stack, Carol B. *Call To Home: African-Americans Reclaim The Rural South*. New York: Basic Books, 1996.
- Stallings, L.H. *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015.
- Steady, Filomena Chioma. "Women of Africa and the African Diaspora : Linkages and Influences." In *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, edited by Joseph E. Harris, 160-167. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1982.

- Tan, Charles. "Nnedi Okorafor Interview on the Nebula Awards Website." *Nnedi's Wahala Zone Blog*, January 9, 2009.
<http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2009/01/nnedi-okorafor-interview-on-nebula.html>.
- Tcheuyap, Alexie. *Postnationalist African Cinemas*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011.
- Thomas, Dexter. "Why Everyone's Saying 'Black Girls are Magic.'" September 9, 2015. Accessed March 30, 2018,
<http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-everyones-saying-black-girls-are-magic-20150909-htmllstory.html>.
- Thompson, Krista. "A Sidelong Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States." *Art Journal* (Fall 2011): 6-31.
- Valentine, Victoria L. "Njideka Akunyili Crosby Painting Sells for Record 3.1 Million at Christie's, Nearly Three Times Her Previous High Mark." *Culture Type*, March 12, 2017.
<http://www.culturetype.com/2017/03/12/njideka-akunyili-crosby-painting-sells-for-record-3-1-million-at-christies-nearly-three-times-her-previous-high-mark/>.
- Vandal. "A Food Connection: Interview with Wura-Natasha Ogunji by Antonio C. La Pastina." *Aster(ix) Journal*, October 25, 2013.
<http://asterixjournal.com/a-food-connection-interview-with-wuru-natasha-ogunji-by-antonio-c-la-pastina/>.
- Wana Udobang, "Will I Still Carry Water When I am a Dead Women?" *WanaWana Blog*, April 24, 2013. Accessed March 30, 2018.
<http://wanawana.net/2013/04/24/will-i-still-carry-water-when-i-am-a-dead-woman/>.
- Weheliye, Alexander. "My Volk to Come: Peoplehood in Recent Diaspora Discourse and Afro-German Popular Music." In *Black Europe and The African Diaspora*, edited by Darlene Clark Hine and Trica Danielle Keaton, 161-179. Urban and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009.
- Wemega-Kwawu, Rikki. "The Politics of Exclusion: The Undue Fixation on Western Based African Diaspora Artists." Accessed May 30, 2018. *Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam Newsletter* no. 125.
- Williams-Forson, Psyche. "Other Women Cooked for My Husband: Negotiating Gender, Food, and Identities in an African American/Ghanaian Household." *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 2, (Summer 2010): 437.
- Wooford, Tobias. "Africa as Muse: The Visualization of Diaspora in African

American Art 1950-1980.” PhD diss., University of California, 2011.

Wright, Michelle M. *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

Wright, Michelle M. *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2015.