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Performing Nigerianness: Equivocal Identities and Digital Legibility of White Women Comedians

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Abstract

Sabina Yuhas (@Overszabi) and Juliana Belova (@juliewanderz or Oyibo Marlian) are Hungarian and Russian women, respectively, who are fascinated by Nigerian popular culture. Despite their successes in exploiting Black culture to attain wealth and fame in the Nigerian mediasphere, their works have hardly been studied. Close readings and nuanced analyses of their selected TikTok skits show a multiplicity of images that are neither fully European nor Nigerian—equivocal identities—mediating Otherness. However, the longstanding power asymmetries between Africa and Europe characterize their enactments as commodification of Blackness, accounting for why Nigerians who perform “Europeanness” do not attain corresponding success.

Résumé

Sabina Yuhas (@Overszabi) et Juliana Belova (@juliewanderz ou Oyibo Marlian) sont des femmes hongroises et russes, respectivement, fascinées par la culture populaire nigériane. Malgré leurs succès dans l'exploitation de la culture noire pour atteindre la richesse et la célébrité dans la médiasphère nigériane, leurs œuvres ont été peu étudiées. Des lectures approfondies et des analyses nuancées de leurs sketches TikTok sélectionnés montrent une multiplicité d'images qui ne sont ni pleinement européennes ni nigérianes – des identités équivoques – médiatrices de l'altérité. Cependant, les asymétries de pouvoir qui existent depuis longtemps entre l'Afrique et l'Europe caractérisent leur mise en œuvre comme une marchandisation de la négritude, ce qui explique pourquoi les Nigériens qui pratiquent l'« européanité » n'obtiennent pas le succès correspondant.

Resumo

Sabina Yuhas (@Overszabi) e Juliana Belova (@juliewanderz ou Oyibo Marlian) são duas mulheres, uma húngara e outra russa, respectivamente, fascinadas pela cultura popular nigeriana. Apesar dos sucessos que têm alcançado ao explorarem a cultura negra para obterem riqueza e fama nas redes sociais da Nigéria, os seus trabalhos têm sido pouco

estudados. Uma leitura atenta e uma análise das subtilezas das suas publicações no TikTok revelam uma multiplicidade de imagens que não são nem completamente europeias, nem completamente nigerianas – identidades equívocas –, através das quais mediam o Outro. Porém, as assimetrias de poder que há muito predominam entre a África e a Europa caracterizam as suas atuações como mercantilização da Negritude, explicando por que razão os nigerianos que desempenham o “europeísmo” não alcançam um sucesso equivalente.

Keywords: comedy; social media; skit; white; oyibo; Europe; Africa; Nigerianness; performance; women

Introduction

With the advent of digital technologies in Nigeria, the affordances of participatory exchange on social media for both African and European users have opened up possibilities for positive mediations and negotiations of cultural encounters. Social media’s capacity to mainstream the agencies of cultural producers in the country has energized emerging studies. Yeku (2022) emphasizes the potential of social media memes to launch a political crusade against frivolous leadership in Nigeria. In his editorial, Chukwumah (2021) explores COVID-19 humor conveyed through social media platforms as an embodiment of the postcolonial conditions or distinctive features of the typical Nigerian experience. Adenekan (2021), on his part, advocates the recognition and legitimation of literary outputs and performances, humorously framing the daily experiences of Nigerians. In addition to this growing body of works on popular culture and the use of new media in Africa, I examine the works of two female skit makers, Sabina Yuhas (@Overszabi) and Juliana Belova (@juliewanderz or Oyinbo Marlian or Fulltime Fool). The former is a Hungarian woman who adapts and re-creates comic acts produced by popular Nigerian comedians. Through lip-sync and recreations of Nigerian cultural expressions, she keys into performance trends in the country as well as remakes the skits of famous Nigerian comedians on social media, such as Emmanuel Osawaru (popularly known as Iye Osakpolor), whose cross-gender acts are based on a fictitious quarrelsome local female trader who argues with all her customers; Funke Akindele (popularly known as Jenifa) whose comic series dwell on an eponymous character, Jenifa who misuses the English Language; and John Okafor (Mr. Ibu), a popular comic actor in the Nigerian video film industry. Oyibo Marlian, on the other hand, is an ardent fan of a Nigerian musical artiste, Azeez Adeshina Sanyaolu (popularly known as Naira Marley) who leveraged social media platforms to relaunch into the music and dance industry a pattern of dancing known in the local parlance as “leg work.” Although the leg work dance was pioneered by Bright Chimezie who initiated the sub-genre of highlife music known as Ziggima in the 1980s, Naira Marley exploited social media to popularize it in the new millennium. Oyibo Marlian’s fascination and obsession with this artiste (Naira Marley) in particular, and the Nigerian popular culture in general, account for her adventurous relocation from Russia to Nigeria, and eventual participation in the production of Nigerian humor.

While Oyibo Marlian is a Russian, Overszabi is a United Kingdom-based Hungarian female comedian. Both performers also double as social media influencers whose popularity is specifically produced by digital media-enabled comedic productions. Despite the avalanche of cultural products on social media, these women attained the status of celebrities in Nigeria. They have become legible subjects in Nigeria's digital space, producing several contents concerning Nigerians. Their white skin "distinguishes" them in this space that is overwhelmingly populated by Black people. This form of cross-cultural performance has been described as "deliberate plays" that conflate "difference and sameness" because "their physical difference makes them stick out from the masses" and this can be exploited as "an advantage in a competitive environment" (Krings 2015, 231). It is this advantageous "difference" that Juliana Belova exploits in her choice of name, Oyibo Marlian—"Oyibo/oyinbo" is a Yoruba word for white people and fair-complexioned individuals. Like its Igbo version "Onye ọcha," "Oyibo" gestures towards observable differences such as skin color, hair type, accent, and so on in a person, informing a cultural attitude that screams otherness. Undoubtedly, the physical "difference" of these women, not necessarily the "double cultural contacts" (Adeoti and Salawu 2021, 2) in their acts, explains their popularity among the Nigerian audience.

Nigerians tend to prefer white skin in some contexts. However, they are unconscious of racial discrimination and the intersections of race and power. For instance, in Igoni Andrian Barrett's (2015) *Blackass*, Furo Wariboko, a 33-year-old lead character experiences a sudden transformation into Oyibo. The character offers a glimpse into whiteness in contemporary Nigeria: disoriented by his new identity, Furo gains attention from children desiring to touch his skin, secures an unmerited job, and becomes a gigolo for a woman who accommodates and shows him off. "A lone white face in a sea of black", Barrett (2015, 11) writes, Furo also learns "how it felt to be seen as a freak: exposed to wonder, invisible to comprehension." This racialized difference, Anwoju (2023, 97) contends, spurs an "in" group and an "out" group, demarcating outsiders based on their perceived un-Africanness. Differentiation being the catchword here, the othered identity is neither discriminated against nor loathed as in the twentieth-century interwar period in British West Africa (Ray 2009); it is rather seen as an oddity against which indigenous features are measured. Said's (1978) framework trumps claims to neutrality in the partitioning of humanity, ascribing cultural otherness and constructions of the us/them binary with inherent hostility and prejudice to smugness in ways that reify colonial logic. The Nigerian situation outstrips this assertion and opens nuanced vistas of realities. Social practices resulting from the recognized differences between Africans and non-Black foreigners are complicated. For instance, in some contexts, the locals consider non-Africans inferior, contrasting them with native values such as jovial, compassionate, communal, generous, and flexible. In other situations, Nigerians frame them as having superior ideals such as perceived incuriosity in others' privacies and restraint. Bashkow (2006, 13) notes that "[a]mbiguity characterizes not only the evaluation of whitemen as good or bad, attractive or repulsive, better or worse than Orokaiva themselves, but also the very otherness of whitemen, their difference and distance from Orokaiva." This applies in Nigeria.

Experiences of race-making in the country are ambivalent in different contexts. Regardless of the degree, however, fair complexion mainly serves as a basis of comparison, subverting the intersections of race and power ideology dominant in studies on white-dominated spaces considered to have a race problem.

Skin color is not seen as a fundamental determinant of the innate superiority of any group. Fair complexion is neither an absolute impediment nor a benefit in the country but can be exploited in a playful context—as a “technology of visibility” (Thomas 2020, 46)—to impress the people. Importantly also, Overszabi/Oyibo Marlian who perform Nigerian daily lives do not show contempt for the local culture; their fans would not hesitate to defame their acts once a derisive representation of the people is detected—the audience is hostile. These account for minimal offense and racial tension between the comedy routines of Overszabi/Oyibo Marlian and their followers. Instead, their enactments of the Nigerian cultural life “show how a legal sense of citizenship also needs to be complemented by a cultural logic that centers popular culture” (Yeku 2022, 130). Despite the growing number and popularity of white Nigerian creators of humorous content on social media, there exists no academic inquiry into the meaning and nature of their enactments. I address this gap by examining selected TikTok skits of Overszabi and Oyibo Marlian through close reading and nuanced analyses to argue that their punchlines, which mostly undercut Nigerians’ expectations of Europeans, result in equivocal identities—a third space that shrinks otherness and negotiates the comics’ identities and belongingness in the culture being fictionalized.

Intercultural Performances in Digital Spaces: Africa and Europe

Encounters between Europe and Africa have led to debates on how African cultural creations are imitated and borrowed. In music, art, sculpture, hairstyle, and fashion in general, Africa’s abundant cultural expressions have been adopted by non-Blacks. This practice has increased in recent times with the availability and spread of the Internet. As Adamu (2010, 41) puts it, the easy spread of local cultural products through “small media technologies has created pathways” for intensified adoption and appropriation. The point is that spectators do not merely consume social media content but also engage with them, own them, produce and re-produce fascinating popular expressions across cultures (Strong and Ossei-Owusu 2014; Ojomo and Sodeinde 2021). This is facilitated by multiple tools in the mediasphere that allow content creators to easily copy, “combine or manipulate [mediatized acts] to create new, derivative works” (Knobel and Lankshear 2008). When Europeans borrow and remake Africans’ digital cultural products, the imitative works often become problematic, given that they are produced in an environment where theatricality and performative behavior are financially beneficial (Ahn et al. 2013). More so, Europe’s coercion, exploitation, and theft of Africa’s cultural materials during (neo)colonialism underscores Arewa’s (2016) designation of borrowing as appropriation when it is “inappropriate, unauthorized and undesired.” A combined reading of the exploitations of African cultural expressions to attain fame and gain online, and the reality of

unequal “powers” between both continents (Inspiration 2021) connotes that profiteering from unauthorized copying of digital performances is suspect.

Discourses on cultural appropriation elicit important questions concerning social media practices. Sobande (2019) states that digital remixes and the mixture of language, folklore, fashion, humor, and other cultural components are common practices on Web 2.0 platforms. It is this digital culture that non-Blacks leverage to reproduce Nigerian-themed content on social media. Yeku (2021, 165) views social media as a site of “infrapolitics,” lacking strict censorship of new cultural producers. The context here is that content creators in the digital space are seen as marginal artistes whose works have become increasingly crucial in addressing institutional malfeasance in the country. Yeku’s (2021) framework is important in showing the insouciant profile of digital spaces in Nigeria, indifferent to Europeans infiltrating the country virtually and partaking in comedic representations of the local culture. However, this study pursues the goal of examining these non-Africans who perform Nigerianness as people caught between two cultures, resulting in what Bhabha describes as a “third space” (Bhabha 1994, 9). Venturing into a different culture places them in the Diaspora and subjects them to a form of hybridity that vitiates their own organic cultural identity. The consequence is that their fictional identities become “unhomed” or “homeless” (Bhabha 1994, 9). In this study, I call these “equivocal identities.” As seen in the literatures cited above, the comic routines of non-Africans who perform Nigerian culture on social media have hardly received academic inquiry. Hence, I examine selected TikTok routines of Overszabi and Oyibo Marlian as well as audience reactions to them to determine the nature and meanings of their works. This agrees with the position that meanings and implications of performances are unattainable “without actors who perform and spectators who receive, evaluate and react to these actions” (Rai and Reinelt 2015, 1). In the following, I review women’s participation in comedy and the social media space in Nigeria. Next are the analyses of selected skits of the two European women (Overszabi and Oyibo Marlian) and then audience receptions and reactions to the works.

Women’s Comedy and Social Media in Nigeria

Women’s visibility in the field of comedy coincided with the advent of stand-up and greatly increased in the era of social media. In the history of comedic enactments, Nigerian women have always taken a backseat. This is due to their age-long tussle to unshackle themselves from the culture of self-restraints imposed on them in childhood. A popular female stand-up, Anita Alaire Afoke Asuoha (known as Real Warri Pikin) rues that “women are relegated to getting married and having children” because the Nigerian society does not “support or encourage women” to pursue their dreams (Igeh 2021). The consequence of this societal structure is that girl children are raised to be afraid of stepping into public spaces and to be doubtful of their abilities. Recounting her initial challenges in doing comedy, Helen Paul (known as Tatafo) regrets that her “male colleagues were being excused for some things [they] said [but] the same grace

was not granted to females in the same profession” (Ojoye 2016). The point is that while men were granted considerable freedom to express themselves, female comedians whose jokes transgressed societal conventions on femininity were vilified. This has resulted in women’s underrepresentation in comedy, causing Chioma Omeurah (known as ChigurI), a popular female comedian to urge more women to participate in the field to close this gap (*1st News n.d.*). Despite these challenges, some women comics have recorded successes in stand-up comedy by working “twice as hard as ... male colleagues to get recognized in the industry” (Igeh 2021) and lately in social media comedy.

The emergence of digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram, and the growth in the number and diversity of audiences who enjoy comedy also encouraged more women to go into humor production. More so, as an antidote for the rising rate of unemployment in Nigeria, several women in the country embraced skit-making and incidentally attained wealth, fame, and celebrity status. A fast-rising female comedian, Gabriella Victory Omozele (popularly known as Mizgabby or Flora 222) stated in an interview that the huge monetary proceeds she received from comedic enactments on social media made her conclude that it was “the path for [her]” (Ynaija 2021). Indeed, fame and wealth attract more talents, including Nigerians in Diaspora as well as foreigners.

In addition to the increasing number of women who participate in humor practice, the twenty-first century witnesses a growing trend in which European women perform Nigerians’ lived experiences on social media, projecting intersectional meanings that expand their acts beyond amusements. These women also push beyond the boundaries of the social expectations of African women in terms of skin color, unsettling Black-dominated places simply by asserting themselves in digital spaces. Oyibo Marlian and Overszabi represent an increasing number of non-African women who produce content premised on the routine lives of Nigerians. While Oyibo Marlian moved to Nigeria, Overszabi operates remotely from the United Kingdom. These two European women leverage the borderless nature of social media platforms to partake in the production of Nigerian-themed skits. This study unpacks the performative mechanics that the two women engage to enact cultural difference and assert equivocal meanings by projecting themselves not as non-/Nigerian women but as “intersectional subjects” on social media (Blackburn 2018, 3).

Nigerianness and Equivocal Identities in the Acts of Overszabi and Oyibo Marlian

The major mark of Nigerianness in the skits of both Overszabi and Oyibo Marlian is their source—the Nigerian culture. Even though Overszabi, unlike Oyibo Marlian, deploys sets that are mostly reworkings of content created by famous Nigerian comedians, this study, in consonance with Hutcheon’s admonition, views them as creative works borne out of fascination for the Nigerian popular culture, not “parasites” feeding off the earlier versions (Hutcheon 2006, 6). Their acts do not deride the people as the black face masking tradition but instead

recreate and promote the African culture. Nevertheless, their creative re-production of Blackness in a location that compensates performative acts amounts to appropriation. Put differently, while their remaking of existing content—remixing is part of digital culture (Newell and Okome 2014)—is creative, the comic materials are exclusively sourced from Nigeria, a former British colony. This reality may not necessarily reify colonial oppression but, on a closer look, could evoke the legacy of cultural extraction, evidence of which abounds in several archives in Europe. The point here is that the routines of the non-Black women may not signal brazen dispossession but fit into Arewa's (2016) description of appropriation as profiteering from borrowed cultural forms that could reinforce “historically exploitative relationships.”

Overszabi deploys lip-sync, costumes, gestures, and facial expressions, to create acts that are laden with the Nigerian experience. Fusing the local Pidgin English in a masculine voice thick with the Nigerian accent and her appearance as a European woman, the character she enacts dazzles her audience with images that are neither fully European nor Nigerian. In one of her skits, she plays the role of a local interpreter for an anonymous priest. The clergy speaks English while she enacts a funny interpretation of the message in Pidgin English through lip-syncing:

Anonymous Priest: Go to Nineveh and preach my word.

Local Interpreter: Enter Nineveh go tell the people for there say see the way my matter take dey.

Anonymous Priest: For the people there have sinned against me.

Local Interpreter: The people there don too fall my hand, dey wan even dey draw my leg dey follow ground.

Anonymous Priest: And Jonah refused and enter [*sic*] a ship going to the wrong direction.

Local Interpreter: Jonah come say lai lai, im come sneak enter canoe wey dey go Okumagba.

Anonymous Priest: The ship experienced a great storm.

Local Interpreter: Na so the canoe come drink better water.

Anonymous Priest: Jonah was thrown into the river and he was swallowed by a big fish.

Local Interpreter: Na so Jonah come dance Shaku-shaku (dances) enter river, Urhobo fish come swallow am.

Anonymous Priest: He saw himself where God sent him after three days, started preaching the word.

Local Interpreter: After three days na im the fish come go vomit am for Ekpa.

Anonymous Priest: And he started preaching the word

Local Interpreter: Na im e come ball enter street for Ekpa come say [this one] too rugged, e dey use jazz. (Overszabi 2021a).

In the above act, the character that Overszabi plays—a local interpreter—is decked in Buuba, a Yoruba attire comprising a long skirt, long-sleeved blouse,

and headgear, all of which are made of Nigerian fabrics. She holds an open Bible in one hand, and a microphone in the other. This skit is set in a local village church in Nigeria where a sermon is being preached to a congregation who are unable to comprehend the English language. Although many Nigerians re-created this skit and circulated it on social media platforms, Overszabi's version is instructive. First, the dissonance between her epidermal features and that of the Nigerian character she plays renders her identity ambiguous. Hers depicts a hilarious image that would make a viewer ponder the identity of the performer. Second, the use of local interpreters in church or public events is reminiscent of the indirect rule system that existed in British colonies, seeking to sustain the status quo and at the same time indoctrinating the people with alien policies and religions (Ocheni and Nwankwo 2012). As a cultural gatekeeper, the local interpreter influences and mediates the actual message of the priest, using local idioms and exaggerating the Christian God as a being that uses *jazz*—charms—on recalcitrant adherents. The antithetical relationship between charms and the Christian faith escalates the ridiculous in this act, prompting more questions on the identity and integrity of the interpreter.

Another interesting aspect of the skit is the fact that Overszabi chooses to enact the role of a local interpreter instead of Anonymous Priest who speaks English, a European language. Her choice of enacting a character that speaks Pidgin English illustrates a conscientious subversion of the anticipated behavior of a European woman—it dislocates the so-called hegemonic European culture. Hegemony relates to the domination of commonsense realities that, over time, appear normal and natural. Hegemonic power manifests with an extent of consent. That is, it operates with the ironic connivance of the subject within the “fundamental outlook of the society” (Bocock 1986), as evident in some Africans' emplacement of superiority in European ideals—“colonized mentality” (Chimezie 1975, 67). This contradictory process overrides interpersonal valorization of selves and recasts the very concept of supremacy, validating the position that hegemony may be performative (Gramsci 1971). Its performative quality implicates a possible de-institution of supremacy through the failure to sustain a particular pattern (Butler 1988). This is what Overszabi does with her role as a local interpreter, endearing herself to the Nigerian audience. By dressing in Nigerian apparel and speaking in Pidgin English, a humorous language that is spoken in many parts of the country and considered “the most widely spoken Creole language in the world” (Faraclas 2013, 417), the comedian presents an image that undercuts Nigerians' expectations of Europeans in general. This is subversive. Beyond eliciting laughter in her Nigerian audience, the act frames Overszabi as an insider who shares the sentiments of ordinary Nigerian masses, thereby diminishing Otherness as well as subverting dominant stereotypes of Europeans in Nigeria and Africa. This act is proven effective by audience acceptance and laughter—as shown in the emojis and comments made by Overszabi's followers.

Before the advent of social media skits of this nature, discourses on Africa-Europe inter-cultural encounters have foregrounded Africans' radical positions of “writ[ing] back” (Currey 2008) and/or “looking back” (Okoye 2010). Such discussions on “cross-cultural encounters” raise questions on issues that deal

with “belonging and self-identification, especially the formation of hybrid identities” (Marotta 2020). On his part, Bhabha notes that the problem with transcultural contacts is the “entertainment and encouragement of cultural diversity” as well as a “corresponding containment of it” (Rutherford 1998, 208). That is, each time a dominant culture appropriates others, it makes efforts to “locate [the others] within [its] own grid.” This leads to a mitigation of “cultural difference” (Rutherford 1998, 208). In reaction to this trend, Africans strive to reciprocate the Othering of Europe “right from the beginning of the colonial encounter” (Okoye 2010, n.p.).

Contrary to these prominent assertions that foreground Europe’s domination and denigration of African culture, Overszabi, through role-play, contests from the inside the hegemony of her own identity. Her set sidesteps the foregoing theoretical standpoints, signaling a transformation of oneself, resulting from cultural immersion. In an interview, she revealed that she had a Nigerian partner through whom she learned of Nigerian popular arts and “fell in love with the culture” (Channels Television 2021). This is also the case with Oyibo Marlian, whose closeness to Nigerians in Russia and their performances “always sparked [in her] a certain interest and curiosity” that she could not ignore (Sadiq 2021). Based on this, it follows that the cultural immersion experiences of these comedians cohere with Mezirow’s position that the social development of humanity is an outcome of protracted interactions and (re-)socialization (Mezirow 2000). A sustained encounter with an unfamiliar lifestyle alters one’s perspectives and reframes one’s beliefs, attitudes, viewpoints, and values. Put differently, the transformation of self is one of the components of cultural immersion. This explains why the comics embrace the Nigerian culture without locating it within their own grid; instead, they performatively situate themselves in the Nigerian milieu.

While Overszabi lives in the United Kingdom and remotely exerts her acts through social media since February 2021, Oyibo Marlian lived in Nigeria during her period of comedic enactments. Motivated by a strong desire to visit Nigeria, she arrived in the country in October 2020 and debuted her TikTok skits on November 16, 2020. In an interview with *Punch* newspaper, she revealed that, before leaving Russia, her fascination with Nigerian popular culture, particularly Naira Marley’s song entitled *Soapy* and the accompanying “leg work” dance had earned her the name “Oyibo Marlian” (Sadiq 2021). She also stated that Jiga Wire, a hype man and disc jockey at a Russian club, noticed her obsession with the song and christened her accordingly, just as her Nigerian friends at home (Russia) made her “love the country [Nigeria] and its culture. The music, food, humor and many other things made [her] want to not just visit Nigeria but permanently move [there]” (Sadiq 2021). Despite relocating to Nigeria with only one hundred dollars she received from a fan on Instagram, Oyibo Marlian easily settled in the country and quickly gained traction on social media through her performances which range from “leg work” dances (to Naira Marley’s songs) to comic portrayal of Nigerians’ daily lives, especially amorous relationships.

It is important to note that she leveraged the Marlian fad and rose to fame within a short period—she gained 300,000 followers on Instagram within one year. Oyibo/Oyinbo is a Yoruba word for Europeans and fair-complexioned

individuals. In Nigeria, there is a relative predilection for “white” skin, resulting from an assumed absence of racial issues in West Africa (Pierre 2013); this situation combined with the comedian’s allegiance to the Marlian trend to launch her into the mainstream. The Marlian movement is one of the popular dance challenges that illustrate how popular culture animates the creation of physical and social media communities. Often intense and ephemeral, such popular dances are widely practiced by young people, and even some politicians who temporarily blur wide class gaps, infiltrate young voters and establish a group (youth) identity only during campaigns. Characterized by dance movements simulating masturbation by men, “[d]isaffected Nigerian youth ... have playfully self-identified as ‘Marlians’ ... to signal a sense of exclusion, beatifying themselves from the social and political margins to which they feel pushed” (Ayobade 2021, 5). Marlians perform disobedience to hegemonic morality, embodying the entirety of the negative traits attributed to young Nigerians such as laziness, indecent dressing, and frivolous studentry. Hilarious as the performances of Marlians, they constitute a collective meaning signaling the “aesthetics of misery” (Obadare 2016, 74), which reinforces the capacity of humor for framing the subversion of critical commentaries. Oyibo Marlian’s participation in this movement is arguably seen as a Western recognition of the challenges and principles of members of the movement. Thus, among many other youngsters who could do the “leg work” dance, she became outstanding and, as earlier noted, gained up to 300,000 followers on Instagram within one year. The point being made here is that her physical “difference” and connection to the Marlian movement played contributory roles in her attainment of celebrity status.

Just like Overszabi’s, Oyibo Marlian’s performances also convey convoluted portraits. They constitute counter-narratives of Nigerians’ expectations of white women, demonstrate identification with the people, and enervate the boundaries of what constitutes Nigerianness. While Overszabi is a virtual Nigerian resident, Oyibo Marlian physically integrated herself into Nigerian culture. Her knowledge of Pidgin English—the language used mostly for musical lyrics and comic productions in many parts of southern Nigeria—also accelerated her success in the Nigerian comedy space. In one of her routines, she enacts the animosity that often exists between previous lovers, displaying exceptional knowledge of Nigeria:

A young lady: (her phone rings) My ex. (picks up the call) Hello...

Voice of Osato: Hello, Baby. How are you *naa*? It’s me, Osato. Where have you been?

A young lady: Your Papa (your father).

Voice of Osato: What did you say?

A young lady: No, I mean Apapa. I have been in Apapa since, yeah.

Voice of Osato: Ok, I thought you said my papa o (my father). I for say who is now teaching you that kind of thing. (I would have wondered who taught you that) Anyway, have you eaten?

A young lady: (sighs) Your father!

Voice of Osato: What did you say now now again? My father?

A young lady: No, I mean Ofada. Ofada rice. I ate Ofada rice.
 Voice of Osato: Ok, I thought you said my father o. Anyway *sha*, you know I miss you naa, can we see?
 A young lady: Thunder fire you!
 Voice of Osato: Thunder will fire whom?
 A young lady: No, Baby, you know this song: (She sings along as the song is played in the background) Thunder fire you for all the lies you told me, thunder fire you, for when you cheated on me, thunder fire you).
 (Juliewanderz 2021d)

Relying on word sense ambiguation, the character played by Oyibo Marlian switches from Nigerian landmark locations to food and songs, flaunting her knowledge of the country from the perspective of an insider. The excerpt above shows that her conversation with Osato, her previous lover in this fiction, is riddled with a blend of puns and dramatic irony, indicating duality while eliciting laughter. Her dual identity stems from merged cultures. It is uncommon to find a white woman who speaks Nigerian Pidgin English and demonstrates knowledge of landmark sites in the country. This is a clear instance of cultural hybridity or merged cultures. Writing on merged cultures, Zohdi (2018, 150) notes that, “hybridity and merged identity happens [*sic*] to the ones who are trapped between two different cultures, that of the colonizers and that of themselves as the colonized.” While this holds in the context of Bhabha’s framework, the skit understudy dislocates it. The character performed by Oyibo Marlian subverts this by centralizing the indicia of an ex-colonized space, generating an equivocal image that undermines her European background and elicits laughter. In the skit, the expression “Your Papa,” in the local parlance, is an insult to one’s biological father; Apapa is the name of a Local Government Area in Lagos State; Ofada is a rice variant produced mainly in Ofada, southwestern Nigeria; while the song in reference is Ric Hassani’s *Thunder Fire You* which was outlawed by Nigerian authorities for hate lyrics. At each instance of pun, Osato suspects a red flag in the conversation but is soon confused by Oyibo Marlian who deliberately ambiguates meaning using near-homonymic substitutes. This success of word sense ambiguation rests on a prior semantic consensus on the exact meaning of her earlier statement—your Papa—which is identifiable by the audience in the manner of an aside. The joke is on Osato.

Puns are common strategies in humor practice where they are deployed not only to draw laughter from the audience but to also place them into a valenced disposition towards the object of derision. Osato’s failure to realize the puns results in his further confusion over “your father” with “Ofada”; “Thunder fire you!” with Ric Hassani’s song of the same title. While the set highlights young people’s penchant for pursuing pleasure despite glaring warnings, it also stirs curiosity about the equivocal identity of Oyibo Marlian. The entire performance, particularly her knowledge of landmark places, songs, and the Nigerian Pidgin, constitutes what is described as “cosmopolitan subjectivities”—the processes of “doing ‘being’ cosmopolitan” (Krings 2015, 231). Her competence in the Nigerian culture is a notable instance of acculturation. Unlike Overszabi who mainly

utilizes lip-sync to attain fluency in Pidgin English in the characters she enacts, Oyibo Marlian's direct immersion into the Nigerian lifestyle ambiguates her identity. The comedians penetrate Nigerianness through humorous acts and negotiate their identities and belongingness. The rapid sharing feature of skits published on social media positions Overszabi and Oyibo Marlian as non-African subjects expanding allegiances to Nigerian humor.

Apart from the issue of love, Oyibo Marlian also addresses the trend of self-performance among female digital subjects. Variouslly described as "self-making" (Ligaga 2022) or "self-spectoriality" (Yeku 2022, 101), self-presentation is a performative enactment of one's desired personality. It is a make-belief act that mobilizes digital platforms to create a new self-identity. It is a form of expression that features "a shift from objectification to subjectification in the ways that (some) women are represented [placing] emphasis upon self-surveillance ... a focus upon individualism" (Gill & Scharff 2011, 4). These are mostly online manifestations of postfeminist aesthetics that converge efforts on individual success, counteracting the core of African feminisms which highlights sisterhood, women's league, group aspirations, and their multiple nuances (Amaefula 2021). Distinguishing between make-believe and make-belief (or self-presentation), Schechner remarks that performances of self "create the social realities they enact" (2013, 42). This view draws strength from Goffman's (1959) conflation of social life and theatre, indicating that one performs at all times. The performative quality of self performance often brings into existence a successful, dominant personality who exerts control over other lesser towering figures.

In a clip entitled, *Don't Be Deceived Kings!*, Oyibo Marlian fictionalizes dual images of herself online (labeled "Instagram" in the skit) and offline (labeled "real life"). In the online version, we see a classic lady with long flowing hair, dressed in a tight-fitting, skimpy dress and high-heeled shoes, making erotic body movements that provocatively glamorize her femininity to the tune of hip-hop music playing in the background. This identity is definitive of a class of modern, beautiful ladies who lead a rich, lavish lifestyle on social media. This digital personality is representative of the dream status of some young women who are desirous of shaking off poverty. Upsetting this constructed online image with a punchline that douses the aura it enacts, Oyibo Marlian suddenly reveals the "real-life" personality of the earlier version—here, we see the same individual dressed in black oversized long-sleeve shirt and trousers with matching sunshade glasses; she sits on a motorcycle which she drags along just as commercial cyclists do when they have an empty fuel tank. The act ends with an inscription, "Don't be deceived, kings! She is just a village girl!" (Juliewanderz 2021a). The undertone in the skit is two-fold. First, it is meant to demonstrate the extent to which Oyibo Marlian performatively ingrained herself in Nigerian cultural life. It additionally counteracts the pressures and anxieties imposed on average young women who encounter this variant of self-presentation on social media. By presenting the fad among young people to redefine themselves online, the act foregrounds the potential of digital performances to make identities, reconstruct bodies, flip time and tell stories.

Overszabi also plays on a similar set when she depicts the table manners of youngsters in public and private. Sitting at a dining table and faced with a plate of soup and *fufu*—a Nigerian staple—she synchronizes two personalities with matching voiceover narrations enacting them: “when I was in boarding school in Nigeria, they forced us to eat *fufu* with a fork and knife just like the British” (Overszabi 2022). She accompanies this line with a performance of “serious and dutiful” eating to please the public—in this case, the fictitious authorities of the boarding school. This is quickly followed by a private version: “But when I get home and it’s time to eat, I slap the *fufu* [she smiles and slaps the *fufu* with ‘licentious’ liberty], no mercy [cuts out a piece, dips it into the soup and directs it to her mouth, while shutting her eyes to signal gratification], very delicious. I’m telling you” (Overszabi 2022). In each section of this representation, the narration adopts British and Nigerian accents to match the public and private identities, respectively. Other versions of this skit produced by Nigerians do not generate tension because the (re-)creators belong to the culture being valorized. But Overszabi’s version is instructive, compelling audience attention, particularly in the beginning part of the skit where the British eating habits are described as superior culture.

This act exposes ways neocolonialism is sustained in the formal sector of Nigeria where colonial legacies are sometimes erroneously equated with decency. As Tyson (2006, 149) notes, “The colonizers believed that only their own Anglo-European culture was civilized, sophisticated or, as postcolonial critics put it, metropolitan.” As a result, “native peoples were defined as savage, backward and undeveloped” (Tyson 2006, 149). Bearing in mind that Overszabi belongs to the self-professed superior culture, her representations of European and African lifestyles in this skit are noteworthy. The character she enacts initially embodies the colonizer’s mentality, causing suspicion in her Nigerian audience. However, her transition into the Nigerian pattern of eating unseats tension, accelerates contradictions, and activates convoluted portraits. The point is that her eventual demonstration of satisfaction in the latter culture diminishes suspicion, leading to audience acceptance and laughter at the equivocal identity. This hybrid image illustrates the view that people who are caught in in-between spaces are in “the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity” (Bhabha 1994, 1).

Furthermore, what this act does is highlight the ubiquity of self-presentation and validation of same as “restored performances” indicative of the expanding multiplicity of identities in everyday life, “in relation to social and personal circumstances” (Schechner 2013, 28–29). It also illustrates the assertion that self-presentation is most manifest “when a performer leaves the back region and enters the place where the audience is to be found, or when he returns therefrom” (Goffman 1959, 74). The transitions witnessed in such contexts show “a wonderful putting on and taking off of character” (Goffman 1959, 74); they back-ground the distinction between appearance and reality and project differing shades of performed realities. A reconciliation of this set with personal life experiences animates a collective memory and shared laughter among the audience. When transposed to the digital sphere, the private life reflects an

offline personality that is unknown to spectators who admire the so-called decent eating habits of the British represented in the public version.

Unmasking online posturing stimulates netizens to question sudden, unexplainable, make-belief status and affluence which have now been collectively dubbed “fake life.” Exploiting the anonymity of one’s physical space enabled by the remoteness of social media, some users self-construct prosperous images that exempt them from the indigence that pervades the country. Being a site of lingering leadership woes, Nigeria inflicts her citizenry with hardship of sorts. The desire to liberate oneself from this condition leads to enactments showing one’s transcendence of current conditions and activation of fantasized lifestyles. Self-making is an escapist act that accelerates a performer’s recreation of their world and imposition of the newly constructed reality on the audience. Ligaga (2020) illustrates this practice in Kenya with women’s utilization of social media platforms to create their digital selves, enacting superfluous femininities that oftentimes draw public opprobrium. While Overszabi and Oyibo Marlian’s hilarious performances of selves accentuate the Nigerian context, the “difference” of their skin color further points to an enactment of cultural difference. This arguably softens Africa–Europe relations. Outside the laughing space, however, the longstanding power asymmetries between both continents cast doubt over the motives of the performers. Their acts can be further read as commodification of Blackness—the comedians deploy digital remix practices and cultural solidarity to mask an aspiration for social media fame.

Audience Engagement and Continuous Meaning-Making Processes

A plethora of scholarly sources, including the uses and gratification model, have dismissed the notion of audience passivity, privileging their plurality not only in the sense of diversity but additionally the multiplicity of their responses to cultural products (Barber 1997; Leung 2009; Huang 2010; Barber 2014). It has been established that an “[a]udience is to [performance] what feedback is to communication. Both concepts do not only signal the consummation of a process” but additionally determine the direction of iterative meaning-making processes (Amaefula 2016, 7). Consummation being the catchword here, an audience —“the body of people prepared to grant the performer space and time in which to mount ... a display, by suspending or bending the normal patterns of communicative turn-taking” (Barber 1997, 347)—completes, not concludes the production process. Discussions on the performance quadrilogue map four categories of performance players, which include sources, producers, performers, and partakers (Schechner 2013, 250). Here, Schechner (2013) transcends discourses on performance as a time-space sequence and dissects the relationships among the four entities, describing the producers as link persons, building an overpass between performers and the audience. This bridge facilitates a seamless flow of meaning to the partakers. Instructively, the choice of “partakers” here over “spectators” humanizes the audience and accentuates their capacity for action. This shows that, while producers utilize performers to project a message to the audience, the latter receives it, subjects it to their own realities, and iteratively

adduces further meanings and acts. This is substantiated by the view that “the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (Jenkins 2006, 2). Meaning-making in the new media, Jenkins (2006, 3) writes, shifts the way of being an audience from passivity to activity; “[r]ather than talking about media producers and media consumers as occupying separate roles,” he contends, “we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands.”

The unpredictability of audience response is a hallmark of social media performances. A skit might generate viral proliferations or surprisingly attract audiences’ attacks on the performer. This is exemplified in an encounter between Overszabi and her follower who ignores her content and attacks her private life:

the.djin: Another single mom with a black kid! And they say stereotypes are wrong hahah
szabina883: My darling, who said I’m single? His dad is the most amazing dad. (Overszabi 2021c)

This comment, which questions the paternity of her child, bypasses Overszabi’s art and pushes her into discussing her private life with a stranger. It hints at the restiveness of the audience and the attendant anxieties a humorist faces. After this encounter, Overszabi momentarily ceased making skits with her child, in an apparent effort to keep her family off social media trolls (Overszabi 2021c). This sort of aggressive reaction was also meted out to Oyibo Marlian, particularly when she relocated from Nigeria to Egypt in December 2021. Her audience expressed disappointment in her for extolling the infrastructure and job opportunities in Egypt at Nigeria’s expense, as her reasons for leaving:

adeofLagos: Imagine a Nigerian flying into Moscow with just \$100 in his/her pocket. Such person would have faced more difficulty than what you experienced in Nigeria. Or possibly mugged by skin-heads while trying to survive on Russian streets. Rather you got a rosy treatment in Nigeria aside the rather poor living conditions ...

RoyalBoy: Isn’t that the Russian girl who went to Nigeria with a hundred dollars?? Wasn’t she taken care of by Nigerians? Wasn’t she made a celebrity by Nigerians? Wow! I genuinely thought this video was about her gratitude towards Nigeria & Nigerians ... If a Russian moves here (to the UK) or anywhere else in the world with just \$100, she’d be hungry & homeless within the first 3days ... (Juliewanderz 2021c).

RoyalBoy’s comment highlights the reality that Oyibo Marlian would not be conspicuously different in the United Kingdom, which is a white-dominated land. On the other hand, she is noticeably different in Nigeria and her physical difference forms the basis of her celebrification. The comments above show some of the exploitative undertones associated with the performance of cultural difference. The reactions revile Oyibo Marlian for being ungrateful to Nigerians

who celebrated her within one year, as well as raise questions on inexistent reciprocal gestures for Nigerian immigrants who perform Europeanness. From October 2020 through December 2021, Oyibo Marlian's sudden "love" for Nigerian popular arts peaked and faded. She broke her bond with fans online, abandoned them and their culture, and departed from the country abruptly. This speaks to the artifice of value the artiste placed on the people and their popular expressions, which she exploited to achieve influence and affluence on social media—feats she could not attain in Russia. Apparently, taking on and dropping off differing identities for fame and financial gains not only bespeaks beguilement but also strengthens the view that capitalist goals find "the fracturing of identity a wonderfully lucrative commercial project, to the extent that it does not simply respond to identitarian distinctiveness but cultivates it for its own purposes" (Causey and Walsh 2013, 2). Unbeknownst of the context above, most of the comedian's audiences cherish her performances and believe the same to contribute to the centering of Nigerianness.

Overszabi and Oyibo Marlian navigate unpredictable audience reactions by presenting sets that diminish the expected differences of a European woman performing Nigerianness. These jolt their audiences to the ongoing transnationalization and increasing global awareness of Nigerian humor and culture. For instance, Oyibo Marlian's dexterous display of the leg work dance amazes her Nigerian audience with how she has been transformed into a third space embodying exact simulations of current fads.

Chabel: Omo see Oyibo girl dey dance ooooo. Correct one. (See a European dancing [leg work]).

It'sjust-ify: babe u dey burst my brain o. (Girl, you blow my mind.)

Okere Victor: You sabi this dance well. Even me still dey struggle. And I dey dance oo. (You know this [leg work] dance very well. I still struggle with it, even though I am a dancer.)

Jae: Omo me cannot even move my legs. (I cannot even move my legs) (Juliewanderz 2021b)

In the excerpt above, these audiences extol her "leg work" skills as well as assess their own competencies in the art. Both It'sjust-ify's exclamation and Chabel's comment are all expressions of excitement and surprise. On the other hand, Okere Victor's reaction is of particular interest here. Comedians do not wheedle out laughter from their audience. Instead, they put up unusual situations that trigger the viewer's imagination and reconciliation of the scenes with their personal experiences, causing the latter to "release" cramped tension and energy, in the form of mirth (Ferrar 1992). This is validated by the view that "the hallmark of [performance] is the exposition of the tensions and contradictions driving today's world" (Schechner 2013, 3). The expository character of comedic representations animates the audience to juxtapose a hilarious performance with their own experiences, resulting in varying motivations of laughter for the same act. This process is captured in the assertion that every one of us "constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information

extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives” (Jenkins 2006, 4). Being an individual whose social interests include dancing, Okere Victor’s response clearly differs from the preceding ones. His reception of the performance transcends mere consumption and admiration but, as deducible from his comment, further invigorates him to practice and proliferate the trending dance challenge, in the manner of “consumption as re-consumption” (Barber 1997).

This form of audience reaction is not exclusive to Oyibo Marlian. In another set where Overszabi participates in a trending dance challenge, her audiences equally express surprise just as they feel obliged to reproduce the content:

Adetayo Adejimi: I’m still amazed with what I just watched.

YOKILAR: You even sabi pass me wey dey here sef. (You even know [this Nigerian dance] more than me).

Churchgirl: You are wonderful. I love you. (Overszabi 2021b)

Like Okere Victor, Yokilar indulges in self-assessments: “You even know [this Nigerian dance] more than me” (Overszabi 2021b). Comments of this sort constitute creative audience responses that activate increasing awareness of shared cultural belongingness between the performer and the spectator. Admission of comparative self-deficiency in the dance pattern is coterminous with a sudden realization of a lag in one’s “own” cultural trend, now co-owned/ better owned by an “Oyibo.” This is an interaction that softens the concept of “otherness.” The meaning here is not necessarily in the performance itself but in the way the comedian has positioned her body to foster audience interactions, that intermediate point where spectators engage with the skits and consequently create new meanings for a meta-audience, enabling a simultaneous recognition and collapse of difference in a manner that deconstructs the comic as an equivocal third space. Bhabha describes this hybridized meaning through a psychological analogy, explicating identification in such a circumstance as a process of “identifying with and through another subject, an object of otherness, at which point the agency of identification,” that is the subject, “is itself ambivalent because of the intervention of that otherness” (Rutherford 1998, 211). The intervention of the so-called otherness, in this context, generates meanings that unify both divides and create, “something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiating meaning and representation” (Rutherford 1998, 211).

Conclusion

I have examined how two European women—Overszabi and Oyibo Marlian—exploit the pervasiveness of digitized spaces to participate in the production of Nigerian-themed skits, as a digital expatriate and an immigrant, respectively. The paper considers their acts as furtherance of Nigerian women’s increased participation in the cultural production of humor. Exploring these non-Africans’ framings of lived experiences in Nigeria, including participation in several dance

trends in the country, the study highlights their acts as a mediation of non-Africanness and Nigerian culture. Their punchlines, which mostly undercut Nigerians' expectations of Europeans, and European women in particular, yield equivocal identities that are interpreted here as a third space that diminishes Otherness and negotiates the comics' identities and belongingness in the culture being fictionalized. Utilizing lip-sync, facial expressions, dances, the Nigerian Pidgin English among other performance accouterments peculiar to an ex-colonized space—Nigeria—the comics mitigate the mutual stereotyping of Africa and Europe and entrench trans-border belongingness. This animates their followers to remix or reuse their content for a continuously expanding audience. While their acts—which mainly involve the exploitation of Blackness—earn them legibility on social media and celebrity status in Nigeria, the historically extractive relationship between Europe and Africa characterizes their performances as cultural appropriation. This is most manifest in the manner Oyibo Marlian repudiates her bond with online followers and sojourns to the next African country—Egypt—commending the latter's infrastructure at Nigeria's expense. Against this background, it is further argued that these white comedians mobilize the remix culture in digital spaces and cultural solidarity to veil their desire for social media fame—an aspiration they could not achieve in their home country. These raise questions of reciprocity in the cases of Nigerians who perform Europeanness.

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