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Mobilizing Distance in Times of Crisis: The Aesthetics of Diasporic Witnessing as Nigerian Activist Sensibility

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Mobilizing Distance in Times of Crisis:
The Aesthetics of Diasporic Witnessing as Nigerian Activist Sensibility

This paper tracks diasporic engagement with crises in Nigeria. While scholars have shown how, as participants and direct witnesses to crises, diasporic communities have been integral to political dissidence and radical change in home countries (Koinova 2013; Orjuela 2021), the literature is yet to identify how the diaspora observes conflicts from afar. Homing in on the Nigerian diaspora, and engaging canonical scholarship on witnessing and spectatorship and media studies, I argue for a new taxonomy on diasporic witnessing, which posits that distance activates a distinct form of engagement with crisis in the postcolony, suggesting that this unique form of witnessing involves both viewing atrocity and responding through documentary creation. The diasporic witness is qualitatively unique for embodying the multiple subjectivities of witness, participant, and spectator, for leveraging distance in response to political violence and human rights violations in the home country, and for documenting atrocity, serving as the evidentiary cudgel against attempts to control or restrict the flow of information by the Nigerian government.

Foregrounding the Biafran famine during the Nigerian civil war, Nigeria's late 20th century military dictatorship, and present-day hactivism in response to politico-criminal syndicates, I illustrate how the diasporic community mobilizes distance, technology, and the arts in response to media representations of crises. Drawing upon photography, digital blogs, and theatre, I argue that the Nigerian diaspora views and acts upon political and humanitarian crises by memorializing suffering and evidencing human rights violations.