Research Article

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Picturing an Impossible American: Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Photographic Transfers in *Portals* (2016)

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Abstract: This article considers artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby's use of photographic transfers and popular culture in her 2016 painting "Portals" to craft an artwork specific to her experience across multiple points of social identification in the United States and Nigeria. Through close reading and the study of Crosby's formal and conceptual strategies, Zelt investigates how varying degrees of recognition work through photographic references. "Portals" contests assimilationist definitions of American identity in favor of a representation which is multiplicitous, operating across geographies. By juxtaposing images from different times, in different directions, Crosby constructs "contact zones" and provokes a mode of looking that reflects a feeling dislocation from the country in which she stands, the United States, and the country with which she also identifies, Nigeria. After a brief introduction to the artist and her relationship to Nigerian national politics, the article explores how distance and recognition work through image references to express a particular form of transnational identity, followed by an examination of uses of popular culture references to engage with blackness and an interdependent "Nigerian-ness" and "American-ness." It concludes by contextualizing the painting's display amid waves of amplified nativist purity in the US.

Keywords: art, identity, photography

The third-grade class rambles up to the painting. With shoelaces untied and shirts untucked, their rumpled blue and white uniforms reflect small freedoms explored on a field trip to the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan. They are here to look at art proper. To be guided and goaded into thinking about what they see and to interpret it for themselves. Spilling out onto the hardwood gallery floor they must lean back on elbows to observe the more than seven feet of painted pages in front of them.

Two large panels spaced two feet apart float unframed on the wall.

"What do you see?" asks the young docent. It is an invitation to look for something recognizable. To dip into an existing personal pool of symbols, relationships, gestures, and feelings and the ways they are visually manifested in an artwork. "What do you see?" inverts the power dynamics upon which high art often rides, making the artwork accountable to the viewer's frame of reference.

In looking at *Portals*, 2016, the students fixate on the figure of a young woman seated in the left panel. Scaled to a little larger than life, she sits with her eyes narrowed and ankles crossed facing her audience. The creamy yellow of her smartly fitted sheath dress contrasts elegantly against her dark brown skin. One child ventures a guess: "She is sad." he says. His classmate notes that "She looks disappointed." Another speculates on the woman's thoughts and hopes: "She is probably thinking about her family and not wanting bad things to happen to them." Someone else considers her history, commenting that "Something bad's happened to her." One suggests that the painting "looks like a hard day at work."

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Figure 1. Installation shot of Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Portals*, 2016[1]

The two panels of this painting are made of hundreds of images, layered on each other, delineating space, shadow and skin. Yet all the answers are focused on the woman. Finally, the docent relieves the tension built up by their eager answers. "What do you see?" she replies, "This is a picture of the artist, Njideka Akunyili Crosby. She is from Nigeria. These two pages act as one painting that gives us a sense of who Njideka is."

Sitting with *Portals* in the galleries of a major museum of American art, overhearing viewers of all ages grapple with the simple question "What do you see?" caused me to seriously consider the way recognition works in this painting and the ways it speaks to multiple audiences at once. When I look at *Portals*, I see photographs. I see a painting that is very much a painting, but that is also something else. I see a portrait of an American built with references that are unidentifiable to many Americans. I see a young woman with dark skin, seated inside, at night, looking back at me. But what I see is limited, and that is part of *Portals* power. Through close reading, this article will untangle the ways that Crosby uses photographs, in the form of readymade images, to control the relationship between the painting and its viewers, and to craft a representation of American identity which is multiplicitous, operating across geographies.

Crosby's use of photographs as both compositional and conceptual tools in *Portals* is critical to her crafting an artwork specific to her experience across multiple points of social identification including race and nationality. The artist is best known for her paintings' complex layers of references. Stylistically, Crosby brings together training in Western academic painting with Nigerian visual culture, mass media images, and autobiography. Rather than just serving as simple windows into Crosby's biography or mirrors of the artist's experience, however, the photographic materials and references in *Portals* also refract and create distance between the artist and her viewers. By focusing on her deployment of readymade images, particularly photographic transfers, this article will consider the ways that *Portals* is simultaneously legible across multiple audiences.[2]

Crosby's use of montage is a keen negotiation of recognizing and not recognizing, via which she controls access to the "self" pictured in this self-portrait. The photographic transfers are sourced from popular culture, news media, and family photographs across decades. Whether or not an image is recognizable to a viewer varies individually, but is determined largely by social experience. Some images harbor particular

1 Acrylic, transfers, colored pencils, collage and commemorative fabric on paper Diptych, each: 213.4 x 243.8 cm (84 x 96 in) Overall dimensions: 213.4 x 525.8 cm (84 1/8 x 207 in) © Njideka Akunyili Crosby Courtesy the artist, Victoria Miro, London/ Venice and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N.Y.; purchase, with funds from The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Photograph by Bill Orcutt

2 To make the photographic transfers or photo-transfers, Crosby makes inkjet prints of the images at the scale she wants and coats the image surface in acetone, then she presses the surface directly against the paper of the painting and physically rubs the image off on to the paper's surface.

significance for Nigerians of Crosby's generation or African migrants in the diaspora; others might only be recognizable to members of Crosby's immediate family. The push and pull between personal and public imagery, the grasping at familiarity, or feeling blocked out, is analogous to the sensory experiences of Crosby's immigration to the United States from Nigeria and contributes to the creation of an impossible character that emerges from Crosby's own experiences. According to contemporary pro-assimilationist and white nationalist efforts to define America as racially, geographically and culturally homogenous, Crosby's self-portrait should not exist in American art.[3] But with the help of photographic transfers, *Portals* refutes these efforts by occupying multiple positions at once, by calling attention to the way identity is expressed in relation to culture, and by encouraging viewers to be self-conscious of their own positionality in relation to the artwork.[4]

In between Home Space: Nigeria and the United States

Crosby came of age in post-postcolonial Nigeria. Raised in 1980s Enugu, a university town in southeastern Nigeria, her parents were professors of medicine and pharmacy. Crosby remembers her childhood as culturally insulated. She describes Enugu as "a small town where everybody, every family knows each other. Everybody is Igbo. It was very homogeneous" (Hileman). In 1993, when she was about eleven, Crosby started at Queens College, a prestigious all-girls boarding school in Lagos.[5] The move from Igbo-centric Enugu to the megapolis of Lagos had a lingering impact on her perspective; "It really was my first contact with cosmopolitan life," Crosby recalls (Heawood). Her cultural world expanded throughout her adolescence to include British and American popular culture as well as Nigerian magazines, music, movies, and fashion (James; Crosby 2017; Zelt).

Crosby's experience of cosmopolitanism developed during a turbulent period in Nigerian national politics that impact her relationship to mass media and nationality. A series of delayed elections in 1993 eventually resulted in military injunctions and a government overthrow by Sani Abacha who abolished all democratic structures and assumed totalitarian control until his sudden death in 1998. Increased national wealth from international investment in Nigerian oil extraction brought with it an expanded lens of global popular culture, albeit delayed, with American television and film from the 1970s and 80s being broadcast in Nigeria decades later (Bourne).

The end of the millennium marked a tumultuous period of change for the Akunyili family. In 1997, the Akunyilis won the United States green card lottery, which allowed Njideka and her older sister, Ijeoma, to move to Philadelphia two years later. Njideka was sixteen when she moved to Philadelphia and started her undergraduate education at Swarthmore College the following year.[6] She would spend the next decade between countries traveling back and forth from her studies in the United States and her family in Nigeria. After Swarthmore, Crosby studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and later completed the Masters program in Studio Art at Yale University. Following a series of residencies after graduate school, including one at the Studio Museum of Art in Harlem, Crosby moved to Los Angeles where she continues to live and work.

While Crosby was in college, her family rose to prominence in Nigeria because of her mother's civil service. Dora Akunyili was appointed the director of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control. There, Akunyili took on Nigeria's false pharmaceutical cartels and reformed the national drug industry. The magnitude of Akunyili's effort elevated her to the level of national folk hero. She was

3 My use of the term "impossible character" is inspired by Mae M. Ngai's discussion of the legal construction of immigrant categories in the United States. Ngai argues that an illegal alien is "an 'impossible subject', a person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved" (Ngai, 5).

4 This article is an early iteration of a chapter-length study of *Portals* that engages more extensively with Crosby's use of photographic images in her artistic process, as well as the use of photographs as pictured subjects and collage material, including portrait fabric.

5 Crosby is not sure at what age she moved to Lagos. Some sources state she was ten years old in others eleven years old.

6 Similarly, to her move to Lagos, Crosby has sometimes recounted that she moved to the US at age 16 and others at age 17. She confirmed that she was 16 (Zelt).

recognized internationally, including by *Time Magazine*, who in 2005 named Dora as one of the "Heroes of Our Time" (Limonick and Da Costa). Her mother's civic participation brought Crosby's personal life into direct contact with national politics by the end of the aughts.

Crosby's biography and her evolving relationship to Nigerian national politics offers an important frame for the images that she chooses to transfer into *Portals*. By the time Crosby began her MFA program, her experience of the Nigerian national popular culture which served as entertainment during her adolescence had begun to fold back on itself, featuring images of Crosby and her family members in society pages and culture blogs. Before starting at Yale, in July 2009, Njideka married Justin Crosby, a white American sculptor who had studied with Njideka at Swarthmore. The Crosbys' wedding in Nigeria was televised nationally, and according to at least one Nigerian blogger, it was broadcast live in lieu of coverage of President Barack Obama's visit to Ghana happening at the same time (Ifedigo). Soon thereafter, Njideka Akunyili Crosby began seriously experimenting with incorporating found photographs into her paintings, transferring them into a series of self-portraits.

Does it Transfer?

> "But for me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it." -Chinua Achebe, "English and the African Writer," *Transition* 18 (1965), 30.

Crosby approaches her rigorous artistic training as a kind of language, often stressing her position in relationship to Western visual art as an analogue to author Chinua Achebe's use of English (Hileman; Crosby 2017; James). She treats her technical skill and deployment of Western realism as a "borrowing of tradition." Through the incorporation of photographs, she is able to push painting, to "take that language and use it to talk about the experience of the place the language is not from." The reliance on photographs during composition, the incorporation of readymade images, and the inclusion of photographs as subjects are all ways that *Portals* bends, moulds, and remixes "inherited" tradition to produce something new and that is distinct to Crosby's transcultural experience ("Njideka Akunyili-Crosby: Chimamanda of the Art World?").

The transferred images in *Portals* are part of a bank of photographs from a Nigeria of Crosby's own making, one that she defines as a person looking back from afar, with a new and particular relationship to popular culture. A close reading of *Portals* offers an example of identity in process and in diaspora, or as Stuart Hall argued a consideration of identity "always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall 222). "As a way of staying connected to home," Crosby collected images from online of Nigerian society pages, musicians, and designers (Davis). She would return home with a shot list of Nigerian material and visual culture, photographing floor patterns, her grandmother's tea table, and crochet doilies on sofas, the significance of which she only came to see after leaving the country (Crosby, Tate Talks, 2016; Zelt). Crosby acknowledges that her position as a person who left Nigeria, helped her see aspects of popular culture that were familiar enough to be invisible to Nigerians in Nigeria (Davis). In other words, the imagined Nigeria Crosby renders in *Portals* through popular culture montage is only visible because she left for the United States.

The process of sourcing her readymade images represents an act of memory, an effort to lay eyes on definitive residues of her childhood. There is a snapshot quality to many of the transfers, which, combined with the faded hues that result from Crosby rubbing the photographic image into the painting's paper, leaves a filtered haze that mimics the way memory works sometimes. Some transfers are hard to make out, and many American eyes might skim past them, perhaps considering the subject unrecognizable, choosing instead to focus on the painted figure. The transfers are discernible, however, to viewers who are familiar with the generation and geography of the popular culture Crosby reproduces. A Nigerian woman in London who visited Crosby's solo exhibition, *Njideka Akunyili Crosby: Portals* at Victoria Miro gallery described the memory effect of the transfers: "It took me back to my childhood in Nigeria," the woman wrote, "I recognised practically all the images you infused into your work, with the exception of the family

ones" (Griffin). But there are limits to a viewer's recognition even for members of Crosby's family, as Crosby recounts, "It was encouraging when my cousins from Nigeria came to see my work [at Victoria Miro in London] because some of the images I've used also resonated with them" (Davis). Knowing, recognizing or responding to only "some" of the images, but not all, is key to the viewer's experience of this self-portrait. It has the effect of transporting those with shared experiences to a Nigeria that now persists in memory. But the use of photo-transfers, and of mingling personal images with popular images, acts as a screen in this self-portrait. The photographs help form a barrier, informed by popular culture references, between the artist and the representation. Since no one audience, aside from the artist, will recognize them all, the photographs are a means by which Crosby can control the level of intimacy between audience and artist. This agentive act of building a personal archive also manages the degree to which the artist is revealed. The images act to protect and preserve the Nigeria of her memory as well as the version of Nigeria that she carries with her and the version of Nigeria which helped form her.

Figure 2. Detail from Njideka Akunyili Crosby *Portals*, 2016.

Traversing national boundaries, Crosby's Nigeria has been shaped by movement, by living abroad and carrying cultural references with her. Popular cultural symbols take on additional meaning for expatriates who are removed from being fully saturated in contemporary Nigerian popular culture. In *Portals* a vintage box of Oxford-brand sweetened cabin biscuits (Figure 3) as well as album covers for musicians that serenaded her adolescence, such as Kris Okotie *Please Don't Go*, *Love Nwantiti* by Nelly Uchendu and Mike Obianwu (Figure 4) and Prince Nico Mbarga & Rocafil Jazz International's *Cool Money* (Figure 5), function as signifiers of a Nigeria of another time. Crosby describes her image selection process as "thinking of pictures I feel resonate with me" and "thinking of pictures I feel encapsulate a Nigeria I experienced" (James). The selection and inclusion of the transfers occurs at the intersection of thinking, feeling, seeing and remembering. This nexus reflects the range of ways of knowing or identifying with a place that is singular to Crosby but also made public through a work of art. The photos transferred onto the painting form an imagined community across a generation of Nigerian and West African immigrants who share in a pointed feeling of recognition of the popular and material culture reproduced in *Portals*.

Figures 3-4. Details from Njideka Akunyili Crosby *Portals*, 2016.

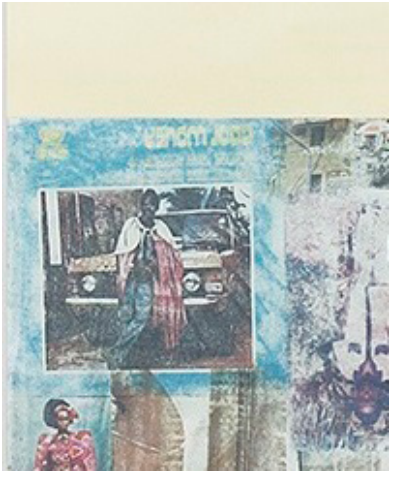

Figure 5. Prince Nico Mbarga & Rocafil Jazz International's *Cool Money*

Moving Closer

Crosby's relationship to Nigeria continued to take shape while abroad. The transfers in *Portals* reveal how Crosby's version of Nigeria formed in response to her movement between Nigeria and the United States. This section considers certain details in each panel and their relationship to the Nigeria Crosby constructs and her relationship to that Nigeria. The transfers in both panels work in a reverse chronology—the images on the panel on the right are mostly historic and date to or reference Crosby's childhood, while the images in the panel on the left picture Nigeria and Crosby from adulthood (Figure 1). There are images in both panels from international news events that Crosby would have experienced online from afar. For example, a photograph of distraught mothers of schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram militants in Chibok in April 2014 is repeated in the right and left panels (Figures 6 and 7). Additionally, the right panel contains images from international news coverage of environmental disaster in the Niger Delta caused over and over again by international oil companies, notably Shell in the 2010s (Figure 7). Raw and recent, these news images stand out from the others in the right panel, which tend to be more historical references. But the impact of both on children, who are pictured in various ways throughout the right panel, alongside popular culture images from Crosby's own childhood, make them thematically congruent. The gaps in time between recent news images with news and family photographs of an older vintage cause the transfers in the right panel work like jumps in memory. Bringing together images from disparate times and sources evokes both chronological and physical movement: "For me, switching between transfers and collage is synonymous

Figures 6 and 7. Details from Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Portals*, 2016.

with traversing different worlds as you look through my work." Crosby states, "As the eye moves from one place to another, you're making jumps in worlds…there are shifts in time and location" (Ando). The disorientation caused by bringing together anachronistic events and references is amplified by Crosby's compositional choices. The photo-transfers constantly change orientation. No individual transfer sits next to another that is oriented in the same direction. The viewer's body must comport to the painting's scale and these changes in orientation. The viewer must turn their head upside down to read the photo-transfers right-side up. The transfers, then, have the viewer twisting and tumbling to make sense of what is in front of them. The physical behaviour required to read the photo-transfers in *Portals* resonates with the sensation of standing between multiple cultures. By juxtaposing images from different times, in different directions, Crosby provokes a mode of looking that reflects a feeling of dislocation from the country in which she stands, the United States, and the country with which she still identifies, Nigeria.[7]

Figure 8. Detail from Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Portals*, 2016 (Left Panel)

7 In post-colonial discourse "dislocation" refers to the occasion and experience of displacement as a result of the colonial occupation. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin). I am using it to describe a feeling of disjuncture and unrecognition.

The photo-transfers in the left panel (Figure 8), the portion of the painting that features a painted figure based on Crosby, incorporate photographs of her as an adult alongside contemporary images from Nigerian popular culture and fashion. Snapshots of Crosby and her sisters at family events are some of the most frequently repeated images. One section features a portrait of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and a press photograph of the Nigerian musician 2Baba, back when he was known as 2face Idibia, clad in a green velvet jacket at the 2011 BET awards. These two internationally successful artists face away from a photograph of Abacha, whose totalitarian government formed the backdrop to their childhoods. This example shows how transfers in the left panel build the context of Crosby's engagement with Nigeria in her adulthood, as an artist working internationally and through her engagement with fashion, music, and culture.

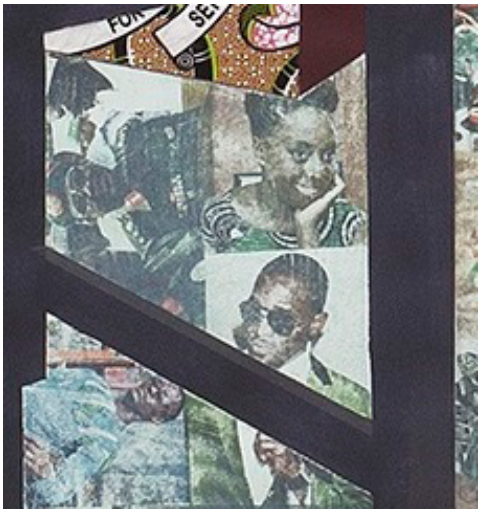

Figure 9. Detail from Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Portals*, 2016.

Unlike in the right, the transfers in the left panel have another compositional role. Functioning as more than planes of floor or wall, in the left panel the transfers form shadows and furniture. They emanate from the chair that supports the figure based on Crosby and act as a symbolic foundation (Figure 10). On the seat of the chair, the figure leans onto a photograph featuring Crosby, her husband, Justin, and her mother, Dora, from Crosby's wedding. It is significant that this group photograph bears the weight of the figure because Crosby frequently points to her marriage as a way she navigates two cultures, calling it her "contact zone."[8] Informed by Mary Louise Pratt's definition of the term, Crosby defines a contact zone as a place "where things collide and grapple with each other" to create something new or "where cultures come together and rub up against each other and what results" (Crosby, "Njideka Akunyili Crosby").[9] This point in *Portals* acts as a contact zone on multiple levels. Formally this passage of *Portals* brings together Crosby's painting skill with her use of image transfers. It breaks the barrier between painted representation and the photo-transfers and compositionally creates a foundation for the figure. The figure leans onto a photograph that is simultaneously a personal family moment and an image of a national event. It serves as proof of an enduring identification with Nigeria as well as a commitment to the United States.

8 See Davis; Crosby, "Artist Talk Njideka Akunyili Crosby"; Crosby and Whitley; Crosby, "Njideka Akunyili Crosby."

9 Mary Louise Pratt defines "contact zones" as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 34).

Figure 10. Detail from Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Portals*, 2016.

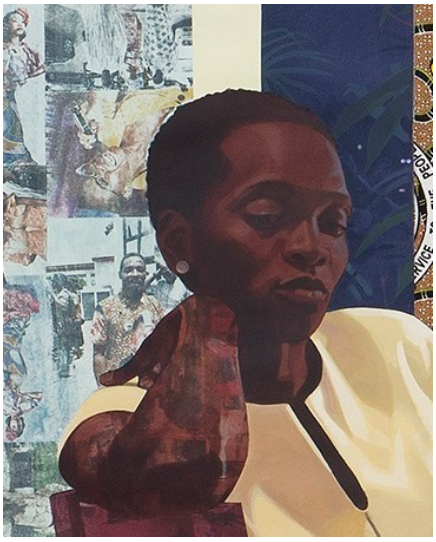

Figure 11. Detail from Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Portals*, 2016.

Elsewhere, another point of contact blurs the line between Crosby's aesthetic choices and her conceptual investigation of identity. Directly above the group wedding photo at the figure's right arm, the transfers emanate from bent elbow and wrist (Figure 11). Again, Crosby is exhibiting masterful painterly skill. The foreshortened arm is composed with precise perspective and shadow along with transferred elements. Ranges of darks—elbow against arm, wrist against face, face against night sky—are carefully crafted side by side. But more than just a display of technical skill, the range of hues, of dark skin against dark night, mark the range of experiences of becoming black in America. The figure's skin is set against a night sky that is filtered through a mix of palms, associated with Crosby's current home in Los Angeles, and cassava leaves, prevalent in Nigeria. Therefore, the landscape against which her face is set is an impossible geography, an amalgam of the LA hills and a Lagos evening, contrasting the figure against both locations at once. Situated at this junction, Crosby's identification with the United States implicates her into the system that signifies race. "Race," as scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant explicate, "operates in the space of intersections, at the crossroads where social structure and experience meet" (Omi and Winant x). Race operates as a master category in the United States. It is an unstable and ever-shifting form of social identity that is central to the organization of political life in the United States (Omi and Winant). By contrasting the figure's skin against a transnational geography, *Portals* points to the slipperiness of racial formation, specifically blackness, and the way it is constructed within very specific circumstances. The homogenizing effect that blackness can have as a social category—implying a unified experience of authentic blackness—is at odds with the very individual experience of the way that social category structures everyday life. As Michelle Wright argues in *Becoming Black*, "Black subjectivity means constantly negotiating between two extremes," such that "any truly accurate definition of an African diasporic identity, then, must somehow simultaneously incorporate the diversity of Black identities in the diaspora yet also link all those identities to show that they indeed constitute a diaspora rather than an unconnected aggregate of different peoples linked only in name" (Wright 2). *Portals* emphasizes a range of black identities through its focus on Crosby, by bringing together disparate geographies and different landscapes of meaning. The cultural references are particular to Crosby but also filtered through her. They catch on to larger meanings and experiences of American-ness and Nigerian-ness. The transfers in *Portals* provide a link to different people in the diaspora; they represent a dispersal of cultural symbols and the meaning they carry.

As discussed above, the transfers help form the environment in which representation occurs, but in *Portals* images also materially structure representation. The figure's arm (Figure 11) is built with images. Yet the transfers that make up the arm are indiscernible. They are too dark to be legible in photographic reproductions, and when *Portals* is installed, the elbow is too high up the wall to get a close look, making

those images almost indecipherable. This indecipherability suggests that it is not so much the subject of the transfers but their formal function—the fact that they structure the figure—that is significant. Here Crosby embodies herself through photo transfers. More than just documents of the popular culture that surround her, the transfers are part of the makeup of the artist, they signify the ways that images work to construct a sense of self.

By this point, it has probably become apparent that though *Portals* is called a self-portrait, I have been referring to the figure seated at the table in the left panel not as "the artist" but as "the figure based on Crosby." Although this figure is painted in a realist style, and although the figure was drafted from photographs Crosby made of herself in her studio, the artist refers to the figure in this panel as a character based on her. That distance between self and portrait is potent and is another space managed by references to popular culture. Crosby states that the figure in *Portals* acts as "this weird alter ego. Not to compare myself to Beyoncé, but its like I am Beyoncé**,** and she is my Sasha Fierce" (Zelt). The character Sasha Fierce was American pop icon Beyoncé's short-lived alter-ego who performed the more edgy songs on the 2008 album *I Am...Sasha Fierce*. On this two-disc album, the disc labeled "I Am..." contained the gentler pop tracks, such as "Halo" and "Ave Maria," which were typical of Beyoncé to that point. The disc titled "Sasha Fierce," included songs like "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" and "Diva," that shirk respectability politics, emphasizing female empowerment, subversion and sexuality with lyrics like "I need no permission, did I mention?" and "Where my ladies up in here that like to talk back?" (Knowles). Beyoncé deployed Sasha Fierce as a persona through which she could perform an assertive identity, and Sasha offered a filtered process by which Beyoncé could take on a more assertive public persona via a performance of a self that was representative of and separate from Beyoncé.[10] Similarly, Crosby maintains the distance between herself and the self she represents in *Portals* stating "I have no issue using my life in my work, but she," referring to the figure in *Portals*, "is Sasha" (Zelt). *I Am... Sasha Fierce* dates to the same time Crosby was beginning to be faced with issues of being represented in popular media in Nigeria. By turning to persona as a tool, Crosby joins a group of artists, notably U.S.-based artists of colour and women, that traffic in the ways intersectional identities are performed and read through contemporary art.[11] The incorporation of photographic transfers into the painted figure gestures to the ways that both race and gender in the United States are constituted by, through and against images. Scholars Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks have written in depth on the lasting impact of images for black-identified women in the United States. Both Collins and hooks stress the importance of self-definition and of simultaneously underscoring the particularity of experience and collective social consequences of race and gender. The transferred images in *Portals* traverse singularity and collectivity, ultimately coming together to form a dynamic portrait of a self. Working on representations of the self from her studio in the United States via the performative mechanisms of both American and Nigerian popular culture offered Crosby a way to control and reinterpret her ever-shifting relationship to identity and to both countries.

An Impossible American Portrait

After looking closely at *Portals* and the ways images work within the painting, I will conclude by stepping back and considering what the third-grade class glimpsed during their visit to the Whitney Museum: how the painting works in the world. Within weeks of being completed, *Portals* was installed at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York as part of the yearlong exhibition *Human Interest: Portraits from the Whitney Collection*. Originally intended to be the centerpiece of the fall 2016 exhibition entitled *Njideka Akunyili Crosby: Portals* at Victoria Miro in London, *Portals* was exhibited first in the 2016 Armory Show, a major annual contemporary art fair in New York, and never left Manhattan. The Whitney's speedy acquisition allowed for the painting to hang in the section of *Human Interest* titled *Self-Conscious* alongside works by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Rudolf Stingel, Lyle Ashton Harris, Shirin Neshat, Kalup Linzy, K8 Hardy, and Eleanor Antin. Therefore, *Portals* existed in multiple places at once, both hanging on the wall of the

10 For more see Kumari.

11 For more see Smith; McMillan.

Whitney in New York and serving as an absent namesake in London. When the title for the exhibition in London was explained, it referenced the painting currently on display in New York, resulting in a transnational exhibition reflecting the artist's own effort to manifest concurrent transnational geographies in her artwork as well as the international movement of images that is critical to her practice.

Therefore, the painting's display enacts its own form of dislocation. Crosby implored members of her audience at the Whitney in March to go see the exhibition *Portals* on any trips to London that fall (Crosby, Whitney 2016). Similarly, she asked her audience gathered at the Tate Modern London in October, to go view *Portals* at the Whitney over the course of any pending trips to New York (Crosby, Tate 2016). These comments reflect the global movement of contemporary art makers and audiences. But it also betrays Crosby's own distinct identification with her generation as Afropolitan. Popularized in the 2005 essay "Bye-Bye Babar (Or What is an Afropolitan?)" by Taiye Selasi on the website for the UK-based *The Lip Magazine*, "Afropolitan" describes the generation of African emigrants, who came of age after the postcolonial period. She defines the group as belonging to no single geography, "not citizens, but Africans of the world…Rather than essentialising the geographical entity, we seek to comprehend the cultural complexity; to honor the intellectual and spiritual legacy; and to sustain our parents' cultures" (Selasi). A sense of movement, the experience of home in multiple locations, and an enduring relationship to Africa are all critical to Selasi's delineation of the concept, and Crosby invokes it in explaining her process and herself. At the gallery Art + Practice in Los Angeles in 2015, Crosby defined Afropolitans as "cosmopolitan contemporary Africans… Africans who were born on the continent but don't live there anymore or born to African parents outside the continent or were born outside and went back…people who straddle multiple worlds" (James). Later in an interview with *W* Crosby defined Afropolitans as, "super-cosmopolitan, but trying to hold onto traditional things in their own way" (Solway). "Bye-Bye Babar" meanwhile, was reprinted in Crosby's only existent monograph *Njideka Akunyili Crosby: I Refuse to be Invisible* published in 2016 by the Norton Museum of Art.

As a self-portrait of a self-proclaimed Afropolitan, *Portals* offered the Whitney Museum an opportunity to include that complex diasporic identity under the umbrella of American art and portraiture, against waves of white supremacy, xenophobia and amplified nativist purity in the United States. By the time *Portals* premiered at the Armory Show, United States national news media was still in the early days of reporting increased anti-immigrant sentiment coming from the sea of contenders for the Republican presidential ticket. Hopefuls including former Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal were making statements equating immigrant difference with violence, such as "immigration without assimilation is invasion" (Kaplan). At the same time, Donald Trump notoriously described immigrants as "killing us" and embraced an "America first" ethos during his early campaign rallies (Politi). The acquisition and exhibition of *Portals* by the Whitney Museum represented a visual network that pushed back against definitions of America like Jindal's and Trump's by spanning multiple continents and embracing an enduring transnational multiplicitous position.

Installed in April 2016 and removed a year later, Portals remained on view during the increased pronouncement of hyper-nationalism in the United States. It was on view through Donald Trump's acceptance of the Republican presidential ticket in July 2016, through Election Day in November and through the first few months of Trump's presidency, including the early iterations of the "travel" or "Muslim ban" executive orders. The significance of the label accompanying *Portals* at the Whitney Museum shifted during display, as the rhetoric of nationalist purity got bolder. The label included the quote from Crosby: "I want to put the viewer in this space of confluence, of multiple things … It is this space where disparate elements come together, and the new space that comes out isn't just *this* plus *this*—it's like a whole new identity." Considering the history of the painting in place, or more appropriately across place, helps to clarify the new space created by *Portals* at the Whitney Museum. The urgency of the painting's inclusion and exhibition reveals a critical need to incorporate multiple expansive and changing identities as American.

The impact of Crosby's singular experience and construction of her Nigerian-ness in America, in addition to her embrace of Afropolitan identity, is echoed in her use of popular culture images and photographic readymades. Her incorporation of the photo-transfers manifested a means of resistance, which she has called "my mini coup" by using a portrait of herself she to create expanded versions of

both Nigeria and America that embrace identity as filtered and in process (James). Crosby's refusal to translate the different elements of her painting, to let varying degrees of recognition, exist side by side, simultaneously contradicting and complementing each other, favours a realistic representation of identity beyond nativism and xenophobia: particular, messy and impossible to ever fully discern.

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