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Diasporic Witnessing: Art Aesthetics in Response to Crisis

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Abstract

This article explores diasporic cultural texts that document suffering in homeland contexts. Analysing contemporary visual art produced by Nigerian artists based in Canada and Belgium, and engaging with canonical scholarship on witnessing, spectatorship, and diaspora studies, this article offers a new taxonomy of diasporic witnessing, which, I argue, reflects how a diasporic migratory intelligentsia frames and represents crises in the homeland. By examining the work of three disparate artists, this article argues that diasporic witnessing offers a unique framework for understanding how diasporic subjects with material and cultural currency view, engage with, and respond to political and structural crisis in the homeland.

Keywords: Nigerian diaspora; postcolonial crises; visual art; witnessing; spectatorship; documentary

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Introduction

Images of African suffering proliferate in our global media landscape through journalistic and humanitarian visuals that characterize postcolonial Africa in terms of a crisis narrative. These images reflect consumer practices that predominate in the western cultural market, where the production of sensationalized suffering in Africa is a constitutive feature of the media industry (Huggan 2001; Baxi 2002; Brouillette, 2007, 2011; Ede 2015; Arnett 2016). Underscoring this crisis narrative is a colonial sensibility that regards Blacks as passive victims in need of the aid of white, western subjects, the agents of change positioned to dole out care (Pruce 2020; Pallister-Wilkins 2021). This view is coded by means of a visual nexus (intersecting media, arts, and photography) that juxtaposes white, western spectators and visual cultural producers with objectified African subjects, focusing on race as the sole marker of privilege, and as such unconcerned with the intersections and nuances of classed distance. This racial coding permeates scholarly and cultural discourses of spectatorial relations between the Global North and South. More importantly, it accounts for a relatively under-discussed dynamic between the homeland context and the diaspora.[1]

Diasporic Africans are not only audiences but also producers of representations of crises. The cultural presumption of racial difference between the African subject and the western spectator elides the possibility that both positionalities may be paradoxically bound by affective ties to geography yet separated by class. The distinction between subject and spectator, as conceived traditionally by visual scholars, is not so clearly delineated in the case of African diasporic witnesses (Sontag 1977; Azoulay 2008); rather, the subject-spectator nexus is increasingly complicated by globalization and technological advances, as landscapes and demographics continue to shift and evolve through the processes of migration and digital-social integration (Hirsch and Miller 2011).

Using Nigeria as a case study situated within a broader discussion of diasporic means of cultural representation, classed agency, and institutional access, I argue that cultural producers of the Nigerian diaspora in Europe and North America embody dual subjectivity as both witnesses and spectators. Due to their distanced but sustained relationship with the Nigerian homeland, diasporic subjects with access to the means of cultural production are positioned to represent crises in Nigeria. Their dual-subject position destabilizes a humanitarian visual nexus that hinges on binarized terms between the spectator and the imaged subject of crisis, complicating this relation through the intersections of class, affect, and ascribed racial identity. In considering this unique socio-political positioning, I argue for a new taxonomy of diasporic engagement with crises in the Global South, which I refer to provisionally as diasporic witnessing.

First-generation Nigerian diasporic artists straddle the worlds of the homeland and host-land while documenting crises in Nigeria. 'Diasporic witnessing' is both a process and an approach to representation. As a process, it designates how the elite classed diasporic subject reflects on and interprets specific spectacles of humanitarian suffering through mediated or direct exposure. Subsequently, the creator produces cultural texts documenting suffering in homeland contexts to which they have affective and historical connections. Their observations and creative expressions, which include visuals, literature, theatre, sound, and digital media, are driven by emotive responses to the normalization of crises experienced

[1] In "Diaspora-Homeland Relations as a Framework to Examine Nation-Building Processes" (2010), Dan Lainer-Vos critiques the binary terms 'homeland' and 'host-land' for their false implications of rootedness and foreignization to a place in the migrant experience. I employ these terms broadly, in line with their current usage in the literature, while also recognizing their retrograde connotations regarding spatial belonging and the concept of 'home'.

at a distance, as well as by a desire to enact change in the face of that normalization. As an aesthetic, diasporic witnessing is a form of self-representation demonstrating both the artist's cultural awareness of the homeland context and their ascribed agency within a global classed system and marketplace. These cultural texts sometimes – though not always – denote the creator's superciliousness towards Nigerian subjects. They register an aesthetic gaze complicated by the convergence of class and the presumption of affective cultural cohesion and collective identity and position the creator as the vanguard for the representation of African crises.

Visual works by three contemporary Nigerian artists – Komi Olafimihan, Emmanuel Nwogbo II, and Otobong Nkanga – anchor my analysis of diasporic cultural representations of crises in Nigeria. Olafimihan is a Northern Nigerian who travelled to Lagos for the very first time as a diasporic subject based in Canada. Concerned with space, the visual texts informed by this trip narrate an experience of disconnection and reconnection to the Nigerian homeland, presenting a nuanced discussion of citizenship and identity and how they are inflected within the diaspora. While Olafimihan's aesthetics demonstrate how his distanced vantage inspires patriotism, Nwogbo's aesthetics – which concern both temporal and spatial distance – foreground his alienation from the Nigerian homeland through a diasporic subjectivity that embodies a western epistemic position. Nwogbo subtly expresses a heightened self-perception that appears to be rooted in his western vantage point. Lastly, Nkanga's photographs concern spatial transformations within a Lagos neighbourhood as they map out structural problems and systemic complacency. She employs a documentary aesthetics through the point-and-shoot style while drawing attention to her position as a witness. In her work, ascribed identity corroborates her representations of crises.

The creators I conversed with eagerly shared their observations about how distance informs their practice. These conversations clarified, first, the artists' unwavering commitment to social change in Nigeria and, second, their political convictions, both of which are expressed in their art. The artists vary, however, in terms of how they self-position as witnesses of Nigerian crises. Where one treads reflexively in his coverage of certain communities, another assumes the authority and right to critique Nigerian sensibilities across the board. This article honours the ways in which the artists undermine Nigerian political scripts, while recognizing their entanglement within hierarchical and exploitative power structures that underscore colonial dynamics between the West and Africa. Diasporic witnessing reflects the ambivalence inherent in a western-based diasporic subject-position. Creators produce critical texts that subvert state power yet evince their privilege and agency within a global capitalist system of exploitation.

Employing insights from photography and performance studies, I enrich existing scholarship on spectatorship, which traditionally focuses on white viewership, by turning my lens on Western-based diasporic Nigerian cultural producers. Susan Sontag (2003) conceives of spectatorship as "a quintessential modern experience" (n.p.) in which the viewing of suffering is mediated by photojournalism, an undertaking that is by and large copacetic with objectification. For Sontag, viewing an image equates to "possess[ing]" (2003, n.p.) the subject, whereby the spectator assumes the active position through touching and feeling the material object that is the image, their gaze perpetuating the infinite objectification of the photographic subject. While Ariella Azoulay (2008) offers critical insights that dispel the spectator-subject binary, Sontag's work finds purchase in my analysis for its implications of photography and cultural production as an elite-class undertaking.

Echoing Sontag's intimations on photography's relational binaries, subsequent scholarship discusses the photographic reproduction of global power dynamics, offering an instrumental analysis for my exploration of the diasporic subject-position. Kimberly Juanita Brown (2014) argues that photography reinforces global power disparities by prioritizing the spectator's emotions over the subject's suffering. This presumed superiority is ingrained in how the Global North spectates upon the pain and suffering of the South. Similarly, James Arnett (2016) writes, "the Western world perpetually and unconsciously performs this superiority in its affective consumption of the postcolony" (151). Subtle in the humanitarian photographic framing of African crises is the unnamed western spectator's material advantage and ostensible capacity to alleviate perceived suffering by making generous donations. Lillie Chouliaraki (2006, 2013) similarly frames the spectator's position as one which tends to reproduce existing global power divides. The spectator is seen to act by the very process of consuming visuals of suffering, whereas the subject, represented as a two-dimensional text, acts as a foil for the spectator's presumed privilege, wealth, ablebodiedness, and vitality. The subject waits to be acted upon.

Several critics turn from spectatorship to witnessing to better grasp what it means to experience an event in proximity. Tim Etchell proposes that "to witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one's own place in them" (quoted in Little 2017, 50). Advancing this definition, Little explains, "'witness is both a noun – a person who sees an event first-hand – and a verb – to see an event (usually of some significance) take place, or to give evidence or testimony verifying an event" (2017, 47). One need not merely be present at the site of the accident, but also offer an account. Taking the above scholarship as a point of entry, I consider the ethics and forms of witnessing through the examination of cultural texts by elite diasporic subjects, suggesting that testimony – that is, the impulse to document crises – is instrumental to diasporic witnessing.

Diasporic witnessing is contingent upon, first, the production of cultural texts from a distanced vantage point reflective of a spectatorial relation to the crisis context, and second, the diasporic creator's prior immersion within the context of their textual preoccupation. The diasporic witness is both a cosmopolitan subject who possesses the means of cultural production and access to cultural capital, thus asserting authorship of texts, and, fundamentally, also embodies a dual-subject position as spectator and witness. These creators are witnesses insofar as, to some degree, they have experienced first-hand the crisis of the Nigerian nation-state, where one's survival requires circumnavigating adverse structures and conditions of life, and citizenship demands labour that is normally a function of the state in the Global North. Yet they are spectators by virtue of their classed subjectivity, which affords them distance (both spatial and material) from the everyday suffering of average Nigerians. Spectatorship and witnessing do not necessitate authorship. Conversely, diasporic witnessing calls into focus a practice and lineage of cultural representation by elite African creators in the Global North. By virtue of their geographic distance and of being members of a minority community armed with access to the host country's intelligentsia, they are subjectified as authentic voices of a context that may be dear to them but that is far away from the host society.

Contextualizing the Nigerian Diaspora

African diasporic formations in the Global North have a long and diverse history, an exploration of which is beyond the purview of this article, although, for the purposes of my argument, it is worth noting that the New African Diaspora, named so as to map a coeval trend

that is distinct from old African diasporic formations which were tied to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, defines a willing departure from the continent (Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009). This departure is due to the multitude of structural problems created by European colonialism, including economic decline, political corruption, and the International Monetary Fund's imposition of structural adjustment. To borrow from Tejumole Olaniyan (2004), "the contemporary African state/condition (…) [remains] compromised by centuries of unequal relations with Euro-America" (107). In short, postcolonial African crises unfold against the enduring legacy of European expansion.

Crisis defines both a moment of sudden rupture and the normalization of socioeconomic destabilization (Mbembe and Roitman 1995). In Nigeria, crises have been iterated through war and structural insecurity, burdening ordinary citizens through constant upheaval. Postcolonial Nigerian history is mired by neo-colonial exploitation, a history of military rule, and the exploitation of natural resources for political gain. Moreover, the state is shaped by poor leadership, as Chinua Achebe (1984) famously opines. Since independence in 1960, the nation has endured rigged elections, coup d'etats, military dictatorships, and economic instability resulting from a booming oil industry that consequently intermingled political with foreign corporate greed (Falola and Heaton 2008). This directly resulted in Nigeria's ongoing infrastructural, social, political, and economic crises, spurring a rapid spike in migration rates to Europe and North America from the early 1980s onwards (Imoagene 2022). Middle-class Nigerians are emigrating in droves to the Global North, leading to a so-called 'brain drain' (Imoagene 2022; Otiono 2011). Dreams of emigration have captured the middle-class imagination.

The brain-drain accounts for my focus on an elite minority of diasporic cultural producers: the most exemplary Nigerian figures of diasporic witnessing often come from relatively prosperous backgrounds. European and North American countries accommodate the largest number of diasporic Nigerians (Imoagene 2022). My case studies are based in Canada and Belgium, which have immigration policies designed to privilege individuals with capital or other pre-existing comparative advantages (Duplan and Cranston 2023). They are implicitly geared towards people with the support networks needed to apply, as they usually involve both steep costs and are aimed at applicants with wealth, educational qualifications, and/or language proficiencies (Imoagene 2022).

Komi Olafimihan

Komi Olafimihan represents one such example of a well-positioned artist from an affluent background. Born and raised in Kaduna, Nigeria, Olafimihan is well established within the art scene in Canada, recognized for his poetry, visual art, and performance works. He has been featured in exhibitions at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum and Ottawa's National Arts Center (ByBlacks). In 2010, he was presented the "Empowerment and Success Award" by the then Governor General of Canada, Michelle Jean. In addition to his visual art practice, he performs and writes poetry, appearing in the award-winning short film *Black Bodies* (Fyffe-Marshall 2020) and recently publishing a collection titled *Three Hundred Poems* (2023). All of these achievements attest to his accomplishment within the industry.

His visual works invite us to contemplate how one's ascribed identity reinforces one's obligations to a distant homeland. Olafimihan relocated with his family to Canada in 2002, and he continues to reside there, although his parents have since returned to Nigeria to sustain their thriving architectural careers and private business ventures. He recalls his childhood in Northern Nigeria with fondness, noting that it was largely relatively pleasant,

perhaps made all the more so by his family's middle-class status. Yet, one event emerges time and again in his conversations with his siblings: a memory of the "aftereffects of a riot in Kaduna State…[where] there were huge trucks packing [dead] bodies from the market" (Olafimihan, interview, December 20, 2023). This memory, as Olafimihan recalls, "left a mark on us" (Olafimihan, interview, December 20, 2023). This narrative anecdote offers a glimpse of the complexity within his subject-position, wherein he once witnessed crisis in the homeland.

While living in Canada, Olafimihan undertook research for his master's degree in architecture, requiring him to return to Nigeria. This funded research trip to Makoko was Olafimihan's very first trip to Lagos and this settlement. His thesis reconstructs the Lagos-based Makoko settlement, where many homes stand on stilts. Conveying his efforts to retool the settlement's infrastructural problems, he explains that his "whole thesis and proposal was to create a housing alternative to what they had because there was a push towards revitalizing the area" (Olafimihan, interview, December 20, 2023). Yet he came across this settlement entirely by chance. He discovered Makoko while conducting research on Maroko, another slum in Lagos: "when I was researching…about Maroko, I kept on finding this [settlement] and I thought it was a typo, only to find out that it was a completely different slum" (Olafimihan, interview, December 20, 2023). That he conflated the two communities signals his distance from the context. Olafimihan's first encounters with slums and informal settlement communities were mediated through online images in which the communities appeared "very nasty" (Olafimihan, interview, December 20, 2023). This admission gestures to a spectatorial disposition more akin to that of the distant white subject-position. Yet, despite embodying a spatial and material distance from the context, Olafimihan assumed responsibility within the Nigerian state that behooves his citizenship.

> I felt like whatever it is I was studying, I needed it to benefit my study… my thesis had to tie back to Nigeria (…) the [Makoko] site felt like the perfect place to implement what I had learned (…) in my mind, I just felt very patriotic at the time (…) it felt like a way back home. You've gone abroad and studied, and what can you do for the country now? (Olafimihan, interview, December 20, 2023)

His deep commitment to Nigeria was so central to his work that he ensured his education remained relevant and applicable to the needs of the country. It is this apparent contradiction between his spectatorial disposition and perceived intimacy with the national context, a contradiction embodying the diasporic paradox of belonging and foreignization, that establishes his subject-position as a diasporic witness.

Paradigmatic of his efforts to document and address the infrastructural problems, Olafimihan connected with the then Governor of Lagos State, Babatunde Fashola, through an Atlanta-based scholar, a collaboration that – adjacent to but separate from his academic research – reveals his level of access and social currency. Impressed by Olafimihan's thesis, Fashola extended to him an invitation to contribute to the renovation of the Makoko community. However, Olafimihan would eventually become apprehensive about continuing with this undertaking, backing out because he found the prospect of such work overwhelming. As he explains, he was "[unable] to follow through" with the work (Olafimihan, interview, December 20, 2023), though his reasons would only become clearer later on in our conversation.

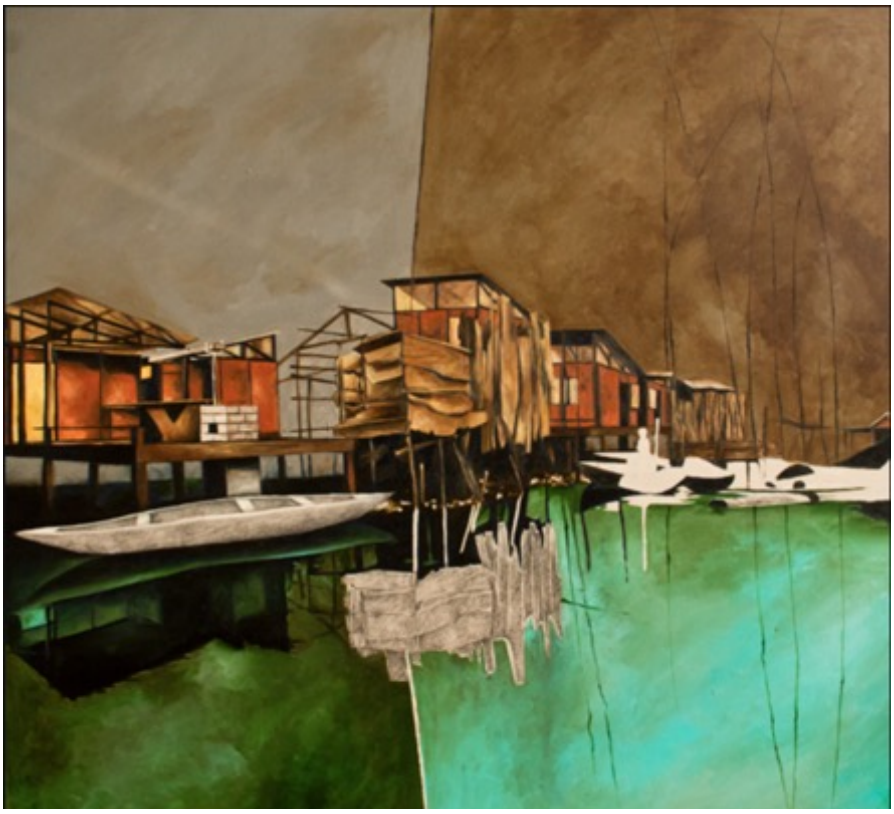

Figure 1: A depiction of housing structures on stilts, contrasting a redesigned projection with the community's current conditions. Komi Olafimihan, *Makoko Cut-Out* (n.d), acrylic on canvas, artist's collection, 6, September, 2023, https://komiolaf.com/collections/architecture-2/makoko/. Image is used with the generous permission of Komi Olafimihan.

Makoko Cut Out (Figure 1) is Olafimihan's attempt to artistically document the conditions of this settlement, to continue the work he felt he abandoned by parting from Fashola's project. As he explains, "I wasn't able to keep my promise of coming back to [revitalize the area] but it was something that had always been on my mind and I wanted to bring my architecture into my painting at that time" (Olafimihan, interview, December 20, 2023). While the significance of this promise and its intended audience is not wholly clear, the artwork symbolizes Olafimihan's deep commitment to this project, to harnessing his skill, knowledge, and resources in the service of Makoko, as a substitute for the collaboration with Fashola which was never fully realized. The artwork visualizes the settlement in two iterations. With a line demarcating the image, the right side represents the community's current state, with run down, decrepit structures, mud-coloured skies and pale green water, while the left side offers a redesigned contrast of what the community could look like, with brightly lit and sturdy housing structures, a ray of light signalling renewal and hope piercing through the sky, and deeply pigmented rich water. Scratch marks further emphasizing decay overlay the right side of the painting. Human subjects are conspicuously absent: the one suggestive outline of a person, featured on the right side, appears in white; the implication is their erasure in the framework of the government's political project, which gestures to the state's preoccupation with the aesthetics of the settlement over the people's needs. This image thus presents a subtle critique of

the Lagos government's beautification project, disaffiliating Olafimihan from his earlier work.

Just as the painting reflects the evolution of Olafimihan's work, in which he departs from the state's goals and ideals, he visualizes grinding poverty as a form of crisis. As observed above, the white negative spaces signify the community as a subordinate concern to Fashola's political revitalization project. Olafimihan explains:

> The reason why it is called Makoko Cut Out is because everything is in colour but the places where the people are and the boat is supposed to be is in white (…) I was experimenting with the idea of negative space (…) when the government was pushing towards revitalizing this space, the least of their concerns was with the people that actually live there, and that was what I was trying to convey with that piece. (Olafimihan, interview, December 20, 2023)

These words suggest that the white negative spaces function to highlight a process of displacement and dispossession that targets the residents of Makoko under the guise of renewal and revitalization. For Olafimihan, the crisis is inflected both as the proliferation of inadequate infrastructure, a concern that earlier galvanized his interest in the community and one tethered to classed oppression, and, more astutely, as the subjective experience of economic disenfranchisement under a government that swiftly disposes of its poor in favour of economic and beautification goals. In short, the community suffers precisely because of their economic status and hence marginalization within the state's social configurations. Clear from the trajectory of his artwork is Olafimihan's reckoning with his privileged and classed distance from his subjects. While he was circumstantially copacetic with the Nigerian political elite, working for the state at a distance far removed from material suffering, he eventually began to grapple with his own complicity, deviating from his course of revitalizing the slum to document the nuances of the crisis, which owes as much to the state's negligence in its pursuit of aesthetic goals as it does to the community's impoverishment. Here, Olafimihan's work of diasporic witnessing not only demonstrates how wealth and material access inform how a creator interpolates images of, as well as represents, crises but also maps out his process of coming to terms with economic distance and advantage.

As a Canada-based Northern Nigerian, he held a multivariegated "outsider's gaze" (Olafimihan, interview, December 20, 2023) informed by digitally circulated images, denoting once more his spectatorial distance from the crisis context. His admission provides an entry point into the nuances of the citizen subject within postcolonial contexts, and how partial and fitful national affiliations further complicate the positionality of the diasporic witness. If, as previously suggested, diasporic witnessing designates both the documentarian's claimed national affiliation with the documented subjects, but also, and more importantly, denotes their immersive, experiential knowledge of the wider national context, then, through Olafimihan, we observe how national affiliation does not equate to having insider knowledge of all communities within the national framework.

National affiliation, to some degree, accounts for the diasporan's affective connection to a distant homeland, reflected in Olafimihan's claimed patriotic obligations to Nigeria. His sense of allegiance to this ostensible homeland could be surmised through Benedict Anderson's (2006) consideration of the nation as an imagined community, "imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members" (6), and a community because "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7) regardless of its social

fractures and the forms of structural exploitation that exist. For Olafimihan and other diasporic Nigerians, the concepts of nationality and nationhood are abstractions that hinge on a collective imagination, reinforced through state and educational institutions, ideology, religion, culture, history, mythology, and media.

Yet, in Nigeria, nationality and even civic duty are complicated by the primordialism embedded in the legal and political systems (Kendhammer 2014). Ethnicity emerges as the primary form of identification and conduit for social and political engagement. The predominance of ethnicity in Nigeria has its roots in the British process of indirect rule, which relied on divisively politicizing ethnicity by installing separate administrations for the respective ethnic groups, while amplifying their distinctiveness and sowing discontent between the groups (Ikpe 2009; Kendhammer 2014). As a result, social and political alliances are formed around ethnic identities, hindering national integration and destabilizing ideological foundations of nationhood (Ikpe 2009). The degree to which the citizen-subject is rooted to the nation is tied to ethnicity first, then class, language, and political affiliation. In Nigeria, a Northern subject such as Olafimihan probably has little cultural connection to the denizens of Makoko, which further raises the question of why he conflates his civic duty with performing a service for the Lagos settlement. Olafimihan's sensibility towards Makoko deviates from Nigerian political norms and aligns more with Anderson's intimations of an imagined community. Thus, his diasporic identity intensifies his allegiance to Nigeria, as, in the Global North, citizenship of a nation undercuts ethnic leanings; this is partly because citizenship is far more legible in the Global North than it is in Nigeria.

Olafimihan's project captures how, in diaspora, forms of social coherence and cohesion arise and play out differently from in the homeland context. The diaspora offers unique forms of connection that diverge from homeland politics and emerge out of the sociopolitical realities of the host-land (Tsuda 2013). That is to say, the distance from the homeland, along with the communities that form within the diaspora, forged through shared histories and traditions alongside experiences within the host-land, reignites patriotism. Referring to the process of ethnic and identity formation in the US, Olaocha Nwadiuto Nwabara (2018) suggests that experiences of racism, xenophobia, alienation, and belonging interact to ascribe a racial and ethnic identity onto diasporic subjects while constituting how these subjects negotiate their space and relate to their homeland (71). Ties are forged out of mutual struggles and experiences. And these struggles and experiences, as Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani (2013) write, may incite a "utopian idealization" of the homeland (3). This interplay between belonging and foreignization within the host-land shapes the diasporic gaze, as the subject remains tethered to a homeland context, albeit now from a distance.

The parallels between Olafimihan's spectatorial gaze and his conviction to represent Makoko's crisis of housing, hygiene, and ultimately, dignity, further highlights the tensions working within a diasporic positioning: he assumes responsibility for documenting and representing a crisis foreign to him because he situates himself as having a degree of proximity to it by virtue of being a citizen-subject of the nation-state. He implicitly distances himself from other "outsiders" to Makoko, who "go there to try to solve problems and quickly abandon the region" (Olafimihan, interview, December 20, 2023). He lays claim to the land through citizenship, presumably with the intention of offsetting potential scepticism or wariness toward his foreign position. He embodies the commitment that befits his citizenship as he makes "the promise" to the community to document the crisis. But he is a spectator by virtue of his privilege, even though he has borne witness to crises in Northern Nigeria in the form of the post-riot

devastation in Kaduna. To sideline the cultural and linguistic barriers he encounters, he employs the services of a driver, something he can do as a foreignized Nigerian armed with overseas currency. His dual identity resonates here; while his foreignness situates him as being in need of an intermediary, his Nigerianness enables that support, rooted in insistence on an affective connection to the nation. This tension between his diasporic distance, affective connection, and material access delineates diasporic witnessing from spectatorship and other forms of witnessing. Olafimihan's experiences map out how his disconnection is rooted in class and space, while also providing the impetus to perform patriotism.

Emmanuel Nwogbo II

Unlike Olafimihan, Emmanuel Nwogbo II is temporally distant from the crisis he documents. But like Olafimihan, his subversive, critical aesthetics serve as fodder for nuancing the diasporic subject-position. It further troubles a spectatorial gaze and aesthetic approach to discourse about Africa, reflecting broader power dynamics between the West and Africa. Born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria, Nwogbo is a visual artist and storyteller who combines journalistic visuals and texts through photo manipulation to create digital collages. His art is accessible through public platforms, including his website and social media. In addition to being featured in seven exhibitions, he has received the award "Best Visual Artist in Halifax", presented several talks, and appeared in over 24 media articles, all signalling his rising prominence within the local art world.

He first left Nigeria to undertake his bachelor studies in Cyprus and relocated to Canada for his Master of Design in 2014. He grew up hearing stories of the Biafran crisis through his father, who was four years old at the start of the civil war. Nestled in his home library were war history books, one of which focused on Biafran history. This early exposure to civil war history would later inform his artistic work on Nigeria's ever-evolving political structure. Nwogbo hails from a family of Biafran survivors who transferred their traumatic memories of the war onto him. In our conversation, he relayed a story of his family's evacuation from their homes during the civil war, only to return to the exhumed corpses of their loved ones.

> My dad told me about when [the Nigerians] burnt their compound so they had to leave Awka. The craziest thing about that story was that, as my dad told me, when someone died, especially the man, they would bury him in his room, they would dig the grave in his room and put the coffin in there. So during the war, when [the Nigerians] came in there, they saw the hole and they thought that treasure was buried in there, so they actually destroyed the grave and exhumed the body. So when my family came back, they had to perform the burial rituals again. (Nwogbo, interview, December 6, 2023)

This is a story Nwogbo returns to time and time again, one he inherited from his father, gesturing to its affective significance as the cornerstone of his family's experience during the war. Nwogbo inflects parts of his narrative with great enthusiasm, almost as if these are his personal accounts of the war, exemplifying what Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer refer to as postmemory: the affective transference of trauma memories from survivors to their descendants in ways that come to displace parts of the descendant's own life stories (2012). The artist's retelling signifies his embodiment of his family's traumatic recollections.

Figure 2: Image contrasts a *Life* magazine cover of wide-eyed Biafran children with a Nigerian propaganda banner showing a well-fed baby, suggesting weaponized hunger as a strategy used during the Nigerian-Biafran War. Emmanuel Nwogbo II, Happy and Healthy Babies (n.d), digital photographic collage, artist's collection, 28, October, 2023, website unavailable. Image is used with the generous permission of Emmanuel Nwogbo II.

Perhaps an expression of this embodied trauma, Nwogbo's artwork "Happy and Healthy Babies" (Figure 2) visualizes the crisis of the civil war by juxtaposing Nigerian propaganda with the West's coverage of Biafran suffering. The image is part of his series "Black and Surreal", which reconstructs Nigerian history through juxtapositions and an ironic disposition, using collage to highlight hypocrisy, corruption, and state violence in Nigeria's political structure. The piece visualizes the Biafran tragedy through dichotomous images spliced into one. Nwogbo superimposes a hand wielding a *Life* magazine, which features starving Biafran Babies, onto an image bearing Nigerian wartime propaganda on the health of Nigerian children. This recalls the Nigerian wartime strategy of blockading the secessionist enclave from food suppliers in an effort to force the Biafrans to acquiesce. The result was the starvation of millions, most recognizably the women and children who came to epitomize Biafran suffering in a global imagination. Nwogbo's insertion thus offers a moral critique that draws its power from the unsettling juxtaposition of vulnerable children with the Nigerian propaganda. He mediates civil war history through a documentary aesthetic that both memorializes Biafran suffering and delivers a scathing indictment of Nigerian culpability in that suffering.

Through Nwogbo, we observe not merely how diasporic witnessing is predicated on one's understanding of crisis within a given context and on one's generational trauma inheritance, but also on how distance

complicates the witness's gaze. While his upbringing informs his work, he credits his diasporic positionality with enabling him to apply nuance and perspective to the historical context he engages with. As he says, "my own perspective has changed just by virtue of being outside of Nigeria", adding that his outlook on Nigerian politics is "a little more open and less rigid" than those in the homeland (Nwogbo, interview, December 6, 2023). In his view, his temporal and spatial distance from the crisis enables critical witnessing otherwise marred by immersion within the context and the continued affective imprint of the war in postcolonial Nigeria.

The most telling aspect of Nwogbo's position lies in his comparison of Nigeria to Canada. Remarking on tribalistic voting patterns, he asserts: "In Canada, no one is going to tell you this person is from Quebec, so we won't let him be prime minister. But this is a huge part of Nigerian culture. You just want your tribesman there even though you're not benefiting from them which I think is a weird tribalistic thing" (Nwogbo, interview, December 6, 2023). Nwogbo's comparison of Canada with Nigeria signals a bias in favour of the West, with the former emerging as a beacon of progress and democratic values for the world to emulate. Canada thus exemplifies the correct iteration of democratic politics. Nwogbo's western vantage point mars his perception of ethnic politics in Nigeria, and this is paradigmatic of the tension between the two worlds of the diaspora and the homeland. His bias thus hints at a self-positioning that draws its validity from its vantage point within the West and speaks to a cosmopolitan posturing that is integral to the functioning of diasporic witnessing.

Figure 3: Depiction of uniformed soldiers wearing red graduation hats and moving about in front of a building labelled University of Biafra. Emmanuel Nwogbo II, *University of Biafra* (n.d), digital photographic collage, artist's collection, 28, October 2023, website unavailable. Image is used with the generous permission of Emmanuel Nwogbo II.

"University of Biafra" illustrates his effort to harness a perspective inflected by diasporic distance. This is an image of gun-wielding Biafran soldiers standing before a building that bears the inscriptions "University of Biafra" and "Student Center". Knowing Nwogbo's technique of digital manipulation and collage, I initially struggled to identify the elements of the text that do not belong there, only perceiving that the soldiers are wearing red graduation hats upon closer inspection. Presumably, to most viewers, this detail is unexceptional, considering the ubiquity of military educational institutions worldwide: soldiers in most nation-states undergo rigorous training, often at designated military universities and tertiary institutions. But for Nwogbo, the absurdity of the image pivots on the contrast between these soldiers, who represent the reality of the civil war, and the university, a quintessential embodiment of order, excellence, and perhaps even banality.

For all its subversive implications, given that the image problematizes the Biafran state ideology and rhetoric, the artwork exemplifies Nwogbo's heightened self-conception and framing as a discerning observer, whose elevation and intellectual criticality is rooted in his temporal and spatial distance from the crisis. Despairingly, Nwogbo recalls laughing at the original image "because (…) that was the University of Nsukka that they turned to the University of Biafra" (Nwogbo, interview, December 6, 2023). The image, he explains, is ironic since "there was no actual school there (…) this was during the war, nobody was going to school. There was war and hunger" (Nwogbo, interview, December 6, 2023). He intuits that Biafran leaders fixated on the mundane to their detriment. They "made so many stupid mistakes (…) where they focused on a lot of stupid things. Why do you need a university when you don't even have a country yet?" (Nwogbo, interview, December 6, 2023). His suggestion is the university's redundancy in the broader framework of the war, which perhaps indicates his lack of awareness of Biafra's full complex history. The university was a hub of intellectual, scientific, and technological innovation, contributing significantly to the war effort by producing weaponry, amongst many other important materials (Ukaegbu 2005). Thus, Nwogbo's scathing criticisms foreground how distance can paradoxically impair the diasporic subject's gaze while still emboldening his/her presumptions of awareness and understanding of nuanced but distant crises. Nwogbo's complex positioning thus presents a case study of the ways in which diasporic witnessing neither prescribes nor identifies a singular ethics but highlights an often-western epistemic position from which cultural producers make meaning of crisis through the production of cultural artefacts that document, memorialize, and present political commentary.

One might assume that, given his family's experience during the war, Nwogbo would express more sympathy towards Biafra's objectives implied by the photograph: a secessionist movement tragically fixated on its revolutionary potential (Ayalogu 2024). But Nwogbo bears no such affinity towards Biafra. As he expressed in our conversation,

> Even though I am Igbo, I have the advantage of being removed. Why are young Nigerians so tribalistic? You didn't witness the war. All the things that made a lot of Nigerians tribalistic, you didn't witness it. It means you learned this tribalism and you're going out of your way to be tribalistic. That is one of the advantages I have as an Igbo person that didn't witness the war. I didn't witness the war so the things that would make me hate a Yoruba person, for example, I don't have that. I am able to look at things critically.

> (Nwogbo, interview, December 6, 2023)

Nwogbo notably identifies distance between himself and his subject and emphasizes that he did not bear witness to the war. The war serves as his point of entry into a discussion about tribalism and the advantages of his spatial and temporal distance. Implied in his reasoning is belief in his ability to represent both a distant crisis, such as the war, alongside the more immediate issue of ethnic division. As a diasporic subject, he claims to have eluded ethnic tensions affecting resident Nigerians. His words presuppose that, despite not bearing direct witness to certain crises, he sees what is obscured from those in the homeland by virtue of their proximity to the crisis; that is to say, his lived experiences and classed distance coalesce to inform his diasporic gaze. His comments on his own work suggest that, as a relatively elite diasporic subject, he views himself as being afforded more information and as having more understanding of crises than his compatriots within the homeland.

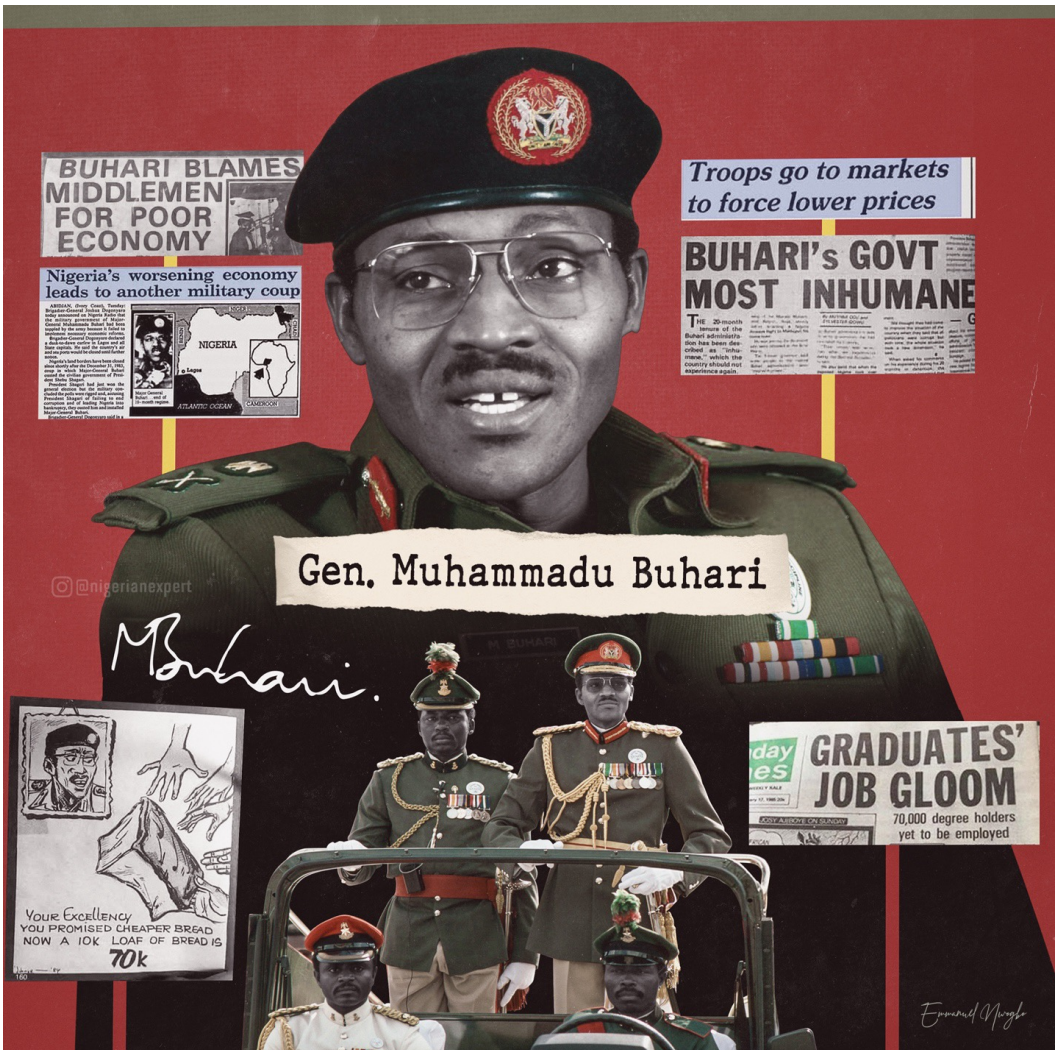

Figure 4: Depicts cut-outs of ex-Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari and military leaders, with newspaper clippings of negative press framing the image. Emmanuel Nwogbo II, *Beast of no Nation* (n.d), digital photographic collage, artist's collection, 28, October, 2023, website unavailable. Image is used with the generous permission of Emmanuel Nwogbo II.

This augmented self-perception can be gleaned from Nwogbo's project on Nigeria's Heads of State. Observing Nigerian support for corrupt politicians during various electoral campaigns, Nwogbo undertook one of his most transformative archival works in 2023, documenting human rights violations by Nigerian presidents since independence. One of these works, titled "Beast of No Nation" (Figure 4), is a collage of ex-Military President Buhari. This piece features two newspaper images of the president during his initial tenure in the 1980s as a military ruler, a newspaper comic, and newspaper clippings with the headlines "Buhari Blames Middlemen For Poor Economy", "Buhari's Govt Most Inhumane", and "Graduates Job Gloom", hinting at the economic crisis aggravated by Buhari's presidency.

Foregrounded in the frame, the first image shows Buhari in uniform and mid-sentence; the second, smaller image shows him in a vehicle with three of his subordinates, all likewise in military uniform. At the left-hand side of the frame, a satirical comic visualizes several hands despairingly extending towards a loaf of bread while a hung drawing of the president watches. This visual narrative recalls the stringent criticism of Buhari's leadership which was pervasive in mainstream media, both implicating the ex-president in Nigeria's economic decline, and more importantly, demonstrating the sort of pushback he received. As one of the headlines underscores, "Nigeria's worsening economy leads to another military coup". Thus, Nwogbo excavates Buhari's pernicious history through a palimpsestic text, offering layered evidence of the leader's time in office. His artwork preserves history that should not be forgotten.

Reflecting on his impetus for documenting Nigeria's leadership, Nwogbo explains he wanted to gauge whether the same "tribalistic" trend that swayed the polls would come to bear on the 2023 elections. His work thus serves to remind Nigerian observers, who he claims possess "a very short memory" (Nwogbo, interview, December 6, 2023), of Buhari's legacy as an incompetent leader. As he explains, "during the 2015 election, a lot of people were pro-Buhari. They thought he was going to be the saviour, but I've always found that funny because Buhari made so many mistakes while in power in 1982. People thought that he was going to come into power and do something different" (Nwogbo, interview, December 6, 2023). He remarks that people who initially expressed support for President Buhari switched during his eight years in service, noting that the most recent election yielded the same exact patterns and trends, where some Nigerians expressed support for the ruling party, the APC, despite its atrocious records, and based on ethnic allegiance. Nwogbo documents and archives political history to counter the risk of their neglect or casual dismissal.

This strategic archival practice is an example of what complicates Nwogbo's subject-position. On the one hand, he takes meticulous care to collate historical texts as evidentiary cudgels against corruption, and on the other, his posture embodies the sort of western gaze that endows him with an augmented sense of self, as indicated earlier. This duality exemplifies the ambivalence of diasporic witnessing, where producers engage with crises at a material distance that both enables creative production and to some extent obscures their gaze.

Otobong Nkanga

Born in Kano (though her heritage is of the Ibibio people of Southern Nigeria) and raised for some time in Lagos, Nkanga's family relocated to Paris when she was a teenager. She returned to Nigeria to study art at Obafemi Awolowo University and continued at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In Amsterdam, she served as artist-in-residence at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdan (2002–2004) and completed her Masters in the Performing Arts at DasArts (2005–2008), continuing in various

residency programmes. Of all three artists in this paper, Nkanga is most commercially successful. With an expansive corpus, she has attained international prestige, secured seven awards, and featured in numerous exhibitions, with her art being acquired by reputable museums and galleries worldwide. Now residing in Antwerp, Belgium, her frequent border crossing can be said to inform her diasporic artistic sensibilities, in which the centrality of land, the complexities and abstractions of the human body within space, and the critical focus on resistance to crises constitute the pillars of her narrative constructions.

Titled "Dolphin Estate I" and "Dolphin Estate II", the first two photographs to be considered belong to Nkanga's "Dolphin Estate" photo series, documenting the titular Lagos neighborhood in its "fallen state of disrepair".[2] The photographs offer a glimpse of how her experiences previously living in the region bear on her process of diasporic witnessing, as she witnessed "this new construction [Dolphin Estate] being put up in a very fast paced" way. As she recalls in the text accompanying the photo series, the estate, which was built in the 1990s, was initially adequately equipped with solid infrastructure. Over the years, however, the material needs and upkeep required to sustain it have largely been left to tenants, who must "take care of their daily needs such as water, electricity, and having to cope with flooding problems". The photographs focalize water tanks and refuse against a backdrop of dilapidated structures. The first image depicts a series of apartment complexes arranged in parallel formation, with one building positioned horizontally at the end, conveying the density of the area. The buildings appear to be constructed with concrete. Attached to each building are water tank stands housing blue, yellow, and peach tanks and satellite dishes. Featuring similar constructions, the second image additionally portrays poorly constructed shops dwarfed by the size of the apartment complexes, and an empty bunk bed. The bed, in addition to the clothes lines connecting the buildings in both photographs, subtly hints at a gendered framing of the crisis. As Nkanga explains, the images map out "the labor required for everyday survival". While she does not express this view, I perceive this labour as having feminine connotations.

Similar to the above images, the third photograph, "Dolphin Estate III", foregrounds Nkanga's implicit criticism of a normalized crisis alongside her paradoxical subject-position as being both intimately bound to and distant from the context. This image depicts a row of similar buildings within the same estate. There are clothes hanging on lines and water tanks, just like in the above images. Marked by a partially built brick fence along the left building, a construction project is underway, though it is unclear whether the image shows its halted progression, as is the trend on this estate. In this image, men meander beneath a palm tree and by the building to the right, showing vegetation and life among these tightly packed dwellings. "Dolphin Estate IV" emphasizes the estate's density through the addition of smaller housing structures, with rusted zinc or aluminum rooftops. These apartment complexes are in varying states of decay, visibly damaged by rainwater. Titled "Dolphin Estate Area", the fifth photograph visualizes a landscape full of refuse, a male figure standing beneath a tent in the distance, shops in the background, streetlamps, and billboards. The photograph registers an unkempt, chaotic scene indicative of the underlying issue of maintenance.

The crisis in these photographs is the gradual and progressive unfolding and normalization of the abnormal. As Mbembe and Roitman (1995) intimate,

> one approaches the crisis not as a system, but as a prosaic: the routinization of a register of improvisations

[2] The Dolphin Estate series and accompanying text can be viewed on the artist's website: https://www.otobong-nkanga.com/dolphin-estate

> lived as such by people and, in this sense, belonging at most to the domain of the obvious or self-evident, and at least to the banal or that which no longer evokes surprise. (324)

The crisis defines the citizenry's compliance with that which is aberrant, complacency through adaptation. Nkanga's images critique the normalization of crisis while foregrounding efforts to survive. Such a focus on survival strategies signals the paradox of Nkanga's intimacy with and distance from this space. On the one hand she claims lived experience and thus familiarity with the Lagos world she depicts; on the other, her distance is coded in the framing of the image, the lens that prevents her full inclusion and participation within the imaged site. Here, diasporic witnessing highlights how the creator draws upon her direct exposure to and prior knowledge of the context to represent the crisis.

The sixth and seventh photographs, titled "Dolphin Estate Rows" and "Dolphin Estate Extended" respectively, look almost identical, save for an almost imperceptible difference: the former appears digitally manipulated from the foregrounded pole onwards. Both images depict rows of rundown apartment complexes with a roadside covered in refuse. The inclusion of human subjects in both frames emphasizes the neighbourhood's theme of routinized disorder. The variations between the two images include a newer, fenced-in building that strikingly contrasts with the older structures in the sixth photograph; this building is replaced by shops, cars, people, and more dilapidated building structures in the seventh image. By foregrounding the newer construction in the former image, Nkanga emphasizes the estate's progressive dilapidation, bringing into focus "the results and conditions of a long-lost dream", visualizing the crisis through the juxtaposition of the estate's embodied aspirations with its reality.

Nkanga's editorial manipulation demonstrates the extent to which images can mislead. Elements such as the overexposed backgrounds and simplistic point-and-shoot aesthetic insist on the documentary quality of these texts (Sontag 2003). Coupled with Nkanga's perceived authorial weight based on her lived experiences, viewers are more likely to trust the authenticity of these images, so much so that I doubted my perception of the edits. This highlights a key element of diasporic witnessing: the presumption of the creator's authority over the subject matter. By contextualizing the images through references to her lived experience, Nkanga deepens viewer consideration of the text's affective relevance and evidentiary quality. As Susan Sontag (2003) intimates, "whether the photograph is understood as a naive object or the work of an experienced artificer, its meaning – and the viewer's response – depends on how the picture is identified or misidentified; that is, on words" (n.p). Context matters deeply, and the weight and significance of these images is largely anchored to preconceptions about Nkanga's cultural awareness of what the images present, which she either purposely or unwittingly plays up by personalizing her framing of this series.

Conclusion

We thus perceive how diasporic cultural producers represent crises in their natal homeland despite being materially distant from their subjects. The three disparate artists offer different points of entry into the discussion of diasporic witnessing: through Olafimihan, we glean the nuances of nationhood and citizenship in Nigeria, its iteration within the diaspora, and how it informs diasporic participation or connection to the homeland; analysis of Nwogbo's corpus evinces his alienation from homeland politics, alongside his ambivalence as an affective cultural producer of historical commentary while implicitly claiming superiority rooted in a western vantage point;

and Nkanga's images, their evidentiary claim, underscore the significance of ascribed identity by positioning the creator as an authority on or representative figure of crises in Nigeria.

Given their liminality between the homeland and host-land, diasporic artists hold appeal as creators with deep insights into their putative homelands. While they do bear insights, their outlooks toward the homeland context are significantly complicated by their spatial and material distance, as is perceived in the works and narratives of the artists discussed above. Thus, the impulse of diasporic witnessing to collate evidence of political corruption and document crises highlights how some are burdened or drawn to engage with homeland social, cultural, and political events while still being alienated from the context. As such, diasporic witnessing draws into focus the ambivalence of a diasporic subject-position, mapping the tensions within a positionality that is just as bound to global power differentials and advantaged by class asymmetries as it is critical and subversive of corrupt politics within homeland contexts.

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