

Naija Akatarians II
The Nigerian Diaspora in Vienna
and their Contribution to Understanding Austrian Society



By Happy Akegbeleye & Petja Dimitrova

There are less and less of us.
Many Africans are leaving.

But many are born and raised here.
So there is actually more
and more of us.



Many, regardless of their legal status, are leaving, due to a lack of prospects. Nigerian families have moved away, because of the racism their children face. Despite her good grades, a friend's daughter has consistently experienced rejection at school. She never receives any support. As many parents lack the necessary knowledge or language skills to navigate through the school system, they prefer to move away, to the UK, for example. Even well-educated and qualified Black people are leaving.

I don't stay Vienna for almost twenty years now and up till today it remains highly repressive. But I go stay and I go change am.



Make I tell you: I just arrived as aduro, oyinbo call it an asylum seeker. My first interview wey I face na about how I take enter this country and where I pass enter. About my "route."

I wanted to explain the reasons, but was told to keep it short. They were obviously not interested at all; they just wanted to get rid of me.



Na so ooh, I'm in my mid-forties and I've been in Vienna for almost twenty years now. I merely survive, through paper-sharing, and I need to avoid stops and searches. I have no documents, not even the one for registration, the *Meldezettel*. My three children, who were born here, only have their birth certificates. We all live together, but I'm in constant fear of deportation. I try to act cool, but in reality I'm deeply depressed and mentally exhausted. I push it aside, but I really don't know how much longer I can handle this.



Some players in our football club *FC One Love** have been with the team for more than ten years, and yet, there is no solution for them. Many remain undocumented. Legalization is a major psychological problem. You can even notice it in their game, in the way they behave, in their lack of concentration. They lock themselves in, but you can't survive in isolation. You rely on donations. The team serves as a social, a therapeutic place.

I'm a player in the youth football academy of a Top Club in Austria. But I play for the Slovak national team U15, because I don't have an Austrian passport. For a career in Austria, I would have to renounce my two other citizenships. But why should I? I'm just being discovered and I'm wanted there. And *Oida*, it takes far too long to obtain an Austrian passport, it's very expensive and you risk a very long procedure, as they are just looking for reasons to deny it.



Even for those among us, who are, due to sex work, victims of human trafficking, there are no options left for obtaining documents. Some of these women are very young. They conceive, and end up as single mothers without any access to public support. They have to fend for themselves.



I miss my dad very much. The Austrian authorities won't let him live with us...



Well, his residence had been denied. Although I'm an Austrian citizen, we are married, we share custody for our child and I am pregnant with a second one, the authorities, MA 35 and even the court, won't let us live our lives together. They argue that our and our children's right to a family life are not being violated, as we can stay in touch digitally. We should use modern communication tools to maintain the bond and to ensure "the right to regular and direct contact with both parents," as stated in the Austrian constitution. It's not ideal for the children to use screens, they admit, but this is on us. As we started our family life with the knowledge of my husband's "uncertain immigration status," the protection of the right to a family life as foreseen in the European Convention on Human Rights does not apply to us.



We are a group of several women, mothers, who do not receive child benefits or any other financial support for our children. It's denied to us, due to bureaucratic harassment and obstacles caused by formalities, involving MA 35 and other authorities. Some lose their children to the child welfare services – *the Jugendamt* – others face deportation.

The community is full of taboos! People don't really want to talk about their problems. They don't want to expose themselves, because they fear being seen as "losers."

Only information about job opportunities, health services, school, or the Jugendamt has been shared. Many of us are just lost when confronted with the bureaucracy and the legal system in this country. It's hard to grasp it. We struggle with the German language, but formal/bureaucratic German can make you go crazy.



The *Jugendamt* is a real issue in the community. We, as a family, had a very traumatic experience. My 8-year-old got into a fight at school and boasted about his strong father. He just created some boyhood story. The *Jugendamt* got involved and my children were questioned. The kids assured that they hadn't experienced violent behavior at home, but the social worker didn't believe them – and so we ended up in court. The procedure lasted more than two years: they visited our home several times, checked our housing situation, whether there was enough space for the children, if all of them had individual beds and really slept there. They checked if and how we spent time together as a family etc. And then the *Jugendamt* claimed that we, as parents, work too much and don't spend enough time with our children. Luckily the judge, a woman, insisted that women should work and that it's quite normal to have to manage a job and children. So, that is how we won the case.



Once, in school, we watched a movie about Michael Jackson, who was abused by his father. I made some jokes about my father. The *Jugendamt* got involved and they questioned me about my "violent African father." I had to see the school psychologist and there were some meetings scheduled with my white mom. After a while, they confirmed that everything was okay. I receive a lot of love and affection from my parents. In school, I'm focused. I'm usually the best student. I have good grades. I'm nice, but they didn't believe me. Schools today have to change. They don't teach us about Black history there. When there are pictures of brown people, my friends and I, we make jokes about who of us it could be.



Sadly, my white mother has to raise me alone. I don't even know my father. He was deported to Nigeria fifteen years ago, when I was born. I have no access to Black culture.

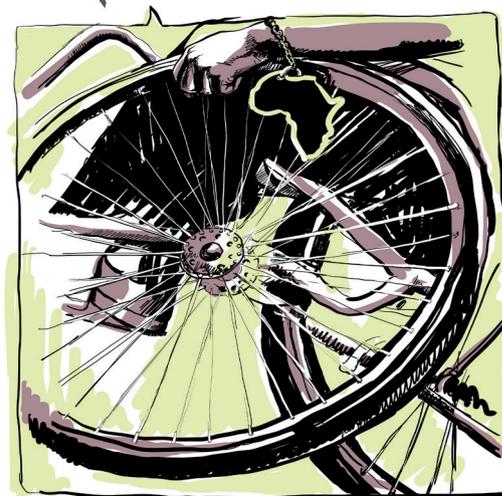
Hey, come join us! We are a group of Black youngsters in *SFC*. We're all between 14 and 20 years old. We're all about self-organization and creating a safe space. We want to have a sense of normalcy without constantly feeling like a minority. Anyone who identifies as Black can join. There are two groups, one for girls and one for boys, framed rather by gender identity than by biology. We discuss topics such as identity, belonging and sexuality – also beyond the constraints of our families. Many participate, some come to listen – they are present, but remain silent.



Do you like soccer? We are the eight Black players of a youth team, and we always stick together. Funny enough we're all Nigerian. We joke a lot about being Black, about who is lighter or darker, and such silly stuff.



Don't stay alone! My son is in a wheelchair and has experienced racism in his integration class. We talk a lot about how he can stand up for himself.



Good to talk. My parents initially came as students to London and Vienna and have been living together here since the 1980s. They worked hard in poorly paid jobs, my father for years as a taxi driver. They didn't teach us their language, so Yoruba for us was a kind of code language. They spoke a very broken German with us, maybe a translated Yoruba. To this day, deeper and more personal conversations are full of misunderstandings, as we lack a common language and understanding of expressions and meanings. I have been taking care of my mother since my father passed away in 2022. I accompany her to the hospital, address her loneliness and financial difficulties. I even earn money for her and some siblings in Nigeria.



I know this, ooh. I've been in Vienna since the 1980s and I've been a pensioner since 2014. Actually, I want to spend my sunset years in Oyo state. I even tried to live there for nine months, but the country is really not safe. The healthcare system barely functions, so I don't trust it. Also, being a widow is a challenge, as single women still lack acceptance and possibilities. Well, I hope the situation will improve. In the meantime, I will stay here, close to my grandchildren. I have good ties with other Black seniors. We engage in social projects in Nigeria and are connected with the Nigerian diaspora in the world. We are philanthropists and visit places such as Bratislava, Salzburg and Klagenfurt. We try to enjoy life.

I be pensioners too and na Celestial church I dey for Vienna, the oldest Nigeria church for here. In the 1980s, the church provided substantial assistance to Africans regarding money, accommodations etc., but allegedly, after police raids, such activities were suspended.



I nor fit go church because I need to rest my body, as I don work well well. But as women are more isolated in this society, churches are more popular among them. It's festive there, new clothes are shown off and they can sing together. Nevertheless, nowadays many women turn to social media platforms like TikTok to share their problems and stories and to seek solutions. Some even make money from this, they hope for a lot of clicks or they sell small items online.





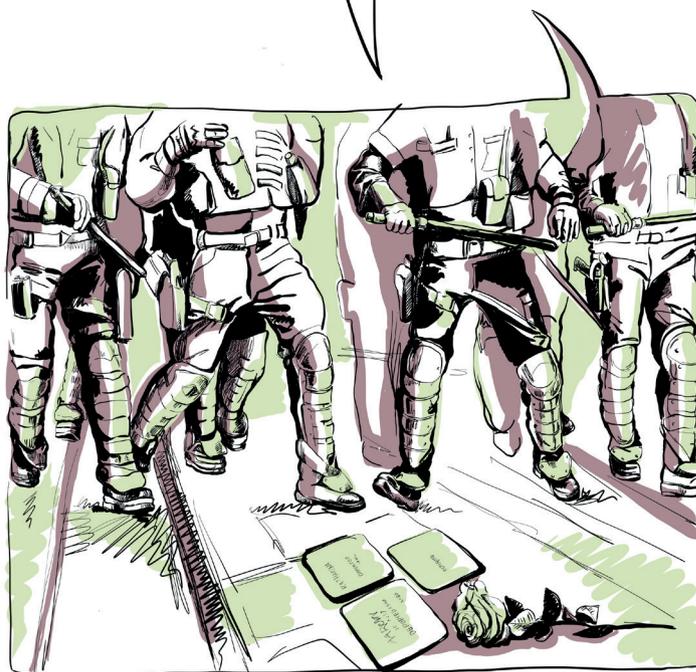
I've been here since 2009 and I have strong ties to the Nigerian community. However, I no longer attend my church as I can't afford it any longer. Our pastor, for instance, put a lot of pressure on us for money. He kept talking about rent costs and how the church is threatened in its existence. He even made the amounts of peoples' individual donations public. Then he preached a lot about "the enemy," about being suspicious when it comes to friendships. It turned out that he was pursuing his own interests with the members.

But people still dey go Africa churches because dey make you feel at home and make everything dey normal. There's not much left for us in Austria. Other social spaces, such as pubs, hair salons or afro shops are constantly being raided by the police and other authorities.



I really miss my Nigerian people, but my child and I stay away from the community. It's not safe for us. I'm a single transgender father, living with a Convention passport, and I want to avoid homophobia and transphobia. I want a safe life here. So, my life is imbedded in the queer community. Nigeria is no longer an option for me. That chapter is closed.

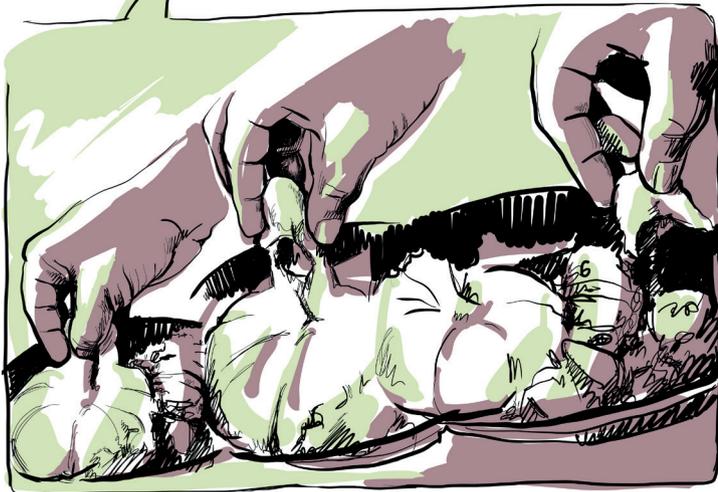
Safe space? There is no safe space in Austria! Some years ago, the WEGA, a kind of special police force stormed my apartment and left behind devastation, destruction and broken doors. I was brought into custody and spent a few days in detention. In the urgent procedure, all allegations turned out to be a mistake. A mixup! I was released and got compensated with a few hundred Euros. But I was advised not to accept it, because the police would seek revenge. Most of us decline compensation payments. And every day we face embarrassment due to racial profiling, arrests, mixups and that sort of thing.



Many African establishments have been raided by the police, especially in 2016-17, allegedly due to a migration wave from Italy. Now, all these young people are gone. I had a restaurant back then. The police did various stops and searches of everyone, our bodies, papers, everything. As the owner, I protested, but they found some drugs and kept returning. Several undocumented persons were arrested, possibly to be deported. And the customers stayed away. A police officer advised me to screen all clients and to not allow any like that. But how should I do that? We, as owners of African restaurants, got together and hired a lawyer. Things improved somewhat, but I was already worn out and withdrew. Only a few places survived, but they have strict clientele policies, of which I am not part.



The police will even enter your plate of food. Several times after work, I visited an African restaurant with friends, the ambassador and others. Just as we took our first bite of food, a police raid took place, and we all had to show our IDs with greasy hands or even lie on the ground. They called it a routine check.

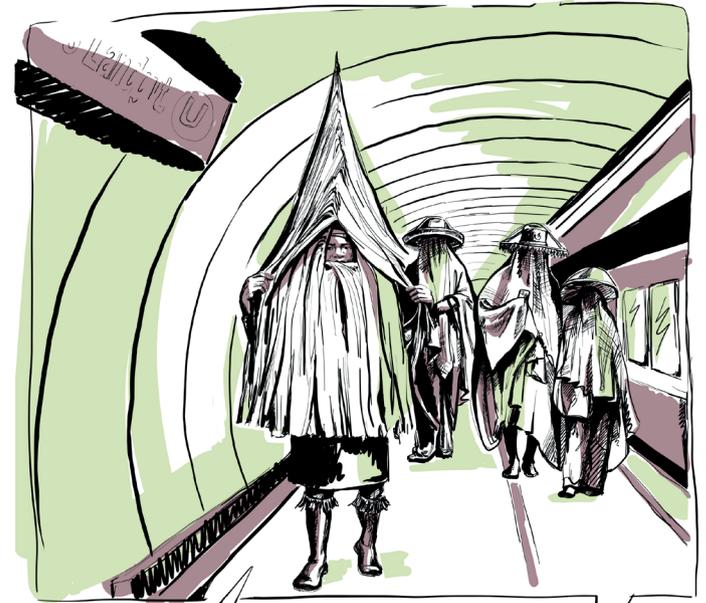


My barber shop was raided and destroyed by the police several times, but I don't seek compensation, because even a lawyer told me that I would just have even more trouble with the police then.

Quite recently, my twelve-year-old and I were subjected to racial profiling while waiting to board a bus to visit the countryside. More than 50 people were standing in line, but the police came straight to us, asking for our passports. I told my child to film the incident. I asked the police to act professionally and I refused to hand over my passport, but after some fussy denunciation, I gave it to them. Months later, I received a penalty for disturbance of public order and insulting a public official. I appealed. Luckily, we had the video evidence, that showed no wrongdoing on my part. So, in the end, the judge gave the officers a tutorial on what it means to disturb the public peace and revoked the fine. My child is now very eager to become a lawyer.



I have experienced this multiple times. Once, I was walking in the city center among a crowd of tourists, talking on the phone, an urgent call, when, all of a sudden, I got stopped by plainclothes police. They asked me to show my ID, and I had to end my phone call abruptly. The officer took a picture of my ID with her phone. When I requested her duty number, she declined, although she has to give me that information. I filed a complaint at the police department, but they just justified the action.



As I mainly commute to work, I don't experience that many police controls. Among friends, we advise each other to stay calm and conflict-free. We try not to gather in public and not to draw attention to ourselves. We become invisible. But many of us have to deal with mental health issues. People are really being made sick.

I work on construction sites through placements by a temporary job agency, a *Leihfirma*. As an undocumented person, I can't have a permanent position. Most of my colleagues are Eastern Europeans and we have some things in common. Work places in Vienna are diverse, but in the outskirts of the city and in the surrounding areas, it's mainly Austrians from neighboring villages. In these placements, I often deal with not being greeted and just being ignored by my co-workers. I can somehow live with that, but if the n-word is used, I get really angry and talk back.



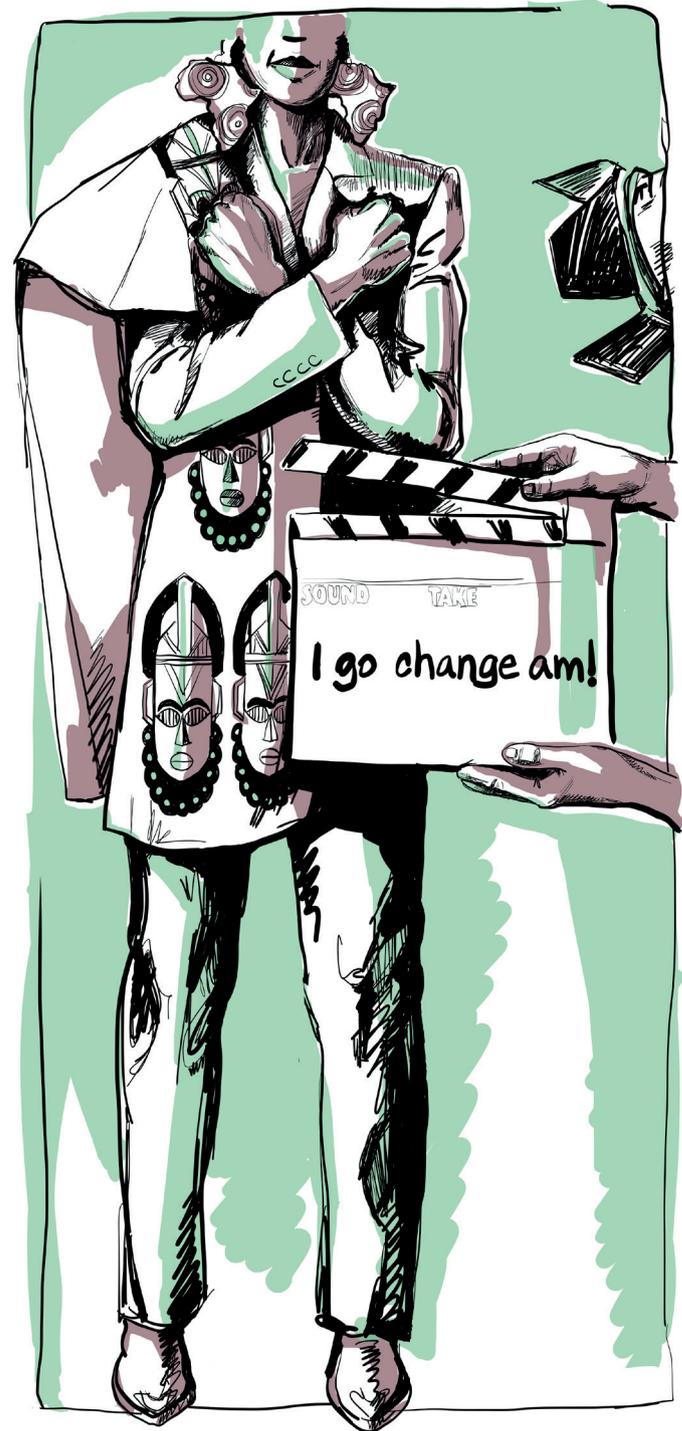
I also work through a *Leihfirma*, in the waste and recycling sector. Every week, I am dispatched to three different workplaces. Everywhere, migrants do the dirty work, and Austrians have the supervisory positions. I am always assigned heavy tasks. And I experience a lot of rude and oppressive treatment from my colleagues with remarks like "Use your brain!", "Are you stupid?", "You idiot!", but also the n-word. There is no labor council, a *Betriebsrat*, or any supportive colleagues for filing complaints. I really have the feeling that migrant workers are pitted against each other.



Recently, I had an issue with an elderly fake-white colleague, who constantly tries to offload her own tasks onto me. I got annoyed and stood up for myself. This somehow stopped her, but she continues with foolish comments that I am "like a lion in the jungle, far too angry and emotional."

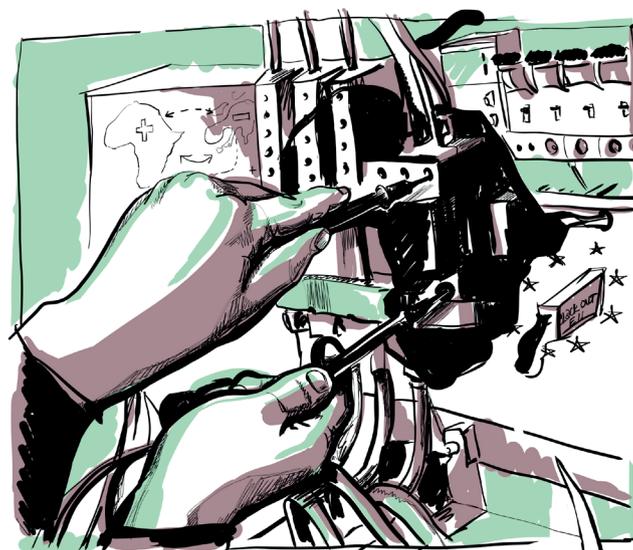


I'm an actress in the Austrian film industry, but I also have another regular job. Living with a child, I need financial security. The art field is tough, because I receive short contracts that I have to accept or decline. Recently, I had a role, but they wanted to 'fix' my accent by dubbing it in German. Sadly, they won't choose a Black Austrian voice. There are only a few Blacks in the film industry. At times I am mistaken for a cleaning lady.



In the hotel where I work, there are also many African girls. They are funny and gossip all the time. But as there are lot of homophobic comments, I keep my distance, because this is difficult to endure for me as a transgender man.

From time to time, I encounter other gay colleagues at my job placements. None of them come out. We all conceal ourselves, so we don't stick together, but I am used to living hidden as a gay anyway. Life is uncertain and unsafe. I try to frequent my queer Africans' association, but often I'm too exhausted and tired after work for a queer life and activism.



I also work through a *Leihfirma*, but I earn quite well as an electrician, and I like the flexibility. Like this, I can take a leave of absence for a few months and travel to Nigeria and then start working again without having to search for a new job. I have family in Africa that I need to visit, and two kids here in Vienna, for whom I'm there. I'm well qualified, but this doesn't protect me from abuse. My colleagues often seem to be surprised that I'm not dealing and that I'm highly educated. Sometimes, I'm even approached as a dealer. That's really annoying!

I am originally from Port Harcourt, but I have been in Austria for a long time. I'm a trained welder with a good salary. I have worked for various companies with branches all over the country, but it's a bit tiring, not really fitting with my family life. When the job conditions worsened, I resigned from my permanent position: welding requires regular breaks, as one is constantly exposed to toxins and dust. We need masks, it's very wearying. Suddenly, there was only one lunch break. I complained to the *Betriebsrat*, a very weak and disinterested one, because they wanted me to act as the spokesperson and negotiate at the forefront. So, I left and now I work for a *Leihfirma* that enables me to choose the work locations.





I've been in a permanent position for one year now. The company manufactures screws, metal parts, and stuff like that. It's located in the outskirts of Vienna, in Weinviertel, in Lower Austria. We are six to seven Nigerians working there. Almost all of the others are Austrians from nearby villages. We all work hard. We have fun during the breaks, and after work we go out together. This seems to trigger some people, though. Recently, I found a cloth with holes cut out for eyes and a mouth – a reference to the KKK – in the shared changing room! It was quite shocking, violent, and traumatizing. One Black colleague immediately quit. We informed the supervisors and the *Betriebsrat*, but they didn't do much. They stick together, when it comes down to it.

Where are we supposed to complain about bullying and racism if the *Betriebsrat* considers this to be kind of "annoying"? We have to live with the consequences in the workplace.

At work, I counter bullying, racism and sexism with jokes. I try to turn the tables, create confusion. I swallow my anger and refer to the law, even if I don't have trust in it.

E good to get contact and connection with oyinbo people in case you need help and information from dem. I dey always find ways to fight for my rights.

As a Black, you just know that racism is there and na part of the struggle in this country. And this nor be my problem but all those anyhow and yeye people around.



Our children and the younger generations are way more active. They are visible in various jobs, in schools, striving for higher positions. They want to have their place in all areas of society. We stay strong.



Naija Akatarians II

The Nigerian Diaspora in Vienna and their Contribution to Understanding Austrian Society

By Happy Akegbeleye and Petja Dimitrova

In this grafik novel Black Austrians from different perspectives and generations talk about their shared experiences of arriving and living in Vienna, of exclusion and racism, self-organization, self-empowerment, and much more.

It brings together the diverse experiences and assessments, discussed in the numerous interviews. These stories, from and about the lives of Black people in Austria, comprise a kind of survey of the present – as a part of Austria's history. They signify and mark a present in which anti-Black racism is deeply embedded in the public sphere, in the workplace, in schools, in administration, in the ranks of the police, in the justice system, and in countless other spaces. The experiences and accounts of the Black children, teenagers, women, men, pensioners, workers, artists, athletes, queer people, families or communities very clearly highlight democratic deficits in the rule of law or respect for the dignity of migrants in Austria. They make visible both specific forms of structural violence in mainstream society today, as well as the contradictions and ambivalences of their own actions or of the attitudes of their communities. A central element in the project is the drawings that illustrate, on the one hand, what is being told, and, on the other hand, inquire of a future that pursues an inclusive and transcultural Austria, beyond violence, exploitation, and discrimination, as well as pursuing a good life for everyone who (wants to) lives Here.

Naija Akatarians II is a follow-up project to Naija Akatarians: Nigerian Migrants in Vienna Since the 1960s. (2016)

It explores the migration hi/stories of Nigerians in Austria through artistic means.

<https://naijaakatarians.wordpress.com>

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