Virtual African Diaspora Conference
Theme: Old and new African Diaspora Networks: Before and After COVID-19
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Race and Notoriety in diasporic Nigerian life

Thank you for organizing, I really want to go to Wits and am excited to have this opportunity to participate. Virtual format hopefully will increase transnational conversations and intellectual exchange, during and post-Covid-19.

I'll just dive right in – in the last few weeks, you may have seen vivid recent scenes in the international media of black Africans, many of them Nigerians, sleeping in the streets of Guangzhou, having been ejected or refused service from hotels and housing due to Covid-19 rumors. McDonald's corporate headquarters even issued an apology over a sign that explicitly singled out black people for Covid-19 health concerns and refusing entry.

There have been multiple responses to these images and reports. Most immediately, many African and African diasporic perspectives voiced outrage and concern on social media. The story was quickly and widely snapped up by international western media on major platforms, circulating headlines about Chinese racism and prompting countries like the US to issue warnings for their own black citizens in China. In response, a variety of critics suggested the account is being sensationalized, and that the incidents stemmed from misunderstandings. Others have also pointed to the hypocrisies of international news media, and particularly western outrage, when in the United States law enforcement regularly not only terrorizes black people but routinely kills them. Indeed, the Chinese government has a webpage that keeps track of the deaths of black people at the hands of US law enforcement, much more comprehensively than dominant western media sources. Yet again, in these situations, black suffering becomes a spectacle wielded for different geopolitical powers to size up each other and morally condemn the other, all the while sidelining the very real transnational connections of anti-blackness and racism.

For the purposes of this paper, I want to quickly highlight two important lines of analyses came out of various Nigerian and African critiques of the incidents. The first was criticizing the treatment of black people in Guangzhou while immediately contrasting the incident directly to the vastly different treatment of Chinese nationals residing across the African continent. Many have pointed out that Chinese nationals are rarely treated the way Africans have been treated in China, with some calling for symbolic retaliation against Chinese nationals living in Africa. This point highlights the geopolitical landscape of China as a global actor, but also how the *bodies* of Chinese nationals symbolically become a site where geopolitical critique of the Chinese state can be expressed. Secondly, the other line of analysis I want to highlight is that this incident in Guangzhou is not a singular one. Indeed, the incident provoked much outrage across a broader African diaspora precisely because it falls within a broader pattern, both across time and geographic context, of the vulnerability and volatility of black African migrant and diasporic life across Asia and the Middle East, along with the West. This analysis enables us to both historicize the event within a longer history of anti-black violence as well as the ways in which crises like Covid-19 illuminate the contemporary transnational geographies of race and nationalism.

This paper today will consider how incidents like what we see happening under Covid-19 fall within a longer pattern and also are part of the ongoing processes of racialization. Specifically, I will draw from ethnographic fieldwork amongst Nigerian diaspora across the Global South conducted in 2014 and 2015 during the ongoing Ebola crisis in West Africa. Indeed, my interlocutors reported similar scenes of hotel rejections that we see today under Covid-19 during and well after the Ebola crisis in 2014. Furthermore, this paper explores how diasporic Nigerians understand moments like Covid-19 and Ebola discrimination in relation to a wider range of important events of racialized and xenophobic anti-Nigerian violence.

2014 Global Ebola Scare

While the constantly shifting waves of Nigerian movement across the Global South are difficult to map precisely, some contours of this migration came into sharp relief during the 2014 Ebola epidemic and its global scares. Tens of thousands of Nigerians regularly travel to destinations across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia for educational and entrepreneurial purposes, as well as more temporary journeys for tourism and medical care. Nigerians are major commercial actors in

trade sites across the Middle East and Asia, and they make up a significant percentage of African migrants living in those sites. Thus although the Ebola epidemic raged in the West African countries of Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone beginning in December 2013, global panic did not fully take hold until the first cases of Ebola hit Lagos, Nigeria seven months later in the summer of 2014.

Suddenly, a subsequent series of Ebola scares struck places such as Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Singapore, China, Vietnam, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, India, Hong Kong, Sudan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and South Africa, in a very strange way highlighting a highly dispersed landscape of mobility between Nigeria and the Global South. Nigerian and other African diaspora across many of these sites were subjected to extremely publicized, racialized and nationalized experiences of suspicion, scrutiny, and pathologization. Some Nigerians were forcefully quarantined, and some in terrible conditions without proper access to food, water, toilets, or communication, before being deported without notice or explanation. As global travel locks fell into place, Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan made public statements condemning the stigmatization of Nigerians across the world. US presidential hopeful at the time, Donald Trump, tweeted about Ebola around 100 times, calling for flight and travel bans from West Africa, a logic we see extending to today.

In actuality, Nigeria's total number of Ebola cases did not surpass 20 people and resulted in only eight deaths in its population of over 170 million people. At the time, liberal Western responses, including the voices of journalists and anthropologists, condemned news media for stereotypical Africa coverage, often employing *other* numbers to counter racialized stereotypes, saying for example "You are much more likely to die from the common flu than from an African with Ebola!."[1] This same liberal impulse has emerged in NYC during Covid-19, where researchers have shown that the major Covid-19 vectors into NYC were from Europe, rather than China. A typical liberal response to this would be to then use this research to suggest that the anti-Chinese and anti-Asian violence was unwarranted. While these facts help us understand how the "facts on the ground" are in fact often divorced from the readily available social explanations, they fail to

[1] Paul Stoller, "Ebola Emissions," *Huffington Post,* October 8, 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-stoller/ebola-emissions_b_5663027.html.

address another important possibility: if Covid-19 had been brought to NYC by Chinese people, or if Ebola had spread much more globally in 2014, would the facts then 'justify' the harsh national or racial profiling? If it is scientifically evident that black people in Guangzhou are not a significant vector of Covid-19, nor Chinese people in New York City, then why did hotels continue to refuse service to Nigerian and black African clients, institutions cancel exchanges and events with African institutions (even in non-affected countries), school children mock black classmates with shouts of "Ebola!", landlords evict black tenants, commuters avoid black passengers? It is clear that such crises are less exceptional moments but ones where ongoing racialized processes continue to rear their heads through crises and beyond them. Science can help us demonstrate the fallacies the racism but only if properly historicized; it is clear that 'facts' alone are not enough.

I want to use anthropologist Nancy Munn's conception of 'events' as a way to think about the spectacle of black eviction during Covid-19 in China, and the 2014 Ebola scare, as less exceptional moments but rather unusually stark ones, or clarifying ones, that exemplify ongoing processes of racialization. As news stories punctuate social media and daily conversations, globalized mediascapes proliferate and enable the linking of dispersed incidents, or what Munn has called "events." Events are moments that people articulate as part of a larger world, in terms of causality, meaning, and implication. As formative moments that are infused with the "ambience of potentialities or 'futurity', as well as pasts," events are key sites of translocal consciousness.[2] Rather than conceptualizing social worlds as tethered to cohesive shared cultural essence or historical narratives, Munn argues that translocal consciousness and interconnected social entities emerges through everyday practices that infuse "the experience of a given event with pasts (or possible pasts) and futures."[3] Thus by considering ebola as an *event* in Nigerian diasporic life across the Global South, it highlights a range of ongoing difficult circumstances regularly experienced, where processes of racialization are tightly intertwined into national stereotype.

[2] Nancy D. Munn, "Constructing regional worlds in experience: Kula exchange, witchcraft and Gawan local events," *Man* (1990), 5.
[3] Ibid., 13.

Indeed, Nigerian migrants across Africa and other parts of the Global South have garnered particularly notorious reputations in both popular and academic accounts. Movies such as the 2009 global blockbuster science fiction film *District 9* and the 2008 South African feature film *Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalema* famously cast its drug gang lord antagonists as Nigerian residents in South Africa. Academic accounts have described gatherings of Igbo Nigerians in Johannesburg as a kind of public flexing, where men gather and entertain themselves outside as "display[s] of impunity, pointing to the insufficiency of South Africans to not only effectively deal with them, but also their own deficit of public action."[4] Scholarly accounts suggests that Nigerian men gather across sectors and class backgrounds to exchange information and publicly flex wealth and strength in the faces of South Africans. Nigerian men, in particular Igbo and southern Nigerian men, across the Global South have also been characterized as particularly ostentatious, aggressive, and loud, especially compared to other African nationals from other countries. Strikingly, such descriptions are also common in both academic and popular accounts of Nigerian gatherings in places like southern China. These national-specific stereotypes that cast Nigerians as ostentatious, aggressive, and loud can very quickly turn into ammunition against Nigeiran migrants during politically tense moments.

Indeed, in addition to stories and photos of discrimination during events like the Ebola crisis, there is a wider circulation of social media decrying the discrimination against Nigerians across the world. Here is one example of a meme circulating on social media amongst Nigerians living in Dubai and in Asia during 2013 xenophobic anti-Nigerian tensions in South Africa:

Figure: "Dear South Africa" anti-xenophobia social media message, 2013.

In referencing "Once we cried for the pain caused on you…" the meme recalls how both the Nigerian state and civilians supported black by both the Nigerian state and many Nigerian civilians in the 1980s and 90s. The rest of the text, "But now we cry because of the pain you cause :(," calls attention to the loss of such recognition of solidarity. In 2013, the anti-Nigerian tensions had been sparked by a drug-related death of a South African, and South African

[4] Abdoumaliq Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Duke University Press, 2004), 227.

residents chased Nigerian residents, many of whom claimed to be unrelated to the drug trade at all, from their homes.

Similar kinds of incidents have erupted around drug-related deaths in India, where one event will spark riots and violence against Nigerians and black African residents. Some news reports take pains to counter group stereotypes in these contexts, like a 2013 Al Jazeera article on the murder of a Nigerian in the Indian state of Goa: "That some Nigerians have been involved in crime has strengthened the stereotypes against them, and honest, hard-working people such as Nwaneli, the businessman, have paid the price."[5]

For Nigerian diaspora, race and national stereotype are co-constitutive. While anthropological instinct often compels attention towards the intricacies of 'local' repertoires of distinction – for example, race in relation to particular discourses of ethnicity, colorism, caste, class, and localized histories of colonialism – this paper shows how such analyses must be unified with considerations of transnational economies of migration, geopolitical formations, national stereotype, and globalized media circulations.

I will conclude this paper with a story from fieldwork. During fieldwork in 2015, one evening I joined some Nigerian interlocutors in a suburb of Guangzhou. One Nigerian man, nicknamed Biggie, held what he called 'office hours' each evening at a plastic table on the sidewalk outside of a grocery store, where Nigerian men from the neighborhood would gather to relax, drink, browse the internet on Biggie's VPN hotspot, and discuss.

The evening that I visited, Biggie's office hours ended on a loud conversation about the hypocrisies of global media coverage on the deadly outbreak of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) at the time, in 2015. One young man, who had been browsing the internet quietly on his smartphone, read aloud parts of a news article about MERS deaths in South Korea. Another man exclaimed, "You know, if this sickness is in Africa now, the way they will mention

[5] Hakeem Ifran, "Murder sparks India-Nigeria diplomatic storm," *Al Jazeera*, November 10, 2013, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/2013/11/murder-sparks-india-nigeria-diplomatic-storm-201311109531844644.html.

it, talk about it, you know! It's not the way they are talking about [MERS]. Like when the Ebola was there in Nigeria, the way they were talking about it… Somebody might even die before the Ebola comes!"

Biggie then turned to me and said, "If you are living with the word of the journalist, and in the world of their words, and people believe *that* of the world, my dear, that person will die before his time." Someone interjected quickly, "Because of fear!" Biggie continued, "But if you live with the word of God, try to know what God says concerning you, then you will know that all these things they are talking about, it's not for you." Like Biggie, many Nigerians living across the Global South regularly recognized how the "word of the journalist" or stereotypes about them were not simply false representations but enacted realities for migrant Nigerians navigating across the Global South, of racial profiling and national discrimination.

In their work on the idea of racecraft, Barbara and Karen Fields have noted that "race transforms one person's action into another person's being," and "even though the targets may imagine their race is their identity, but in fact it's an identification."[6] That is, rather than conceptualizing racial identity as simply something that individuals identify with or individuals conceptualize about themselves, what the Fields highlight is thus the structural and state dimensions of contemporary *racecraft*. They use the example of the shooting of Amadou Diallo, an African immigrant who was shot by the police in the United States. While Diallo may have identified a variety of nuanced ways – as an African, an immigrant – what ultimately determined his death was the fact that police officers identified him as black and dangerous. Focusing more on processes of *identification* illustrates how race is enacted. That is, rather than attributing Amadou Diallo's death to his black identity, focusing on the police officer's *identification* of him highlights race as an ongoing enacted process. Racecraft thus is at once unescapable, mundane, and consequential, and ties together imagination and enactment simultaneously, similar to how Biggie described the dangers of succumbing to the "words of the journalist," or how Nigerians are stereotyped as they migrate and live across the world.

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[6] Barbara J. Fields, in "Beyond Race Relations: An Interview with Barbara J. Fields & Karen E. Fields," interview by Daniel Denvir, *Jacobin Magazine*, January 17, 2018, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/01/racecraft-racism-barbara-karen-fields.

In conclusion, this paper considers how it is important to look at what is new in these moments but also what is *not* new – why do the same logics of blame and exclusion reemerge in times of crises? Interconnected events across the world of experiences of anti-black racial profiling show the workings of racecraft, or race as a process of identification in the context of global racialized communities. Furthermore, in considering racialization and national stereotype together, we can see historical patterns of racial events that "engage apprehensions of a wider social milieu beyond that of the 'moment'"[7] and continue to inform the movement of diasporic Nigerians.

Abstract: Nigerian notoriety has emerged as a global national stereotype – particularly in relation to drug-trafficking and prolific scamming rackets – alongside global racial ones, that are ever present in Nigerian diasporic livelihoods in the Global South. Both popular and academic accounts of Nigerians in places such as South Africa and China often cast Nigerian migrant men as prone to criminality, aggression, and excessive ostentation. This paper critically examines how global racial processes become entwined with nationality, ethnicity, class, and gender. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork as an Asian American researcher amongst Nigerians in the Global South, I consider ethnographic scenes where Nigerian migrants talk about personal risk in relation to global structural inequalities, the centrality of state profiling in black migrant experience, and shifting gendered and kin relationalities. In particular, this paper explores how the transnational visibility of anti-black state violence through globalized media and social media networks reframe how migrant Nigerians drew constellations of evidence and patterns of interpretation for race and blackness across the world. Drawing from fieldwork during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, I reflect on how Covid-19 discourses have similarly animated xenophobic racial ones in contemporary diasporic life.

[7] Munn, *Constructing Regional Worlds*, 2.