

Picturing women: identity, power and photographs in urban Nigeria

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Abstract

In urban Nigeria, the profile of photography as an art form is on the rise and the work of female artists is coming to global attention. This article argues for a more nuanced analysis that reflects on image objects that ‘speak back’ to issues of inequality and challenge centre/periphery sightlines that remain salient within a transnational, interconnected ecosystem. ‘Picturing women’ alludes to the active intersection of the feminine as framed identity within a context of unequal power relations at the global and local level. Through the prism of three key pieces from artists Ndidi Dike, Adeola Olagunju and Jumoke Sanwo, based in Lagos, Nigeria, I trace the use of lens-based media within their respective practice. What emerges is the relevance of enduring ways of seeing and being from a local ethnographic context that challenge the powerlessness discourse that so often frames visions of Africa. The concept of ‘impaired citizenship’ from the work of theorist Ariella Azoulay provides a helpful provocation to think about the particularities of place that photography unsettles to propose connectivity beyond borders. In conclusion, the article calls for more critical engagement with discursive questions of difference to counter persistent opacities and silences.

Keywords: Nigeria, photography, women, citizenship, identity, Lagos

Framing the centre/periphery dialectic

I sit in an overcrowded *danfo* bus, the ubiquitous, second-hand, yellow-painted vehicle of mass public transport that keeps the people of Lagos, Nigeria crawling in grid-lock traffic ‘suffering and smiling’, as famously immortalised in the song by Fela Anikulapo Ransome-Kuti. It is a hot, humid day, as hawkers and their wares weave in and out of the cars, the trucks and intrepid *keke* drivers of motorised rickshaws constantly fighting for space whilst the ceaseless stream of pedestrians take their chance on foot, trekking as it is commonly known. I hear a child, perched besides me on one overflowing knee, ask, ‘Mama, where be capital of the world?’, ‘Lagos’ comes back the answer without missing a beat. I smile and wonder how a photograph of this particular grid-lock would compare with rush hour London. I ponder on this vignette, the memory returning to me as I walk around an exhibition held in 2019 at Palais de Tokyo in Paris, France. The exhibition *City Prince/sses*, brings together over fifty multimedia, multi-disciplinary artists from Dhaka, Lagos, Manila, Mexico City and Tehran to create one unbounded mega-polis, teasing out divergences and convergences along a gamut of socio-political, cultural and economic imaginaries. In this dizzying array of sheer visual talent, the exhibition brings the global South often situated as the periphery, to the de facto centre of the global North.

In the globalised postcolonial world of today, questions of centre/periphery, borders and boundaries illustrate unequal power relations, as well as the elision of local specificities under continued taken-for-granted conceptual categories that frame viewings of art from Africa. In this article, I want to explore the extent to which the practice of female photographers can be read through sightlines that place their ethnographic context at the centre and inverts what is often a normalised duality of centre/periphery relations. My

analysis contends that this duality is neither fixed nor stable and instead frames it as contested space. I focus on the work of three Nigerian artists: Ndidi Dike, Adeola Olagunju and Jumoke Sanwo who in different ways utilise lens-based media within their practice. All three artists are primarily based in Lagos, have strong local and international recognition and exhibit their work within the continent and beyond. Dike and Olagunju's work appeared in the *City Prince/ses* exhibition, whilst Sanwo's work featured in this article has toured extensively. This reflects the growing complexity of an ecosystem that enmeshes photographers, multi-disciplinary artists, curators, buyers and audiences in multi-sited, layered relations that cover aesthetics of value, economies of scale and are situated within a global art market that often ignores or pays scant attention to the social, economic, cultural and political context that embeds their work.

This article aims to problematise the feminine as framed situated identity within a context of unequal power relations at the global and local level, through attention to the diverse practice of Dike, Olagunju and Sanwo. In an era of rapid globalisation, the specificities of the local are often side-lined or historicised in processes that leave the global North at the centre of the 'idea of Africa' (Mudimbe, 1994) moribund and fossilised in the hashtag speak of #africanising. The growth in international photography exhibitions focusing on Africa and hosted in the USA or Europe has increased visibility and 'legitimacy', despite Africans centuries-long engagement with photography (Fiofori, 2017). The growing patronage from private and public collectors can suggest a Faustian pact and although not the focus of this paper is an important dynamic within a complex terrain marked by uneven power relations. Brand exhibitions that placed Africa's photographs firmly on the global map include the 1994 exhibition and catalogue *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* held at the Guggenheim, New York and the 2006 exhibition and catalogue *Snap Judgments: New*

Positions in Contemporary African Photography, both curated by Okwui Enwezor. Similarly, in Europe, the 1998 publication *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography* in English, French and Portuguese editions sought to give a comprehensive overview reflecting the three colonial trajectories of the continent. In more recent years, important collections such as The Walther Collection held exhibitions and conferences to highlight the rich diversity of photography from Africa giving rise to a host of publications including *Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive* (Garb, 2013).

The recent partnership between the National Museum of African Art Smithsonian Institution and the Royal House of Benin, Nigeria to exhibit in New York and Benin, *Fragile Legacies: The Photographs of Solomon Osagie Alonge* (Staples et al., 2016) marks changes in the international visual ecosystem and gestures to different modalities of collaboration. Solomon Osagie Alonge was the official court photographer for the Benin Kingdom in what is now present day Nigeria, and background research drew on participatory approaches to engage with the public in Benin and ground the exhibition in this vibrant and vital context.

Increasingly, the relevance of the ethnographic context and that *Photographies Other Histories* (Pinney and Peterson, 2003) really do matter, is encouragingly reflected in the growth of academic peer-reviewed journal articles and books that focus on the archives, ethnography and history of photography in Africa (Haney, 2010; Peffer and Cameron, 2013; Geary, 2003; Morton and Newbury, 2015; Vokes, 2019). In this article, I hope to make a contribution in this vein as I draw on ethnographic research conducted in Nigeria (2017-2018) part of a larger multi-country project funded by the European Research Council titled ‘PHOTODEMOS: Citizens of photography: the camera and the political imagination’¹. My fieldwork was conducted in two ancient cities, Ilé-Ifè and Ila Orangun, Osun state as well as

¹ For more information on the project see: www.ucl.ac.uk/photodemos

mega-city Lagos with its estimated population of 20 million. It is the commercial and creative capital of Nigeria and the most cosmopolitan part of the country, acting as a magnet for everyday people and artists from across the country, the region and the world. In Osun state, I carried out more traditional ethnography living in the community to understand the role of photography in people's lives. Whilst in Lagos I was more purposive in my engagement, seeking photographers who embrace a social activism agenda within their practice.

Impaired citizenship, distorted lenses

Ndidi Dike, Adeola Olagunju and Jumoke Sanwo are three artists who I came to know well, interviewing them extensively and gaining knowledge of their practice and process. All three artists pay attention to the politics of everyday life within a context of ongoing struggle as citizens and artists in the polity of Nigeria. Impaired citizenship is a concept that comes from the work of photography theorist Ariella Azoulay, who in the seminal text *The Civil Contract of Photography* proposes a theory of photography based on what she terms as ‘a new ontological-political understanding of photography’ (2008). The civil contract alludes to the very nature of photography’s ability to capture all its participants, the camera, photographer, photographed subject and spectator, into a new sphere of civic relations that transcend nation-state borders. Through this matrix Azoulay proposes that neither participants, camera, photographer, photographed subject or spectator, can solely determine the meaning of the photograph or have the capacity to seal themselves from unintended consequences. Instead what emerges are precisely the unintentional effects of this encounter beyond the event. She is not the first theorist to think about the open-ended relations between the camera, photographer, subject/event and audience/spectator. However, Azoulay makes the distinction that in this encounter, some will be situated as non-citizens whilst others might suffer from impaired citizenship compared to those who enjoy full citizenship (2008).

It is crucial as more attention is being paid to women and photography in Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular, to strive to foreground debates on voice and commensurability.

With Africa one could argue that the imposition of new structural dispensations for organising the political power, and social and economic capital that emerged from the colonial encounter led to entrenched inequalities that continue to mark the postcolonial

nation-states of Africa. The continent, as part of what is termed the global South, remains subsumed in relations of inequality in a world order dominated by the countries of the global North. The people of this continent – signified as Africa - have been and continue to live in disaster contexts riddled with conflict and insecurity. Azoulay in her theorization, proposes that we think carefully about the ‘ideological mechanisms’ that states deploy ‘to cause us to forget’ the divisions between those deemed privileged citizens, non-citizens or those that suffer from impaired citizenship (2008). In this category, she situates women who, owing to the nature of the social construction of gender, are in relations of inequality with men. I find it generative to think with Azoulay in the context of Nigeria in what can be termed as the politics of crisis in everyday life through which people negotiate their day-to-day concerns.

‘Picturing women’, alludes to both the gendered power dynamics central to the practice of these three women artists, and their re-framing of womanhood within a context of sharp social and economic inequalities. Azoulay provocatively insists that the coming of photography heralds a new civic space of co-relationship beyond the limitations of the nation-state. Nigeria is currently in its longest phase of uninterrupted civilian rule, yet the legacy of military rule and political instability haunts the civic space. It is a country of sharp inequalities; great wealth and opportunity exist side by side with endemic poverty and precarity. As a federal democracy, there is a tension between the nation and the state. Nigeria’s citizens enjoy rights as full citizens of the country, but constitutionally can also claim citizenship as indigenes at the federal state level granting them access to enhanced rights over non-indigenes. Constitutionally federal state indigeneity is ancestral and patrilineal. It is not defined by the federal state of birth and it cannot be inherited through the mother. This codifies another stratum of inequality particularly for women. Scholars note that in many respects the colonial encounter led to a revision of the social system in the lands and

kingdoms that were ultimately forged into the postcolonial nation-state Nigeria. In many ways these revisions curtailed checks and balances that gave women greater equanimity of power in the community (Okome, 2013). Women were at the vanguard of acts resisting colonial power across what was to become Nigeria. Examples stretch from the 1920s Igbo Women's War to the various feminist campaigns led by Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti who was also the only woman in the delegation that negotiated independence from the British (Okome, 2013; Johnson-Odim and Mba, 1997).

The constitutional framing of citizenship by indigeneity is one example of the legal stratum of inequality particular to women, others include the failure to pass a comprehensive domestic law bill safeguarding the rights of women. More recently there has been a strident campaign in the face of what has been termed a 'pandemic' of sexual violence against girls and women to highlight the failure of the police, courts and politicians' ineffectiveness against all forms of sexual violence. I explore the work of Ndidi Dike, Adeola Olagunju and Jumoke Sanwo through a heritage of resistance and transformation and the contemporary ongoing challenges of endemic inequality and the quest for rights. I take three recent pieces by these artists to suggest that they provide a lens through which to trace women's continual challenge against the prevailing patriarchal landscape in Nigeria. The specificity of Lagos provides a hyper-connected filter as a global mega-city caught up in circuits of communication, exchange and praxis distinct from those of secondary cities, the peri-urban or rural milieu. The artworks that follow below by Dike, Olagunju and Sanwo utilise photography to reveal many layers of violence, incommensurability and contested silence. The concluding discussion is not intended as a final word on what are fascinating intersectional image-practices, rather it reflects a more complex appraisal of ongoing struggles. These are concerns and debates taken up in other disciplines and across civil

society to unpack gender and power relations in Nigeria within and outside the arts (Ako-Nai, 2013; Okome, 2013; Oyěwùmí, 2011).

Fiction Steeped in Reality

©Ndidi Dike 2018





In *Fiction Steeped in Reality*, the artist Ndidi Dike draws on her personal family archive to create a series of works that fracture time, space and place to make a wider commentary that intertwines Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Africa's diaspora within the exploitative global mining industrial complex. The work debuted at Lagos Photo Festival 2018 under the theme 'Time Has Gone' (*Oge agaa la* in the Igbo language) to dialogue with archives and future imaginaries. I focus on these two images, a diptych in the series, because they powerfully argue for intersubjective time where the plump, well fed choir-singing nativity children, share the same time, coeval with their compatriots (Enwezor, 2006:14). The child labourers who scrape a living in the dangerous world of the artisanal mine, contrast with the mini angelic hosts, seemingly oblivious to the proffered alternative vision of their lives. The work has an almost tactile quality, with movement in stillness inviting your touch. It is leant a sculptural quality through the layering swirls of latex underlying the surface of

these images. The young girl in the first image evokes the divinatory and transformational possibilities of the Black Madonna what Dike terms ‘the potent promise of “miracle crusades”’ (Dike, 2018). She is the chosen one, the mini-saviour who evokes the ‘good deeds’ of anti-slavery missionaries. She sits surrounded by the products of the mine’s economic bounty, indicating the ongoing legacy of slavery as other children labour in slave-like conditions.

The images emanate a deafening sonic frequency (Campt, 2017), the projected harsh inequalities doubly underscore the dissonance of angelic singing children who hover above the squalor and degradation of the mine. The tactility and coeval nature of these images energises and adds liveliness to the work, overcoming the fatigue often induced by conflict and exploitation photography from Africa. In her practice Ndidi Dike has a long-standing interest in the politics of the global mining industrial complex and its impact on people and environments. In this rich multi-layered piece, two opposite ends of the spectrum are presented as metaphoric outcomes for women and their children. On the one hand are families who enjoy full citizenship as their socio-economic status enables them to provide stable opportunities and a childhood free of want. On the other hand, are those children born into lives of hardship, want and poverty sitting at the juncture of impaired or non-citizenship. Dike’s use of coeval time suggests an unstable spectrum within non-linear histories, where chance and spirit emanate in the aura surrounding these images.

There are powerful synchronicities in these images of pain and redemption harkening to what Azoulay terms the citizenry of photography. The audience at Lagos Photo exhibition has much in common with the Paris audience at *City Prince/sses* exhibition, both connoisseurs of contemporary art in a privileged global space. The socio-economic metrics that place France

on one scale and Nigeria on another visibly dissolve, rendering borders and boundaries meaningless as art takes centre stage. Dike's use of the vernacular photography archive disrupts distance as the motif of well-tended children, a common imperative in family photo albums, and niggles at joint consciousness, reflecting complicity in the plight of the *other* children working in the mine. The archive is alive seemingly full of horrors amongst nativity scenes. Dike takes up the baton embracing 'visual practices that recognize coevalness, [to] reach beyond the stock images that have endured until now as the iconography of the "abandoned" continent' (Enwezor, 2006:18). The impaired citizens emerge not only through the sightlines of race, but through confronting privilege and class.

Pilgrimage

©Adeola Olagunju 2018-2019



In *Pilgrimage*, the artist Adeola Olagunju invites us within the intimate space of her own multiple journeys, revealing internal and external mobilities, physical, emotional and spiritual along a range of axis. This is a moving sequence of ten animated and non-animated photographs from three cities, Lagos, Berlin and Ilesha projected as a multimedia installation composed of parallel floating screens. Lagos is the city where Olagunju has based her practice, Ilesha is the city of her ancestry, a once great ancient Yoruba kingdom, whilst Berlin is her European compass during her current sojourn. Olagunju has long used the personal as an experiential resource for her practice working primarily as a lens-based artist. In *Pilgrimage*, she continues her aesthetically and politically charged inquiry into Yoruba religion and cosmology as a central organising lodestone intrinsic to negotiating life within

contemporary intersecting modernities. In this installation Olagunju's own journeys through place within Ilesha and the two global cities of Lagos and Berlin, imbricate multiple historic mobilities as counterpoint to a prayer poem, *Sober*. This is recited over the images by the Zambian composer Kaleo Sansa whose repeated plea "Spirit so Divine" echoes through the gallery.

The interlaced cityscapes bridge two continental spheres to illustrate movement and waitness and evoke ambivalent claims of progress. Time out of place is the quiet backwater that Ilesha represents, whilst Lagos and Berlin like many global cities are an assemblage of super-diversity, intersecting cleavages that span ethnicity, social class, age, gender, religion and citizenship to reflect evolving and expanding population densities (Vertovec, 2007). These three points are map co-ordinates that simultaneously link and disrupt any hegemonic hierarchical idea of linearity. Instead they foreground a 'politics of time' and challenge the audience to accept the coeval nature of time. The scholar and artist Moyo Okedjeji notes that for the Yoruba people, one of the main ethnic groups in Nigeria, *Ile aye fele* "Life is delicate" and art is a metaphor for 'a long and precarious trail ... *the pilgrimage of life* (my italics) begins at birth' (Okedjeji, 1997: 165). It is this inner and outer journey that Olagunju gestures towards from within the centrality of Lagos where this installation was first shown, and outwards again to the *City Prince/sses* exhibition at Palais du Tokyo where I first encounter the work.

The vision of the journey, the *Pilgrimage* is both metaphysical and psychic where 'the appropriate traffic signs are metaphorical ones, ritually situated and symbolically planted in the landscapes of the travellers' minds' (Okedjeji, 1997:166). Time, movement and mobility are central ongoing concerns despite the difference between and within Lagos, Ilesha and

Berlin. The piece is imbued with hope; the hope that women bear as they move forward encompassing coeval realities as they look back to their forbearers and ancestors. Three cities remain in flux with old and new juxtaposed, overlaid along the continuum of pilgrimage as Olagunju expresses what she terms a ‘search of the sacred or the self’. This rooting of the *Pilgrimage* through what might be unknown routes for many in the audience, offers, if we accept these ‘gaps’, areas of opaqueness not as non-sense, but as silences that offer us space to breathe within this landscape. In this installation images and sound evoke a sense of resonance through time and space to offer resource to ancient repositories of wisdom and power that accompany women’s journeys as boundaries are transgressed to ‘represent the unknown, the future, [and] the yet-to-be-arrived-at’ (Okediji, 1997:166).

Silence des Femme

©Jumoke Sanwo 2013-2018



Women are also central to the work of Jumoke Sanwo as seen in her multimedia series *Silence des Femme*. The piece spans 2013-2018 and evolved from seeds planted during Sanwo's participation in the Invisible Borders Trans African Photographers project, the Lagos to Addis Ababa edition. The sheer physicality of this innovative mobile residency brought together a diverse group of artists from Africa, including photographers, curators, videographers and writers. Their aim was to create work and collaborate with other artists through different encounters on the road, as they moved via public transport from one country to the next. Sanwo notes that the experience highlighted the challenge of borders and

led to critical engagement with the question of borders as flexible and contingent, subject to movement beyond state borders, which coalesces similarities to blur differences of language, culture and religion. It was during this journey that Sanwo met women victims of sexual violence in Chad, a country on the northern border of Nigeria. In Anglophone Nigeria, next door to Francophone Chad she met women who similarly suffered from sexual violence and the resultant stigma of shame that led to deeply hidden silence about this most intimate act of violence. The experience of hundreds of women and girls caught up in the Boko Haram insurgency in northern Nigeria mirrors conflict and insecurity in Chad.

In this work Sanwo explores identity and aesthetics whilst foregrounding her passion to confront injustice. The Chadian visual artist Salma Alio, although not a victim of sexual violence, poses as her model. The image of a woman in a hijab with pink tape across her mouth in the shape of an 'X', resonates with a regularly purported media stereotype of Muslim women 'muzzled' by their faith. The lush beauty of this portrait is disrupted by the garish, harsh pink tape across the woman's lips. Her enforced silence and steady, immovable gaze seemingly accuses the audience of complicity with her muzzled state through the silence of their gaze. The installation also features other faceless images where the bright pink tape is criss-crossed over other iconic zones of the feminine. The nipples on breasts, the womb just above the vagina, erogenous zones that through the legacy of a colonising image economy (Poole, 1997) stand as shorthand for the image of the hyper-sexual black woman's body. *Silence des Femme* seems to subvert what Olu Oguibe has termed 'certain specifications of imagery and representation, which in the minds of the West truly represent its Arcadian imaginary of Africa' (Oguibe, 2004:166).

The title of the piece '*Silence des Femme*' together with the recurring motif of the pink 'X' taped across the woman's mouth, acts as a visceral scream against the violence and violation of women. The model's defiant gaze dares the violators, seemingly shouting the iconic revolutionary phrase '*aluta continua*' (the struggle continues). I contend that the 'X' is not a negation, but instead 'X' could be read as marking the site of resistance. It is an invitation not only to look at the sites of violation but to acknowledge a woman's agency to resist these acts of silencing. I am reminded of a group discussion with young female university students in Ilé-Ifè who during fieldwork spoke about the social pressures to keep silent if you were a victim of sexual abuse or violence. For many silence seemed to be the wisest and only course of action. We tried to unpack the apparent inevitability of this totalising silence and ask why the stigma of the 'fallen woman' continued to hold such power in the contemporary imaginary? These images shocked, elated and offered hope to our discussions long before the #metoo movement. In predating the #metoo movement *Silence des Femme* is poised at that junction of local specificities and global conversations. In a context that cuts across Nigeria and the metropolises of Europe and America, where the struggle for justice against sexual violence continues, it troubles the aesthetics of identity and inverts the image of the weak, silenced woman offering strength and mutual recognition, within mutual struggles.

Conclusion

I return to my grid-locked Lagos traffic jam to ponder what this seemingly utopian concept, ‘the citizenship of photography’ proffered by Azoulay can contribute. One of the most powerful provocations of Azoulay’s approach is an insistence on photography’s role in instigating relations that transcend the boundaries of the nation-state. This can allow a different perspective on photography where the politics of quotidian life come to the fore to demand visibility beyond borders. Azoulay’s typology of the relations of *all* the governed as contingent and uneven, enables a re-calibration of life in Lagos within a lens that incorporates London, Berlin, Paris and New York to name other global cities. In all these locales, there are the few who enjoy full citizenship and the many who inhabit impaired or non-citizenship. Azoulay in particular places women, who are a substantial proportion of the population in whatever nation-state, as vulnerable and liable to suffer from impaired citizenship. Thus, alluding to the dominance of patriarchy and the uneven power relations that impact the lives of many women on myriad societal dimensions. In this article, I tease out why power relations rooted in historic inequalities persist. I examine the work of Ndidia Dike, Adeola Olagunju and Jumoke Sanwo as female artists who have gained international renown by grounding their practice in issues of social justice. Their photographs do not deny painful realities but reframe them through an insistence on the coeval.

Many constituencies in Nigeria's population toil through a life of impaired citizenship, it is not only the plight of women. At the same time, many who are governed in the wealthier countries of the global North equally struggle in relations of inequality that some recognise when confronted within the gallery space, by works such as those of Dike, Olagunju and Sanwo. All three artists draw on resources that are ready at hand, whether a family personal archive, the shared stories of a road trip that refract realities on journeys to multiple global metropolises, to re-centre the ancestral homeland. As artists, they know what they want to say unapologetically and they ignore casual epitaphs, "*Woman, you craze!*" ("Woman you are crazy!"). Instead they take aim with a weaponised female gaze to disrupt inter-generational structural oppressions. The work of Ndidi Dike, Adeola Olagunju and Jumoke Sanwo visually re-centres the lens of Africa's realities as generative resource for strategies to foster interconnected global alliances. As artists, they draw on multi-vocal visuals grounded in vernacular aesthetics to reach back and press forward. Azoulay's provocation of a citizenry of photography highlights a politics rooted in the everyday that potentially upends social inequalities to mitigate impaired citizenships beyond the individualistic logics of the market. Through these processes of reclamation, there is hope for a future where inequalities are rendered flat. The work of Dike, Olagunju and Sanwo place Lagos in Paris, Dakar, Berlin, Venice, Addis Ababa, Bayreuth, Porto Alegre Brazil, to name some of the cities they have exhibited their work. They connect and electrify new circuits to counter impaired citizenship within the politics of visibility.

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