Article

Digital Borders, Diasporic Flows and the Nigerian Transgender Beauty Queen Who Would Not Be Denied

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Abstract

In 2011, Miss Sahhara, a transgender woman from Nigeria with UK refugee status, was crowned First Princess at the world's largest and most prestigious beauty pageant for transgender women—Miss International Queen. The then Cultural Minister of Nigeria when contacted for comment responded that if she was transgender, she could not be Nigerian, and if she was Nigerian, she could not be transgender—a tacit denial of her very existence. In recent years, LGBT people "fleeing Africa" to the "Global North" has become a common media trope. Responses to this, emanating from a variety of African voices, have provided a more nuanced reading of sexuality. What has been absent from these readings has been the role of gender expression, particularly a consideration of transgender experiences. I understand transgender refugees to have taken up "lines of flight" such that, in a Deleuzian sense, they do not only flee persecution in countries of origin but also recreate or speak back to systems of control and oppressive social conditions. Some transgender people who have left, like Miss Sahhara, have not gone silently, using digital means to project a new political visibility of individuals, those who are both transgender *and* African, back at the African continent. In Miss Sahhara's case, this political visibility has not gone unnoticed in the Nigerian tabloid press. Drawing on the story of Miss Sahhara, this paper maps these flows and contraflows, asking what they might reveal about configurations of nationhood, gender and sexuality as they are formed at both the digital and physical interstices between Africa and the Global North.

Keywords: transgender refugee; diaspora; LGBT Africa; gender identity; queer migration

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A Beauty Queen

> From the street to the Internet, particularly on blogs, Facebook and Twitter, vitriolic tweets and venomous Facebook post are being thrown at Miss Sahhara, so strong-worded that, as a matter of fact, she seems to be the most hated indigene of the moment. (Lee 2017)

In 2004 two seemingly unconnected events took place. The first iteration of what would quickly become the largest and most prestigious beauty pageant in the world for transgender women had its inaugural show in Thailand (Martínez 2017). Thousands of kilometres away a transgender woman, named Miss Sahhara, left Nigeria for London believing that if she didn't escape her country of origin her next suicide attempt would be her final one (Miss Sahhara 2018, 46). Skip forward seven years and the words "I am contestant number 2 and I am representing the giant of Africa, NIGERIA" (Keeling 2012),[1] carried across the stage of the selfsame pageant for the first time in the pageant's history. This day was not only significant for the pageant which, in its history, had never had an entrant from the African continent let alone crowned a woman of colour, but for the entrant from Abuja, a refugee living in the UK, this was her moment of announcing herself to the world as transgender *and* Nigerian. Immediately a strong contender, using the international press the pageant functioned as the platform specifically and strategically chosen to establish Miss Sahhara as the "first transgender Nigerian." Though she would go on to win several crowns including Miss Super Sireyna Worldwide in the Philippines in 2014 (Mordi 2019), this moment was the one which brought her into the purview of the Nigeria she had left seven years prior and in particular its tabloid press.

It is arguable that the lack of organisations and visible trans community in Nigeria due to issues around safety, as with elsewhere historically, has allowed the media to play a critical role in providing the "facts" about what it might mean to be transgender and from Nigeria. Articles dating back to 2011, coinciding with the pageant, provide a particular archive increasingly focused on transgender people who have fled the country seeking asylum in the Global North. Headlines such as "Nigeria's Top Ten Transgenders [sic]" are not uncommon. Nothing has as yet been published on the representation of transgender people in media and tabloid press in the African continent, especially those considered in some way "infamous." There are of course several ethical questions regarding this archive—questions I do not attempt to address here but in another paper (Camminga 2020). Drawing on in-depth interviews with Miss Sahhara alongside her media archive, in this paper I consider the presentation and image, both visual and textual, of Miss Sahhara as cultivated, weaponised and deployed by her via

[1] As part of an ethical approach to working with deeply traumatic and violent online archives, at the request of Miss Sahhara, it is critical that I point out here that the documentary referred to—*Ladyboys*—was named after it was shot. Indeed, she was not told the name of the show until it had been released. Had she known she is quite clear she would have withdrawn her participation (Miss Sahhara, interview with the author in Crooked Billiard Hackney, London, 2019).

social media. I also consider the ways in which this is taken up by the online tabloid press in Nigeria. My aim here is to unpack the tensions that exist at the intersection of citizenship, nationhood, gender and sexuality as they are formed at both the digital and physical interstices between Africa and the Global North.

Studies on trans women's use of the Internet have largely focused on the safety and lucrative possibilities of online sex work (see Vartabedian 2019). Although even in this Julieta Vartabedian suggests that the subject is under researched. When media representations of refugees and asylum seekers have been considered as sites of study, the focus has most often been on the co-option of "sexual minority" or LGB refugees by media in the Global North. Rarely have we asked what it is that refugees themselves produce and project and how this is received. In this paper I am not interested in the media of the Global North, rather I am interested in how transgender refugees such as Miss Sahhara have taken up what Deleuze might call "lines of flight." This is not a line that simply flows in a linear direction or maintains a scripted trajectory, but rather a "radical movement of becoming, unsaddled by the imperatives of assimilation or imitation" (Vartabedian 2019, 164). This offers an engagement with transgender identity that is, as I have argued elsewhere (Camminga 2017; 2019), particularly critical to thinking through and about transgender and trans politics from the Global South. It is a movement which flows and has both forward and backward momentum. I am interested in how people like Miss Sahhara, transgender refugees using digital media, represent themselves and how this is received, rejected, refuted or appropriated by the media in Nigeria.

Miss International Queen

Considered the "transgender equivalent of Miss World," supported by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, and streamed to thousands of viewers annually all over the globe, Miss International Queen is a beauty pageant unlike any other (Warmerdam 2010). It is managed and owned by Tiffany's Show Pattaya Co., a cabaret company which bills itself as "the original transvestite [sic] cabaret show" (Tiffany's Show Pattaya Co. n.d.). The aims of the event include, strengthening the bond of the international transgender/transsexual community, providing a space for trans acceptance and human rights awareness and bridging the gap between the LGBT community and wider society (Bueide 2013, 99). Participants must be "naturally born genetic male" and between the ages of 18 and 36 years in the year in which they compete. Those under 18 need the permission of a parent or guardian (Tiffany's Show Pattaya Co. 2016). They must also be "pre- or post-operation transvestite or transsexual," proof of which may be asked for at the organisers of the competition's discretion. The judges include plastic surgeons, local celebrities and theatre directors, "all looking for feminine beauty, elegance and grace" (Keeling 2012). Running over five days, the key rounds used to judge the finalists and winners are national costume, swimwear and judges' questions. Critically for Miss Sahhara, entrants must (Tiffany's Show Pattaya Co. 2016),

> be a citizen, national or passport holder of a nation to be represented only. A copy of passport and/or birth certificate may be used for verification. Legal documents such as a working permit and permanent resident visa are not sufficient to be used to represent a country.

When Miss Sahhara entered Miss International Queen in 2011, she competed against 22 women to be crowned the most beautiful (trans) woman in the world (Keeling 2012). In her promotional video for Miss International Queen, entitled *Journey to Miss International Queen*, Miss Sahhara is seen walking towards the camera with the green and white of the Nigerian flag superimposed over her body, along with flashes of leopards and images of people around hut-like structures, all of which seemingly intended to indicate Africa and indeed the giant she claims as home, Nigeria. Though Miss Sahhara had moved to the UK to seek asylum in 2004, her country of birth, Nigeria, became the country which she represented in the pageant. She did so and would continue to do so in several pageants following this one to bring attention to the issues of LGBT people in her country of origin (Miss Sahhara 2018, 43). As she explains in a pre-pageant interview (Miss SaHHara 2011),

> I want to show the world … that we can be people who make a change in society. I moved to the UK because in the UK I have the opportunity to live my life and be myself, unfortunately in other parts of the world women like myself are not given that opportunity. We have prejudice, discrimination, being called names and harassed and unfortunately my country where I come from is one of those countries where people like myself do not exist. That's the reason why I have decided to represent Nigeria … that was where I was born. The UK gave me solace, it gave me a place to be, it gave me a home but Nigeria is where I come from and I believe that by representing Nigeria I could voice the plight of other women like myself in countries that are similar to Nigeria that are not allowing people to be themselves.

Given the uniqueness of Miss Sahhara's entrance into the world of transgender pageantry as both a black queen and a woman from Africa, her experience was filmed as part of a UK documentary series exploring the lives of trans women in Thailand, *LadyBoys*. The show "had several re-runs worldwide pulling total audience figures of over 1.4 million" (Miss Sahhara n.d.). It is fair to say given the audience of the documentary series and the online audience who watch the live-streaming of the pageant, that her entry into the competition was anything but quiet. For Miss Sahhara, sick of hearing that "there are no trans people in Nigeria," this is a moment she frames as her international debut (Norris 2018). As she explains in the *LadyBoys* documentary (Keeling 2012),

> Wearing this banner or sash … names Nigeria I am making a statement saying "I am here. I am proud. I am a transgender woman and this is who I am" … You say it doesn't exist in Nigeria. It does exist in Nigeria … they see it as immoral and wrong and I feel we've been given a great opportunity here [at Miss International Queen] … to celebrate ourselves as trans women.

Celebrate she did, on the 4th of November 2011 Miss Sahhara, representing "the giant of Africa," was crowned the First Princess at Miss International Queen. When asked about the impact of her win, Miss Sahhara explained that although she had launched herself onto an international stage as a transgender woman from Nigeria, the necessity of continued advocacy did not really register until it was reported that a journalist had asked the Nigerian Minister of Culture what he thought of her representing Nigeria in the pageant and her subsequent crowing. He responded by saying that if she was indeed trans she could not be Nigerian and if she was Nigerian it was impossible for her to be trans. For Miss Sahhara, this deniability by a country she had proudly represented was a turning point, the moment at which she explains she actively went "to war with the Nigerian state through the internet" (Miss Sahhara, interview with the author, De Singal Antwerp, TGEU, 2018).

The Battle to Speak Back

Pageants such as Miss International Queen have been criticised for following what is perceived as the traditional model of pageantry, and thus prioritising and rewarding "conformity to (racist and ageist) standards of beauty and talent for showmanship" (Martinez 2014, 691–92). Indeed, Miss Sahhara suggested that because she was the first black person to ever enter the competition it was indicated to her early on that it would have been impossible for her to win, as it would cause too much of an upset. However, she was crowned, as noted, First Princess, and in so doing Miss Sahhara became the public face of transgender identity in Nigeria. This particular crowning did not just make her a first princess, it secured her place as someone the judging panel considered to be the second most beautiful transgender woman, at that time, in the world.

Lines are relational. They are connected; they hold points, bisecting wider fields while also simultaneously establishing fields (Windsor 2015). Considering Miss Sahhara's trajectory to this point in her life, her crowning is a moment of recognition of her beauty and talent, one in which her image as a transgender woman proudly wearing a sash stating "Nigeria" is crucial. It is this, the moment which in a Deleuzian sense leaks, that forms a point of rupture. In his notes on the translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Brian Massumi explains that flight translates from *fuite* which "covers not only the act of fleeing or eluding but also flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, xvi). Miss Sahhara's visual image did not simply provide a narrative of transgender identity but a visual source of it, invested in her beauty which for her is deeply tied to being Nigerian. Projected across the Internet, into homes and bedrooms across the world, it is arguable that this can be understood as the essence of "flowing, leaking, and disappearing into the distance" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, xvi). As Marcia Ochoa highlights in her study of beauty pageants and femininity in Venezuela, when transformistas enter pageants, becoming "queen for a day" facilitates the projection of tranformistas or, in this case, trans women "*out onto an audience*, to show the world how beautiful or fabulous they are. It is power and authority, however momentary"

(Ochoa 2014, 109; emphasis in original). In appearing in a recognised and widely viewed international beauty pageant Miss Sahhara's crowning actively communicated that she is beautiful—not simply beautiful, but beautiful as a Nigerian woman. She thus became the holder of beauty acknowledged and affirmed by others even as, or especially because, she is Nigerian (Bueide 2013, 99).

A line of flight holds the possibility of change within escape "when a threshold between two paradigms is crossed" (Fournier 2014, 121). The pageant positively affirms that which her country of origin has denied, in a sense allowing her to inhabit her pariah status, one defined by her citizenship according to pageant rules, while also facilitating its projection back at her country of origin. As she explains about her own visibility (in Okafor 2017),

> By being visible in the media, we show that we exist and are just as "normal" as every other Nigerian. It removes the air of perversion that is used when telling our stories. The more we speak out, the more we change public opinion about us. The laws may not change anytime soon, but changing the public's perception of our community is more important.

Miss Sahhara was not the first to use the competition as a platform to affect public opinion. The 2009 winner Ali Haruna received widespread coverage in the Japanese press after her win. Much of the press focused on her struggle to access affirming healthcare in Japan. Her visibility and narrative "gathered attention from Japanese people, and … created sympathy and understanding toward transgendered persons" (Kuwano 2012). In thinking through the use of cyberspace by queer Russian Israelis, Adi Kunstman argues that the Internet can act as a technology used by particular communities such as migrants to "disrupt dominant discourses of nation, ethnicity and culture" (Kuntsman 2009, 16). In doing so it is highly likely that at some point the response will be violent. A line of flight often challenges the norm and in so doing can elicit traumatic and violent responses. The responses from the Nigerian press and eventually the Nigerian public, for what the Nigerian tabloids proclaimed as "Nigeria's first transgender" (Dachen 2017), were far less positive than those of the Japanese public. As Miss Sahhara explains (in Okafor 2016),

> I was completely naïve. I did not expect the backlash and criticisms. In many ways, it was good that I didn't know that the attention from Nigerians would be mostly negative because if I had known, I wouldn't have taken the steps to come out so publicly. After coming out, the hate made me stronger and more determined to live my life fully and proudly, without fear of persecution. I wanted to prove the doubters and the haters wrong, by living my dreams fully. I hope that one day I'll influence one or more LGBTQI+ Nigerians to come out and be themselves, without fear.

The live-streaming of the pageant allowed Miss Sahhara to project her image as a Nigerian transgender woman around the world. A line of flight is "not one of individual escape, but of forcing what is escaped to escape too" (Windsor 2015, 167), but there is

no guarantee that this, that which has escaped, will create new openings or greater understanding. The backlash she faced as a refugee, a migrant, someone who escaped, is indicative of that. Critically, Kuntsman argues that though the online and offline world have long been treated as discrete from each other, violence online is often carried offline, reverberating in and through the bodies and psyches it is directed at (Kuntsman 2009, 5).

The Threshold of the National

Writing from the Canadian perspective Ainsley Jenicek, Alan Wong and Edward Ou Jin Lee argue that what they call "sexual minority refugees," transgender people among them, "are one of many groups of bodies used ideologically to uphold the bifurcation between the North/West and the Rest" (Jenicek, Wong, and Lee 2009, 638). As such, these bodies are used by the press as mediating agents to shore up the perception of the Global North as forward-thinking, progressive, enlightened and culturally superior. When Miss Sahhara fled Nigeria to the UK, after being imprisoned in 2004, she was quite clear that she understood the UK to be the site of her "redemption" (xlivemichelle 2016). As she explains, "it was either staying in Nigeria, continue being bullied, harassed, beaten up, and succeed in killing myself, or moving away to a more open minded society to live my dreams to my fullest potentials, so I took the latter (xlivemichelle 2016). This open-minded society was the UK. David Murray, talking to this narrative, suggests that there is often a "hegemonic discourse across numerous media platforms in which sexual, gendered and nationalist identities and cultures are related, conflated and organised into a nationalist morality tale" (Murray 2016, 3). Within this tale, the site of escape for refugees fleeing on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity is often cast as entirely barbaric and backwards. Whereas the place in which they arrive, usually in the Global North, is cast as a site of safety, empowerment and indeed enlightenment regarding sexual and gender identity issues.

The differences in treatment around matters of sexual and gender identity enable journalists, usually situated in the Global North, to highlight implicit and explicit distinctions between the two socio-geographical entities, resulting in the culturalisation of homophobia and transphobia (Jenicek, Wong, and Lee 2009, 652). Murray suggests that what this geographical distinction does is create "old homes" and "new homes" which are constructed "in ways that re-inscribe raciliased colonial tropes emphasising the binary opposition of the civilised, socio-sexually inclusive white … nation-state versus the uncivilised, homophobic, non-Westernised nation state" (Murray 2016, 136).

For this largely linear narrative to work most effectively, it requires the outright support or, at the very least, complacency of the refugee in question. Given the power differential and the desire for safety on which the asylum system is constructed globally, it often makes sense strategically for a refugee to agree wholeheartedly with a narrative which demonises their country of origin. Miss Sahhara, unlike many other refugees and migrants, never casts Nigeria as purely backward or barbarous. She consistently speaks to the redemption of the country and in entering the various pageants, continues to

proudly wear the sash of the country as its representative. When she does she draws comparison between the two sites, the UK and Nigeria, in ways which highlight the issues in both, but rather than cast Nigeria as entirely inherently barbaric and/or backward, she instead focuses on the role of religion and the need for greater information. She reveals (in Mordi 2019),

> I never rejected myself, society and religion rejected me. I was told I did not have the right to exist, I was told I am an abomination, a disgrace to "manhood" and an immoral person for just living my life as I saw fit. Thanks to society, my life took a dark turn because of the amount of hate and discrimination I endured when I lived in Nigeria and still endure even in the UK where I am now afforded some positive opportunities and freedom to be myself.

Murray notes that media platforms create the image of the victimised citizen fleeing their country of origin in search of a new home as a now "grateful potential citizen," and in so doing media works to establish "homologous borders of sexual orientation and gender identity, nation and culture" at the heart of which lies the normative transgender or sexual refugee (Murray 2016, 131). Miss Sahhara, in her participation in these pageants, her active visibility, her claiming of her Nigerian identity and her utilisation of media, is anything but homologous. She presents a rupture between two spaces. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 204) elucidate,

> lines of flight, for their part, never consist in running away from the world but rather in causing runoffs, as when you drill a hole in a pipe; there is no social system that does not leak from all directions, even if it makes its segments increasingly rigid in order to seal the lines of flight. There is nothing imaginary, nothing symbolic, about a line of flight. There is nothing more active than a line of flight, among animals or humans.

Her projection is a leak, an active project of claiming her identity at the level of the national and corporeal, one signified by the very sash she drapes across her body every time she steps onto a stage. It is not symbolic; it is active in its intention to claim a space both on and offline. In her ability to project back and her active claiming of this project of transgender existence, through her war via the Internet, she has created a line a flight that "is itself the living weapon it forges … Lines of flight are realities; they are very dangerous for societies, although they can … sometimes manage to keep them to a minimum" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 204).

Following the Leak: Tabloids

It is undeniable that "media outlets frame public narratives in ways that are important to cultural understanding" (Tamilin, Quinlan, and Bates 2017, 705). Feminist theorising has long taught us that the media plays an integral (often presented as outrightly nefarious) role in constructing perceptions of the social world. Given the lack of a visible trans movement in Nigeria, largely due to repression, harassment and discrimination, the news media is arguably one of the few sites where Nigerians might garner information more generally about trans people. Though she appears quite

prolifically across Nigerian social media and in the general Nigerian tabloid press (and indeed tabloid press as far as Zimbabwe), there is one publication which provides more coverage of her than any other, Pulse NG. What makes Pulse NG particularly interesting is that while some percentage of the Nigerian tabloid press remains anonymous, Isaac Dachen, the editor of Pulse, and the author of many of the articles about Miss Sahhara, does not. Described as "Nigeria's new media network," Pulse's aim is as follows: "There are many voices out there covering news, music, movies and entertainment in general. Pulse Nigeria is there to make those voices louder and connect with a global audience" (Pulse NG n.d.). With 1.7 million followers on Instagram (Pulse NG @pulsenigeria247 n.d.) and 3.3 million followers on Facebook (Pulse Nigeria n.d.), the audience for the tabloid is by no means small. It is arguable that if there was a force invested in managing the impact of Miss Sahhara's narrative and image, it would be the tabloids.

Much of Dachen's writing is culled from Miss Sahhara's Instagram and Facebook. In fact, it is not uncommon for tabloids to simply cut and paste images or text directly, without context or permission, and release this to their readership as "news." They can do so because Miss Sahhara is both a refugee and a transgender woman, positions which ensure she cannot hold the tabloid press in Nigeria accountable. The emergence of the trans subject, particularly the obsession with trans women, within the Nigerian media can be traced back to the moment of Miss Sahhara's emergence and her very public proclamation of her identity as a transgender Nigerian woman. Since then Pulse has published a series of harmful stories with unethical headlines and content, such as the following excerpts (Dachen 2015 and Dachen 2014, respectively):

> Winner of the Transgender beauty pageant, **Miss Sahhara Henson** [sic], born … [DEADNAMING][2] …, is now a sensation among both women and transgenders [sic] alike. The fact that she is **Nigerian** [sic] and looks so much like she was born a woman, only makes her even more unique.

> Nigerian number one transgender, Ms Sahhara has achieved one of her long term dreams of becoming Miss World Transgender Beauty Queen.

The press have often actively made up stories and falsified images. They have also in several instances conjured up former classmates and at one point Miss Sahhara's supposed father. Former classmates have been particularly cruel. The media has revelled in reprinting letters riddled with insults, death threats and accusations of mental deficiency. As a response Miss Sahhara has made several statements regarding their use

[2] As part of an ethical approach to working with deeply traumatic and violent online archives, at the request of Miss Sahhara, I have redacted the name used in the article title referenced. Instead this has been replaced with the term "deadnaming" to indicate the violent practice of referring to a trans person by a name they no longer use. I also use "deadnaming" rather than simply replacing it with "deadname" to indicate the active role of journalists and media in perpetuating particular kinds of violence.

of both her image and their lack of ethics. She also released a video campaign stating that she is valid and asking those who support her to do the same. In the videos she explains (Miss SaHHara 2015),

> I am valid just like you I have got blood running in my veins. I am valid because I am human. I am valid because I am biological. I am valid because I am not immoral. I am valid because I am most definitely a woman.

The Nigerian tabloid press responded almost immediately with an article entitled "Nigerian Transgender Is Sultry in New Photos, Says She's Valid." Deleuze and Guattari note that though a line of flight or rupture might exist, this does not mean that organisations will not work to restore power and restratify everything in an attempt to regain that which is lost and reconstitute the subject according to the perceived acceptable standard (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 9). In 2016 Miss Sahhara directly addressed her blogger and journalist critics in Nigeria, acknowledging their reporting of her, their restratification of her image and her gender by constantly referring to her as a man. Written on her Facebook page (Dachen 2016; emphasis in original), she offered the following as an "education":

> I have never lived as a gay man in Nigeria. How could I have struggled as a gay man when I have never been a man, as unfathomable as it may be for you and your readers, it is a fact. I know my validation as the person I say I am doesn't come from you or anyone else, rather it comes from me, I wear the shoes, I know where it hurts and I alone can tell you how it feels … But when you lot publish the wrong messages in order to get attention for your blogs it encourages hate and transphobia in Nigeria and beyond. As a "journalist/blogger" you should have the duty of care for all your subjects when writing about them, especially marginalised subjects such as the LGBTQI+ community. You all have immense power to influence your readers positively or negatively, so I suggest you educate yourselves, and your readers, instead of inciting hate. Yes it is sensitive to talk or write about the LGBTQI+ community because we are in danger all around the world due to misconceptions, bigotry and lack of education … JUST BECAUSE I HAD MEDICAL CORRECTION TO ALIGN MY BRAIN WITH MY BODY DOESN'T MAKE MY CHILDHOOD AS A FEMALE INVALID … MY SEXUALITY HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH MY IDENTITY AS A WOMAN EITHER I AM A STRAIGHT WOMAN … WHO I GO TO BE WITH DOESN'T DEFINE WHO I WAKE UP AS … NO I DID NOT "TRANSITION". JUST BECAUSE I WAS ASSIGNED A CERTAIN GENDER ON PAPER WHEN I WAS A BABY DOESN'T MAKE ME LESS OF A FEMALE AS A CHILD … SOME TRANS PEOPLE AND MYSELF STILL USE THE WORD "TRANSITION", I DON'T ANYMORE BECAUSE CORRECTING MY LIFE MEDICALLY IS NOT A SWITCH FROM ONE THING TO ANOTHER, IT IS RATHER AN ENHANCEMENT OF WHO I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN.

The Battle Rages On

> I didn't join this competition to get the confirmation that I am accepted in society. I joined it to make a statement to Nigeria that as a trans woman you can do this, you can be here and be free. (Ms Sahhara cited in Keeling 2012).

As perhaps one of the most fascinating developments in relation to Miss Sahhara's visibility and the ongoing tension with Nigerian media, it would seem that almost no story about Miss Sahhara can be written by a tabloid or newspaper in Nigeria without starting by referring to her as a "Nigerian transgender" or "Nigerian transgender woman"—a claim that if we are to take the Minister of Culture's words into account establishes her as both Nigerian and transgender, linking her trans identity very much to her national identity and her citizenship, something which for Sahhara lies at the very heart of her own activism. Following the Miss International Queen pageant, Miss Sahhara went on to enter several well-known beauty pageants for transgender women including Miss Trans Star International and Super Sireyna, which she won. Throughout her platform has remained consistent. Her campaign has always mentioned Nigeria as her home, albeit a problematic one, focusing on the need for education to change people's minds and the role of the media in doing so. For Miss Sahhara pageantry, on a global stage, is a form of protest, a way in which to speak back to "transphobia in Africa" (Monika and MIss Sahhara 2014). As she explains (in Mordi 2019),

> we don't hear about it in media, because the subject of being transgender makes many people in our communities uncomfortable. The media portrays trans women as freaks, perverts, sexual deviants and rapists. In doing so, it encourages misconceptions in society it mirrors … LGTBIQ Nigerians are not afforded the opportunity to be seen as humans, we are always seen as evil in media and society. We must change that! People forget that LGBTIQ people also pay their taxes like every other Nigerian citizen, they have the same blood running in their veins, and we were family first before religion, gender, sexuality, class, wealth, and culture divided us.

In speaking to the way being transgender might relate to theorising lines of flight, Matt Fourier notes that though Massumi's translation of *fuite* is insistent on the lack of relation to flying, alternative translations speak to "an Icarian fugue, an escape too glorious to have already happened but still there, open, somewhere between 'right now' and the closest future" (Fournier 2014, 122). Miss Sahhara as a transgender refugee claims both country of refuge and country of origin, a dual and duelling citizenship status that rotates around the persecution she experiences due to her gender identity. The line of flight for Miss Sahhara is one which flows between Nigeria and the UK but leaks around and within those two spaces and indeed in Thailand through the Internet and social media. It is not always a narrative, visual or textual, that she can control, but it is one that has slowly established her as Nigerian and transgender, a challenge to a state which would deny this.

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