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Oprah, 419 and DNA: Warning! Identity under Construction

The terminology of "African diaspora" is itself relatively new, having become popular after WWII and first defined formally in a 1965 essay by George Shepperson. As noted by Edwards (2001) the specific phrase "African diaspora" contrasts with prior terms such as "pan-Africanism" in ways that convey its orientation towards a more decentralized, heterogeneous, and anti-essentialist meaning; an orientation which is made even more explicit in Gilroy's framework of "the Black Atlantic." Here we investigate the formation of diasporic identity through digital media among two different groups of African Americans: those with a heritage in the US, and those who are recent immigrants (i.e. first generation) from Africa. Strange though it may sound at first, we found recent controversies involving television show host Oprah Winfrey to be a common intersection by which diasporic identity in both groups could be elucidated.

Oprah Winfrey's DNA Ancestry Tracing

In the PBS program "African American lives" (first aired February 2006) host Henry Louis Gates, Jr. traced the ancestry of eight prominent African Americans, including Oprah Winfrey. Winfrey had previously announced her ancestry to be Zulu; but that was—according to the mitochondrial DNA test offered by Gates—incorrect; her closest match was the Kpelle ethnic group in Liberia¹. Winfrey was clearly taken aback by this news; she "had to take a breather." Her personal, emotional, and financial investment (\$40 million for a girl's school in South Africa) in Zulu identity had been intense, despite prior warnings from historians that there was no record of the slave trade delivering people from the Zulu ethnic group.

While Winfrey's conflicting ancestral identity was the subject of a great deal of popular press, it was by no means unique. All migrants create stories, comprised of facts, guesswork, and outright imagination, about their relation to heritage—indeed even people still occupying their own ancestral lands do so (Anderson 1983). But this act of identity self-construction is particularly intense in the case of involuntary migrants such as the descendents of enslaved Africans in America. Ogbu (1978), investigating the rejection of academic success by some African American students, argues that African Americans (as well as those other involuntary inhabitants of the US, Latinos and Native Americans) created an "oppositional identity" to the mainstream culture; making the rejection of what Jim Crow laws and more informal racist systems held them from part of an active form of self-creation. Ogbu (1991) later clarified this concept using the term "cultural inversion" to refer to the rejection of symbols (dress, language, behaviors, etc) associated with a dominant culture. Fisher (2005) amends this model to stress oppositional identity as more about an attraction to alternatives than a rejection of the mainstream: in her view the students were not so much rejecting academics as they were placing a higher priority on becoming a rapper or athlete.

Of course the African Americans of Ogbu and Fisher's studies—high school students in the age of hip-hop, where “keepin it real” often references a glorified criminality—have a different construction of identity than the generation represented by Winfrey, who came of age during the 1960s when dashiki shirts, Afros, and other symbolizations of a displaced African homeland often constituted black authenticity. As Dent (1992), Gilroy (1993), George (2001), and others have stressed, these strategic modes of individual and collective identity—Garveyism, Negritude, Black Power, Buppies, B-Boys, Bohos, Rastafarians, 5 percenters, Gangstas, AfroFuturists, etc.—embody a wide variety of intersections between political strategy, heritage, and social position. From assimilation to separatism, from the promotion of tolerance to resistance and revolution, from civil rights to repatriation in the motherland, these various ideologies (and in some cases accompanied theologies) align themselves with specific cultural expressions. The use of particular elements of African continental culture is thus at least as much a strategic decision as it is a recognition of historical realities. In Molefi Asanti's Afrocentric framework, for example (cf. Asante and Asante 1985), ancient Egypt is re-imagined as the original Black homeland, with sub-Saharan African cultures as secondary derivatives. Visualizations of pyramids and Isis, not kente cloth and Swahili, became signifiers of Black ethnic origins in this Afrocentric movement.

That's not to say one is authentic and the other false. Swahili itself was not a language indigenous to any inhabitants of the “slave coast,” and kente cloth was influenced by cloths from India brought to Ghana through trade (Perani and Wolff 1999). Nor is this peculiar to the African diaspora. There is, for example, no mention of the Jewish exodus in the ancient Egyptian records; a fact that has led many historians to doubt its authenticity. But the decision to fashion a diasporic identity from various cultural elements often finds the historical debates less important than their political and social implications. For Asanti's followers, ancient Egypt held disproof of Black intellectual inferiority (both genetically and culturally), and offered an alternative “classical civilization”—parallel to but independent from ancient Greece—as wellspring of Black cultural and spiritual origins. The tension between the desire to sustain this particular construction of the African diaspora and the need for mainstream academic support is an extremely important conflict, to be sure, but the point here is that it has not been a strong obstacle for the Afrocentrists themselves.

Thus what is striking about Winfrey's construction of diasporic identity was not so much; as many critics leaped on, the lack of authenticity in citing a South African heritage rather than a West African one, but rather how readily she relinquished it when confronted with the results of her genetic testing. One never hears of an Afrocentrist who, when confronted with evidenceⁱⁱ contrary to the thesis of a Black ancient Egypt, simply gives up. This may in part be due to the particular situation: Winfrey's genetic test results were delivered to her by Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates. But equal authority has been leveled against Afrocentrists, and none of them had invested 40 million dollars in a school for ancient Egyptians, as Winfrey had for South Africans.

Public Epistemological and Ethical Associations of DNA

A better explanation might be that Winfrey felt she had to submit to the authority that has been invested in DNA. This authority has been strongly enshrined thanks to the multibillion dollar biotechnology industry and its interpenetration with science education (a network of connectivity that

runs from the funding of university laboratories and in some cases whole departments, to the scientists who sit on both boards of educational institutions and boards of genetics industry corporations, to educators who wish to prepare students for the reality of careers in an academia or industry centered on genetics) as well as popular media (ranging from press coverage of cloning and claims for biological determinism (“discovery” of genes for sexual orientation, obesity, cancer, etc.), to popular fiction such as the X-men trilogy, the Spiderman trilogy, Harry Potter (“purebloods” vs “mudbloods”ⁱⁱⁱ) and so on). However it is here that we encounter an illuminating contradiction to the concept of “digital diaspora.”

Much of the literature on digital communities and identities stresses their flexibility and tenuous ties to physical realities: the famous New Yorker cartoon of the beagle in front of a keyboard—“in cyberspace no one knows you’re a dog”—is merely the extreme for a wide variety of race and gender “tourism”; whether one wishes to represent black identity with references to ancient Egypt, urban ghettos, Caribbean beaches or Senegambian rice paddies there is no place in which that is easier than virtual landscapes and communications. Digital communities based on the aforementioned cultural groupings, from Garveyism to AfroFuturists, flourish in virtual diasporic spaces where cultural elements such as Egyptian pyramid screen savers, kente cloth webpage borders, rap music audio backgrounds, and simple textual elements (“Ho-tep” at the end of an email) can be recombined and reinvented at will. If that flexibility is the epitome of digital representation—if the digital diaspora is offering a blank canvas for ethnic self-construction— then how is it that the digital technology of DNA can be so rigid that it can force a powerful individual like Winfrey to give up the very diasporic identity that she had worked so hard to construct?

There are two possible answers here. A biological realist would say that unlike art and narrative, DNA is an objective physical reality; one which has a powerful influence on our bodies and their lineage. A social constructivist would say that DNA exists as just another discourse, and the fact that its narratives, visualizations and other representations are ensconced in more elite institutions is no reason to grant it a greater ontological status. Our stance on that controversy is somewhat of a synthesis - see Eglash (2005). We need not feel forced to decide between the two; it is enough to know that DNA is more than just another digital media representation; its powerful claim on our bodies, genders, family histories, ethnic identities and even the very concept of race is mediated not by the aesthetics of style and interpretation of historical record but by its location in a high-tech science that garners some of the highest epistemological status in our world.

Moreover it is not merely a matter of having the authority of science behind it; DNA has also dramatically altered its moral dimension in recent decades. Although DNA still carries negative associations from racism (cf. Gould 1981), it has recently taken on more complex series of ethical associations, ranging from its role in freeing black prisoners on death row, to its glorification in the popular CSI television series. The confirmation of the “out of Africa” thesis—that all humanity emerged from Africa a short 50,000 years ago—and its implications for genetic diversity (that all humans are 99.9% genetically identical, that there is not enough diversity for humans racial differences to be considered biologically significant, that there is more genetic difference between individuals than between races) have only been increasingly confirmed by DNA evidence from the Human Genome Diversity Project and other sources.

The extent to which those results have been taken up by popular understanding in the African American community is uneven. Belief in evolution among the lay public is much lower in the US than in many other industrialized nations due to its mobilization of religious fundamentalism and accompanied politicization (Miller et al 2006); Gallup polls in 1997 showed that only about 49% of the lay public (in comparison to 95% of scientists) believe that “man has developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life” (this includes both those believing that God intervenes in evolution (39%) and those that do not (19%)). Factors that positively correlate with belief in evolution include atheism, education, and income. One would think that given the strong role of religion in the African American community, and the lower average education and income level, surely far fewer African Americans would believe in evolution. But the drop is miniscule: the Gallup poll reported 45% of African Americans believe in evolution, in comparison to 49% of Caucasians. Clearly there is a counter-balance to these negative factors; a reasonable hypothesis is that that this counter balance has to do with the positive associations as outlined above. Moreover the “out of Africa” thesis—Africa as the origin of all modern humans— has an enormous following in the black community. Black cultural movements have appropriated this concept for a wide variety of purposes, some allied with theological concepts (black woman as the “the mother of all races” in relation to mythology), some with political concepts (as seen in the Afrocentric critique, or in a less racially charged pan-humanism) and others with a more science-oriented emphasis.

Meanwhile cultural anthropologists and black studies scholars in the academic mainstream, and in some cases the geneticists themselves, have articulated more complex results from the Human Genome Diversity Project and other sources to relatively broad audiences. Thus while the ethically suspect associations (genetic determinism) retains a strong presence in popular consciousness, there is a growing current that allies this faith in genetics with a science-based anti-racism. Another potentially positive association for African Americans is the new heart drug BiDil, which is the first race-specific drug approved by the FDA. After a scandalous history of neglect by medical science, and given the disproportionate number of African American deaths from heart failure, many African Americans (including the Association of African American Cardiologists) have embraced BiDil as a benefit to the African-American community, despite its potential implications as support for genetic determinism and reification of race (Hartigan 2008). In 1998 the denial of the existence of children fathered by Thomas Jefferson and born by his slave Sally Hemmings was put to rest when the Y chromosome DNA in Jefferson's family line was used to establish a definitive link with the Hemmings family^{iv}.

Thus the faith in DNA ancestry tracing has multiple foundations and implications, some contradictory: a much-welcomed change from science as a foundation for racism to science in the service of the black community (eg BiDil, ancestry tracing); an affirmation and reification of the “race” concept, perhaps supporting racism as future genetic claims impinge upon cognition; a contestation of the idea of separate races and affirmation of universal human genetic identity; and a synecdoche for justice and hidden truths (“just as DNA can uncover the unjustly incarcerated inmate, it can uncover the unjustly hidden ancestry”).

Self-fashioning: technological, objective, and autochthonous

One way of framing these variations is in terms of “self-fashioning.” For example, Orel and Willis-Altamirano (1988) spoke of “technologies of self-fashioning” in the context of product design and consumerism, and Dumit (1997) introduced the phrase “objective self-fashioning” to discuss the ways in which people construct an “objective self” using medical facts, which are then revised and recombined in various ways in relation to other elements of their persona and environment (e.g. someone diagnosed with cancer can view themselves as patient, victim, survivor, etc.). Much of this has been inspired by Foucault’s “technologies of the self.” But Foucault’s work is primarily a critique; exposing the ways in which a microphysics of power flows through technologies of the self such that individuals are fooled^v into thinking they are self-governed when they are actually subjects of a dominating “governmentality.” Indeed from a Foucaultian perspective the story could be read in technophobic terms; African Americans in collusion with genetic ancestry tracing are merely victims of DNA’s dominating “biopolitics.” But just as “self-fashioned” medical identities should not be dismissed as capitulation to hegemony—for example they empower individuals for collective action in the social movements born out of geographic “cancer clusters”—such technophobic critiques also inappropriate summaries for the ways in which the new understandings of DNA analysis can articulate with social justice issues in the black community.

While well-reasoned critiques of technological domination are crucial components of any social analysis, a technophobic analysis is one based in romantic naturalism. Kobena Mercer’s (1988) “Black Hair/Style Politics” described the ways in which black hairstyles have often been misinterpreted as having an original naturalistic form, which is then ethically valorized, and contrasted with an artificial form, which is then disparaged. For example, the red “conk” in which African American hair was straightened has been described as a feeble attempt at assimilation (eg in The Autobiography of Malcolm X). But Mercer points out that the red color was no more a match to white sensibilities than it was reflecting an ethnic naturalism: it was instead hinting at something more independent; what the authors of this essay would term an autochthonous self-fashioning. Similarly, he notes that dreadlocks, often assumed to be an “African roots” style, were found nowhere in Africa previous to its importation from the west (its origins in Jamaica resulting from the influence of laborers from India). And of course post-60s hip-hop era hairstyles opened up vast possibilities: “Post-liberated black hair-styling emphasizes a 'pick n' mix' approach to aesthetic production, suggesting a different attitude to the past in its reckoning with modernity” (Mercer 1988, pg 51).

Like Mercer’s de-naturalized account of black hair styles, African American naming practices also show a mixture of references to dominant American culture, African heritage, and autochthonous self-fashioning. Lieberson and Mikelson (1995) found that the invention of unique names in the African American community (based on historic records in Illinois and New York) dramatically rose after the 1960s, which matches the historical timing Mercer noted for innovations in black hairstyles (figure 1).

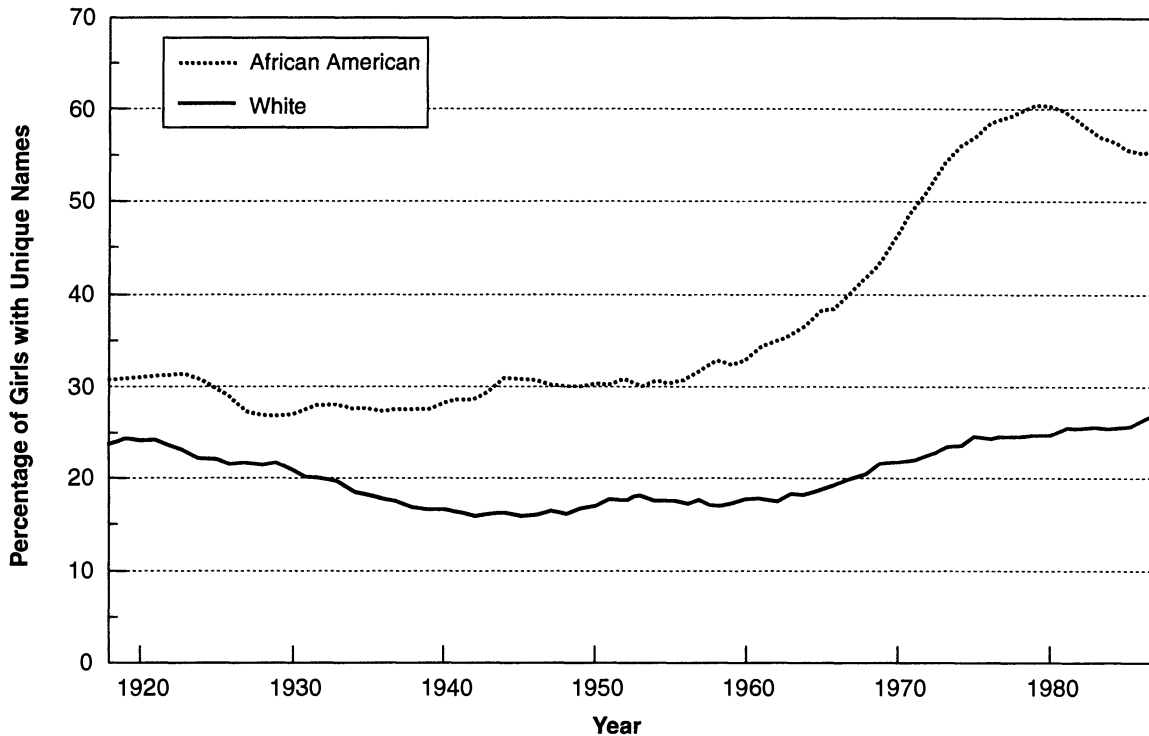


Figure 1. Standardized Percentages of Unique Names for Girls Born in Illinois, 1916–1989

Lieberson and Mikelson used a questionnaire completed by 224 subjects (convenience sample) to investigate the linguistic character of some unique African American names—Maleka, Shameki, Shatrye, etc. They found that white and black respondents had equal success in guessing the gender of names (about 70 percent), and that specific linguistic conventions for indicating gender (such as the “a” ending for girls) better matched American English conventions than African naming conventions (eg in New York 51% of African American girl’s names ended in “a”; as did 38% of white girl’s names). Thus while much of the inspiration for these inventions was clearly from other sources, including Arabic and African, they did include some synthesis with dominant cultural linguistics. What was particularly striking for us, however, was their documentation of the “Frenchification” of the names (such as the “elle” ending). Was this the influence of France’s welcoming gestures towards African American expatriates like Josephine Baker, James Baldwin, Sally Hemings, and Richard Wright? Or was it the associations of France with the aesthetics of the upper class? Like the red color of the conk, there are hints here of an autochthonous self-fashioning, a declaration of independence from the restraints of dominant culture and heritage; yet articulating with each in strategic ways.

Self-fashioning and DNA analysis

This autochthonous self-fashioning does not end here; one could site numerous examples throughout African American culture in music, film, performance, dress, etc. The question is, what would it take for black communities to have command of technologies like DNA ancestry—to make them available for projects in technological, objective, or autochthonous self-fashioning—rather than simply capitulate to its authority? There are indications that such agency is already in the making. Social scientist Alondra Nelson reports:

I've spoken with African Americans who have tried four or five different genetic genealogy companies because they weren't satisfied with the results. They received different results each time and kept going until they got a result they were happy with. (quoted in Younge 2006).

While the different results support the skepticism against DNA testing (cf. Palmié 2007), and its ad hoc character violates Popperian norms for scientific discovery, we believe its greater importance lies in the possibilities for an active self-fashioning of diasporic identity. If such uptake is nothing more than selective wish-fulfillment—if Oprah Winfrey were to continue to take ancestry testing until she found a result she was happy with—it would be failure; but so would mere capitulation to what is currently a business-driven version of “science” that also does little to honor Mertonian and Popperian scientific norms (Bolnick et al 2007). It is only when black communities can take the same agency in their command of DNA that they have had in hairstyle, music, and linguistics—an agency that emerges from the interaction between the physical laws of nature and the infinite creativity of the human spirit—that DNA will take its proper place in the African diaspora.

We now shift gears and examine another controversy, illuminating another example of self-fashioning.

Oprah, 419 and a crisis of identity

A “performance” may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.” – Goffman (1959)

On April 13th 2007, the Oprah Winfrey Show presented the episode, “What the New Scam Artists Don’t Want You to Know”. The episode featured Oprah Winfrey and Brian Ross of ABC News discussing “Nigerian Scams”. The presentation very effectively positioned American citizens as “victims” being scammed and the Nigerians involved as “crooks” doing the scamming. Working off Brian Ross’ prior 20/20 investigation of 419 scams, the episode presents as a visually engaging exposition of “Nigerian Scams” with the stated intent of educating viewers and empowering them to resist these particular scams.

The reaction to this show amongst what we will tentatively label the “Nigerian Diaspora”^{vi} was overwhelmingly negative and the subject of a great many blog posts and articles. The controversial episode was debated, discussed, dissected and opined upon in effusive and at times combative conversations across a number of websites frequented by communities from/in Nigeria. Indeed it appears that a number of the participants interpreted the episode personally as a form of criticism, though Oprah took the time out to state that the show was not aimed at the “entire country and everybody in the country” but only at the subset of scammers under discussion. Instead of placating non-scamming Nigerians, Oprah’s statement seemed to incite even more ire and contempt, particular among the 2,490 member strong Facebook group with the inelegant name of “oprah is an idiot for dissin NIGERIA”.^{vii}

There are diverse ways in which we could to approach the study of the controversy that the episode described above engendered. In this paper however, we will as Latour (1987) advocated in *Science in Action*, utilize the controversy to examine “identity in the making” by following the discursive trail of the

Oprah Show and the response to the show. We shall posit the episode and the succeeding reactions on the web as opposing knowledge generating sites engaged in the process of constructing the identity of ethnicity. The subsequent analysis relies heavily on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework to situate actions undertaken by the various actors.^{viii}

Scene One, Act One

(The set is prepared, the audience prepped, cameras are rolling, the performance begins... Oprah and Brian Ross introduce the topic for the day.)

Oprah: A Florida lawyer, a California heart surgeon, a New Hampshire accountant, and even a former congressman. What do they have in common? All of them were caught up in a scam so powerful, so seductive and addictive that many of its victim[sic] end up losing their life savings, go into prison, or in some cases ending their life. ABC's chief investigative correspondent Brian Ross knows exactly why this con has caused victims around the world more than \$3 billion a year. And we wanted to do this show because you could be the next target. What you're about to see is what scam artists do not want you to know.

(On cue, Brian Ross expands upon Oprah's introduction and explains that the perpetrators are Nigerians.)

Brian: ... The Nigerian scams are coming through a never-ending onslaught of e-mails and through the U.S. mails. These are all checks. U.S. Postal inspectors have intercepted at least six million scam letters and counterfeit checks sent to the United States from Nigeria, all individually made out. Postal inspector Steve Korinko says the scammers use U.S. phonebooks and special computer programs that pull out e-mail addresses to find their victim.

(The postal inspector testifies to the truth claim that Brian just made and the discussion quickly moves to establish the bona fides of the "victims" as they are enlisted in the performance as victims/non-fools. Brian Ross poses a rhetorical question that he will answer shortly.)

Brian: What kind of a fool would fall for this?

(Postal inspector Steve Korinko plays the role of honest witness vouching for the victims, establishing their victimhood.)

Steve: When you interview people who have been victims, they're the first thing from a fool.

(Oprah highlights this all important point – the American "victims" are NOT fools.)

Oprah: Yes, surprisingly, the furthest thing from a fool.

(Finally, Brian drives the point home.)

Brian: Absolutely, very intelligent people, smart people you'd think wouldn't fall for this. This is not senior citizens or people that have some sort of impairment. These are smart people. Sometimes it's greed. Other times it appeals to the ability to sympathize, to help somebody out. A lot of their victims have been Christian ministers that are told there's \$30 million here we wanna give to help small churches across the country, just give us some money to get it out of Nigeria.

[At this point in the episode Oprah and Brian spend some time exploring the modus operandi of the scammers and then begin exploring Nigeria in more detail. We will not bore our readers (audience?) with all the messy details, and admit that we are selectively arranging the narrative.]

Oprah: *Okay. So the Nigerian scam, why Nigeria? Why, why are [sic] those been so successful?*

Brian: *Well, this is a desperately poor country with wonderful people who are very intelligent and good school system and no jobs. And many of the young men we found there, go to school and learn the scams in the school, as well, it's a corrupt country where the leaders have been corrupt for years.*

Oprah: *Yeah. Yeah, yeah.*

Brian: *They've doomed their people to a life of poverty.*

[Mr. Ross goes on to explain how in Nigeria, no one gets arrested for crimes until very recently and goes on to detail the specifics of the "419" section of the Nigerian code that makes it illegal to obtain money under false pretences. A section of his 20/20 report is shown to the audience presenting his trip to Nigeria, including footage of a dramatic apprehension of some suspected scammers.]

Oprah: *Okay, so, are they cracking down because, as you said, I mean, there's a lot of corruption going on there, and are they cracking down because it's Americans who've been scammed and the pressure from Americans?*

Brian: *There's pressure from America and from Great Britain where the scam is. But Americans are the primary targets and they feel the Americans are what they call, the mugus, the big fools.*

Oprah: *Hmmm.*

Brian: *The big gullible fools.*

[Oprah and Brian present a number of sympathetic victims of 419 scams. As the episode comes to a close, Oprah introduces Sid Kirchheimer the author of "Scam Proof Your Life", they have a conversation about Nigeria and Mugus. As we shall see, this part of the performance by "Team Oprah" seems to especially agitate "Team Nigeria".]^x

Oprah: *Mugus. And we've talked about Nigeria a lot. So I know we're gonna get letter from somebody saying that Nigeria has a lot of wonderful people. You don't have to send the letter, we already know that. We're just talking about this particular scam that's going on. So we're not talking about the entire country and everybody in the country. Save your letters.*

Sid Kirchheimer: *And it's not just Nigeria.*

Oprah: *Yeah.*

Sid: *A lot of scams originate in Nigeria and, you know, are done by Nigerians. But, you know, eastern block countries are big source of scams, the Far East, you know, here in the United States, other countries. It's not exclusively in Nigeria.*

Oprah: Yeah. We were just talking about the Nigerian scams and them thinking we're mugus. We'll be right back.

[The episode ends with a few well placed words of advice]

We now switch stages and examine the reaction that occurred in “Team Nigeria”. We have chosen to narrow our discussion to three websites; a more comprehensive survey would be beyond the scope of this paper. Furthermore, these particular websites - “communities of discourse” diverge in ways that are productive to the ongoing analysis. The three websites are

<http://www.nigeriaworld.com>

<http://www.nairaland.com>

<http://www.Facebook.com>

Scene Two, Act One

Nigeriaworld.com

Nigeriaworld.com is a news aggregation site. It collates and parses news from a number of Nigerian dailies. In addition, the site possesses a “featured article” section that comprises of Op-Ed like pieces written by a number of frequent contributors.

A look at some site statistics gives us an idea of the audience and reach of Nigeriaworld.com.

Alexa.com Traffic Details for Nigeriaworld.com^x	
United States	35.8%
United Kingdom	23.0%
Dominican Republic	5.0%
Canada	4.6%
Nigeria	3.7%
Others (countries with traffic levels below 3.7%)	27.9%

Alexa.com ranks Nigeriaworld.com as the 221st most popular destination for traffic from Nigeria. As the table above indicates, close to 60% of the traffic on the site comes from the United States and the United Kingdom combined. Only a paltry 3.7% of the site traffic is from Nigeria. We can effectively conclude that the audience of Nigeriaworld.com is located outside of Nigeria, primarily in the United States and the United Kingdom. This is important because identifying the prospective audience enables us to contextualize the content of the discourse.

While Nigeriaworld.com has an interactive forum, much of the content relevant to the controversy under examination is in the Op-Ed articles. A few weeks after “What the New Scam Artists Don’t Want You to Know” episode aired, Jude Mbionwu an author from Atlanta GA, wrote the article titled “**Oprah, 419 and Nigeria’s Image**”.^{xi}

In the author’s own words,

“I listened with despair as my sister narrated how Oprah ended her show about Nigerian fraudsters by telling everyone to hold on to their letters. She did not want to hear the Nigerians’ sides of the story she

just told America. A story that further casts Nigeria in much poorer light in the already biased minds of the world and especially the American public: a story about 419 fraudsters.”

“...I will write to the millions she just cast in a negative light in front of millions of her fellow Americans.”

“...I am, by no means, supporting 419 fraudsters. But just like typical American way of seeing things, she did not want to hear the stories of the people who believe that with \$5000.00 paid to a total stranger from the poorest continent in the world, they will be able to receive some deceased person's \$1 Million. Oprah should realize that it takes two to tango. Her show should have been about those errant fools who search for the quick millions from Africa. Oh my, what fools. And, oh my, what unrepentant 419 imbeciles for giving Oprah do a show that gives the reason to make people look at me twice with suspicion every time I say I am a Nigerian. It should have been a balanced show, Oprah. For the disrespectful way she presented the show, Nigerians will forever remember her; all the way to ignominy. Unless she uses the same platform to address the true facts. I am not saying that Oprah should not do a show about 419 fraudsters. She should remember to balance your[sic] stories.”

The central argument is that the episode did not present a balanced point of view. The author calls into question the casting of those being scammed as “victims”. It is noteworthy that the author reverses roles from in the episode and casts the scammed as “fools”. The article is an impassioned affair and the author appears to have interpreted the episode as relating to all Nigerians, not merely the fraudsters. This same sentiment is echoed in another piece on the site titled **“Crime and Punishment: Time for a Real Soul Searching for a Nation”**.^{xii}

The author of this article, the Christopher Odetunde from Houston TX, frames the controversy as an opportunity for “national soul searching”.

“As Nigeria battles to shed a reputation for corruption, the recent statement, "All Nigerians are Corrupt Regardless of Level" mischievously attributed to Ms. Oprah Winfrey^{xiii}, though sad, is a case in point for soul searching in Nigeria.”

“...The accusation by Ms. Winfrey, if false, is a slap in the face for all honest and law abiding Nigerians at home and in Diaspora but, if true, is an opportunity for Nigeria as a viable, law abiding nation to be contrite and embark on real soul searching...”

“...In America, for example, an average Nigerian is seen as a thief and Nigeria as being populated by thieves. Some news channels even stated that every Nigerian institution has a department that teaches corruption.”

“...The issue is not that Ms. Winfrey made the statement but why on earth will she make a disparagingly blanket statement Nigeria and indirectly black people? There are over 140 million Nigerians, how many of these citizens duped Ms. Winfrey to justify her statement?”

A similar position is argued in Okoh Emeka’s Sept. 10 article **“Why ‘Victims’ of 419 Should Not be Pitied”**.^{xiv} Okoh, writing from Moscow, reiterates the reversing of roles of victims and scammed, even going so far as to call for a directed media assault at the “victims” of scams.

“... the so called Nigerian Scam has also become an issue in the most revered shows in the world run by Oprah Wilfrey[sic], these and many others undoubtedly fall into the grand image tarnishing campaign

that most of these media stations who claim independent, free and impartial have carefully orchestrated and they seem ready to carry it out with a force comparable to that of tsunami.”

“...There is no denying the fact that 419 scam is a thorn in the flesh of Nigeria as a nation, and the struggle to exterminate it should be an all encompassing fight that not just the anti crime bodies should champion but me and you as individual citizens. The west cannot waste any opportunity to tell the world that Nigeria is the most corrupt, most dangerous, most everything bad, they have virtually succeeded in instigating hate against Nigerians even in our own back yards, pathetically, our citizens and even government have practically fallen prey of this new form of colonization, colonization aimed at dehumanizing us, aimed at reducing us to mere criminals, the type whose focal point is coding the mind set of the world to view every Nigerian in bad sight.”

“... In matters of world politics and international affairs he who has the power often has the right, and he who is weak can only with difficulty keep from being wrong in the opinion of majority of the world. And who forms the opinion of majority of the world? The media. That is why we need to change strategy, that is why our diplomatic onslaught should be fierce; we need to be hostile in our counter attack. **Nigeria should use any visible opportunity to tell the west that their citizens are greedy stricken, make it loud and clear at any given chance that only scammers and fraud minded and extremely greedy people fall for 419, our new foreign minister should let them know that falling for 419 is ridiculous and idiotic ...** The president should proclaim this even in the UN, yes, it will be a bit scandalous but that is exactly what we need to bring back the issue and allow people ponder it while we quietly work hard to solve the problem at home, even if it means creating a special agency that will handle it...” (emphasis added)

The author here proposes a radical inversion of the rhetorical strategy employed in the Oprah show, calling for a concerted media effort to label “citizens in the west who fall for the fraud” as “scammers and fraud minded and extremely greedy people”. By design, these web articles are not open to comment from readers and we can only speculate as to the effects on the intended audience.

While these articles are diverse in tone and scope there are a few things they share in common;

- A. Each article interprets Oprah’s episode as an attack on all Nigerians – not just the scammers.
- B. The authors seem to be simultaneously engaging in two audiences, one of which we can categorize as an *insider* community, hence most of the articles are written in an inclusive manner – examples of this include the use of the pronoun “we”. In Mbionwu’s article his final sentence reads “They are doing a lot more damage to Nigeria than **we** realize.” In Okoh’s article above, “That is why **we** need to change our strategy.”
- C. This insider community seems to comprise of individuals both within and without Nigeria i.e. the larger group of Nigerians with whom there is a sense of solidarity, in Goffman’s nomenclature, a team.

Scene Two, Act Two

Nairaland.com

Nairaland.com is a forum driven site. More discussion group than website, Nairaland.com hosts about 164,400 members engaged in roughly 89,000 conversations (Topics).^{xv} The site design is minimalist, with the central attraction being the conversations going on in the forum. Members create discussion topics

that are of interest to them, and open to floor to others to contribute. Unlike Nigeriaworld.com majority of the members utilize aliases (usernames) to post. Topically, the discussions cover the entire gamut, from lovemaking to the American presidential election. A large number of the conversations are framed as questions, and can be as personal, for instance asking how to improve one’s spoken English, or playful, for example asking what others are wearing at Christmas. The tagline of the site is “Home of Nigerians And Friends of Nigeria”. Established in 2005, it is run by a self proclaimed capitalist from Ogun State in Nigeria, who appears from his self image to be in his twenties.

Alexa.com statistics give us some insight into the composition of the Nairaland.com community.

Alexa.com Traffic Details for Nairaland.com ^{xvi}	
United States	19.2%
Nigeria	16.8%
United Kingdom	14.2%
Philippines	4.1%
India	2.8%
Others (countries with traffic levels below 2.8%)	42.9%

Nairaland.com is ranked 18th in Nigerian traffic, indicating that it is highly popular amongst Internet users there. Interestingly, almost 20% of its traffic is generated from the United States. However, unlike Nigeriaworld.com, Nairaland.com has a substantial portion of contributors/audience from Nigeria.

The controversy we are exploring is represented in a number of conversations. The largest of which is **Nigeria’s Image Was Badly Damaged on Oprah Today!**.^{xvii} This conversation is one of the largest on the site, comprising a total of 26 pages. While it started out as a discussion about the episode described above, it morphed into an argument about Nigerian identity politics. The first few posts set the tone for the rest of the 26 pages;

Sweet_T (male in Los Angeles, CA, USA): *Did anybody see Oprah Winfrey's show today? Nigerians and Lagos was paint [sic] in dark today. They showed how Nigerian boys are doing all kinds of dating and online scams at the cyber cafes all over Nigeria! And most of these fraudsters are Ibo names. CNN also ran the same kind of program in recent months. Why are Nigerians so damn greedy, especially the Ibo boys!!! They make me sick with all these negative attention to Nigeria. An Ibo boy in Houston, TX was arrested in his house with \$500,000 cold cash in his house. Money he got from doing credit card fraud and internet fraud. Can you imagine??? This is one of the reasons i hate some Nigerians in the western world. They go back to Nigeria and pretend as if they work at the World Bank. Ill-gotten wealth!!!*

debosky (male in Onitsha, Anambra, Nigeria): *another Igbo basher, una no dey tire(slang for “don’t you get tired”)??*

Sweet-T: *@dobsky I'm not an Ibo bashers, if you have access to internet, go to ABC news, CNN, and other websites and see for yourself !! They even showed Fred Ajudua's house. Most of the names shown are Ibo boys. The fact is that Ibo boys are too dang greedy and they put Nigeria's image in a terrible shape. I don't care if you are Ibo or not but the fact is that if you know any Nigerian doing illegal and shady business, your duty is to report him to the authorities and let's take our country back NOW !!!!*

cheexy (female, Nigeria): *It makes me sick too but i kind of frown at the emphasis on Ibo boys. For the fact that few Ibo boys were caught doesn't mean that the Ibos are the only tribe that engage in "yahoo-yahoo". The trend has eaten deep into every tribe and we should all work hand in hand as a nation to restore moral values that have been eaten up by the craze for material wealth. Let us educate the younger generation about the importance of a good name and this country would change for the better.*

4Play (male, London, UK): *I agree! These Igbo people are shaming Nigeria with their criminal dealings. Their greed is unparalleled and has led them to become Nigeria's top purveyors of criminality*

Very quickly, the conversation is hijacked and becomes an argument about ethnic identity, with the content of the episode subjected to scrutiny in an attempt to categorize various ethnic groups as more or less corrupt than others. In this thread it appears that Team Nigeria is dissolving and new coalitions form around other identities – Ibo, Yoruba.

debosky: *Rubbish, 'ibo boys like money too much, ibo boys are too greedy' those are tribal stereotypes, and are very wrong. But that is what laces each and every one of your posts. stop maligning the tribe due to a few foolish ones. When they bring out videos of yoruba dudes doing the same like on ABC what did you say then? the issue is that Nigerians are involved, don't make it into an Igbo thing. PS I am not Igbo. @ 4play am I hearing you right?*

maxell (female, Nigeria): *People lets leave the tribes out of this. The Nigerians on the oprah show could have been from anywhere, this is just side tracking the issue at hand. When are our young men going to stop spoiling our precious Nigerian name? Is it a must that we succumb to anything just to be a millionaire at 22/23 years old? Please lets focus on the main issue here abeg.*

4Play: *The truth needs to be told sometimes. It is true that Nigeria as a whole has a high rate of delinquency but there is no point pretending its frequency does not vary across the different ethnicities. It is well known that the Igbos are a greedy and money obsessed tribe. This character drives them to commit crime way beyond that of others.*

Thus the conversation continues and soon the original focus is lost in the debate over Nigerian identity politics.

Another thread/conversation that attempts to address the controversy is entitled **'All Nigerians Are Corrupt', Says Oprah Winfrey.**^{xviii} This conversation is twenty-one pages long, and there is a poll at the start of the thread asking for readers to cast votes. The poll states, *"This is a serious matter. Whose side are you on?"* Out of 247 votes cast, 85.8% were on the side of "Nigeria" and 14.2% of respondents where on the side of "Oprah Winfrey".

Of particular interest is the manner in which the poll is framed – "Whose side are you on? Nigeria's side or Oprah Winfrey?" as an oppositional binary. One cannot be for both. The poll is prominently displayed at the beginning of the conversation, like a call to arms – pick your side. Once again, we see a delineating of groups. "Nigerians" at one end, "Non-Nigerians" at the other. Team Nigeria is being constructed and performed through oppositional conflict and controversy.

The thread begins with an announcement, and immediately, there are calls for proof of authenticity;

Fodiyo (male, Kaduna, Nigeria): *What do you make of the recent campaign of calumny that Oprah Winfrey was said to have sponsored on the CNN against Nigeria? According to a report i read on the Punch newspaper this morning, she was said to have advised the US govt to sever relationship with Nigeria on ground of corruption. "all Nigerians- regardless of their level of education- are corrupt" she was quoted. The report said her conclusion was because of a Nigerian of Igbo extraction who was said to have stolen 500,000 USD from a gullible foreigner through 'Internet fraud'.*

angel101(female, London UK): *Do u have a link to the story?*

MILITIA (female, USA): *Don't forget that Judge Judy said the same thing on one of her shows last week!!!! Please give us link so we can see for ourselves and have a good debate on this one!!!!*

The conversation proceeds with a number of passionate denunciations of Ms. Winfrey, drawing more forum members into the debate. The content of the conversation centers on what was or was not said on the Oprah show, and what would constitute a valid response to the episode. Some forum members discussed the issue as a problem with Nigeria, while others argued that other ethnic groups were involved in the scamming. Some forum member playfully baited others while watching out for the administrator, taking delight in skirting the edge of propriety and forum custom. Twenty one pages later, and closure over the authenticity of the statement attributed to Ms. Winfrey is still unachieved.

Scene Two, Act Three

Facebook.com

Unlike the other two websites discussed thus far, Facebook.com does not cater to any particular nationalistic community but rather is utilized by a much wider world-wide audience. Alexa.com reports that it has a worldwide traffic rating of 7 - making it the world's 7th most popular site according to Alexa.com's rankings of global internet traffic. As one of the most popular social networking websites, Facebook has a large and diverse community with different and varied interests. We will not delve into a specific description of the Facebook community as we have done elsewhere. Our interest here lies in a particular group with the inelegant name of **oprah is an idiot for dissin NIGERIA** [OIAIFDN]. However, before we discuss the details of the group, it is necessary to examine the "Group" application on Facebook in order to adequately contextualize the staging of this particular group.

'Group' is a software application that runs on Facebook which allows anyone to stake out a portion of virtual Facebook-space and invite others to join in identifying with the aims and/or direction of the group. Groups not only enable user identification and solidarity, but also create a shared space where members of the group can exchange ideas, start discussion forums, share pictures and video, and interact in all the ways that Facebook enables. Reflecting a deliberate design choice, on the part of the creators of the site, groups can be formed with three different levels of access – Open, Closed or Secret. Open groups are open for anyone to join. All information about the group is visible to the entire Facebook community. Closed groups are more restrictive, new members require administrative approval, and only members can view the groups interactions, though the group is listed in the group directory. Secret groups are the most restrictive. They are not listed, membership is by invitation only, and there is no way to tell who the members are or what they discuss.

OIAIFDN is an open group, as such anyone can join, all communication is accessible, and the group is clearly listed in the Facebook group search directory. The group's description page is a study in bellicose, belligerent, difficult to understand speech.

“oprah winfrey, in her hur long sponsored prgrame on CNN against NIGERIA, just FUCKED with the most populous black nation in the world, you cant spit in the faces of almost 150million people and expect a happy ending,.....the moment she opened her mouth to attack the character of all Nigerians,she declared war on each and every one of us,all over the world, and must be made be made to regret this beyond comprehension,for the rest of her life....If u dont understan the gravity of what she just did, let me put it to you this way, CNN IS WATCHED IN OVER 150COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD, OPRAH IS THE MOST POWERFUL TV PERSONALITY IN THE WORLD, SO WHEN OVER 1 BILLION PEOPLE 'and counting' HEAR YOU ARE A NIGERIAN, YOU'VE LOST THAT BIZNESS DEAL, SHE HAS MADE IT MORE DIFFICULT TO GET INTO SKOOLS ABROAD, SHE HAS MADE IT MORE DIFFICULT TO GET A JOB ABROAD, OUR PEOPLE ABROAD WOULD HAVE TO HIDE THEIR NATIONALITY TO SURVIVE, BECAUSE HAS JUST MADE US THE WORLD ENEMY NO.1, This are the very few of the numerous effects of her action.

NAIJA PEEPS! this woman must pay, and paYback shuld be with everything you've got 'i.e the internet' post on YOU TUBE, on YAHOO, on MSN, MYSPACE,FACEBOOK, on even the HER SITE, ..What i'm trying to say is hit her hard, shes just one person...cuz she just thru a big wrench in the engine of your future.”^{xxix}

The description can be read as a call to arms, asking for members of the group to respond to the perceived slight. Once again, the episode on the Oprah show is interpreted to be an attack on the entirety of “Team Nigeria”. For our purposes, an analysis of the content generated by the group is not necessary. Content wise, the group differs little from the Nairaland.com conversations, except that it is perhaps a little more vitriolic. It's membership reflect that of the Nigerian-denominated members of Facebook, many of whom are located in different areas of the world. While it is difficult to tell what percentages are within and percentages are without Nigeria, we do not imagine that the distribution will differ much from that of Nairaland.com. Of more interest is the situated nature of the group within the Facebook community.

The administrator of OIAIFDN selected the title of the group, a deliberately provocative name, and left the group as an open group. Currently the group has approximately 2,500 members, who are all individual recognizable and chose to openly associate and identify with this group. As the general custom on Facebook, unlike Nairaland.com is to use actual names, the implication of the staging of this group is that members are personally identifiable. Thus taking up membership of the group is discursively identical to announcing to whomever within the facebook community bothers investigate, that one is diametrically opposed to Ms. Winfrey's perceived attack on Nigeria, and that one is sufficiently motivated to do so publicly.

Scene Three, Final Act

An empty theater; empty seats stretch out as far as the eye can see in all directions. Lights come on, focused on a stage to the right of the center. The seats are suddenly filled with a diverse global audience. The Oprah show episode described above is meticulously performed. Lights fade. After a short period, light come up on another stage closer to the left. There are three actors on stage from Nigeriaworld.com. They make their impassioned arguments which starkly contrasts the previous performance, to the audience which now comprises, Nigerians in Diaspora, listening in from multiple continents and nations except that now the stage extends all the way around the theatre encompassing them all. Everyone appears upset and angry as they listen to the rhetoric of The Three. The lights dim.

People are moving around, milling about the place. Some members of the audience move backstage and are joined by others, all looking young. They enter a side-room with the label Nairaland.com and begin discussing the performance on the first stage. They are well known to each other and the discussions take on a tone of familiarity. Multiple non-synchronous conversations are being carried out simultaneously. Some of them reach consensus, albeit digitally, other conversations seemingly go nowhere, all however appear cathartic. One person leaves the room and returns to the global audience. She marks out a space and raises a bold flag mocking and challenging the first performance, calling out for others to join. One by one, they come from all over the world, to show their identification and solidarity to the flag.

While the above description is completely contrived it serves to amplify the interpretive frame we seek to bring to bear. In Goffman's terms, we can posit that the episode on the Oprah show—at least from the POV of the diaspora Nigerians—calls into question the performance that Nigerians in Diaspora commonly present, i.e. that of ethical, honest productive members of their respective communities. Team Nigeria is therefore a “performance team”. Once a member of the team (any individual scammer) is cast as breaking role and acting in a contrary manner, the credibility of the entire team is put in question. The reaction from teammates is swift.

The articles we analyze from Nigeriaworld.com present an interesting case of the blurring between front and backstage, as they simultaneously seek to reassure other team members that the performance has not been discredited, while attempting to reposition the guilty members of the team as belonging to another team of “fools” and thus not adequately representative of the team. This team of “fools” they content is one that the scammed and the scammers both belong to. Team Nigeria is shown to be a complex team. Perhaps a more adequate description would be that Team Nigeria is a meta-team (i.e. comprised of several different teams). Yet that partitioning is precisely the rhetorical effect that those who label Oprah supporters as fools are trying to achieve; the dissenters themselves would likely prefer to see this as one team with diverse opinions.

The conversations on Nairaland.com present as classic backstage discourse. Team Nigeria struggles to come to grips with the disruption in the performance. Some name calling takes place, and the meta-nature of the team quickly becomes apparent with sub-teams forming and arguing that the other was responsible for the disruption to the performance. Rhetorically, this is not as strong a move as claiming that the guilty parties should really be seen as a separate team, but perhaps what is lost in rhetorical strength is gained in sustaining open discussion.

From the preceding analysis, the performance in the description of the facebook group takes place securely in the front-stage. By creating an open group that is glaringly negative of Oprah, the facebook team performs and stages a unified oppositional identity.

From Oprah and DNA to Autochthonous Self-Fashioning in-the-making

In this paper, we have attempted to follow the trace of two controversies orbiting around Oprah, DNA and 419. Though at first glance they may appear disparate, both operate in a similar fashion in our stories, unearthing controversy and initiating crises of identity. DNA and 419 cause the actors to reconsider the age old question of “who am I?” enabling us to examine the processes of what we describe as autochthonous identity-in-the-making: a self-fashioning that appropriates the tools available in a deliberate forging of the self.

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ⁱ Despite the enormous attention to the results in the popular press, very little attention went to the test itself. Mitochondrial DNA testing examines only the matrilineal heritage, so if Oprah had Zulu ancestry in her patrilineal heritage it would not have been detected. There are numerous other reasons to be skeptical of the accuracy of this testing; see Bolnick et al (2007) for an overview.

ⁱⁱ See critiques in Oritz de Montellano 1993, Martel 1994, and Lefkowitz 1996. In contrast to both Asante and his critics, Drake (1984) provides a more balanced portrait, noting that the influence of sub-Saharan Africa on pre-pharonic Egypt has solid archeological grounding, and that it is only the claims for Black presence during the later pharonic periods that is controversial.

ⁱⁱⁱ One should give credit to Rowling's conscious opposition to genetic determinism in her fantasy—the characterization of "mudblood" is consistently critiqued as an elitist myth—but it is worth noting that magical ability in the Potter world is primarily inherited, and that term mudblood is critiqued for its disparaging implication and not because the rarity of a magical individual born to a non-magic family is statistically incorrect.

^{iv} But see Palmié 2007 for a critique of the genealogical testing.

^v I used “fooled” here for short-hand, but Foucault’s position is that our very conception of “self-governance” is itself a product of this domination.

^{vi} The use of the term “diaspora” is in keeping with Edwards(2001) discussion of the term, retaining the sense that “diaspora” articulates difference.

^{vii} The group size is dynamic. During the 6 days that we monitored the group, new members joined at an average of 8 per day.

^{viii} See Goffman (1959)

^{ix} In our analysis, we are casting “Team Oprah” as the entirety of the various actors in the episode described above. The episode is the performance, the studio set, guests, cameras and videos are all part of the setting and function as props, enabling the credible performance. “Team Nigeria” will be expanded upon elsewhere in this paper.

^x http://alexa.com/data/details/traffic_details/nigeriaworld.com (accessed Jan 10, 2008)

^{xi} <http://nigeriaworld.com/articles/2007/may/033.html> (accessed Jan 10, 2008)

^{xii} <http://nigeriaworld.com/feature/publication/odetunde/072707.html> (accessed Jan 10, 2008)

^{xiii} We have been unable to corroborate this statement. It does not appear that Ms. Winfrey ever made such a statement.

^{xiv} <http://nigeriaworld.com/articles/2007/sep/101.html> (accessed Jan 10, 2008)

^{xv} When we visited the site, there were 164,473 members in 88,806 topics - <http://www.nairaland.com> (accessed Jan 10, 2008)

^{xvi} http://www.alexa.com/data/details/traffic_details/nairaland.com (accessed Jan 10, 2008)

^{xvii} <http://www.nairaland.com/nigeria/topic-48907.0.html> (accessed Jan 10, 2008)

^{xviii} <http://www.nairaland.com/nigeria/topic-68514.0.html> (accessed Jan 10,2008)

^{xix} This description is available on the group’s website within Facebook and is publicly available.