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Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and the Diaspora

Edited by Abimbola Adedokun · Toyin Falola

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African Histories and Modernities

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abimbola Adedokun and Toyin Falola

Questions have always been posed on the relationship between creativity and politics: Is art perpetually called upon to be a site of personal and cultural politics? Why is the social and political liberation of black subjects still being hinged on art expressivity? Through the decades, black artists and black productions in Africa(n) diasporas have been made, seen, and interpreted through a somewhat inflexible category of politics.¹ Does art by the marginalized, the subaltern, the excluded, the forgotten, the dominated, fulfill the liberatory potentials critics ascribed to it? What other possibilities do political art fulfill that transcends the politics? Beyond art as a symbolic system or creative strategies constructed towards fashioning, expressing, or supporting a political agenda, what about the goal of art and its creative processes as means of personal fulfillment or individual aggrandizement?

Contributors to the discourse have played around Murray Edelman's contention that, "art is the fountainhead from which political discourse, beliefs about politics, and consequent action ultimately spring."² This is evident in many ways, particularly, the ways art productions have been called upon to fulfill statist politics. Art production was part of the symbolic means of communicating the legitimacy of Obas' power and

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majesty by objectifying social fulfillment and embodying social memory in ancient Benin empires.³ In seventeenth century, Japan art was part of the system of social stratification and power legitimacy by the state and political elite.⁴ Artistic productions were also integral to the imperial reign of notorious figures such as Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, who considered the “soft power” of art as a persuasive medium that could complement the brutal and aggressive force of militarism.⁵

Art is, therefore, innately political; it innovatively synchronizes life into abstractive, embodied, and visceral forms to both create and share meanings, values, beliefs, and political ethics.⁶ Art gives us a perceptible image or sets of images to perceive evocative messages sourced from the social and cultural milieu in which the artist is embedded and which forms the stock from which the transactions of political, cultural, and social identity issues are produced. As Judith Butler once noted, the processing of seeing images is itself never shorn of preemptive sociopolitical biases. When the field of vision is tainted by the schema of identity politics, the processes of viewing the end product is always steeped in the ideological impurities of the context that produces these images.⁷ Arts, its producers, consumers, interpreters, and the regulators, are all, therefore, subject to politics.⁸ As the meanings we take away from art are subjective, we, within the vast universe of broad meanings artistic production offers, take away an array of connected ideas that encapsulate a reality that we relate to, or which relates to us. While we can, therefore, agree with Edelman that politics is a production of art, we would also assert that art, especially, when it takes on a pedagogical mission, is produced by the politics against which it wages its ideological wars. Indeed, art generates the ideas of heroism, virtue, nobility, and cultural fantasies that we have come to suppose are intrinsic to human moral and cultural essence. These ideas are crucial to political rituals; they grant us a shorthand way of grasping complex materials. However, politics also pushes us to intuit the artistic images with which we discourse with the world to evoke, to provoke, to conscientize, to resist, and to conjure ideal images of the world while we condemn the insalubrious aspects of the real.

Art, therefore, produces politics and politics produce art; both are interlocked in a conjugal embrace of mutually reproducing images through which we understand our world, interpret them, compartmentalize broad and complex human experiences into relatable paradigms, stage our agency and assert the terms of our humanity within the context of our social temporality. Through art, we create and re-create realities of

our worlds, revise existing beliefs and assumptions to answer to ongoing anxieties, panic, aspirations, and desires of the audience. Art, therefore, is not merely adjunct to politics neither is it a stream from which political actions and processes flow. The creative processes of art, the poetics, the expansiveness of meanings that spring from artistic innovation are all an integral and interwoven aspect of the political milieu of the artist and his/her audience. Art and its inevitable political interpretation, contrary to assumption, are not floating signifiers per se, they are *floatated* signifiers discharged from a politically imbued imagination, filtered through embodied politics, and dispensed into an ethically charged space thus making the entire chain of artistic production a densely and politically overlaid one.

This book, *Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and the Diaspora*, a product of an extensive dialogue on the politics of artistic creativity, examines how black artists in Africa and the African diaspora create art as part of the procedures of self-making in their respective universes. We consider that art, whenever it is re-interpreted against the conditions of the present, stimulates ideas, rejuvenates rational stances, reinforces and upturns definitive perceptions, and poses new ways of seeing. Critics, in investigating creativity in art, have, therefore, tried to expand their analyses beyond the definition, aesthetics, practices of production, and the immediate visceral impacts of art, to considering other ethics of creativity such as how the conditions that contribute to creative process also engenders the possibilities of its efficacy or not.⁹ *Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and the Diaspora* goes ahead to investigate the political aesthetics of art and the creativity of black artists and culture that spans across spaces and places. By weaving together chapters and analyses from various regions such as North America, North Africa, West Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, *Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and the Diaspora* examines the efflorescence of black culture and creativity in both national and global contexts.

Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and the Diaspora emerged out of inquiring the politics of black creativity in the twenty first century. Already, anthropologist, Stuart MacLean, urges an understanding of creativity that transcends the mere implication of a facility to solve problems, one that is calibrated to the demands of global capital. Instead, creativity should be considered regarding its force to impel a rethink of both the syncopation of the human imagination and the making of the material universe. By mapping an “experimental, multiagentive, and

pluralistic vision of creativity,” MacLean offers a critical means of escape from the constrictive ideas of creativity. He conceives creativity as a timeless conception of the universe that does not merely replicate originary or cosmogonic models of action but a relational process of interacting actions between non-individuated humans and non-humans.¹⁰ In this collection, the essays go further to explore creativity as an outcome of the contentious yet “intangible chemistry” between art producers, their cultural milieu, and the reactive ways the latter impugns on the consciousness to stimulate art production. The writers focus on identity politics, social, and cultural changes going on in black cultures in African Diasporas (with its evolving meanings),¹¹ migration, transnationalism, multiple belongings, and consciousness. These forces, we acknowledge, are no mere backdrops to artistic production just as art is not reducible to a foil to politics. Both art and politics are self-constituting and mutually influencing, thus making political culture integral to art and the creative instinct of black cultures.

This collection is necessitated by the imperatives of investigating black culture in an era of increasing globalization, migration, the flux of identities, and increasing interconnection in radical and novel ways. These essays move us to question how the context of black creativity and functions as a propellant of new cultural creations. How does the nostalgia of shared African heritage become a raw resource on which new identities and creative outputs are founded? What are the new black experiences and how are they conjugating radical meanings of creativity, identity, and black culture? Taking off of Paul Gilroy’s ideas on the Black Atlantic that employed the diaspora as a theoretical concept to explore how forced and voluntary migrations, travels, discontinuities, cultural exchange, and appropriation form a worldwide web of black cultures in the US, UK, Caribbean, and Africa, some of the chapters analyze how migration, displacement, and creative refashioning of “home” is currently shaping postmodernist notions of “black” and “African” arts in different contexts and temporalities.¹²

Taking seriously the political aesthetics that underline these artistic expressions, the chapter contributors read creative works of literature, films, performances, music, and other forms of popular culture against the grain of ethnocentric analysis to embrace the iterations of the dynamism of the shaping of contemporary black culture. *Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and its Diaspora* places the complex and mundane concerns of the artists and their creation within the broader national and

transnational conversations of anti-black racism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, migration, resettlement, resistance, and transnational feminisms. These writers make a thoughtful and reflective analysis of black cultures in Africa and the African Diaspora, sorting through the aesthetics of daily life to build a thesis that reflects the desire of black artists and cultures to remake themselves. While the contributors do not merely hark back to an essentialist or absolutist mode of constructing blackness or African identity, these chapters situate their contentions on how “black” and “Africa” continue to inform the arts and creativity of Africans and Diaspora Africans through various spatialities and temporalities.

Adam Aziz’s chapter, titled “From Peasant to Revolutionaries: Transcultural Kinship and Anticolonial Revolution in Kateb Yacine’s *L’Homme aux sandales de caoutchouc*,” is a critical study of identity and its concomitant politics of language, literature, performance, and political power in the postcolonial context of Algeria, North Africa. Aziz dissects one of the works of the renowned writer and playwright, Kateb Yacine, to critique the notion of transcultural kinship he forges in one of his best-known plays, *L’Homme aux Sandales de Caoutchouc* (The Man in Rubber Sandals). Drawing on the shared histories of Vietnam and its anti-colonial struggles with that of Algeria, Yacine connects a narrative that maps the transnational struggles of Vietnam and Algeria, and its interconnections with the intrinsic fissures within the racial politics of the USA at a time it was making its own history of colonial aggressions. Aziz, plotting the negotiations of French and Arab identities which Yacine embodied, plots the chart of the evolution of a literary and performance career of one Africa’s greatest writers through an imbrication of national and personal histories. Through textual and critical analyses, Aziz illustrates how the artistic and creative vision of Yacine, birthed through his anti-colonial politics, became a canvas for an envisioning of anticolonial resistance and transnational kinship among oppressed populations. Aziz raises the question of if and whether the oppressed of the world can band together against their oppressor, the political implications of transcending other contending identities to challenge a common enemy.

In “Revolution and Revolt: Identitarian Space, Magic, and the Land in Decolonial Latin American and African Writing,” Juan Manuel Ávila Conejo breaks down the interconnected themes, symbols, and motifs in revolutionary writings among Latin American and African writers whose works were a revolution against colonial rule. These writers,

facing similar struggles even though their historical trajectories and independence varied, employed similar symbols in their literary imagination to critique the colonial establishment. By connecting the motifs of the land, ritualism, spatiality, metaphysics, and transcendence in this body of works, Conejo exposes the threads that interweave different literary devices. The diversity and similarity of this range of works by different writers in different historical and cultural contexts show how the literary imagination and human inspiration was stimulated by similar ideologies of anti-colonialism and decolonization, sovereignty, freedom, and dignity.

Aaron Brown carries out a study of the family as a creative and political force by reading the works of two well-known Nigerian writers, Chigozie Obioma (author of *The Fishermen*) and Ben Okri (author of *The Famished Road*). These two books are a study in the nation's politics using the family unit and their sufferings to interrogate the notion of unity. Brown, in the chapter, "Family Politics: Negotiating the Family Unit as a Creative Force in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*," extrapolates the challenges and the trauma the families in both books suffer to the national politics and notes that the two writers convey a similar ideology differently. Brown studies the writers' critique of the nation, the ethnic and cultural divides, and the ominous fissures that have haunted the people since the beginning and at certain critical junctures, turned the country into a bloody arena. Brown argues that both books, with their themes of family bonds, have an underlying message that applies to the larger Nigerian politics. While a reading of Obioma's book articulates that individualism and separatism ultimately lead to more suffering, collectivism, and unity within the family—and the nation can produce triumph for members of the family/national unit.

Adeshina Afolayan, in "Auteuring Nollywood: Rethinking the Movie Director and the Idea of Creativity in the Nigerian Film Industry," advocates the auteur theory as a counter epistemology to existing discourses on the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood. He critiques scholars who argue that the material worldliness of Nollywood is a reflection of the socio-economic and socio-cultural context in which it exists. Afolayan argues that the mirror of cultural productions in which Africans peer to see their social and political conditions reflected back at them, can do much more than the basic function of reflectivity of Africans' lived and embodied postcolonial realities to them. The auteur theory, Afolayan

shows, can serve as a veritable take-off point from where Africans can find radical and philosophically grounded ideals to forge a vision. This vision of progress, he says, can propel them to transcend the material worldliness Nollywood is being asked to valorize and celebrate. By giving prominence to the role of the director as an auteur, Afolayan argues that the director takes the position of a political theorist who creates the artistic images and visions that mediates Africa's modernity.

Kamahra Ewing, in her chapter, "Nollywood in Rio: An Exploration of Brazilian Audience Perception of Nigerian Cinema," also explores the potentials of Nollywood. She argues that the pervasive negative anti-black media narratives within Brazil can be combatted by the productions of the Nigerian/African film industry, Nollywood. Given how Eurocentrically biased the Brazilian media is, she argues that Nollywood could fill a void in black diaspora representations by providing diverse images of contemporary and a heterogeneous Africa. Nollywood, as it is presently constituted, has been a viable connector of Africa to its diaspora. By bypassing global and institutionalized channels of image distribution, Nollywood disrupts dominant and negative western media's representation of Blackness. In the survey she conducted among Afro and Euro Brazilians, she explores the potential of Nollywood to provide alternative images of black culture and identity in Lusophone Brazil and its significant black population. This study is a contribution to existing literature on Nollywood, transnational black identity in twenty first century Africa, and global reception of popular culture and representation.

Still on Nollywood and the engagement with the black identity, Olaocha Nwadiuto Nwabara's chapter, "Re-Producing Self, Community, and 'Naija' in Nigerian Diaspora Films: *Soul Sisters in the United States* and *Man on the Ground in South Africa*," studies two films by two Nigerian diasporan filmmakers—Rahman Oladigbolu and Akin Omotosho. Both filmmakers are, respectively, based in the US and in South Africa and are invested in the Nigerian experience in the universe of the black diaspora. By chronicling the immigrant experiences of Nigerians, these artists socially construct the 'Naija' identity as an Afropolitan one. 'Naija' is a colloquial renaming of Nigeria by Nigerian youths and popular cultural artists and Nwabara's theorizing it in this chapter shows how the transnational experience of Nigerianness (along with its colonial baggage) is re-forged by the diaspora experience with the ingredients of ethnic and racial identities and the awareness of it. By focusing on the lived experiences of these diasporan filmmakers,

Nwaobara examines the repertoire-making traditions of these cultures, the process of cultivating an identity as a black minority in the Diaspora, and the fashioning of the ‘Naija’ aesthetic in the Nigerian art of filmmaking and Diaspora storytelling.

Lisa B. Thompson, in her chapter, “A Single Story: African Women as Staged in US Theater,” also provides more ways of considering Afropolitanism and its iterations in theatrical performances. She explores the modes by which the African imaginary circulates in contemporary theater and film by African-American cultural producers. She argues that historically, Africa in the African-American mind has been bracketed between tropes that either romanticize the Motherland, or has envisioned the continent as a wasteland and dystopia. African women, she notes, have been at the receiving end of the dominant and persistent narratives of a dysfunctional continent. Thompson explores US black women playwrights who are pushing beyond these single stories by exploiting the immediacy of theater to narrate more nuanced and complicated stories about the lives of African women. Beyond the worn stories of sexual assault or sexual abuse that the African women as theater characters experience, Thompson lays bare works by contemporary playwrights who engage what she describes as an Afropolitan theatrical aesthetic, a mode of representation that is as artistic as it is cultural and political. The Afropolitan theatrical aesthetic, she notes, challenges the constrictive representation of African women and creates a universe of narratives that advance performances of African identity, pushing against stereotypical representations of Africa and Africans.

In the chapter by Gustavo Melo Cerqueira, “Silêncio: Black Bodies, Black Characters, and The Black Political *Persona* in the Work of the *Teatro Negro* Group Cia dos Comuns,” he makes an analytical critique of *Silêncio*, a play by one of Brazil’s most prominent black theater group, Cia dos Comuns. The play questions the racism embedded in the Brazilian society by amplifying the silences lodged in the body of the black person whose identity is constituted in fear and the embodied trauma created by oppressive racism. Cerqueira dissects the play, its political critique, and the innovativeness of its aesthetics by looking into the notion of the black political persona in Brazilian black theater culture. By delving into the Cia dos Comuns’ founding philosophy, performance history, and political engagement in Brazil’s racist society, Cerqueira shows how Cia dos Comuns use the *Silêncio* as a radical argument to shift the interplay between existing notions of the black persona and

the black character. *Cia dos Comuns* thus offers us a critical and highly creative means of using theatrical aesthetics to engage existential and ideological issues. *Silencio*, Cerqueira argues, is a marshal of theatrical innovation, history, culture, ideology, and resistance strategies to engage racism in Brazil by (not) deploying the black body it oppresses.

Lucee Barthlomee explores the concept of artistic creativity in contemporary age by challenging the ideas that creativity is a thing of the mind, serendipitously sparked at the right moment to unleash a genius idea. She argues that creativity is vitally located within the active body, and when the body is positioned within a spatiality or a temporality, it is stimulated to create or innovate. In her chapter, “New Orleans: America’s Creative Crescent,” she peers through the phenomenological lens of scholars such as Merleau Ponty, Dylan Trigg, and Rebecca Solnit to examine the nature of America’s creative hub, Louisiana, New Orleans, to understand how the creativity of the body is intertwined with the space it inhabits. By considering the history of Louisiana as a melting pot of race, ethnicities and cultures from different parts of the world through phases of American history, and the subsequent emergence and practices of Mardi Gras Indians in select African-American neighborhoods of New Orleans, she argues that it is no coincidence that it was the city of Louisiana that gave America a vibrant cultural product such as Jazz music. Barthlomee’s argument in this essay has a huge significance for arts education, challenging the time-worn belief of arts educators who believe creativity is innate, and is neither taught nor cultivated.

James Yeku, in “The Hashtag as Archive: Internet Memes in Nigeria’s Social Media Election,” extends the meaning of art production to internet chatter to follow the tracks of a new form of citizen engagement in Africa. He studies the socio-political activities of citizens who have made the Internet a sub-political zone where they perform active and engaged politics by weaponizing the ubiquitous internet medium. Yeku explores photo-based Internet memes and viral social media hashtags in Nigeria’s recent history to show how the social media has created a canvas for the envisioning and enacting of new political aesthetics. From Nigeria’s general elections and the subtle and satirical analysis of politicians’ manifesto to #bringbackourgirls that became a global campaign, Yeku shows how the young Nigerian citizen steadily bypass the orthodoxy of traditional media and uses the internet as a zone of dissent and citizen engagement that affirm their political subjectivity. This emerging political and cultural production combines visual and popular culture with satirical rhetoric,

and the result has enabled the evolution of a new cultural politics that provides democratic space to even marginalized populations to perform their civic agencies.

Bernard Steiner Ifekwe looks at creativity as both an artistic and political activity. In his chapter, “Black Creativity In Jamaica And Its Global Influences: 1930–1987,” he considers Jamaica in the twentieth century where all creative activities were geared towards the mental, economic, religious, and political emancipation of black people after many centuries of servitude to white domination. This creativity came in different forms: Garveyism, with its philosophy of race pride and black redemption; Rastafarianism, a black religion, which venerated the late Ethiopian monarch, Haile Selassie I as the god of Africa; and reggae music, with its militant lyrics, which expressed the black experience in slavery, colonialism, and post-colonial periods. He argues that political and temporal contexts in themselves can be stimulators of black creativity.

Modestus Nnamdi Onyeaghalaji, reflecting on the aesthetics of African art in his chapter, “Ethics and Aesthetic Creativity: A Critical Reflection on the Moral Purpose of African Art,” focuses on the problems of ascribing moral intent to artistic creativity in African Aesthetics. Traditional African art, he says, is conceived to be functional, community-oriented, depersonalized, and contextualized and, therefore, serves practically moral and meaningful purpose. However, this morally contemplative purpose to African art is being undermined within the artistic creativity and appreciation in contemporary times. Onyeaghalaji employs the philosophical methods of conceptual and critical analysis to interrogate this emergent phenomenon in African aesthetics. He argues that contemporary African art, more than a hybrid of cultures, is influenced by the Western predilection and modeled to feed the Western interest. This factor abdicates its traditional role of art being a codification, unification, and objectification of African cultural experiences and values. He identifies the moral consequences and value problems arising from this colonizing trait of African art to conclude that for African art to achieve a higher level of moral consciousness and dignity, it must take on a prognostic intent of the unification, synthesis, and interpretation of African experience.

In the final chapter, Olivier J. Tchouaffé weighs the intangible factors that encircle the success of iconic black female artists in the global cultural industry by drawing semiotic parallels between Beyonce and Saartjie Baartman, the South African Hottentot woman who was

exhibited in Europe as a freak. His chapter, “From The Queen of Freak Show to Queen Bey: Thoughts on Black Feminism(s) Canons, Pop Culture and Pedagogy”, tracks the notions of race, gender, and cultural work the symbolic economy of black female enterprise and the role that exogenous structures such as capitalist relations of production, corporate administrative hegemony, and social arrangements play in mediating their global acceptance and artistic success. By reflecting on how Beyonce and Baartman mirror each other, and the history of white male gaze, financial power, legitimating codes of visual aesthetics of desire, he explores the modes of knowledge and practices that produce these women could also be brutally exploitative of these artists. He asks, what is black female creativity and how does it operate within a global economy where capitalism and white supremacy are the primary denominators of cultural labor?

Altogether, we sum that as black people all over the world have experienced various forms of exploitations—from slavery to colonialism, apartheid, racism, and various forms of subjugation—their bodies and their lands have been denuded by external rampaging forces. This shared history of abuse and profiteering at the expense of black populations has, over the century, resulted in dispersal, displacement, and migration—forced and voluntary—that have triggered—and are still triggering—creative flows of expression. The flux of identity and the consequent identitarian politics spurs a desire to transcend roots to recreate one’s space while at the same time, it plays a crucial role in the ways black artists and communities create new artistic cultures based on the experiences, insights, ideas they accumulate and the new identities they forge. Going back to Gilroy, this collection examines a post-Black Atlantic thesis. In the new age, with new migration patterns, new movements, and new technological devices that guarantee instant connectivity to cultures around the world, what is Black Atlantic and how are black people inscribing themselves into the contemporary social history of modernity and modernism using the expressive tools of art?

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CHAPTER 2

Rewriting Algeria: Transcultural Kinship and Anticolonial Revolution in Kateb Yacine's *L'Homme aux sandales de caoutchouc*

Adam Aziz

In Kateb Yacine's 1970 play, *L'Homme aux sandales de caoutchouc* (The Man in Rubber Sandals), Mohamed, a shepherd of North African origin contracted by France to fight in Indochina, is attacked by Viet Cong rebels. Mohamed, in a sudden moment of realization, recognizes that the rebels are not so different from the men of his village and refuses to fire, proclaiming solidarity with their cause. In another scene, a similar pattern of cognizance occurs for Alabama, an African-American soldier serving in the Vietnam War. Alabama draws parallels between the African-American liberation struggle and the Vietnamese reunification movement and transforms into a Viet Cong rebel: "J'ai déserté / Je suis un Viet / À ma façon / Que tous les Noirs américains / Tuent leurs officiers / Et la guerre sera juste."¹ ("I have deserted / I am a Viet / In my own way / May all Black Americans / Kill their officers / And the war

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will be just.”) In both moments exemplifying the spontaneous embodiment of transcultural kinship, Mohamed and Alabama see their own struggles mirrored back to them, prompting their conscientious objection to violence exerted onto populations whose struggles they consider to be not unlike their own. The textual transformation of these characters, from poor shepherd to anti-war pacifist for Mohamed in French Indochina and from Black Panther to Viet Cong fighter for Alabama during the Vietnam War, reveals that *L’Homme* is provocative in motif as it is calculatingly purposeful in its selection of historical context and political overtone. It is not mere happenstance that Yacine chose to tap into the rich depository of anticolonial fervor circulating in Vietnam and adapted it into the theatrical form.

In this essay, I argue that *L’Homme* is a critical piece of creative writing in North African Francophone theatrical literature by its deliberate deployment of Vietnam as the narrative setting and its compelling messages of transcultural kinship and anticolonial revolution. First, I describe Yacine’s upbringing and discuss the variegated influences shaping his foray into theater. Second, I embark on a textual analysis of *L’Homme* by discussing the play’s structure, its recurring themes, and the narratives of several major characters. Because the play features a monumental cast of characters, rather than analyzing all of them, I engage in an intersecting mapping out of the diverse origins, historical contexts, and narratives of major characters that I contend serve to unify and epitomize the play’s broader themes of transcultural kinship and anticolonial revolution. Even though *L’Homme* may appear oddly discordant in cast and momentum, I demonstrate how a comparative textual analysis reveals a consistent articulation of the play’s recurring themes. Third, I problematize the play’s message of an anticolonial solidarity transcending space and time by speculating on the implications of narrative co-optation. I ask if Yacine’s attempts at refashioning the struggles of colonized groups result in a streamlined narrative that collapses differences and particularities in culture, history, identity, and language, or if its archive of literary figures may be achieving a different goal. Fourth, I locate *L’Homme*’s overt political themes as exemplifying Yacine’s commitment at developing a creative theatrical form that transmits instructive lessons in post-independence Algerian national unity.

KATEB YACINE: BACKGROUND AND FORAY INTO THEATER

Born in 1929 to an Algerian family of Kabyle-Amazigh origin in Constantine, Kateb Yacine was from the outset an individual situated between divergent worlds: the French-speaking milieu dominant in colonial-era Algeria and the Arabo-Islamic world maintained at home by his family. Yacine spent his initial school-going years at a Qur'anic school where literary Arabic was the principal language of instruction. At the age of seven, Yacine was sent by his father to a French colonial school, where he first learned French. Yacine's father envisioned that French would serve his son well in the future, as it was, at the time in the 1930s, deemed an essential language of communication and social mobility in colonial Algeria if one desired to succeed.²

Later in his life, Yacine gained literary fame throughout Africa and Europe as a novelist writing in French—most prominently for his debut novel *Nedjma*, published in 1956. For Yacine, French served as a vehicular container for developing a versatile Algerian literary voice he believed had yet to flourish: He believed that wielding and mastering French along with knowledge of its culture was not antithetical to Algerian identity, but rather a *butin de guerre* (“spoil of war”) that could be harnessed to cultivate new generations of culturally mobile Algerians who could employ French and the fields of knowledge it provided access to for gaining national liberation. When Algeria gained independence in 1962, however, the political turbulences and censorship that followed pressured Yacine to temporarily leave the country and move to Paris, where he continued writing.

Yacine's rich body of works reflected the talents of a writer of considerable versatility and intellect. Cognizant of his influential public role as a writer and the potentiality for change in his home country, Yacine returned to Algeria from exile in 1970, ceased writing in French, and began producing theatrical plays performed in vernacular Algerian Arabic. He traveled around Algeria throughout the 1970s to stage his plays with his theatrical troupe. Because he was not fully comfortable in Algerian Arabic, Yacine would first write in French or latinized Arabic, and later worked with members of his troupe more well-versed in the vernacular to polish his work.³

Vernacular Algerian Arabic is a non-standardized, colloquial dialect derived from standard Arabic, and is considered to transmit a distinctive sense of “Algerian-ness,” articulating the more intimate aspects of

the daily Algerian experience. Its built-in lexical diversity, incorporating words from standard Arabic, French, and Amazigh, adds to its depth and expansiveness, while its grammatical ease adds to its allure. Aside from making his works accessible to the vernacular-speaking Algerian public, Yacine's decision to compose in the vernacular stemmed from a personal impulse: His parents had primarily communicated in the vernacular. Since Yacine had stopped speaking Arabic growing up and switched to using French, he described feeling particularly estranged and distant from his mother, who never learned to speak French:

Jamais je n'ai cessé, même aux jours de succès près de l'institutrice, de ressentir au fond de moi cette seconde rupture du lien ombilical, cet exil intérieur qui ne rapprochait plus l'écolier de sa mère que pour les arracher, chaque fois un peu plus, au murmure du sang, aux frémissements réprobateurs d'une langue bannie... Ainsi avais-je perdu tout à la fois ma mère et son langage, les seuls trésors inaliénables—et pourtant aliénés.⁴

I never stopped, even on successful days at school, from feeling deep down in me this second rupture of the umbilical cord, this interior exile that brings the schoolboy closer to his mother only to tear them apart, each time a little bit more, at the whisper of blood, at the reproving quivers of a forbidden language... And so I had lost all at once my mother and her language, the only inalienable treasures—nonetheless alienated.

Retracing his career back to the vernacular after having mastered French was, for Yacine, the poignant return of an adrift son to his natal roots and a restoration of the severed matrilineal cord. It also symbolized his way of reclaiming the dispossessed pluralism he believed was constitutive of being Algerian, which included the communicative importance of vernacular Arabic in structuring quotidian life and a renewed vigor for Amazigh language and culture.⁵ Yacine also insisted upon acknowledging the mosaic of ethno-cultural and linguistic influences essential in the reworking of an Algerian identity, as neither the language of Molière nor the Arabo-Islamic world could, in a singular act of monopoly, claim to authenticate fully what it meant to be Algerian.

The vernacular also meant, for Yacine, a renunciation of hegemonic French and Arabo-Islamic influences as sole determinants of Algerian-ness, as well as an act of defiance against post-independence pro-Arabization laws that promoted literary Arabic. Staging theater in the vernacular would also enable the Algerian population to access his plays and be

made aware of complexities in Algerian history, as Yacine professed that “l’histoire portée au théâtre devient un spectacle et touche ainsi un public qui n’avait pas accès aux sources historiques.”⁶ (“History brought into theater becomes a spectacle and influences a public with no access yet to historical sources.”)

Vietnam was already on Yacine’s mind when he began work in 1949 as a journalist for the Algiers-based newspaper, *Alger Républicain*. By then, Yacine was already politically active, joining the Algerian Communist Party in 1947. An event that profoundly had affected him was the Sétif and Guelma massacre. On May 8, 1945 in the northeastern town of Sétif, Algerians gathered on the streets to celebrate the end of World War II and protest for Algerian independence. The demonstrations escalated into widespread riots as French police and Algerian protestors engaged in retaliatory attacks, with the death toll estimated to be as low as 1400 by the French government to as high as 30,000 by Algerian nationalist groups.⁷ The incident was a turning point in French-Algerian relations, as it demonstrated growing organized resistance against colonial rule. As Ahmed Akkache, Yacine’s colleague at *Alger Républicain*, described:

La période 1948–1949 milieu du siècle, était une période de bouillonnement extraordinaire et Kateb s’est retrouvé là, au confluent de deux grands événements qui l’ont profondément marqué : les massacres du 8 mai 1945 et la fin de la seconde guerre mondiale; une guerre terrible contre le fascisme qui avait duré de longues années.⁸

The mid-century period of 1948–1949 was a period of extraordinary activity and Kateb found himself between two major events that profoundly shaped him: the massacres of 8 May 1945 and the end of World War II; a terrible war against fascism lasting many years.

During his brief journalist career from 1949 to 1951, Yacine began writing about Indochina.⁹ His turn to Vietnam was not accidental. Spurred by the Sétif and Guelma massacres, Yacine fixated on the international arena to search for answers to explain the Algerian desire for national autonomy. And as Vietnam became increasingly visible on the global stage, through its anticolonial insurrections and the 1945 unilateral establishment of North Vietnam by the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh, Yacine began making comparisons between Algerians and the Vietnamese, two communities under French colonial rule. Subsequent

events in Vietnam, such as the 1954 Battle of Dien Bien Phu that resulted in France's defeat and withdrawal from Indochina, further solidified the revolutionary connections he had made between Vietnam and Algeria. Vietnam was, for Yacine, a revolutionary site Algerians could critically look towards in responding to questions of Algerian independence. Yacine had begun drafting several scenes in 1947 for a play on Vietnam, but it was not until 1967 after he had traveled to North Vietnam that he began developing the play further.¹⁰

While visiting Vietnam in the late 1960s, Yacine was impressed by Ho Chi Minh and the apparent success of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement.¹¹ By then, Algeria had already gained independence from France, but the tumultuous post-independence era compelled Yacine to look to Vietnam for didactic instruction. He was also struck by how Vietnamese theater, Chèo, creatively incorporated folk traditions and history and inculcated a strong sense of communal identity, something he saw as absent in Algerian theater. As he confessed in an interview in 1986:

Lorsque je suis allé au Vietnam, j'ai été frappé par le fait que les Vietnamiens ont porté presque toute leur histoire au théâtre, depuis l'invasion chinoise il y a bien longtemps, plus d'un millénaire. Je voudrais faire un peu la même chose en Algérie, c'est-à-dire porter notre histoire ainsi que notre histoire brûlante actuelle, parce que là je touche à des thèmes qui sont d'actualité.¹²

When I went to Vietnam, I was struck by how the Vietnamese brought most of their history into theater, since the Chinese invasion more than a millennium ago. I wish to do the same thing in Algeria, to transmit our history as well as our current fervent history, because there I deal with themes that are of current relevance.

It was this desire to radically shape the theatrical form in Algeria that led Yacine to finish composing *L'Homme* after a final trip to Vietnam. The theatrical stage was a fertile terrain upon which Yacine planned to cultivate an Algerian national theater that would transmit what he considered to be teachable lessons in national unity, transcultural solidarity, and historical knowledge from revolutionary sites like Vietnam. As Pamela A. Pears points out, "Kateb wishes to emphasize mutual identification and understanding among oppressed peoples. Above all, he sees his play as

a vehicle enabling the creation of ties that bind human beings to one another.”¹³

TRANSCULTURAL KINSHIP AND ANTICOLONIAL REVOLUTION IN *L'HOMME*

L'Homme deals with themes of colonial oppression and military imperialism, with Vietnam as the narrative locus and fecund battleground for the contestation of competing ideas on culture, ideology, and nationhood. Yacine portrays agents competing for control in Vietnam, while dissenting characters, from colonial soldiers and North African *spahis* (light cavalry) to Vietnamese rebels, resist in a myriad of ways. I begin by analyzing the narrative trajectory of three non-Vietnamese characters, showing how they embody moments of transcultural kinship with the Vietnamese. As I have described in this project's opening paragraph, I refer to transcultural kinship as cognitive modes of cross-cultural recognition in which characters are prompted to declare solidarity with another population after having been exposed to instances of shocking violence or trauma. I then move on to analyze the narratives of two Vietnamese characters, showing how Yacine portrays their actions as embodying idealized notions of anti-colonial revolutionism.

L'Homme contains eight chapters. The play begins in 40 AD with the rebellion of the Trung Sisters, military leaders, and national heroines celebrated in Vietnam for their fierce rebellion against Chinese military expansionism, and closes in 1970 with the death of Ho Chi Minh, the eponymous man in rubber sandals that the title of the play alludes to. Sometimes hundreds of years are contained in a chapter, while other times a chapter covers several decades, altogether producing a prolonged snapshot of Vietnamese history. North African, African-American, Latin American, and European characters are included in ways that connect them to the play's focus on Vietnam. Protagonists, villains, and one-time characters weave in and out of scenes intermittently, signifying fluidity and irregularity in narrative pace. There is also a blending of historical with fiction and a synthesis of present events with ancient history. Some characters such as the Trung Sisters are real historical figures, while others such as Alabama are fictitious offshoots, as Yacine draws upon both history and creative imagination. Because of the mammoth temporal and geopolitical scope and much overlap between history and fiction,

sketching an exhaustive picture of all the play's chapters, characters, and links to real-world history is beyond the scope of this essay. Rather, *L'Homme* is best understood through a textual analysis of several major characters, whom I argue epitomize the play's principal messages of transcultural kinship and anticolonial revolution.

The first character is Henri Martin, based on the French soldier with the same name who gained fame in the 1950 Henri Martin Affair for refusing to participate in colonial efforts in Indochina. The real Martin joined the French navy to combat Japanese troops invading Southeast Asia, but was sent to Vietnam where he witnessed a litany of horrors perpetuated by colonial soldiers. In the play, the soldier Martin vividly recalls a scene of horrifying colonial violence in Indochina:

Six cents personnes / Sont rassemblées dans une cour / Les hommes sont torturés / Ensuite, on les massacre / Les filles sont violées / Des femmes enceintes sont frappées / Jusqu'à éclatement de l'abdomen / Une seule maison est restée intacte / On y enferme deux jeunes filles / Et on y met le feu.¹⁴

Six hundred / Are gathered in a courtyard / The men are tortured / Then, they are massacred / The girls are raped / Pregnant women are struck / Until their bellies burst / Only one house remained intact / Two young girls were locked in it / And they set it on fire.

Later, a Vietnamese schoolboy carrying an oil lamp addresses the chorus, who are dressed as French blue-collar workers (with Martin among them): "Là-bas, en France / Vous allez à l'école / Ici, nous étudions / Au bord d'une tranchée" ("Over there, in France / You go to school / Here, we study / At the edge of a ditch") to which the chorus replies in rhapsodic agreement, "Arrêtez la sale guerre!"¹⁵ ("Stop the dirty war!") It is unclear whether this scene occurs in Vietnam or France, but its incidence suggests the sequestration of a cosmopolitan, atemporal space where like-minded individuals gather to share their experiences in proletariat continuum. This transcultural space Yacine creates invites a critical juncture of self-reflection for a perceptive character like Martin. The scene suddenly transforms into a courtroom, where a judge accuses Martin of betraying France. To this, Martin replies in emphatic solidarity with the Vietnamese:

Celui qui aime la liberté / Ne l'aime pas seulement pour lui / Mais aussi pour les autres / La défense nationale / Doit se faire sur le sol de France / Et non pas contre un peuple / Qui lutte pour être libre.¹⁶

He who loves freedom / Not only loves it for himself / But also for others / National defense / Must be done on French soil / And not against a people / Who are fighting to be free.

Yacine's depiction of a Frenchman within this continuum of transcultural solidarity allows him to deploy Martin conspicuously as a voice of lateral dissent from within France. In reneging on his military obligations by wielding the argument of universal liberty as defense, Martin is depicted as not only condemning colonial practices in Indochina, but also elucidating a shared human aspiration for self-autonomy and liberation. In allowing Martin to conscientiously object to colonial practices by articulating a transcultural mode of solidarity with a colonized population, Yacine places colonial Vietnam as a parabolic example upon which comparisons between colonial Vietnam and colonial Algeria could be made and the Algerian independence question could correspondingly acquire amplified meaning, as he clarifies in an interview:

Il y a en commun le phénomène des langues, le thème de la libération et celui de la patrie, le thème d'un peuple qui se libère; un combat pour la libération populaire qui se passe en Palestine ou au Vietnam, cela se situe peut-être à vingt-mille kilomètres, mais c'est le même problème. Tous ces problèmes sont posés dans les pièces et, par là même, concernent l'Algérie.¹⁷

There are in common the phenomenon of languages, the theme of liberation and the homeland, the theme of a people emancipating themselves; a fight for popular liberation occurring in Palestine or Vietnam may occur 20,000 kilometers away, but it is the same problem. All these problems are expressed through theater and thus concern Algeria.

In another chapter, Mohamed, the North African soldier conscripted into the French army in the early twentieth century, undergoes a similar moment of transcultural kinship. Mohamed's situation corresponds with a historical reality: Natives from French colonies such as Morocco, Algeria, and Senegal were enlisted into the French army as infantrymen to fight in the First Indochina War, but they regularly faced racial prejudice from French military officers. In the play, Mohamed is struck by how the struggles of the Vietnamese remind him of those of his own

people. After experiencing a profound moment of transcultural recognition and pride, he refuses to fire on the attacking Vietnamese rebels and joins their cause. Conversely, Mohamed's compatriot, a character called Face de Ramadhan, undergoes a divergent trajectory. Seduced by promises of glory, fortune, and social standing, Face de Ramadhan eagerly enlists in the French colonial army. Like Mohamed, he quickly becomes disillusioned, subjected to discrimination by his French superiors. Face de Ramadhan futilely attempts to prove he is no different from the French, imitating how they eat, drink, and behave, but fails to gain acceptance. In the end, while Mohamed assumes a principled stance by refusing to exercise violence and joining the Vietnamese cause, Face de Ramadhan is unable to overcome his wounded pride and treats any Vietnamese he encounters with contempt. In a noteworthy scene, Face de Ramadhan abuses and kicks a young Vietnamese rickshaw boy, Troï, to the ground, replicating the same pattern of colonial violence practiced upon him.

The divergent pathways Mohamed and Face de Ramadhan each pursue are a compelling literary depiction of the psychological trauma of colonial paternalism. Mohamed transforms his bitter experiences into a principled posture of pacifism, anti-violence, and solidarity with the Vietnamese. Face de Ramadhan, tortured over his inability to be seen as equal by his French counterparts, is unable to see beyond his own suffering. He reproduces animosity towards the Vietnamese—whose condition as colonized subject is no different from his—and flees from critical moments of confrontation. Face de Ramadhan desires acceptance and mimics the actions of his French superiors, at one point even participating in the torture of a captured Vietnamese rebel, Ngo. Face de Ramadhan's performance of selfhood is rooted in his desire to seek the attention of a capricious colonial paternalism whose approbation he is continually failing to gain.

Jacques Lacan theorizes how “the effect of mimicry is camouflage” where the subject is not “harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.”¹⁸ Camouflage, as an art of disappearance, entails effacing distinguishing elements of the self to blend seamlessly into the surroundings without discordance. According to Lacan, camouflaging mimicry does not allow the subject to *become* another; rather, it produces a *stain* in a painting of otherwise harmonious similitude.¹⁹ Homi Bhabha interprets Lacanian mimicry in the

colonial context, seeing colonial mimicry as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite [...] Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.”²⁰ Face de Ramadhan occupies an indeterminate space of ambivalence, doomed to reproduce an idealized selfhood he cannot properly assume as he is consistently mocked by his French peers. Face de Ramadhan vacillates perpetually between camouflaging mimicry and self-abnegation, possessing neither the distinctiveness of identity nor the prejudgment of difference. What follows this volatility in identity, then, is more trauma and violence.

It is compelling that Yacine selects a cryptic name, Face de Ramadhan (Face of Ramadan), suggesting that the character lacks distinctive selfhood. Pears points out that he “embodies the exterior image of Ramadan as a pious and holy month,” but beneath, he sustains “a complete black hole of subjectivity entirely different from what we expect to see.”²¹ Consider how in the same scene where Mohamed refuses to fire on the Vietnamese rebels, Face de Ramadhan flees in terror: “Allah! Allah! / On va crever ici / Comme des chiens de chasse! / Ce sont des communistes! / Ils ne croient pas en Dieu!”²² (“Allah! Allah! / We will die here / Like hounds! / These are communists / They do not believe in God!”) In another scene, Face de Ramadhan abandons his post in panic after mistaking a coughing toad for a grenade: “Allah! Une grenade / Qui saute et qui me suit!”²³ (“Allah! A grenade / That leaps and follows me!”) Yacine’s selection of wily interjections, with the religious invocations of ‘Allah’ and ‘Dieu’ during Face de Ramadhan’s moments of extreme trepidation, is not coincidental, as it contrasts the dissemblance between Ramadan, a sacred month in the Islamic calendar calling for principled devotion and self-restraint, and Face de Ramadhan, whose inability to adhere honorably to any one institutional code of conduct (whether in organized religion or military culture) belies the lack of distinctive selfhood and loyal group affiliation.

Thus, a discussion of the character Mohamed is incomplete without a corresponding analysis of Face de Ramadhan, whom I argue is not simply a character foil to Mohamed, as Mohamed and Face de Ramadhan are drawn as co-terminus analogies of postcolonial Algeria. Mohamed is a common male name in the Islamic world that Yacine often uses in his works, most notably in his 1971 play on Palestine, *Boucherie de l'espérance* (Butchery of Hope), in which the main antagonist Mohamed stands in for Palestine. In *L'Homme*, Mohamed is likely an analogy for

Algeria: He begins as a poor North African peasant living under colonial rule and, beset by poverty and despair, accepts the offer to enlist in the French colonial army in return for monetary rewards. Face de Ramadhan is also enticed by the same offer, but the diverging choices they make distinguish them from each other. This, then, invites comparison to the North African postcolonial context, in which Yacine appears to suggest that Algerians could internalize decades of colonial dogma and end up like Face de Ramadhan, a formless persona trapped in the cycle of imitation, self-denial, disappointment, and trauma.

Conversely, they could assume a principled position of certitude, like Mohamed does, by drawing upon transcultural kinship with similarly colonized populations and forging a distinctive national culture rooted in cultural pluralism and socialist futurity. While this dualism that Yacine draws upon no doubt risks oversimplifying and polarizing the complexities of colonial trauma and postcolonial futurity, the suggestion that Mohamed *is* Face de Ramadhan, or at the very least *could* be, is a cautionary metaphor. Yacine knowingly employs in sketching Mohamed as origin and presence (a united Algeria with a strong sense of national identity) and Face de Ramadhan as dissension and absence (a divided Algeria damaged by neocolonialism and self-abnegation).

Yacine also sketches the narrative of another fictitious character, Alabama, and places him within the historical context of the African-American civil rights movement. Naming the character Alabama carries two connotations: It pays homage to Alabama as a hotbed of civil rights activism, from the fearless defiance of Rosa Parks to the tenacity of Selma Voting Rights marchers, while also recognizing the state's complicity in allowing Jim Crow laws and racial segregationism to flourish. In the play, Alabama's journey begins on the streets of Harlem, where he encounters the President of the United States heading to church. Yacine portrays the President as a pompous character who views African-Americans with distrustful, paternalistic condescension. When Alabama follows him to church, the President is astonished: "Mon Dieu, une panthère! / Une panthère noire / Qui lit la Bible!"²⁴ ("My God, a panther! / A black panther! / Who reads the Bible!"). In a rapid succession of fiery come-backs, Alabama castigates the President for what he deems as hypocrisy in segregationist policies characteristic of the U.S. Jim-Crow era:

Garde ta Bible dans ta poche / Elle est bien où elle est / Avec ton porte-feuille et tes préservatifs / Il me faut cette église / J'en ai besoin pour te

combattre / Pour faire entendre notre voix / Pour te lancer tes psaumes /
 En pleine figure / Comme tu as besoin / De nègres à l'église / Pour
 blanchir ta conscience / Les mêmes nègres / Que tu fais trimer / Les
 mêmes négresses / Que tu prends dans ton lit / Pour interdire ensuite / À
 ces négrillons qui sont tes bâtards / Tes belles écoles toutes blanche.²⁵

Keep your Bible in your pocket / It is befitting where it is / With your
 wallet and condoms / I need this church / I need it to fight you / To
 let our voice be heard / To throw you your psalms / In your face / Just
 as you need / Negroes in church / To whitewash your conscience / The
 same Negroes / That you enslave / The same Negresses / That you take to
 bed / And then preventing / These black children who are your bastards /
 From going to your lovely all-white schools.

Here, Yacine encapsulates what he perceives as centuries of social injustice against African-Americans, caricaturizing what he perceives as a complicit U.S. national apparatus that permits racial segregationism to prosper. Alabama is later sent to fight in the Vietnam War. He is astonished when he discovers what he considers to be a paradoxical mission, "Protéger le Viet-nam / Contre ses propres habitants!" ("Protect Vietnam / From its own inhabitants!") to which his superior, Capitaine Supermac, replies sardonically, "Tu dois casser du Viet / Pour mériter tes droits civiques."²⁶ ("You must crush the Viets / To earn your civil rights.") Alabama's experiences in Vietnam radically change him, as war violence compels him to experience a spontaneous moment of transcultural solidarity with the Vietnamese. He kills his commander, deserts the army, and joins the Viet Cong. Yacine thus portrays Alabama as eventually becoming aware of parallels between African-Americans and the Vietnamese, and realizing he is fighting for a national apparatus that has similarly denied civil liberties to his own people. Alabama marks his own social location of marginalized subject as comparable to that of the Vietnamese and declares solidarity with them, which Yacine illustrates by making Alabama literally *transform* into a Viet Cong rebel.

Alabama, Mohamed, and Henri Martin are characters made to participate in various instances in Vietnamese history, and they all undergo similar moments of transcendent recognition. These moments operate under a convergence of transcultural solidarity that necessarily collapses differences in culture, language, and national origin. On a textual level, Yacine appears to be articulating that transcultural kinship is the precursory essence for a revolutionary politics that would engender radical

social change in an era marked by repeated patterns of colonial violence and anticolonial insurrectionism. Alabama, Mohamed, and Martin are all dramatically portrayed as transcending the shackles that once constricted them to their respective social locations, and by doing so, they are able to embody new subjectivities in the pursuit of radical political change.

The other recurring motif, anticolonial revolution, is traced through two Vietnamese characters whom Yacine depicts as embodying exceptional revolutionary passion. Yacine first traces the journey of a character called Nguyen Ai Quoc, who appears in the first chapter as a cook's assistant on a French vessel headed for Marseille. Ai Quoc's journey is transformative. He first seeks out proletariat support from laborers and denounces colonialism: "Franchement, camarades / Si vous ne soutenez pas / La lutte des peuples opprimés / Quelle est donc la révolution / Que vous voulez faire?"²⁷ ("Frankly, comrades / If you do not support / The struggle of oppressed peoples / What then is the revolution / That you intend to make?") In another scene, Ai Quoc, as a formidable socialist leader, launches a call to arms that provokes a peasant revolution, alluding to Vietnam's actual unilateral secession from France in 1945. In a following scene, the choir triumphantly declares the landslide election victory of a mysterious character l'oncle Ho (Uncle Ho), and opens a door to reveal a dignified Ai Quoc. It becomes clear, for those familiar with Vietnamese history, that Nguyen Ai Quoc is, in fact, Ho Chi Minh, first president of an independent Vietnam. Through anticolonial revolution sustained by proletariat support, the poor peasant Ai Quoc *transforms* into the charismatic politician affectionately called Uncle Ho, fatherly ancestor of modern Vietnam.

If Ai Quoc's journey is transformative and affirming, then Yacine furnishes a counter-narrative that leads to tragic death: that of Troï. We first see Troï in chapter three as the young rickshaw boy subjected to Face de Ramadhan's abusive violence. Troï reappears in chapter five as an active North Vietnamese communist seeking Vietnamese reunification amid the Vietnam War. He and his wife, Quyen, are imprisoned for communist activities by the American-backed South Vietnamese. Yacine also briefly alludes to revolutionary Latin America: The FALN, a Venezuelan guerilla group, kidnaps an American colonel and demands the release of Troï, with whom they declare solidarity. Lancedalle, an American officer, promises to release Troï in an agreed exchange of prisoners, but orders Troï's execution after the Venezuelans release the captured colonel. When the execution squad fires at him, Troï cries out in defiance,

“Vive le Viet-nam! Vive Ho Chi Minh!”²⁸ (“Long live Vietnam! Long live Ho Chi Minh!”) before falling to the ground. Troi’s fate mirrors the real-life execution of Nguyen Van Troi, a young Viet Minh communist who attempted to assassinate the U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1963.²⁹ Yacine adapts Nguyen Van Troi’s story to not only illustrate the potential costs of revolutionary activity but also its galvanizing effects, as the character Troi’s death inspires others to take up his cause.

Anticolonial and anti-neocolonial revolutionism are thus featured in two distinct panels of Vietnamese history that Ho Chi Minh (colonial Vietnam) and Troi (U.S.-occupied Vietnam) represent. Nguyen Ai Quoc guides Vietnam to independence, transforming into Ho Chi Minh and paving the way for further gains to Vietnamese political sovereignty. The subsequent 1954 Battle of Dien Bien Phu between French forces and Viet Minh nationalists splits Vietnam into the communist, Ho Chi Minh-led North and the U.S.-occupied South. Troi fights in U.S.-occupied Vietnam and his tragic fate serves as a cautionary tale of the risks involved in revolutionary endeavors as well as a demonstration of the revolutionary’s readiness for self-sacrifice. And because Yacine’s use of Vietnam in *L’Homme* is also shaped by his commitment at developing a creative theatrical form with instructional goals, Yacine is thus implying that Vietnam *is*, in fact, an exemplary ideal for Algeria to bear in mind, where a socialist Vietnam under the unyielding leadership of a charismatic leader represents a blueprint for an Algeria of the future: “Mon pays tel que je voulais qu’il soit, je le voyais naître sur la terre vietnamienne. L’Algérie comme projetée dans l’avenir [...] l’Algérie ayant franchi l’étape du nationalisme, le Vietnam ayant commencé l’instauration d’une vraie république socialiste.”³⁰ (“My country as I wanted it to be, I saw its birth on Vietnamese soil. Algeria as projected in the future [...] Algeria having passed through the nationalism stage, Vietnam having begun the establishment of a real socialist republic.”)

NARRATIVE CO-OPTATION AND LITERARY ARCHIVES IN POSTCOLONIAL TEXT

Yacine’s brand of a globalizing socialist-Marxist politics is undoubtedly evident in the play. Yet, *L’Homme* should not be simply interpreted as engaging in a rigid anticolonial politics or romanticized ideations of

socialist solidarity. While shaping a text according to a unitary political aesthetic involves the favoring of certain ideological impulses, it is also crucial to note that Yacine's writings were impacted by a confluence of socio-political developments and prevailing sentiments representative of his time that contributed to the overall ideological thrust of *L'Homme*.

In this section, I ask whether Yacine's articulation of a transcultural kinship collapses differences between the marginalized groups he depicts. Does the staging of these groups as universal "victims" of colonial powers furnish greater insight into or radically oversimplify the complexities of colonial exploitation and trauma? I answer by investigating the epistemic possibilities of the text—how it offers ways of re-thinking marginality and colonial subjecthood. Texts such as *L'Homme* that communicate provocative ideological messages may be better seen as reflective of interpellations circulating at the time when they were written, rather than as elaborate manifestos prescribing an unchanging transhistoricity. Yet, this also does not mark *L'Homme* as fundamentally anachronistic or unable to withstand the vicissitudes of changing social times. *L'Homme* is a product of its era, and while it collapses important differences between groups, it is also a vibrant literary archive whose purpose is to evidence and preserve the collective presence and voices of marginalized populations. Consider how the text itself is structured, with the large cast of characters encompassing multiple temporal, geopolitical, and cultural configurations, the intersecting of narratives, the overlap between history and fiction, and the breakneck narrative pace. The text's ingenuity lies not in the monumental and chaotic nature of its plot structure, but in its manner of giving voice to narratives that have been left at the periphery amidst the grand world-making project of European colonial expansionism and its epistemic violence.

There are, however, limits to the textual representation of marginality, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes that "the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic."³¹ This is a reminder of the costs incurred when the marginalized is rendered recognizable using dominant rules of recognition, which Spivak cautions will "objectify the subaltern and be caught in the game of knowledge as power."³² This is similar to how Louis Althusser describes interpellation as the process through which ideologies unilaterally shape subjects through hegemonic logics, as "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects [...] even before he is born."³³ Despite these limits, *L'Homme* succeeds in convening seemingly

disparate narratives to produce polycentric subject-positions, assembling a subaltern counter-literature that communicates *beyond*, but not completely unburdened from, the signs, terms, and language of dominant literary production. What is striking is thus not how Yacine charts resistance to colonial and neocolonial hegemony in disparate localities such as Vietnam, Algeria, black America, and France as being *separately* generated, but how they are emerging *together* in purported solidarity, subverting the trappings of the dominant-or-subordinate binary that inscribes marginalized groups as, in Althusser's words, "always-already" immobilized in patterns of passivity and subservience. The complex ways these narratives are made to intersect, then, challenge their collective invisibility in dominant modes of literary representation.

Yet, disrupting hegemonic knowledge production requires more than just a mere textual re-inscription of the marginalized. When Yacine depicts Mohamed as refusing to fire because he recognizes similarities in the struggles of the Vietnamese, or when Alabama transforms into a Viet Cong rebel, the *political* nature of these individual shifts and fissures in subjecthood suggest *contextually-specific* costs and stakes at hand. The cross-cultural solidarities being fashioned are reflective of similar political changes in the discourse, movements, organizations, and social structures of colonized populations engaging in concerted decolonization efforts which, as Édouard Glissant describes, involves "the creativity of marginalized peoples who today confront the ideal of transparent universality, imposed by the West, with secretive and multiple manifestations of Diversity."³⁴ Consider again how the narratives of the five characters discussed are no less than ideologically and politically, if not polemically, transformative: from soldier to communist (Henri Martin), from shepherd to anti-war pacifist (Mohamed), from Black Panther to Viet Cong fighter (Alabama), from rickshaw coolie to revolutionary martyr (Troï), and from peasant to politician (Ho Chi Minh). Taken together, the intersecting nature of these narratives demonstrates how the North African, Vietnamese, African-American, and French contexts are not disparate social locations separated irreconcilably by gulfs in culture, language, space, and time. Rather, the solidarities Yacine constructs (Algerian/Vietnamese, African-American/Vietnamese, Venezuelan/Vietnamese, among others) are shown to emerge from specific socio-political conditions endured by marginalized groups, demonstrating their capacity to engage in complex, consequential, and contextually-specific political mobilizations across cultural lines.

The genealogies of characters such as Henri Martin, Mohamed, Alabama, Ho Chi Minh, and Troï traced in *L'Homme* are also expressive of what Edward Said calls “individual consciousness,” which is “a worldly self-situating, a sensitive response to the dominant culture” that “is not naturally and easily a mere child of culture, but a historical and social actor in it.”³⁵ In the postcolonial North African context, such a dynamic archive of transculturalism and resistive marginality that *L'Homme* represents is an epistemic corrective written for purposes of historical posterity, preserving the individual consciousness of those that dominant history has neglected to confer visibility to. Together, they challenge the universalizing narrative of colonial historicism and Euro-centric diffusionism—the “colonizer’s model of the world”³⁶—in which Third World populations are situated as anachronistic, provincial, and auxiliary to a rapidly progressing, intellectually-elevated, and geographically-centered Europe. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that because European colonial historicism enforces a radical temporal and geopolitical re-structuring of history, which relegates Third World populations to a distant historical past, anticolonial narratives contest the centrality of Europe as singular subject of the historical present:

Twentieth-century anticolonial democratic demands for self-rule, on the contrary, harped insistently on a “now” as the temporal horizon of action. From about the time of First World War to the decolonization movements of the fifties and sixties, anticolonial nationalisms were predicated on this urgency of the “now.” Historicism has not disappeared from the world, but its “not yet” exists today in tension with this global insistence on the “now” that marks all popular movements toward democracy.³⁷

The stories in *L'Homme* thus serve to produce an enduring literary, political, and historical archive blended from both history and fiction, where textual fiction is able to stake a claim to authenticity in the same way that testimony’s claim to objective historical truth has always done.³⁸ Yacine’s *L'Homme* is one of many creative writings of the postcolonial generation that offers new literary representations of the colonized, imagining counter-memories and alternative political possibilities, social communities, and individual consciousness. *L'Homme*’s archive would be what Chakrabarty describes as the “peasants, tribals, semi- or unskilled industrial workers in non-Western cities, men and women from the subordinate social groups—in short, the subaltern classes of the

third world.”³⁹ *L’Homme* merges history and fiction to produce a kind of mythic literary, political, and historical archive of alternative possibilities that demands entry into the *here and now*. If we consider Saidiya Hartman’s reflection that “myth is the threshold of history,”⁴⁰ and if we also return to Spivak’s averment that the subaltern is “the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic,”⁴¹ we may consider how *L’Homme* participates in the genesis of a mythical, circuited, and vibrant historical *present* and the *here and now*, comprised of subaltern Third World subjects who refuse to be consigned to the European civilizational past and whose presence destabilizes the colonial world order and its offers of gift-giving civilizationism.

I also wish to suggest that the narrative co-optation in *L’Homme* works not to reify categories of colonizer-colonized, present-past, and global-local, but to complicate these strict binaries. Yacine furnishes narratives of marginalized groups not only to disrupt their literary invisibility in historical archives, but also to show how this invisibility has obscured complexities in colonial subjecthood. Yacine illustrates textually that the marginalized subject is epistemologically mobile in navigating fields of social relations and power. For example, while characters like Mohamed and Face de Ramadhan are “always-already interpellated” as colonized, ethnic bodies, a designation that Face de Ramadhan futilely seeks to shed their agentic mobilities suggest a more complex picture. As part of the French colonial army, they are brought to Indochina to participate in colonial efforts on the international arena. The local, colonized subject crosses cultural and territorial boundaries to enter upon the global stage—the geopolitical domain of the colonizer. The local (inscribed as colonized, native, ethnic, Third World) is thus *subtended* to the global (inscribed as colonizer, cosmopolitan, European, Western) by its participation in colonialism’s world-making project.

This spatial trespass is also a trespass that reshapes the meanings and roles of colonial subjecthood. While still subordinate to colonialism’s hegemony and its joust for power (to return to Spivak’s caveat), the now-global colonized subject is spatially and geopolitically untethered from its native land and acquires new subject-positions upon being invited to participate on the global frontier. Face de Ramadhan’s ambitions compel him to engage in victimizing acts, from being complicit in the torture of a Vietnamese rebel to assaulting a young Troï, which complicates assumptions of the colonized subject as positionally powerless. Conversely, acting on the global stage may produce dynamic meanings in

colonial subjecthood: Face de Ramadhan's actions spark a chain of events that later leads Troï, as a young communist, to take up the communist cause.

Mohamed's narrative follows a similar local-global trespassing but with different ramifications: Where Face de Ramadhan sees abhorrent difference, Mohamed recognizes as kinship, solidarity, and pride, suggesting that lateral interactions between globally positioned colonized subjects further trouble the local-global divide and encourage the genesis of new positionalities. Even though Mohamed remains a colonized subject, albeit mobilized onto the global stage, he refuses to abide by these disciplinary ordinances, sees only similarity amidst difference upon realizing the Vietnamese are not so different from his own people, and crosses a forbidden threshold to challenge and refashion his colonized status of his own volition. For Alabama, Yacine materializes the inconstancy in the local-global divide in a scene where he assumes the dual role of soldier and errand boy in Vietnam. Alabama's superiors employ infantilizing language to order him around: "Hé, boy! Apporte-nous / Des crabes sautés au citron / Et de la bière fraîche / Hé, boy! / Apporte aussi du caviar."⁴² ("Hey, boy! Bring us / Sautéed crabs with lemon / And fresh beer / Hey, boy! / Bring us also some caviar.") Alabama's social location is marked by the global, as a soldier serving in U.S.-occupied Vietnam, and the local, as being treated condescendingly as an errand boy invokes the U.S. Jim Crow-era. Alabama's eventual transformation into a Viet Cong rebel further evidences textually how lateral interactions between marginalized subjects on the global stage may result in agentic resistance against hegemonic structures of power.

From the perspective of postcolonial literary criticism, European humanistic discourse often presents itself as the true "subject" of historical and intellectual knowledge production, while ethnic, colonized, and Third World populations are marked as never capable of transcending the crippling unremarkability and provincial origins of their 'object' status. Postcolonial feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes this as "a colonialist discourse that exercises a very specific power in defining, coding, and maintaining existing First/Third World connections" and as "the underlying anthropomorphism and ethnocentrism that constitute a hegemonic humanistic problematic that repeatedly confirms and legitimates (Western) man's centrality."⁴³ In *L'Homme*, Mohamed transgresses cultural and geopolitical gulfs and asserts a new individual consciousness rooted in an anticolonial, transcultural politics. This is also

seen in the transformations of characters like Ho Chi Minh and Troï—a narrative strategy Yacine employs to conduct a new counter-literature that centers Third World subjects as arbitrators of their own destinies.

Yacine also draws upon characters like Mohamed and Alabama to make an interesting, if not provocative, connection. By complicating the local-global divide and by linking the local and colonial with the global and modern, Yacine shows how the invisible labor of colonized populations has enabled and fueled European colonial expansionism and Western modernism. Consider again how in *L'Homme*, Mohamed and Face de Ramadhan are recruited to fight in Indochina, mirroring the similar local-to-global mobility undertaken by natives from French colonies in Africa conscripted to fight for France in global colonial ventures. Consider also how Alabama's service in Vietnam is conditioned by promises of civil liberties. When his superior Capitaine Supermac reminds him of this, Alabama responds unflinchingly with, "Le Noir contre le Jaune / Pour un Blanc qui voit Rouge"⁴⁴ ("Black against Yellow" / For a White who sees Red"), implying that the violences of marginalization and laboring of minorities in the U.S. have always secured the political and economic interests of the dominant group. *L'Homme* narrativizes the industry of characters like Mohamed and Alabama, whose stories are often written out of dominant literary production but whose invisible laboring is vital in ushering in the global and the modern. *L'Homme* charts a new subaltern historiography, in which its phenomenological moments of transcultural kinship and anticolonial revolution are less noteworthy than its work to visibilize social actors whose narratives have historically been absent or silenced, expanding epistemic possibilities for the marginalized subject to be creatively re-imagined and re-written into literary discourse.

POLITICS, LANGUAGE, AND POSTCOLONIAL NATIONHOOD IN ALGERIA

L'Homme's themes of transcultural kinship and anti-colonial revolution highlight a common quest for national liberation and political sovereignty. Yet, solely lauding the text for its literary quality of elucidating a subversive, liberatory poetics risks characterizing oppressed groups as an undifferentiated mass mired in perpetual subordination and resistance, divorced from particular and changing historical contexts. I thus

argue that *L'Homme* also engages in a political critique of contemporaneous social conditions and issues impacting Algerian society in the years after national liberation, given how Yacine only completed the first draft of *L'Homme* in 1969, several years *after* Algeria had achieved independence. Winifred Woodhull notes that “it seems especially inappropriate to read Algerian writing in terms of the supposed autonomy of aesthetic practices, particularly since that writing explicitly engages political debates in Algeria, challenging the reduction of national identity to a unity defined by religion or culture.”⁴⁵ Following Woodhull, instead of simply framing the text as a response to colonialism or as exceptional in its literary subversiveness, I read *L'Homme* as a contextually-specific political critique of how national liberation and the dismantling of French colonialism have not yet led to a reconciliation of the contradictions and pluralities still present in Algerian society, in particular how women’s issues, sexuality, language, culture, and religion configure into a new national politics. A reading of *L'Homme* is incomplete without locating its motifs of colonial and political imperialism as reflective of Yacine’s broader resolve to inculcate instructive lessons in Algerian national unity.

The relation between culture and nationhood is central in many of Yacine’s plays. Language, in particular, becomes a contested battleground in efforts to shape Algerian national unity. Boumediène Berrabah notes that because language in Algeria is “intimately linked to identity, political power and social mobility, [it] has become a controversial question and a bitter battlefield for competing ideologies and vested interests.”⁴⁶ And as Olivia C. Harrison notes, Yacine’s disjointed language use and legacy are reflective of broader language identity issues in Algeria:

It is an acute irony that the legacy of this iconic anticolonial writer should be part of the larger story of the fragmentation, by French colonial politics, of Algerian society into “*évolués*” (literally “evolved,” that is civilized, natives) and traditionalists, *françaisants*, *arabisants*, Berbers and Arabs. Even after Kateb’s posthumous canonization by the Algerian authorities, his work remains caught within categories created through colonial divide-and-rule policies.⁴⁷

Multiple languages are used in Algeria, such as Algerian Arabic, literary Arabic, Tamazight, and French. There was often variance in the languages Yacine’s plays were composed in, translated into, performed in,

and later circulated as publication. For example, while *L'Homme* was first composed and performed in French and later translated into Arabic, it is currently available only in French in publication, as the Algerian Arabic version is lost to public access.⁴⁸ Yacine had also expressed reservation if he could ever produce a work entirely in literary or vernacular Arabic, as he would often write in French first before obtaining help translating into Arabic. While some of his plays were performed in literary Arabic, Yacine viewed it as “un arabe qui n'est compris que par une minorité de gens, de lettrés, comme le latin”⁴⁹ (“an Arabic understood only by a minority of people, by literates, much like Latin”) as it existed primarily in written form. He focused on producing theater in Algerian Arabic as it was the spoken language of quotidian life in Algeria. The Tamazight language was a more complex issue for him: “[Tamazight] a été étouffé depuis des millénaires [...] Mais elle existe, elle vit et elle s'appauvrit, alors qu'elle est la base de notre existence historique.”⁵⁰ (“[Tamazight] has been stifled for millennia. But it exists, it lives and it is impoverished, whilst it is the basis of our historical existence.”) While Yacine was a strong proponent of Tamazight and Amazigh culture, vigorous censorship from the pro-Arabization government meant that there were difficult restrictions in developing plays in Tamazight.

Yacine's own language fragmentation thus represents similar tensions and contradictions in the use of French, Arabic, and Tamazight that comprise the complex lingual fabric of Algerian postcolonial life. Reactions to his work remain varied in present-day Algeria: While Yacine is well-known for his debut novel *Nedjma*, he may be, as Harrison notes, “most commonly associated among young Arabic-speaking Algerians today with his controversial views on language and his affiliation with the Berberist movements.”⁵¹ Due to the complexities of linguistic and ethno-cultural nationalisms impacting postcolonial Algeria, it is unclear if the legacy that Yacine had meant to sustain in his later career, that of an Algerian writer who produced cultural works for the vernacular-speaking public, had been successfully established upon his death in 1989.

Given Yacine's preoccupation with the politics of language, culture, and Algerian nationhood, he was thus staunchly opposed to pro-Arabization laws passed by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), the ruling party post-independence. In 1962, the FLN instituted literary Arabic as the national language and primary language of instruction in public schools. Similar policies extended into the domains of bureaucratic governance, media, literary production, and higher education.

As the Algerian president Houari Boumediène proclaimed in 1965, “Sans la récupération de cet élément essentiel qu’est la langue nationale, nos efforts resteront vains, notre personnalité incomplète et notre entité un corps sans âme.”⁵² (“Without the recovery of this essential element that is the national language, our efforts will remain in vain, our personality incomplete and our entity a body without a soul.”) The FLN linked literary Arabic, with its cultural and religious ties to the supranational Arabo-Islamic world, to a congenital Algerian national essence. Yacine’s turn to Vietnam thus coincided with his desire to seek new ways of consolidating Algerian national unity against the backdrop of what he perceived as the perilous tide of Arabo-Islamic nationalism espoused by the FLN instituting a monolithic model of nationhood.

In *L’Homme*, while Yacine suggests that the groundwork for an ideal Algeria already resides in Ho Chi Minh’s socialist Vietnam, he also indicates Vietnam as both triumphant exemplar *and* cautionary tale for Algeria by depicting what could happen to a nation torn apart by antagonistic political interests. For example, Yacine presents a character called Général Napalm, an irascible French colonial general whose name alludes to the French army’s practice of using U.S.-supplied napalm over Indochina, and whose death in the text amidst the colonial wars foreshadows the 1954 French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Yacine satirizes Napalm through humorous dialogue:

Allo! Colonel Ducolon? / Qu’est-ce que tu fous / En Algérie? / Si tu veux tes étoiles / Viens vite me rejoindre / Allo! Commandant de La Force? / Laisse tomber Madagascar / Viens vite, je t’attends / Ta femme t’embrasse / La mienne aussi.⁵³

Hello! Colonel Ducolon? / What the heck are you doing / In Algeria? / If you want your stars / Come quickly and join me / Hello! Force Commander? / Leave Madagascar / Come quick, I am waiting for you / Your wife sends you a kiss / Mine too.

Général Napalm uses divide-and-rule strategies to gain control over Vietnam and curries favor with other generals through sweet talk and offering them flowers, suggesting that the conquest of Vietnam intersects with variable economic interests. In another scene memorable for its visuality in illustrating cultural imperialism, the characters of Buddha and Jesus Christ are taken hostage and pitted against one another in a boxing match. Christ is force-fed and surrounded by cheering

supporters, while the Buddha is emaciated, having been starved and mistreated. While Christ is mute and unresponsive, the Buddha speaks out against the injustice of the situation and sets himself ablaze. The Buddha's suicide mirrors that of the real-life Vietnamese monk Thích Quảng Đức, who set himself on fire on June 11, 1963 at a busy Saigon intersection in protest over colonial policies that repressed Buddhist religious practices in favor of Catholicism. The self-immolation of the Buddha in a consenting act of self-sacrifice before a silent Jesus Christ is undeniably a polemic image with strong political overtones, mirroring Troi's willingness for martyrdom and signaling the fracturing of Vietnam by interventionist practices.

Yacine also draws upon the American and Soviet obsession of the race to the moon. The characters Lancedalle and Jaunesonne (a parody of Lyndon B. Johnson) are astronauts in space. Two red planets are in the background, one occupied by the Mars (Marx) and Engels, and the other by Lunine (Lenin) and Staline (Stalin). They observe from afar as Lancedalle and Jaunesonne plant an American flag on the moon, symbolizing its conquest. Niquessonne (a parody of Richard Nixon and a linguistic play on a French expletive), whom Yacine depicts as a duplicitous architect of the Vietnam War, is then captured by the choir, who drops him in a casket, buries him alive under the White House, and reads him a list of American soldiers who died during the Vietnam War.

These narratives are conjoined to depict how Vietnamese national unity is threatened by divide-and-rule strategies by the extrinsic practices of colonial and cultural imperialism. Yacine invites comparison with the postcolonial Algerian context, by implying that Algerian national unity is threatened by *intrinsic* socio-cultural nationalisms that may ultimately fracture Algeria, a nation stubbornly resistant to homogeneous interpellations of nationhood. As he asserts, "l'arabisation, c'est imposer à un peuple une langue qui n'est pas la sienne, et donc combattre la sienne [...] L'Algérie arabo-islamique, c'est une Algérie contre elle-même."⁵⁴ ("Arabization is to force upon a people a language that is not theirs [...] An Arabo-Islamic Algeria is an Algeria against itself.")

L'Homme's textual function, in terms of attending to national issues specific to the Algerian context, is neither to propose a return to some primordial national origin nor to assume that a national politics solely based upon anti-colonialism and cultural conformity alone would sustain nation-building efforts. *L'Homme's* synchronal focus on Vietnam and other sites of resistance establishes the exact *opposite*: that a unified

national body is only possible by confronting and working through, instead of subsuming, the irreducible contradictions and tensions *within* a social polity as heterogeneous as Algeria. The play shows how divisions are created not only through extrinsic forces—French colonialism and U.S. military imperialism, for example—but also through interior elements, as seen by the fracturing of Vietnam into the communist North and U.S.-occupied South. *L'Homme* suggests, then, that Algeria's internal divisions are as much a continuity of the colonial legacy as they are reflective of the political and social costs incurred when a formerly colonized nation remains divided by antagonistic interests after national liberation, and that the momentum gained from an anti-colonial movement may not guarantee unity post-independence, especially if internal divisions are suppressed by monolithic models of nationhood.

I also wish to complicate and attend briefly to Yacine's idealist proposal in *L'Homme* of transcultural socialism as the basis for nation-building. Given how the Algerian government's brand of state socialism in present-day Algeria, more than 50 years after independence, has led to economic stagnation, a lack of export diversification by an over-reliance on the hydrocarbons industry, relative diplomatic isolation, and the establishment of a political autocracy, the Algeria of today may not completely cohere with Yacine's visions of a progressing Algeria. Further, the devastating Algerian Civil War of the 1990s, waged between the FLN and the fundamentalist Front Islamique du Salut (FIS), portends latent political and domestic uncertainties, indicating that *L'Homme's* message of socialist-transcultural solidarity characteristic of the decolonization era has yet to guarantee sustained economic, political, and social stability in present-day Algeria.

CONCLUSION

Yacine ends *L'Homme* with a rousing scene. The choir mourns the death of their leader: "Ho Chi Minh, l'homme qui éclaire / L'homme que tout un peuple appelle / L'homme qui ne dort pas beaucoup / Il marche dans nos rêves / L'homme aux sandales de caoutchouc."⁵⁵ ("Ho Chi Minh, the man who enlightens / The man whom an entire people calls for / The man who does not sleep much / He walks in our dreams / The man in rubber sandals.") By closing the play with this scene, Yacine portrays Ho Chi Minh as a figure whose legacy strengthens beyond death. The play's title, *L'Homme aux sandales de caoutchouc*

(The Man in Rubber Sandals), contrasts the material simplicity and symbolic modesty of the eponymous figure in rubber sandals, Ho Chi Minh, with the momentous impact and legacy he left as founder of modern Vietnam, whose revolutionary politics against colonialism created new possibilities for postcolonial Vietnamese nationhood.

Throughout *L'Homme*, Yacine locates Vietnam as an important geopolitical terrain to transmit lessons in transcultural kinship and anticolonial revolution. By also mapping out an interconnected bridge of shared experiences, from Harlem and Paris to Hanoi and Saigon, the revolutionary experience accrues greater relevance in relation to similar sites brimming with anticolonial fervor. While I have argued that this narrative co-optation collapses particularities and differences, it also creates a subaltern archive preserving the agency of historically-marginalized groups, while also complicating homogeneous typologies of colonial subjecthood that depict Third World subjects as positionally powerless. I have also argued that Yacine presents Vietnam as both political exemplar to emulate and cautionary metaphor to bear in mind for Algeria towards forging a pluralistic national culture necessary for the formative survival of the North African republic. Far from framing the Vietnamese and other groups as acquiescent victims ensnared in repetitive patterns of colonial domination and civil strife, Yacine illustrates where differing narratives of resistance may instead be conjoined as teachable lessons in Algerian national unity. The narratives in *L'Homme* thus depict defiant colonized populations as social actors emerging from, to borrow Chakrabarty's words, the "imaginary waiting room of history"⁵⁶ to forge their own historical and political present.

NOTES

1. Yacine, *L'Homme*, 253.
2. Gérard Faure, "Un écrivain entre deux cultures: biographie de Kateb Yacine," *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée*, no. 18 (1974): 68.
3. Arlette Casas, "Entretien avec Kateb Yacine," *Mots: Algérie en crise entre violence et identité*, no. 57 (1998): 103.
4. Faure, "Un écrivain," 68.
5. I am using the more culturally-appropriate and respectful terms 'Amazigh' and 'Imazighen' instead of 'Berber' to refer to the heterogeneous collection of ethno-cultural groups indigenous to the region of North-western

Africa whose primary identification is with Amazigh culture and the Tamazight language, although Amazigh communities often do speak some form of Arabic and may concomitantly or secondarily identify with Arabo-Islamic culture. The plural of ‘Amazigh’ is ‘Imazighen’ which is also the Tamazight word that the Imazighen use to refer collectively to themselves. While the term ‘Berber’ is widespread in scholarly work, literary publications, and popular imagination outside of North Africa, its use has been consistently rejected among the Imazighen themselves as it is considered a derogatory word of foreign origins (derived from the Greek word *barbaria*, meaning “land of the barbarians”).

6. Kateb Yacine, *Parce que c'est une femme, suivi de: La Kabina ou Dihya, Saout Ennissa, La voix des femmes, Louise Michel et la Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Paris: Éditions Des Femmes, 2004), 36.
7. Martin Thomas, “Intelligence and the Transition to the Algerian Police State: Reassessing French Colonial Security After the Sétif Uprising, 1945,” *Intelligence and National Security* 28, no. 3 (2013): 382.
8. Omar Mokhtar Chââlal, *Kateb Yacine l'homme libre* (Algiers: Casbah, 2003), 55–56.
9. See a collection of Yacine’s journalistic writings compiled in: *Minuit Passé de Douze Heures: Écrits journalistiques 1947–1989* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999), 50, 56–58.
10. Jean-Marc Martin du Theil, “Kateb Yacine: Ce que j’ai vu au Vietnam a été pour moi l’aube d’une renaissance,” *Les Lettres Françaises*, Avant-première, November 17, 1971.
11. Jacqueline Arnaud, *Recherches sur la littérature maghrébine de langue française: Le cas de Kateb Yacine, Volume 2* (Paris: Atelier National de Reproduction des Thèses, Université Lille III, 1982), 714.
12. Casas, “Entretien,” 99.
13. Pamela A. Pears, *Remnants of Empire in Algeria and Vietnam: Women, Words and War* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 37.
14. Yacine, *L’Homme*, 71.
15. *Ibid.*, 77.
16. *Ibid.*, 78.
17. Kateb Yacine, *Le Poète comme un boxeur: Entretiens 1958–1989* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994), 89–90.
18. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis Book XI* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 99.
19. Lacan, “The Seminar,” 99–100.
20. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 122.
21. Pears, “Remnants of Empire,” 43.
22. Yacine, *L’Homme*, 121.
23. *Ibid.*, 105.

24. Ibid., 188.
25. Ibid., 190.
26. Ibid., 198.
27. Ibid., 36.
28. Ibid., 214.
29. "Saigon Executes Youth for Plot on McNamara," *New York Times*, October 15, 1964, late edition. http://www.nytimes.com/1964/10/15/saigon-executes-youth-for-plot-on-mcnamara.html?_r=0, accessed February 15, 2016.
30. Du Theil, "Kateb Yacine," 16.
31. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (New York: Routledge, 1996), 217.
32. Spivak, "Subaltern Studies," 217.
33. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), 175–176.
34. Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 2.
35. Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 15.
36. J.M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993), 10.
37. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8.
38. Another Franco-Algerian literary text similar to Yacine's *L'Homme* that blends both history and fiction to produce an enduring historical/literary archive of subaltern consciousness is Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, La Fantasia* (*Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* in English) in which Djebar re-writes the nineteenth century French conquest of Algeria from the viewpoint of Algerian women revolutionaries, interspersed with actual historical and personal accounts.
39. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 8.
40. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 59–60.
41. Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," 217.
42. Yacine, *L'Homme*, 199–200.
43. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 41.
44. Yacine, *L'Homme*, 199.

45. Winifred Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization, and Literatures* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 52.
46. Boumediène Berrabah, "Post-independence Algerian Linguistic Policy," *Research Journal in Organizational Psychology & Educational Studies* 2, no. 5 (2013): 271.
47. Olivia C. Harrison, *Transcolonial Maghreb: Imagining Palestine in the Era of Decolonization* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2015), 42.
48. Kateb Yacine, *L'œuvre en fragments*, ed. Jacqueline Arnaud (Paris: Sindbad, 1986), 29.
49. Yacine, *Le Poète*, 29.
50. *Ibid.*, 33.
51. Harrison, *Transcolonial Maghreb*, 42.
52. Arthur Doucy and Francis Monheim, *Les révolutions algériennes* (Paris: Fayard, 1971), 214.
53. Yacine, *L'Homme*, 87–88.
54. Yacine, *Le Poète*, 107.
55. Yacine, *L'Homme*, 284.
56. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 8.

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CHAPTER 3

Revolution and Revolt: Identitarian Space, Magic, and the Land in Decolonial Latin American and African Writing

Juan Manuel Ávila Conejo

The concept of revolution is fundamental to the construction of Latin American and African identities. The postcolonial process can be said to have begun in Latin America more than a century before it did in Africa. While most Latin American countries managed to gain independence between 1810 and 1825, the majority of Francophone Africa, which is the focus of this paper, remained under European domination until the 1960s. Nevertheless, in both Latin America and Africa, the twentieth century saw the development of many revolutions, civil wars, foreign interventions, and regime changes as a direct result of colonialism or neocolonialism. Since the 1970s, “Latin America has been embroiled in its own sets of ‘rotten bellies,’” in reference to the systemic problems proper to the colonial period that still persist: corruption, latifundism, and political subservience to the metropole.¹ Nevertheless, this post-independence period saw many revolutionary cultural and artistic projects emerge, including those of the writers here discussed.

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These artists and revolutionaries sought to develop autochthonous identities independently from the regimes and governments that sometimes failed. These movements, which are cultural and intellectual rather than militaristic in outlook, are present in both the texts of Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Luis Fallas, and Jesús Díaz, and in the African texts of Kateb Yacine, Assia Djebar, Aimé Césaire, Cheik Aliou Ndao, and Tchicaya U Tamsi.

In this paper, we argue that the problems of land loss, and the epistemic erosion that follows from it, are among the biggest issues that the post-colonial political process faces. In a general sense, this paper seeks to address the question: what happens to the space for identity in the context of post-independence neocolonial struggles in Francophone Africa and in Latin America? To accomplish this goal, we will extract brief and particular motifs present in a number of texts in order to draw connections between them and pose a response to the question of the relationship between political struggle and (neo) colonialism.

The destinies of Latin America and Africa were also bound by a series of attempts to create international continental unions. Regarding the early post-independence period in both regions, Kubayanda notes that “[Simón] Bolívar proposed a unitary state of Latin America. His idea never worked. Similarly, Kwame Nkrumah in vain proposed African unity after independence.”² Despite these failures, it would be inaccurate to say that the projects of Pan-Africanism and Latin Americanism disappeared completely. Instead, in the twentieth century, these ideas grew into a tendency to generate a new reading of history founded on decolonization, sovereignty, freedom, and recognition of an American motherland and, similarly, of an African motherland.³ Additionally, regional and sub-regional unions such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States and the African Union have emerged to various degrees of success. Because of this impetus to construct a narrative of the motherland, the Latin American and African texts chosen for this analysis can relate to the entire region and to the whole of the decolonial world, since the plight of land theft and accumulation is common to all these regions. Regarding the internationalist character of revolutionary movements, in *Pour la Révolution Africaine*, Fanon indicates that, “Chaque recul de la domination coloniale en Amérique ou en Asie renforce la volonté nationale des peuples africains.” (“Every setback of colonial domination in America or Asia reinforces the will of the African

peoples”) because the triumph of a people of the Third World against colonialism is, at least ideologically, the triumph of the cause of all the peoples of the Third World.⁴ In this internationalist context Fanon established that, “Le peuple algérien est conscient de l’importance du combat dans lequel il est engagé” (“the Algerian people are aware of the importance of the fight they are waging”), as Algerian independence would trigger a wave of uprisings across the continent.⁵ This internationalist quality is both caused by the political circumstances already explained, and the problem of land ownership, which is a common concern of all countries affected by colonialism.

THE PROBLEM OF LAND

First, one must make it clear that the process of independence that had started in the 19th century in Latin America was not an indigenous liberation movement:

La Revolución de la Independencia no constituyó, como se sabe, un movimiento indígena. La promovieron y usufructuaron los criollos y aun los españoles de las colonias. (...) La aristocracia latifundista de la colonia, dueña del poder, conservó intactos sus derechos feudales sobre la tierra y, por consiguiente, sobre el indio. (Mariátegui 27)

(The independence revolution did not constitute, as is known, neither an indigenous nor an indigenist movement. It was promoted by, and it benefited almost exclusively, the Mestizos and the Spaniards of the colonies (...). The latifundista aristocracy of the colony, holder of power, retained intact its feudal rights over the land and, therefore, over the indian.)

While independence was an important step towards emancipation from colonialism, the problems of the indigenous populations remained. These populations, traditionally, spiritually, and economically connected to the land, have been separated from their identitary space. This land problem is also present in Africa, where most societies “were and are still communalistic,”⁶ and where “one of the essential characteristics of the Kongo system of property is inalienability.”⁷ This dual condition of the land as commons and as shared cultural capital is directly threatened by colonial displacement of populations and by the transformation of the relationship to the land from a form of commons into one of private property. The loss of identity that comes with the loss of a people’s territory is a problem that recurs

throughout these texts, and for Cheik Aliou Ndao from Senegal, it is at the core of *L'Exile d'Albouri*.⁸ In this piece, king Ndiaye must choose between leaving his kingdom and fighting a hopeless war against the European colonial powers.

The sacrifice of the land means the loss of their entire economic and political system: “Pour le peuple colonisé, la valeur la plus essentielle, parce que la plus concrète, c’est d’abord la terre: la terre qui doit assurer le pain et, bien sûr, la dignité.” (“For the colonized people the most essential value, because it is the most concrete, is primarily the land: the land that must ensure the bread and, of course, dignity.”)⁹ In the play Ndiaye says to his people: “Tu as connu un roi puissant, avec la fertilité des terres sans limites. Aujourd’hui tu n’as devant toi qu’un prince démuné.” (“You have known a mighty king, with limitless fertile soil. Today you have before you a helpless prince.”)¹⁰ But the material loss is just the beginning because the savannah, on which the sun dispenses its “sourir de fraîcheur (...) dispensateur de sagesse” (“breath of freshness ... giver of wisdom,”) is the living depository of wisdom and memory for the people; abandoned, too, is the *Arbre à Palabres*: a tree that serves as an institutional space for political discussions, oral tradition, and even litigations.¹¹ This idea of a tree as an *axis mundi* is common to several texts and will be discussed later.

The same preoccupation with land theft is present in *Mamita Yumai* (1941) by Carlos Luis Fallas, which denounces the exploitation of the land by the U.S multinational United Fruit Company. Fallas describes plague that struck the banana latifundia in Costa Rica with “terrifying descriptions of dangerous and exploitative labor.”¹² Fallas wrote: “...Y el plácido y tranquilo valle de Talamanca se estremeció al paso de la jauría azuzada por los yanquis.” (“And the quiet and peaceful valley of Talamanca shuddered at the passing of the dog pack, pressed on by the yankees.”)¹³ The destruction of the landscape leads to the fall of the *Raza Heroica* which will then withdraw to hide in the depths of the mountains. In this novel, the indigenous people who lose their identities are not able to recover them. They are brutalized and humiliated as the land is exhausted by the banana plantations. The narrative surrounding this corrupted land characterizes it as an evil devourer of men: “Pobre Pastora, así se le pudren los pies a los que tienen que vivir metidos entr’esos suampos.” (“Poor Pastora, thus rot the feet of those condemned to live in these swamps.”)¹⁴ In the climax of the story Calero, a fellow worker, is crushed by a giant tree and swallowed by the swamp: “Su carne deshecha, convertida en

pulpa dulce del rubio banano.” (“His flesh undone, transformed into the sweet pulp of the fair banana.”)¹⁵ This novel, of realistic style and accusing tone, is still rooted in pessimism, a successful regime change seems uncertain for the region.

It is also at the foot of a tree where we find the *Femme Sauvage*, the embodiment of Algeria in Kateb Yacine’s 1959 surrealist play, published in the midst of the Algerian Revolution, *Les ancêtres redoublent de férocité*. This scene also is full of desolation as “À l’ombre d’un oranger sauvage dont les fruit jonchent le sol, caractérisant le lieu tragique.” (“In the shadow of a wild orange tree whose fruit littered the ground, characterizing the tragic place.”)¹⁶ About the scene the choir sings: “Oui, voici l’oranger aux fruits amers; la stérile abondance de ce pays.” (“Yes, here is the orange tree with the bitter fruit; the sterile abundance of this country.”)¹⁷ Yacine denounces French colonialism, especially in regard to land ownership: “Le sultan dont l’ancêtre a trahi le nôtre (...) pour négocier notre désert, sur la poussière de nos cadavres.” (“The sultan, whose ancestor betrayed ours, (...) to negotiate our desert, over the dust of our bodies.”)¹⁸ Either by colonial occupation, war, or a combination of both, the land becomes an enemy.

Assia Djebar emphasizes the same point in *Rouge l’Aube* (1969), a play that revolves a poet and a young woman, who become embroiled in the revolution: “Quel silence, quel étrange silence, celui qui termine toujours chacun de nos combats... tandis que la terre boit lentement le sang versé” (“What silence, what a strange silence, one that always ends each of our struggles... while the earth slowly drinks the shed blood”)¹⁹ also join in the clamor of the skies when the poet exclaims: “Une aube rouge!... des flaques de sang!” (“A red dawn!... pools of blood!”)²⁰ After seeing these examples, we can notice a trend: colonialism and the colonial wars affect both the landscape, and the ways in which people perceive the landscape, transforming it into a hostile, deadly place that has been rid of its pre-colonial identity. This destruction seems to be a necessary condition of decolonization, since even when the landscape is not directly destroyed by the colonizers or by war, the revolution itself begins by tilling the soil. This is the case in *El reino de este mundo* (1949), by Alejo Carpentier. This book describes the process before, during, and after the Haitian revolution from the point of view of Ti Noel, an African slave. The revolution starts with Mackandal, another slave, who will use the power of voodoo to destroy the colonial world:

El veneno se arrastraba por la Llanura del Norte, invadiendo potreros y establos...como una incontenible enredadera que buscara las sombras para hacer de los cuerpos sombras. *De misereres* a *de profundis* proseguía, hora tras hora, la siniestra antífona de los sochantres.²¹

(The venom slithered through the Northern Plain, invading pastures and stables...like an unstoppable vine staying in shadow in order to turn bodies into shadows. *De misereres* followed *De Profundis*, hour after hour, the sinister hymns of the choirs continued.)²²

This destruction has magical origins and is limited to the colonial world. It does not affect the slaves, only the Europeans who, restricted by the Christian religion and rationalism, are unable to stop the scourge. The French tried everything, writes Carpentier, “pero el veneno seguía diezmando a las familias, acabando con gentes y crías, sin que las rogativas, los consejos médicos, las promesas a los santos...lograran detener la subterránea marcha de la muerte” (“but the venom continued to decimate families, killing people and younglings; yet the prayers, medical expertise, and promises to the saints were unable to stop the subterranean advance of death”).²³ Following the patterns of nature and agriculture, the colonial soil must be completely toiled before it can be transformed, as Fanon puts it: “ce monde rétréci, semé d’interdictions, ne peut être remis en question que par la violence absolue” (“this twisted world, sowed with contradictions, can only be contested by absolute violence”).²⁴

FINDING ONE’S PLACE

The colonial process brings forth an epistemic transformation of the natural environment. The introduction of private property and the process of primitive accumulation lead to a complete shift in how communal identity related to geography. French Philosopher Eric Dardel defined geography by saying: “ce n’est pas d’abord un atlas ouvert devant ses yeux, c’est un appel qui monte du sol, de l’onde ou de la forêt, une chance ou un refus, une puissance, une présence” (“it is not an open atlas before your eyes, it is a call coming up from the ground, the wave or the forest, an opportunity or a refusal, a power, a presence”).²⁵ The field is understood by Dardel as *a geo-graphy*, a writing on or by the earth, which poses it as a narrative centered on the relationship of humans to their environment. This term means that the way in which a

community sees, understands, and names its physical surroundings codifies information; that this information is fragile because it is a dialogue between a timespace and a specific group, and may be destroyed if the link is broken. Clearly, the loss or damage of a territory has adverse economic effects on the population who may need to either move or face starvation and disease. Dardel, however, argues that the most serious danger is the of the inability to place oneself in the world, to lose the sense of direction and position as “un homme dépaysé est un homme désorienté” (“a man without a country is a man without an aim”).²⁶

The link between identity and geography is a major concern of Césaire, who wrote *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1947) to exalt the physical space of Martinique. This issue is at the crux of *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*: “Ce qui est à moi, ces quelques milliers de mortifiés qui tournent en rond dans la calabasse d'une île et ce qui est à moi aussi, l'archipel arqué comme le désir inquiet de se nier.” (“They are mine, these few thousand mortals circling in the calabash of an island and it is mine too, the arched archipelago like the restless desire to deny oneself.”)²⁷ Here, as Césaire described his environment from a subjective and personal view, Martinique is neither a colony nor subordinate to the metropole. It no longer belongs to France, but to him. This process of taking possession and position is the point of departure required for a postcolonial identity. Then, of course, it is important to place oneself in relation to others: Martinique “sépare l'une de l'autre Amérique; et ses flancs qui secrètent pour l'Europe la bonne liqueur d'un Gulf Stream, et l'un des deux versants d'incandescence entre quoi l'Equateur funambule vers l'Afrique” (“separates one America from the other; with flanks that secrete for Europe the good liquor of a Gulf Stream, and one of the two slopes of incandescence which is the tightrope between Ecuador to Africa”).²⁸ The need to place oneself (and not be placed) in respect to others also explains the internationalism in Third World modes of resistance, common to both Latin America and Francophone Africa, he describes Haiti as: “la comique petite queue de la Floride où d'un nègre s'achève la strangulation, et l'Afrique gigantesquement chenillant jusqu'au pied hispanique de l'Europe...” (“the comic little tail of Florida where a negro ended the chokehold; and Africa, gigantically crawling to the Hispanic foot of Europe ...”).²⁹ In this narrative stage, the colonized has found its place in the world, yet the work of the revolutionary identity has just started because this new situation is still subordinated to the global North: Haiti (and by synecdoche the whole of Latin America) is behind the “tail” of the United States, while Africa is below the “foot” of

Europe. Nevertheless, this initial positioning is a first and necessary step for the colonized subject to be able to start building its own identitary space.

CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW WORLD

Arguably, the processes of creating one's place and creating oneself are one and the same. In *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961), Fanon postulates that decolonization: "modifie fondamentalement l'être, elle transforme des spectateurs écrasés d'inessentialité en acteurs privilégiés, saisis de façon quasi grandiose par le faisceau de l'Histoire" ("fundamentally alters beings, transforming the spectators that have been crushed to inessentiality into privileged actors, seizing in a quasi-grandiose manner the grand scepter of history").³⁰ The colonized, once reified, now becomes an active subject able to perceive and construct their own reality. This transformation of the colonized is excellently exemplified by the monologue of Caliban in Césaire's play *Une Tempête* (1969), who at the beginning of the play is deemed by the French colonist Prospero as a "vilain singe" ("nasty ape") when he exclaims:

tu m'as tellement menti, menti sur le monde, menti sur moi-même, que tu as finis pour m'imposer une image de moi-même: un sous-développé, comme tu dis, un sous-capable, voilà comme tu m'as obligé à me voir, et cette image, je la hais! Et elle est fausse!³¹

(you have lied to me, you have lied about the world, lied about myself, you have finished by imposing on me a picture of myself: an underdeveloped, as you say, a under-equipped, that is how you have forced me to see myself, and that image, I hate it! And it is false!)

While it is true that Ariel, the enslaved collaborator to the colonial rule, becomes legally free, it is Caliban who represents the revolutionary ideal of emancipation. Caliban will not kill Prospero because his fight is not about revenge, as what he wants is to "reprendre mon île et reconquérir ma liberté" ("retake my island and regain my freedom").³² However, Caliban is aware of the need to crush the colonial world: "Et je sais qu'un jour, mon poing nu, mon seul poing nu, suffira pour écraser ton monde." ("And I know that one day my fist, only my bare fist, will be enough to crush your world.")³³

The book by Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de Soledad* ("A Hundred Years of Solitude") (1967), tells the story of several

generations of Buendias living in the Caribbean town of Macondo, which soon comes to represent every town in Colombia, and later, all of Latin America.³⁴ Macondo is a brave new world, even prehistoric: “El mundo era tan reciente, que muchas cosas carecían de nombre, y para mencionarlas había que señalarlas con el dedo.” (“The world was so recent that many things didn’t have a name, and to talk about them it was necessary to point.”)³⁵ The creation of Macondo is one of the best examples of the genesis of a world from scratch, as the inhabitants of Macondo do not know much about the world, and have to grasp it and name it. Macondo begins its identitary existence like Martinique, completely surrounded by water (which is paradoxical since Macondo is not an island). As with any new landscape, it needs to be placed in relation to others.

In the Haitian context, this construction of the new world will be more difficult. Under the tyranny of Henri Christophe, the construction of the Laferrière fortress becomes a metaphor for the young nation: “Alzado el puente levadizo de la Puerta Única, la Ciudadela La Ferrière sería el país mismo, con su independencia, su monarca, su hacienda y su pompa mayor.” (“Once the bridge of the Unique Door lifted, the Laferrière citadel becomes the country itself, with its independence, its monarch, its wealth and its grandest splendor.”)³⁶ Laferrière, as the national identity, will be built with the work, death, and suffering of the people who fought against colonial rule. In the African context, Césaire described the Congolese revolution in *Une Saison au Congo* (1967) saying: “Les jours que le Congo a vécus son sont semblables à une étape préhistorique. Mais avec l’indépendance nous avons accédé à l’âge historique ... au travail citoyens!” (“The days that Congo has experienced are like a prehistoric stage. But with independence we have gained access to the historical age...to work citizens!”)³⁷ In Congo, as in Macondo, the creation of the world begins in prehistoric times, and the entrance into the modern age is tied to independence and self-recognition as an agent.

THE MAGICAL LANDSCAPE

This newly-created identitary space is characterized by magical and spiritual traits; the physical space is dynamic and often plays an important role in the revolutionary process. The theme of mountains appears in several works: in *El reino de este mundo*, mountains represent freedom

and rebelliousness as exemplified by the Mandingos, about who it is said that “Todos soñaban con el salto al monte” (“all dreamed with escaping to the mountains”).³⁸ The same is true for Colonel Aureliano Buendía in *Cien años de soledad* who “fue obligado ... a internarse en las montañas muy cerca de la región encantada donde su padre encontró muchos años antes el fósil de un galeón español” (“... was forced to go deep into the mountains near the enchanted region where his father had found the fossil of a Spanish galleon many years before”).³⁹ The mountains, cemeteries, and symbols of defeat for European colonialism, become the home base for the insurrections of the twentieth century, a return to the roots of indigenous resistance in past centuries. This original insubordination in the mountains is one of the main themes of *Mamita Yunai*, where the natives cried helplessly when they “vieron abatirse las montañas seculares, en donde por tantos siglos la Raza Heroica había cantado su canción de Libertad” (“they saw the secular mountains fall, where for many centuries the Heroic Race sang their song of freedom”).⁴⁰

In the post-revolutionary North African context, in similar fashion, the *Femme Sauvage* emerges as the symbol of the Algerian revolution in a ravine, a geographical formation which references the multiple uprisings led by Abdel Kader in the nineteenth century, during the first phase of the conquest of Algeria. The desert also plays a similar role in the North African context, as the ground zero of the resistance “dans ce désert, où nous ne sommes rien, et qui n’a retenu la trace d’aucun empire, aucune puissance ne peut plus nous épouvanter ni nous corrompre.” (“in this desert, where we are nothing, and which has not retained a trace of any empire, no power can either frighten or corrupt us”).⁴¹ The desert in Assia Djebar’s *Rouge l’Aube* (1969), like the mountains in *Mamita Yunai* and *El Reino de Este Mundo*, transmits a symbolic idea of power, calm, majesty, while providing the space for disobedience and rebellion: “La race des nomades qui délirent dans l’ivresse du désert aurait-elle disparu pour toujours?” (“Has the race of nomads who rave in the intoxication of the desert disappeared forever?”)⁴² These conditions of drunkenness and delirium, reference ritualistic trance and are the basis of the anti-colonial resistance because they provide the necessary conditions for the epistemic, magical elements to develop around the revolution, and in the identity space.

TRADITION

A major concern of these writers regarding the revolutionary process is tradition, an integral issue in many of these projects. There is a tendency to preserve old customs and beliefs, both cultural and spiritual. In *Une Saison au Congo*, a play about the last days of Patrice Lumumba, “l’indépendance, amie des tribus, n’est pas venue pour abolir la loi, ni la coutume; elle est venue pour les compléter, les accomplir et les harmoniser” (“independence, friend of the tribes, did not come to destroy the law or the customs; she came to complete them, harmonize and accomplish them”).⁴³ One goal of the process of decolonization was to enable local cultural values to replace those of the colonizers. To achieve this result, it is necessary to create an epistemic space for the incipient identity to develop its own institutions. The need to create this new space is present in *Les Ancêtres Redoublent de Férocité*, a play about the Algerian Revolution that uses a style of “*cante jondo*” (“deep song”) as a means of communication, with voices figuratively and literally coming from the underground. Glissant describes the text as profound chant because it both constitutes and emanates from the very roots of Yacine’s age and context.⁴⁴ To accomplish this goal, the voices of deceased ancestors are used as a way to transmit information on the revolution, rituals, the will of the gods, or the will of the ancestors themselves. This “cult of the dead” is very important in the Berber tradition, which this text is a part of, as it “was one of the distinguishing characteristics of Berbers in antiquity. Their dead were certainly connected with the fertility of the soil and probably exercised some control over the future.”⁴⁵

According to the Roman geographer Pomponius Mela, one of the ways to communicate with the dead was by sleeping on the tomb of the ancestors to consult them as oracles and by interpreting dreams as the responses of the deceased.⁴⁶ This gesture is imitated by the Femme Sauvage in *Les Ancêtres Redoublent de Férocité*. In the same play, there is the figure of the vulture, a symbol of death: “Il n’y a plus d’amour, il n’y plus personne, il n’y a plus que moi, il n’y a plus que moi, l’oiseau de mort, le messager des ancêtres.” (“There is no more love, nobody there, it is only me, the bird of death, the messenger of the ancestors.”)⁴⁷ The vulture tries to address the young women who accompany the Femme Sauvage, but fails, saying “vous ne pouvez m’entendre et je ne puis parler” (“you cannot hear me and I cannot speak,”)⁴⁸ and is, therefore, condemned to remain in the shadows, inspiring terror.

The inability of youth to understand the wisdom of their forebearers is a constant thread in these texts, but the real revolutionary, the *Femme Sauvage*, is the only one who can understand the vulture, saying “à force de rester seule, j’ai appris dans mes trances le langage des ombres” (“by being alone, I learned in my trances the language of shadows”).⁴⁹ The play has ultimately a defeatist tone, at least for tradition, complaining that “les vivants ne savent ni vivre ni mourir, n’ont pas une pensée pour les ancêtres, toujours présents à leur chevet.” (“The living don’t know how to live nor die, and don’t have a thought for the ancestors, who are always present at their bedside.”)⁵⁰ In Djébar’s play *Rouge l’Aube*, about the same war but told from a fantastic and feminist perspective, the character of the poet is a *griot*, a very important figure in West Africa, who functions as a “poet, singer, musician, and repository of oral tradition.”⁵¹ This character, like the vulture, tries to connect people to the knowledge of the past, but is unable to do so because of his old age; he complains, saying, “j’égare ainsi ma seule richesse!” (“I thus waste my only wealth.”)⁵² Despite his age, the poet is the voice of the ancestors that are spurring resistance, and so becomes a weapon for the revolution when he says that one must die “toujours debout, alors, les mots, mes frères deviennent une arme.” (“always standing, the words, my brothers, become a weapon.”)⁵³

In the Caribbean, Jesús Díaz wrote *Las Iniciales de la Tierra* (1987) on the Cuban revolution echoing the same concerns about the generational schism at play in a revolutionary process: “Los muertos estarán siempre vigilando porque los vivos traicionaron su sangre.” (“The dead always keep an eye because the living have betrayed their blood.”)⁵⁴ In *Cien Años de Soledad*, the ancestors of the original revolutionary colonel are literally there: “Miró hacia el patio, obedeciendo a una costumbre de su soledad, y entonces vió a José Arcadio Buendía, empapado, triste de lluvia, y mucho más viejo que cuando murió.” (“He looked towards the garden, obeying an ancient custom of solitude, and then he saw José Arcadio Buendía, soggy, dreary of the rain and much older than when he died.”)⁵⁵ Notwithstanding the prodigious presence of ghosts in Macondo, the new generations of Buendías cannot listen to or understand his suffering: “Una mañana encontró a Úrsula llorando bajo el castaño, en las rodillas de su esposo muerto. El coronel Aureliano Buendía era el único habitante de la casa que no seguía viendo al potente anciano agobiado por medio siglo de intemperie.” (“One morning he found Ursula under the chestnut tree, on the knees of her dead husband.

Colonel Aureliano Buendía was the only inhabitant of the house who did not see the powerful old man overwhelmed by half a century of bad weather.”⁵⁶ The colonel, who has forgotten about father’s abandonment, ends up corrupting the path of the revolution: “de tanto odiar a los militares, de tanto combatirlos, de tanto pensar en ellos, has terminado por ser igual a ellos” (“after hating the military so much, fighting them so much, thinking about them so much, you ended up becoming like them”).⁵⁷ The next generation, the one which will fight neocolonialism in the banana plantations, will also wrong the memory of José Arcadio Buendía:

dormitaba todavía bajo el cobertizo de palmas podridas por la llovizna. (José Arcadio Segundo) no lo vió, como no lo había visto nunca, ni oyó la frase incomprensible que le dirigió el espectro de su padre cuando despertó sobresaltado por el chorro de orín caliente que le salpicaba los zapatos.⁵⁸

([he] was sleeping under the canopy of palm leaves rotten by rain. [José Arcadio Segundo] did not see him, as he had never seen him before, nor he heard the incomprehensible sentence that the specter of his father said to him when he was rudely awakened by the stream of hot urine that splattered his shoes.)

Perhaps, one of the worst results of the corruption of the revolution and of tradition is the one seen in *El Reino de Este Mundo*, after the Haitian Revolution against the French colonizers. After many years’ struggle, slave and revolutionary Ti Noel describes slavery under King Henri Christophe as being: “Peor aún, puesto que había una infinita miseria en lo de verse apaleado por un negro, tan negro como uno...” (“Worse still, because there was an endless misery in being beaten by a negro, as black as oneself.”)⁵⁹ Here, Europeans are expelled but colonialism persists. The result will be a regime where the colonized oppressed themselves, substituting one privileged minority with another.

THE SAGE

Another common figure in both Latin American and Francophone revolutionary literature, and one that is closely linked to the preservation and transmission of traditional spiritual beliefs, is the Sage. The main characteristics of this figure are old age, spiritual connection to the

deceased ancestors and to nature, and supernatural or magical powers. These people, custodians of memory, are often the *pièce de résistance* of the revolutionary or identitary movements. We have already touched on the *griot* present in *Rouge l'Aube*, but this figure is also powerfully present in *L'exil d'Albouri*, when the king must face the loss of their ancestral lands to the European colonizers, it is the figure of the *griot* who stands as last recourse. At the beginning of the play *Samba*, the *griot*, calls to the sun: "Dispensateur de sagesse! Fait que mes paroles soient aussi acerbes que tes rayons! Que mon tam-tam surprenne ton secret et règne comme toi Maître du ciel!" ("Giver of wisdom! May my words be as sharp as your rays! May my tomtom surprise your secret and reign as you, Lord of heaven!")⁶⁰ Samba also has the "puissance du verbe" ("power of the word")⁶¹ and is able to "converser avec la lune" ("converse with the Moon").⁶² The griot also has political power: after the king's controversial decision to leave his land and fight against colonialism, Samba is the one pushing the people to follow the monarch: "nous te suivrons, toi Tison Ardent vomi par les flancs du Lion en plein midi!" ("we will follow thee Ardent Cinder spewed from the sides of the Lion at high noon").⁶³ Finally, it is Samba that will keep the memory of the people even after returning to the depths of memory: "Chaque fois que vous verrez le peuple hésiter sur le chemin de l'honneur, frappez le sol du pied, et surgira Samba: il attise la flamme de l'espoir. Je retourne à l'ombre." ("Every time you see the people hesitate on the path of honor, hit the floor with your foot, and Samba will emerge: he stirs the flame of hope. I return to the shadows.")⁶⁴

In *El Reino de Este Mundo*, Mackandal becomes a Houngan (or *oun-gan*), a voodoo priest who has a deep "knowledge, intuition, and insight on the human and spiritual affairs."⁶⁵ Mackandal is transformed into the Lord of Venom and the guardian of the memory of the African motherland for the slaves brought to the Caribbean: "Conocía la historia de Adonhueso, del Rey de Angola, del Rey Dá, encarnación de la Serpiente, que es eterno principio, nunca acabar... ." ("He knew the story of Adonhueso, King Angola; of King Da, embodiment of the serpent, which is eternal return, never ending... .")⁶⁶ The trope of the snake, or uroboros, is also present in *Les Ancêtres Redoublent de Férocité* and *Cien Años de Soledad* as the quintessential representation of cyclical time. The snake "is regarded as immortal. A snake with its tail in its mouth apparently swallows itself without beginning or end, as a circle and a sphere, it is symbolic of eternity"⁶⁷ and can inhabit several worlds, that of the living as well as that of the dead. Mackandal built a Haitian revolutionary identity based on the African memory and space "...en Gran Allá,

habían príncipes duros como el yunque, y príncipes que eran el leopardo, y príncipes que conocían el lenguaje de los árboles, y príncipes que mandaban sobre los cuatro puntos cardinales, dueños de la nube, de la semilla, del bronce y del fuego” (“...in the Great Beyond, there were princes hard as anvils, and princes who were the leopard, and princes who knew the language of the trees, and princes who ruled over the four cardinal points, masters of the cloud, the seeds, the bronze and the fire”).⁶⁸ This spirit of insubordination inspired slave revolts that were epistemologically rooted in pre-colonial Africa. Mackandal’s powers grow with his seclusion in the mountains, a sacred place in the Latin American narrative, and he is transformed: “Le manchot Mackandal, devenu un houngan du rite Rada, investi des pouvoirs extraordinaires par plusieurs chutes en possession des dieux majeures, était le Seigneur du Venin” (“The one-armed Mackandal, turned a houngan of the rite of Rada, invested with extraordinary powers by several possessions by the major gods, was the Lord of Venom”) and now “Ya nadie detendría la marcha del veneno” (“nobody would stop the march of venom”).⁶⁹

Although primarily performed by men, the role of Sage is not, however, limited in this sense. Mamam-Loi, in *El Reino de Este Mundo*, is a witch living deep in the Haitian jungle, “...une vieille qui vivait toute seule, mais qui recevait la visite des gens venues de très loin,” (“...an old woman who lived alone but was visited by people coming from far away”).⁷⁰ She has profound knowledge of leaves, plants, and fungi, all of which will be the essential ingredient for the venom and therefore the revolt, and tells stories of men who can turn into animals. These guardians of tradition are also present in *Cien años de soledad* as a female figure that serves “Como mediación entre dicha tradición y el escritor, (...) se halla la ya legendaria figura de la abuela” (“as an intermediary between tradition and the writer ... we find the legendary figure of the grandmother”).⁷¹ Here, this role is fulfilled by Ursula, the matriarch of the Buendía family. She is the spirit of the house for more than 120 years, and even after going blind, “El ánimo de su corazón invencible la orientaba en las tinieblas” (“the courage of her invincible heart guided her through the darkness”).⁷² She has the gift of divination and predicts the shooting of her son, Colonel Aureliano Buendía. She knows that the secret of cyclical time lies in the spiral, meaning that history must necessarily decay while repeating itself: “una vez más se estremeció con la comprobación de que el tiempo no pasaba, como ella acababa de admitir, sino que daba vueltas en redondo” (“Again she shivered because of the certainty that time does not flow, as she had just admitted, but that it spun around.”)⁷³ and

this repetition meant that others like her son would come. The male figure of the Sage in *Cien años de soledad* is Melquiades. The old gypsy gives the Buendías some mysterious parchments which were seemingly incomprehensible for generations but are finally decrypted by the last of Buendías. They include the history of their ancestors, and of himself, functioning as a spoken mirror.

NATURAL-MAGICAL PHENOMENA

Finally, a key characteristic of these revolutionary narratives is that of natural phenomena that are actively involved in the transformation of the colonized into the agent, and the colonial geography into the autochthonous geography. Through these phenomena, natural and the spiritual forces conspire to support the resistance. In *Une Tempête*, Césaire includes several magic events, including the voices of the spirits of the forest and Caliban calling Shango, bringer of rains, the god of storms, who makes the sea roar.⁷⁴ The ocean's anger is also the image brought forth by U Tamsi in *Le Zulu*, representing the final battle of the play with the foam of the sea. Chaka's defeat is inevitable, and it marks the beginning of colonial oppression: "*L'écume de la mer, l'enfer enchaîne aux flammes l'agonie.*" ("The foam of the sea, hell binds the flames of agony.")⁷⁵ This play is exceptional in that it portrays the spiritual forces conspiring against the locals. Césaire uses these forces again in *Une saison au Congo* to describe the state of the country while going through a civil war: "*Le vent arrache les arbres. Quelle pluie! Le temps est aussi mauvais que la situation du Congo... on dirait une harde d'éléphants fantômes chargeant travers une forêt de bambou.*" ("The wind tears out the trees. What rain! The weather is as bad as the situation in the Congo... as if a herd of ghostly elephants charged through a bamboo forest.")⁷⁶ Even more powerful is the presence of Shango and other African deities in *El Reino de Este Mundo*:

Un día, daría la señal del gran levantamiento, y los Señores de Allá, encabezados por Damballah, por el Amo de los Caminos y por Ogún de los Hierros, traerían el rayo y el trueno, para desencadenar el ciclón que completaría la obra de los hombres.⁷⁷

(Someday, the signal will be given for the grand rebellion, and the Lords of Beyond, commanded by Damballah, by the Master of Roads, and by Ogun of the Irons, will bring forth thunder and lightning, releasing the hurricane that will complete the works of Man.)

This is the final revolution. At the end of the novel, after the revolt cycles from tyranny, to liberty, to tyranny again; and after Ti Noel has completed his cycle of animal transformations, the memory of his dead teacher Mackandal comes back to him as the ancestor returning to trigger the hurricane: “El anciano lanzó su declaración de guerra a los nuevos amos, ... En aquel momento, un gran viento verde, surgido del Océano, cayó sobre la Llanura del Norte.” (“The old man proclaimed his declaration of war against the new masters... in that instant, a great green wind blew from the ocean and descended over the Northern Plain.”)⁷⁸ This event, half magical, half natural, but completely revolutionary, transforms Ti Noel for the last time. He becomes a vulture and returns to Bois Caiman, the place of origin of his ancestor other, Boukman. In *Cien años de soledad*, the last scene shows Aureliano Babilonia, the last of Buendías, deciphering Melquiades’ parchments containing the family’s history. “Entonces empezó el viento, tibio, incipiente, lleno de voces del pasado... .” (“And thus began the wind, warm, incipient, filled with voices from the past... .”)⁷⁹ The magical hurricane brings back the ancestral wisdom and their ancient will. True to the theory of cyclical time, the family’s history will be repeated endlessly.

CONCLUSIONS

Having surveyed Latin American and Francophone African revolutionary literature, we can establish a relationship between the two in that the theme of revolution as an identitary process is intimately tied to both the ownership of the land and to its economic, historical, spiritual, and cultural consequences for the peoples displaced by colonialism and conflict. The struggle for land and identitary space, both of which have been ravaged, must be renewed by a continuous process of creation and destruction that finds its roots in the notion of cyclical time, and involves the figure of the sage, and other mnemonic institutions. The problem of the ownership of land is not limited to who owns the land. This crisis can also be triggered by the transformation of the property relation of the land to the human being, particularly when moving from communal ownership to private commodity. The conception of communal ownership of the land, not to be bought nor sold but held and shared, is also a major point against the colonial regime, which is fundamentally capitalist and transforms the land into a commodity that is then able to be incorporated in the capitalist world market (and, therefore, western modernity) thus making impossible the development of autochthonous human-space relations.

Regarding tradition, it is clear that it is at the same time motivation and goal, cause, and consequence, of the resistance's ties to a non-alienated conception of culture and nature, bridged by mnemonic rituals related to the ancestors and magic, *bondo* (that is profound, deep), knowledge. Both the idea of returning to a traditional past and also the fear of losing touch with what may be left of it, explain the tension that exists in these narratives between old and new, future, and (eternal) return, in opposition to one another in the post-independence, globalization era. The figures of the Sages also serve as the institutional structure of societies based on the model of clan, familial or not. These figures function as political, social, and spiritual structures and institutions for their society which are, again, at odds with the neoliberal political structures and institutions present in post-independence Francophone Africa and Latin America.

The magical elements, present in every text, fulfill certain functions: first, they respond to local spiritual and religious systems that contrast with the Abrahamic colonial religions in two major ways: the deities, and the notions of time and history. The local gods, chiefly Shango and Hurakan, are based on weather phenomena, specifically the storm, tempest, or hurricane. These gods are ontologically tied to the landscape (as opposed to Christianity, where the divine is transcendent and otherworldly) and are often vindictive against the colonial powers. The ancestors, forming a kind of pantheon, transmit tradition to the revolutionary process and to the younger generations through indecipherable symbols, magical talking animals, dreams, and other supernatural means. This process constitutes the transmission of pre-colonial economic and epistemic structures into the post-independence period, which is key for the decolonization of the colonized subject on a physical, psychological, and spiritual level. The cyclical nature of the tempestuous gods, the return of the dead, and the circular process of destruction and renovation are all indispensable elements that shape the revolutionary processes in the local narratives about self, in constant and eternal recreation.

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CHAPTER 4

Family Politics: Negotiating the Family Unit as a Creative Force in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

Aaron Brown

On October 13th of 2015, two powerful voices in Nigeria's literary landscape met at the Man Booker Prize award ceremony at Guildhall, London. The first, Ben Okri, has received legendary status for his creative work in such novels as *The Famished Road*, a masterful story of a boy navigating a fantastical and thoroughly dysfunctional new Nigerian nation. The second, debut novelist Chigozie Obioma, has risen to rapid fame with the publication of *The Fishermen*, a novel that tracks the experiences of young brothers in small-town Nigeria as they grow into a tenuous adulthood, the tight bonds that brought them together falling apart. While *The Famished Road* can be labeled a magical realist novel—though Okri himself disagrees¹—*The Fishermen* is thoroughly a

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realist novel, anchored in a linear storyline that relies more on its complicated characters than the sheer magic of its prose. Yet, these two novels communicate much about the development of the Nigerian nation—prophesying both the struggles and successes that have resulted from ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. Amidst instability, however, these two novels speak of the nation as a powerful voice, not just politically but also culturally and creatively. Foremost, we see this embodied within the family unit, where the authors play out themes that can be extrapolated to the politics of the nation as a whole.

In Okri's novel, the boy Azaro, a spirit child, feels at times connected to his parents, who suffer and struggle through poverty with larger-than-life dreams and odysseys. Yet Azaro, representative of a mythic world, also must act as an outsider, whose world knows no dimensions. He both wants to be human and yet finds himself repeatedly outside the schemes and plots that haunt the slums in which he lives. It is the concept of family that ultimately knits them together, providing a way past human and spiritual powers fighting to tear them apart. As readers, we are left to speculate and connect this message of solidarity as a vision for the Nigerian nation. Obioma's novel likewise draws political connections from family politics. Its message is much darker, however; the family drifts dangerously apart and hovers in a space where innocence is lost forever, and brothers become enemies.

Extrapolating what happens in the family to the experiences of the nation as a whole is nothing new in literary criticism. It would be easy to draw connections between the individual brothers in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamozov*, for example, and illustrate how each brother represents a different ideology competing for its place in pre-Bolshevik Russia. Closer to the African continent, much has been said about Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and its exploration of religious fundamentalism as well as the competing natures of tribal versus colonial religions within the family.² Ayo Kehinde has elucidated a political parallel in this popular novel by linking the father figure, Papa Eugene, to behavior fitting a "tyrant ruler," whose household stands as a "metonym of a nation" and whose family signifies the "dehumanized citizens of the nation."³ It is in this localized context where Kehinde takes the analysis further: the family structure is not only an allegory but also an exploration of the "prevailing suspicion of the public sphere" and its "failed promise."⁴ The family, then, is not just a mirror of the nation but is also a depiction of the resistance to the idea of the nation, the place where the nation works itself out or, far more often, where it falls apart.

Often, the best place to start when drawing sociopolitical connections from a narrative is to examine what is happening in the lives of these characters. And here I nod to Fredric Jameson's sweeping if reductive claim that all "third-world texts" are "national allegories."⁵ The larger, national themes might be paralleled in the particular, yet we must be wary of reducing texts to mere formulas where political themes can be extracted from surface-level detail. Additionally, due to the inherently limited scope of a novel, we must recognize that drawing such quick connections must be done with care. Nevertheless, writers are often conscious of the political allegorizing they make when creating family narratives. Perhaps, Senegalese novelist Mariam Ba says it best when she acknowledges that "The nation is made up of all families, rich or poor, united or separated, aware or unaware. The success of a nation therefore depends inevitably on the family."⁶ Because the nation's most fundamental form is the family unit, in whatever form that might take, it seems natural then to draw larger connections from the particular.

This paper will examine the relationship between each novel's narrator and his respective family, a close-reading of how these two family units act as a metaphor for the Nigerian nation. Fundamentally, we will explore the creative forces both within the Nigerian family unit and its relation with exterior forces as well. In these two novels, we will see how the family unit acts as a microcosm of the state. What happens within the family (as individual agents) is what happens within the nation, and in the same way, what happens between the family (as a unified body) and society at large also carries with it national and political connotations. This understanding certainly is not a unique concept, nor is it limited to the Nigerian novel. In fact, the identity of the family and its endless redefinitions as we are seeing today is often a universal element to any novel. But in *The Fishermen* and *The Famished Road*, the creative forces of the family are simply too fascinating (yet different) to be ignored, and it is worth a closer look. We will discover that there is a tension between the individual and the collective identity of the family itself: in unity we will see diversity, diversity that threatens the agency of the group, but ultimately gives way to a harmony when the individual family bands together to confront the struggles of a larger society—a harmony that is certainly complicated.

THE FISHERMEN AND THE FAMILY UNIT

To begin, let us examine emerging author Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen*⁷ which has received wide acclaim for its tale of brothers breaking apart from each other in the 1990s, a time period equally tempestuous in the Nigerian nation. A Man Booker Prize shortlisted book (an award that eventually went to Jamaican author Marlon James for *A Brief History of Seven Killings*) the novel has received "Book of the Year" awards from *The Guardian*, *NPR*, *the Wall Street Journal*, and *the New York Times*, among many others.⁸ At its core, the story sounds simple enough: a group of brothers—Ikenna, Boja, Obembe, and the narrator, Benjamin—who spend their days fishing in the Omi-Ala river in the town of Akure in southwestern Nigeria. The brothers are united in their vision from the very beginning—"We were fishermen,"⁹ says Benjamin, but their unity is juxtaposed with their father relocating to another city for work: "My brothers... and I had come to understand that when the two ventricles of our home—our father and our mother—held silence as the ventricles of the heart retain blood, we could flood the house if we poked them."¹⁰ The father, subtracted from their family, has left a gaping hole within the family's system. Though equally authoritative, their mother is unable to keep tabs on her eldest children, having two small infants that keep her at home.

Before they are banned from ever returning to the Omi-Ala by their mother, the boys encounter the madman Abulu, a self-proclaimed prophet, who claims that Ikenna will be struck down by one of his own brothers. At the sound of this prophecy, the family's fracture grows. No longer is the novel a celebration of brothers kicking up dust on the soccer field or plumbing the depths of the local river. Now, each brother is singled out by Benjamin: Ikenna the "python," Boja the "fungus," and Obembe the "searchdog." Each brother emerges as his own force to be reckoned with. They are further divided by Ikenna, driven by his suspicion and mistrust, who continually destroys the special memories they share, setting the prophecy on a path of inevitability. First, Ikenna destroys a calendar created by real-life politician M.K.O. Abiola, who spots the brothers in the Akure crowd and makes them pose for a picture for his presidential campaign. Ripping up the calendar into pieces, Ikenna shocks the brothers into silence, shocked because they would not imagine him ever destroying something symbolizing their comradery.

It is a seemingly harmless transgression that symbolizes the fracturing that continues throughout the book: Ikenna, increasingly absent and aggressive toward his brothers, incites Boja to violence after a heated argument. Benjamin describes the scene that he stumbles upon—Ikenna dead in a pool of blood and his brother Boja fled:

Half-buried in his belly was the wooden end of Mother’s kitchen knife, its sharp blade deep in his flesh. The floor was drenched in his blood: *a living, moving blood* that slowly journeyed under the refrigerator, and, uncannily—like the rivers Niger and Benue whose confluence at Lokoja *birthed a broken and mucky nation*—joined with the palm oil, forming an unearthly pool of bleached red, like puddles that form in small cavities on dirt roads.¹¹

Benjamin’s description of Ikenna’s corpse is oddly geographic in tone. What we visualize are streams of blood, yes, but more importantly, the narrator draws us to actual rivers—the Niger and Benue—that “birthed a broken and mucky nation.” To kill a brother, to cut off a family member, is to harm the very land itself. The family has crossed over into new territory where innocence is a thing of the past: streams now are flooded across the kitchen floor, flooded underneath the refrigerator, flooded so that the characters are shocked at what they behold. This connection between body and geography, family and nation, is too clear to be ignored.

A sense of inevitability—that the madman Abulu’s words would come true—combined with a multitude of tiny if mounting transgressions rend the close-knit family apart. Here we cannot help but draw a parallel to the powerful men in Nigeria’s history and the mysterious deaths they have experienced—M.K.O. Abiola, Sani Abacha, and others. In particular, Abiola, the presidential candidate referenced throughout the novel, would pass away in somewhat similarly mysterious circumstances to Obioma’s characters, Ikenna and Boja. Due to be released from prison where he had been held in the wake of losing the 1993 controversial election, Abiola died suddenly—a death some contest as suspicious.¹² Likewise in 1998, Abiola’s rival, General Sani Abacha, died suspiciously in the arms of prostitutes, leaving behind a legacy of harsh rule and subterfuge against opponents like Abiola.¹³ We cannot assume that Chigozie Obioma is making a political statement one way or the other in his novel, but we can speculate about the national significance

of such high-profile deaths and how they create a vacuum similar to what happens in this novel's family, within the context of this novel. We can observe that the well-being of the Nigerian nation as a whole is fractured during moments of violence such as these. Politics aside—something is lost when distinct entities, distinct “brothers,” sharing in their differences, are subtracted from the politic of the nation as a whole, whether for good or ill.

Returning to the novel, what is left when the leaders of this band of brothers—Ikenna and later Boja—are subtracted? The younger Obembe and Benjamin are left to pick up the pieces, to attempt to emerge into a tenuous adulthood unaided and leaderless. What is fascinating about the second half of the novel isn't the expected grief that rips the family apart—the mother suffers mental breakdowns and the father relocates to Akure so that he can be at home with his family. What fascinates me is that Obembe and Benjamin (due to the strong influence of the former) decide to heap transgression upon transgression. As if a filial murder-suicide wasn't enough for the family, Obembe convinces Benjamin that the only thing to right the wrongs of their brothers is to identify the one sole person who started it all—the madman Abulu—and to kill him at all costs. The outcast, scapegoated from the start, becomes the sole object of their schemes, and oddly enough, as Obembe develops his plan, gaining more agency and identity as a character, his growth goes hand-in-hand with his downfall. Only in committing the transgression of all transgressions—indeed the transgression that had harmed their family in the first place, murder—will their family be paradoxically free, he thinks. Obembe says it best as the two brothers lie in wait: “We are doing the right thing and God knows. We will be free.”¹⁴ But what he fails to realize proves to be his downfall. As Obembe exerts more agency and influence over his brother Benjamin, what he experiences is in fact constriction rather than freedom. Constriction of the self that comes through harming another being—the ultimate condemnation for the ultimate transgression. What he thinks will be a freeing act leads Obembe to live in exile for years afterward, a final stake that drives the family even further apart.

The scene that follows—the murder of the madman—is of incredibly grotesque detail, and yet it uncannily mirrors the murder scene of Ikenna that happens in the first half of the novel. Obembe and Benjamin, wielding their fishing hook weapons, make short work of it: “We jabbed the hook of our lines blindly at his chest, his face, his hand, his head, his

neck and everywhere we could, crying and weeping... the blows perforated his flesh, boring bleeding holes and ripping out chunks of his flesh every time we pulled out the hooks."¹⁵ It is a scene where innocence is finally murdered—where paradise, or what was left of it, has finally been put to death once and for all. Where the togetherness of family is eradicated in trauma and empty vengeance. This is not simply a loss of childhood for Benjamin. This is the fracture of a family, of a nation, beyond wounds that cannot be healed. This is the moment where the collectivist identity of the family is overturned for the sake of the individual.

We cannot move on without highlighting what happens to Abulu after he is murdered: the madman's body falls back into the river—note this—a river that carries him away, his blood disseminating into the silt and current, blood marring the land and spreading downstream. Whereas Ikenna's body births rivers of blood, Abulu's body is welcomed into one synthesis of movement and pain. A cycle of life and death, a stream that carries its contents to the shore of the ocean. Obembe will run away, enter exile, and Benjamin will grow as he is put on trial as an adult, imprisoned. Both of their fates, ironically, have been experienced by the politicians, intellectuals, and artists who have tried to enact change across the continent of Africa and others around the globe. How moving is it, then, that novel ends not only with a confession to the crime committed—but to the longing for the restoration of the family, a kind of future-memory when the last living brothers are reunited. Sharing not in their victories but in the suffering-wrought journey that has led them to this point. What better way to characterize a national history of unrest, cycles of stability and instability, as this final, lasting picture? And yet the final images of *The Fishermen* are oddly unrealistic, idealistic, oddly dreamlike. The hope of unity portrayed here, then, is tenuous, fleeting, and perhaps nonexistent at all.

OKRI'S *FAMISHED ROAD*

If Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* is a realist novel centered around brothers falling apart, then Ben Okri's novel *The Famished Road* is something most assuredly different, not only in genre but in the way the family unit is depicted as a creative and political force. If *The Fishermen* details family that is fragmented by increased transgression and individual agency, the family within *The Famished Road* illustrates how a family

comes together in the face of poverty, political oppression, and a folk-spiritual world threatening to tear them apart.

From the beginning, we notice this family is markedly different than that of *The Fishermen*. The family here—a father, mother, and their spirit-child, Azaro—live in the poverty of a compound full of tenants who can barely afford to pay their dues. The father is a dreamer, an often-intoxicated idealist who takes it upon himself to resist the political parties that prey on the poor. He is a temperamental character who might lash out at his son or a neighbor unprovoked. Yet he is largely a very positive, if misguided, character; one of Quixotic proportions. He is a man who begins as a day-laborer in the market, hauling sacks of salt and cement but by the novel's end he is a man of “interesting powers and a kind of madness” whose profession as a boxer leads him into politics.¹⁶ The mother, on the other hand, is the grounded foil to the father. Her soothing calmness, her diligent hard work as a seller at the market, her ability to rescue both the father and their son from the depths of their physical and spiritual journeys recur again and again throughout the novel. Azaro, an *abiku* spirit-child, is their only son, who is given to his parents by the gods and yet who longs to be human. He straddles the tangible world of unpaid rent and corrupt political campaigns just as he navigates a spiritual parallel, trespassing again and again through a world of ghosts and spirits, whom the other human characters often do not see, and who want Azaro to join them and leave the land of the living.

The forces at work here in Okri's novel are coming from the exterior, working upon the family to tear them asunder, rather than coming from within the family unit as we see in *The Fishermen*—where the forces work like cancer to turn brother against brother from the inside. The father, mother, and spirit-child in *The Famished Road* act as a means of resistance to the political and social oppression happening *around* them, and from their resistance—as we see towards the end of the novel—great works of creativity are able to stream out from them which enhances, embraces, and reifies the community and themselves. From the very beginning of the novel, exterior politics challenge the cohesiveness of the family. We see a landlord and the police attempt to evict the family as the father resists them physically and discovers for the first time, his prowess at fighting.¹⁷ Further on, Azaro, on one of his many adventures, stumbles upon his father's place of work—in the market where a giant of a man shoulders bags of salt, sweats and groans underneath them, yet still calls for more. The scene that is described is mythic and moving:

But there was one among them who was different. He was huge, had bulbous muscles, a toweringly ugly face, and was cross-eyed, I suspected, from the accumulation of too much weight. He was the giant of the garage. They lifted a bag on his head. He made inscrutable noises and flapped his hand.

‘More! More!’ he said...

[H]e groaned so deeply, and he gave off such an unearthly smell of sweat and oppression that I suddenly burst into tears.¹⁸

A few pages later, our focus is honed in on the father, perhaps the same laborer, only this time recognized by Azaro:

And then I saw Dad amongst the load-carriers. He looked completely different. His hair was white and his face was mask-like with engrained cement. He was almost naked except for a very disgusting pair of tattered shorts which I had never seen before. They loaded two bags of salt on his head and he cried ‘GOD, SAVE ME!’ and he wobbled and the bag on top fell back onto the lorry. The men loading him insulted his ancestry, wounding me, and Dad kept blinking as the sweat and salt poured into his eyes.¹⁹

The picture we encounter here shocks Azaro, who visualizes his father’s suffering in a tangible way for the first time. Leading up to this point, his father had been a dreamer who mysteriously disappears and returns covered in mud and dust, exhausted. Now, Azaro knows the source of his suffering. The way the overseers heap on the bags without a single thought, the way they jeer and insult, fully taking advantage of a poor man, is a shocking juxtaposition with what Azaro sees in the peacefulness of his home and the subversive threats of the spirit world. Not very many pages later, Azaro sees his mother’s suffering, as she is evicted from the place where she sells goods in the market by thugs who disagree with her husband’s declamations of their political party. Throughout the rest of the novel, she is hounded by the men, humiliated, reminded of her destitute poverty and continually driven around the market.

What do these two scenes show us within the larger narrative of the novel as well as within this conception of the family unit as a political and creative force? The family unit after these moments retreats into itself—the bonds between father and mother and son grow tighter—and in many ways, what follows in the rest of the novel is a concentrated and often successful plan of resistance.

What, then, are they resisting? In the real, tangible world, there is the swirling political campaign clash between the so-called “Party of the Rich” and the “Party of the Poor.” Through simplicity and satire, Okri exposes the corruption and seeming excessiveness of political campaigns—a biting critique of the Nigerian political climate of Okri’s day. In one episode of the novel, a campaign van comes blaring slogans and promises throughout Azaro’s neighborhood. They promise wealth and development for all the poor tenants and begin to dispense milk to the masses that crowd around—only for the masses to quickly turn the gesture around and destroy the van in their rush to receive the donation. Ironically, the milk makes the tenants sick for days, and only Azaro’s father has the wherewithal to alert the villagers that it is the milk from the corrupt politicians that is making them sick. For the first time, the father gains influence through his advocacy and mediation.

This theme of solidarity with those suffering only grows and flourishes as the novel goes on, a deep resonance the family has with the poor, perhaps even a Marxist lens through which Okri views the Nigerian political climate. Through suffering comes understanding, Okri suggests, not only in this scene with the campaign van, but in many other places throughout the novel. In Chigozie Obioma’s novel, on the other hand, suffering in *The Fishermen* is divisive, experienced alone. Obioma argues that suffering increases only as characters develop an individualist bent over the collective identity of the family. But here in *The Famished Road*, it is suffering that unites; it is suffering that brings neighbor alongside neighbor, father alongside mother alongside son. This is perhaps the greatest lesson Azaro learns in the novel, a way the real world is different than the spirit world. The spirit world teaches one to forget and ignore, to drift through with reckless abandon, just as in the real world, the politicians encourage their constituents to cast an uneducated vote for corruption and incompetence. Suffering, however, is the way the poor respond to the intrusive nature of the rich—it is empowering, constructive, and ultimately fulfilling.

In one tender moment in the novel, Azaro realizes how tenuous his family’s destitute situation is by envisioning his mother as deceased, worrying that without her protection the physical and spiritual realities will swallow him whole. His mother notices the troubled look on his young face and has this to say in response: “What’s wrong with you? Is it because of the... compound people? Or the landlord? Don’t be afraid. We are too strong for them.”²⁰ She tells stories of hope, she sings

songs that console Azaro. In many ways the sickness and near-death that Azaro experiences are transferred to the mother—the spiritual deals she makes to bring her spirit-child back to life always exact a penalty. Again, suffering, especially in the character of the mother, proves healing and unifying. It is in the sharing of suffering, the experience of it vicariously, that pain is overcome. Immediately after she consoles her son, Azaro experiences a rush of feeling in one of the most ornate and moving passages of the novel:

But deep inside that darkness a counterwave, a rebellion of joy, stirred. It was a peaceful wave, breaking on the shores of my spirit. I heard soft voices singing and a very brilliant light came closer and closer to the centre of my forehead. And then suddenly, out of the centre of my forehead, an eye opened, and I saw this light to be the brightest, most beautiful thing in the world. It was terribly hot, but it did not burn. It was fearfully radiant, but it did not blind. As the light came closer, I became more afraid. Then my fear turned. The light went into the new eye and into my brain and roved around my spirit and moved in my veins and circulated in my blood and lodged itself in my ear. And my heart burned with a searing agony, as if it were being burnt to ashes within me. As I began to scream the pain reached its climax and a cool feeling of divine dew spread through me, making the reverse journey of the brilliant light, cooling its flaming passages, till it got back to the centre of my forehead, where it lingered, the feeling of a kiss for ever imprinted, a mystery and a riddle that not even the dead can answer.²¹

It is this consolation that draws Azaro from the spirit world to the human one, a journey that culminates at the end of the novel. At first, Azaro's method is to resist affiliation with the living: "our [human] parents always tried to induce us to live... And we remained indifferent to the long joyless parturition of mothers."²² But by the novel's end, something else is understood entirely: "I was a spirit-child rebelling against the spirits, wanting to live the earth's life and contradictions."²³ Through his parents' advocacy and example, Azaro is welcomed into the human reality of suffering and loss—yet he embraces it all the same.

The irony is that just as Azaro undergoes this transformation from the spiritual to the tangible, his father increasingly experiences the opposite. His father, the drunk and idealistic laborer, by the end of the novel takes up his fight not against the corrupt politicians of the day but against the spirits themselves. The father begins to box and defeat foes like the

Green Leopard, a boxing champion who had died years before but reappears to challenge him. He battles other spirits that nearly kill him, and in his slumbering recovery, he battles them in his dreams. And as he emerges into the land of the living once more, healed and recovered, he becomes the outright leader of beggars, one who borders the knife-edge between visionary and madman. He now has piercing perspective that falls upon the deaf ears of society at large—"We can change the world!" he exclaims as people laugh. Frustrated, the father continues: "That is why our road is hungry... We have no desire to change things!"²⁴ Before he fully arrives at this prophet-like state, the father makes a single transgression, a reversal of the unity the family experiences, when—despite his mistrust for politics—he decides to campaign as a politician himself, a move that quickly leads to a rise then dramatic fall. Only when he experiences near death in another spiritual boxing match does he then realize that his fight is not against other politicians but against the spiritual realm itself that is veiled behind the political parallel.

I label this as a transgression simply because his decision violates the theme of solidarity with the oppressed—it is an effort by him to upset the order and abandon the very reasons that had developed him in the first place. As a result, his political ambitions lead to self-worship and end in an apocalyptic-like failed gathering to garner support for his cause.

Somewhere, in the opposing trajectories where Azaro becomes more human and his father more spirit-like, a paradoxical harmony is achieved. It is here where Azaro's father can begin to vocalize the wanderings his spirit-son has embarked upon between the land of the living and the land of the dead. The father muses that life must be untamable, that there must be a willingness to give oneself over to the road, the famished road that is shared with others embarking on similar journeys, a willingness to change: "My life must be open. Our road must be open. A road that is open is never hungry."²⁵ The road to solidarity is satisfying and yet proves ravenous again and again—it is what keeps this family persevering, drawing lines while unifying: "My son, our hunger can change the world, make it better, sweeter."²⁶

CONCLUSION

The Nigerian family unit is certainly depicted in two singular ways between these two novels. In *The Fishermen*, the united family breaks apart in the face of individualist ideology, a transgression that proves

irreparable to the members that survive. *The Famished Road*, on the other hand, is a novel of a family coming together in the face of oppression and injustice—from both physical and spiritual realms. The vices that are embraced in *The Fishermen*—pride, deceit, envy—are abandoned in *The Famished Road*. We are left with understanding, empathy, hope, and solidarity. While Obioma's novel describes the symptoms of a post-colonial world—of increased fracture and compartmentalization—Okri's novel responds with a prescriptive message. The fracture of a post-colonial world is simply not enough. We must pick up the pieces and respond. I often wonder if the African family unit has been and will be the most powerful force in the face of colonialism and its wake. The family, in all its different forms and variations, responds again and again to oppression with creativity, to injustice with a hunger of hope. Family is the place of preservation: the preservation of culture, value, history. But it is also the forward-thinking place of power, resistance, innovation, and ingenuity. Many other novelists have played upon and perhaps reacted against the family as creative power—just think of Achebe's classic *Things Fall Apart* and more recently Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* where colonial thought infiltrates the Nigerian family, setting it on a course from which it cannot depart. Is Okri's *Famished Road*, then, idealistic, just like the character of the father? Does it ignore the scarring that has resulted from colonization? Far from it. In fact, I believe it acknowledges this and goes beyond: the novel recognizes what all of us have—family—and calls us to see that the best path to reconciliation, repair, and return is right before our very eyes. Often it begins in the family itself, is embodied in the family itself, and from the family, spreads outward until a people, a nation, is infected with its creative power.

NOTES

1. Vikram Kapur, "Reality Is Not in the Realism," *The Hindu*, 28 (2012).
2. See also Adichie, interview by Susan VanZaten, "A Conversation with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie," *Image*, no. 65.
3. Ayo Kehinde, "Rulers Against Writers, Writers Against Rulers," *Africa Development* 35, no. 1 (2010): 43.
4. *Ibid.*, 49, 50.
5. Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 69.

6. Mariama Ba, *So Long a Letter* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2012), 94.
7. Chigozie Obioma, *The Fishermen* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015).
8. "The Fishermen News," *Chigozie Obioma*, <http://www.chigozieobioma.com/>.
9. Obioma, *The Fisherman*, 3.
10. *Ibid.*, 4.
11. *Ibid.*, 142–143. Emphasis mine.
12. Martin Meredith, *The Fate of Africa* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005), 582.
13. *Ibid.*, 579.
14. Obioma, *The Fisherman*, 248.
15. *Ibid.*, 248–249.
16. Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (New York: Anchor, 1993), 364.
17. *Ibid.*, 10.
18. *Ibid.*, 145–146.
19. *Ibid.*, 148.
20. *Ibid.*, 229.
21. *Ibid.*, 229.
22. *Ibid.*, 5.
23. *Ibid.*, 487.
24. *Ibid.*, 451.
25. *Ibid.*, 497.
26. *Ibid.*, 498.



Auteuring Nollywood: Rethinking the Movie Director and the Idea of Creativity in the Nigerian Film Industry

Adeshina Afolayan

INTRODUCTION: NOLLYWOOD AS AN UNFINISHED PROJECT

In “Looking at Ourselves in Our Mirror,” Chukwuma Okoye makes a cogent case for the Nollywood film industry as a significant phenomenon, one with the potential for rescuing the African circumscribed subjectivity in a world of enormous global challenges, as well as jump-starting the arrested decolonization project which has limited the full extent of Africa’s liberation after the horrors of colonialism. Okoye’s defense comes against a welter of shrill criticisms of Nollywood and the video film format. These critical objections have been building ever since Africa’s postcolonial woes began and eventually led to the death of African cinema. We have been fascinated with the impossible rise of Nollywood and its transnational successes, while also shrinking back from its prodigious energies and uncoordinated cinematic re-presentations.

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The most popular objection to the Nollywood video film industry takes the ideological/aesthetic/technological/textual trajectory. The video films are dismissed as being “narratively, technically, ideologically, aesthetically, and culturally coarse.”¹ Nollywood is often compared with the erstwhile celluloid cinema and Hollywood, and usually found wanting in all respects. Nollywood films, for instance, do not win awards at international film festivals. In fact, when these video films even make an appearance, they do so at the margins of the festival as “special” movies to be shown in some back rooms of the main events. There is even an underlying assumption that the video films are counterfeit when compared with the offerings of the “genuine filmmakers.”²

The criticisms are as profuse as the proliferative strength of Nollywood itself. But, Okoye contends, there is something critical missing in the trajectory of criticism. According to him, most of these objections to Nollywood privilege its textual and aesthetic weaknesses over its “sociological purchase”; they persecute “it for not doing what it never set out to do—that is, win laurels at international festivals.”³ If, as Said argues, every text is inflected with its empirical realities or its worldliness, then “Similarly, the critic of the video film must acknowledge its worldliness. Thus an appropriate reading needs to adopt both interstitial and contextual strategy—one examining its relation to other forms of cultural behavior and the other its relation to the geo/socio-political environment of its production.”⁴ Okoye’s central argument is that,

...the Nigerian video phenomenon is one of the truly successful strategies in the postcolonial agenda of constructing a sovereign framework in spite of the cultural and economic imposition of the West. It does not programmatically position itself to talk back to, or contest foreign-authored narratives which largely denigrate the African subject; rather, it is produced principally by small entrepreneurs simply interested in making money. In this regard it is unlike the more ideological cultural engagements before it, such as literature and the cinema which deploys the famous “writing back”...strategy and therefore privilege the retrieval of the African humanity from the debris of centuries of its brutal disavowal in Western literature and cinema. In this pursuit these other practices disregard the very material circumstances within which they are formed.⁵

Okoye then concludes that whatever objections and criticism we may have against this awesome phenomenon, there is so much to hope for in the gradual coming of age of Nollywood, especially the growing

critical engagement with its productions as well as the increasing internal aesthetic and technical sophistication. Nollywood, he argues, inevitably holds the “prospect of actualizing the dream of pioneer filmmakers of a decolonized Africa and engendering a truly autonomous film industry in the continent.”⁶

There are so many issues to agree with in Okoye’s essay. For instance, nobody can gainsay the critical necessity of approaching Nollywood from the perspective of its material worldliness, which is grounded in the postcolonial travails of Africans. But it would seem to me that the mere appreciation of the worldliness of the Nigerian video films cannot be enough to enable a significant transcendence of Africa’s postcolonial realities. What is the point of looking at ourselves in our mirror when all that is reflected back at us is our own sufferings and underdevelopment? It is in this sense that the material/sociological basis of Nollywood cannot be dissociated from its ideological/aesthetic/creative dimension. Africans deserve to have their story told with finesse; we need to see ourselves clearly in our mirror. What we perceive in the mirror needs to give us a conceptual clue as to who we are and what we intend to be.

Thus, when Okoye says “the Nigerian video phenomenon is one of the truly successful strategies in the postcolonial agenda of constructing a sovereign framework,” the “is” in that statement becomes a dangerous chest-beating assurance that dangerously pre-empts the future. Nollywood is still evolving and the issue of African subjectivity is not resolved as adequately as would be appropriate for our postcolonial predicament. This predicament, in all its complexities, is too serious to be left to the rapacious instinct of the Nollywood producer-directors. Nollywood cannot be an epitome of a strategy for transforming the postcolonial predicament unless and until there is a real understanding of Nollywood that does not only revel in the materiality of the video films but that takes that worldliness as the springboard for an emancipatory platform. I contend in this essay that the emergence of the Nollywood auteurs, seen as filmmakers who impose their ideological worldmaking visions on cinematic production, provides not only such an emancipatory moment beyond materiality, but also establishes the possibility of a Nollywood philosophy grounded on a discursive cinematic re-presentation of Africa’s postcolonial situation. With the auteurs, we can critically look at ourselves in our mirror and interrogate our postcolonial experience and act of becoming. The director as cinematic author necessarily needs to be inserted into Nollywood as the mediator of the transformation of Africa’s

postcolonialism. This is because the director stands as a crucial component to the shaping of African modernity, the idea of who we are and what we want to be.

NOLLYWOOD AND THE CHALLENGE OF POSTCOLONIALISM

Nollywood rose on the ashes of the African cinema. Like its counterparts in literature and philosophy, that cinema was established by the urgent need to rescue Africa and Africans from colonial cultural and racial denigration. When the cinema came to Africa, it was as a part of the large ensemble of ideological colonial apparatuses meant to overwhelm the cultural resistance of the Africans. The cinema was especially a sly means of doing this—it became a technological means for confounding the epistemological assurances of the Africans. On the screen, they not only viewed the European historical triumphs, but they also saw how inferior they supposedly were compared to the “gods” who had come amongst them. It was therefore all the more easy for the colonialists to deploy the use of the cinema in facilitating their authority in healthcare, taxation, and so on.

Part of the benefits of the Western education of the African elites, therefore, was the intellectual arming of those who would wrest the cinematic initiatives of imaging and imagining Africa away from the colonial epistemological framework. In Ousmane Sembene, we have the critical collaboration between African literature and African cinema that began in the 50s. According to Aboubakar Sanogo,

The battle for African independence was therefore also a fierce and loving battle for the cinema, for the right to produce and diffuse one’s own filmic images, to counteract the heritage of colonial cinema and to have a cinematic dialogue between African filmmakers and spectators in Africa and around the world.⁷

This struggle to define the cinematic language and context suitable for independent Africa led to the emergence of what Sanogo calls “directorial cinephilia” with its distinctly auteurist dynamics that gave Africa such filmmakers as Oumadou Ganda, Ousmane Sembene, Idrissa Ouedraogo, Haile Ggerima, Med Hondo, Djibril Diop Mambéty, and Souleymane Cissé. These filmmakers had very strong anticolonial antecedent currents in pan-Africanism and the negritude movement. Yet, African cinema,

with this host of auteurs and ideological armament, eventually lost the battle to retrieve and redefine Africa.

The African cinema, according to Haynes, began from a premise of acute contradiction, “on the one hand, its passionate desire for an African expression of cinematic culture and its often politically and socially radical purposes, and, on the other hand, the reality of neocolonial dependency.”⁸ Whatever hopes independence had for the pursuit of the reimagining and reimagining the project of African cinema were brutally dashed by the failure of the African states when confronted with severe postcolonial realities. Thus, for as much as it depended on foreign sustenance, it became very difficult for the African cinema to reach its intended audience or even deliver on its intended purposes. The coffin of the African cinema was finally nailed by the very postcolonial predicament it was attempting to respond to. In the final analysis, African cinema ended up alienating the very audience—Africans—which it hoped to enlighten by re-presenting their experiences through a decolonized cinema. The mediation of this cinema by neocolonial influences, especially through the international film festivals, made it more Western than African in orientation.

By the 1980s and the 1990s, all the cultural and ideological advantages that lent a mighty support to the liberationist agenda of African cinema had already frittered away under the deluge of postcolonial disequilibrium. First, the new African leadership became stumped under the false hope that a colonial state structure could serve as the basis for postcolonial social reconstruction. Then, every other thing fell apart; decolonization became arrested, and the postcolonial optimism became still born. Thus, in the absence of any motivation to externalize Africa’s oppression, given that the African elites had become worthy replacements for the colonialists,

A new vision for survival was needed, one that would go beyond such terms as *engagement* or commitment, one that would engage the conditions of life on a local scale, and not, as in post-colonialism, those involved with the great powers that were perceived as infinitely distant. The path of mimesis, of realism—social, neo-, or *cinéma vérité*—that rested upon the truthfulness of representation, upon the conditions of representation itself, that formed the core of the earlier cinema, *The Battle of Algiers*, *Sambizanga*, *Emitai* (1971), *Xala*, or even *Finye* or *Wend Kuuni* (1982)—were no longer adequate to deal with the *quartiers*, the *bidon-villes* or shantytowns, the locations.⁹

This new vision was the occasion for the sudden birth of the new approach to cinematic practice—the avant-garde video film tradition called Nollywood. With the emergence of Nollywood, *postcolonialism* seems to take on a new meaning derived from below. The postcolonial becomes the space within which the subjects of the ex-colonies make sense of the conditions of their lives, and get to experience “a way of seeing things differently, a language and a politics in which [their] interests come first, not last.”¹⁰ Nollywood has eventually become a popular cinematic mode with a transnational audience “who has found in it an emphatic narrative of its challenging experience and dreams in the peculiar vicissitudes of contemporary postcolonial experience.”¹¹

Haynes outlines the commonalities and contrasts between Nollywood and African cinema. First the contrast—both are radically different in terms of products, thematic concerns, audiences, techniques and technologies, *modus operandi*, commercialism, and distribution dynamics. The contrast is essentially between the auteurist and the popular. Take an example:

The products of the Nollywood system, geared to make films so quickly and cheaply and in such large numbers, are fundamentally different from African celluloid films. Nollywood films are made to fit the small screens on which they are normally seen. The video cameras now in use are mostly of pretty high quality, but the sound recording quality is seldom good enough to stand up to theatrical presentation. The contrast in the investment of time is more important than the technical differences or even the budgets (African celluloid film budgets are very low by world standards, though much higher than for Nollywood videos). Normally it takes years to assemble the funding for a celluloid film, and a script is the primary tool for conjuring up the money; the script therefore is written and rewritten, reviewed and judged for a long time, during which it is the major landmark in the life of the director, who is in many cases the writer.

Nollywood films run on their stories—as has frequently been noticed, they neglect the visual aspect of cinema in favor of the narrative and what the actors can do with the dialogue, and audiences will put up with almost any technical level or bad acting if the story is interesting enough. But the script is generally banged out with the same speed and carelessness as the rest of the film. The scriptwriter and the director are often both hired hands who spend very brief periods with a particular film. The actors, who appear in dozens of films per year and notoriously may be rushing between multiple sets at once, also spend little time with the script. In many cases—particularly with films that are not in English—there may not even be a script, only a scenario from which the actors improvise.¹²

Both are, however, locked in a similar African project. On the one hand, African cinema was concerned with retrieving and recalibrating the images and imaginings of Africa cinematically projected as part of the colonial and imperial agenda. On the other hand, Nollywood is concerned with narrating the postcolonial implications of colonialism. For Sanogo,

Infusing African cinephilic traditions with the anarchic and fresh energies of the amateur (lover) of cinema, unapologetic, confrontational, feeling second to none, and having genuinely global ambitions, the Nollywood tradition desires nothing less than setting the terms of the debate regarding the cinema in Africa and beyond.¹³

And McCall argues that Nollywood has set this agenda in terms of a pan-African dynamics. In “The pan-Africanism we have,” McCall outlines an argument for what he sees as “Nollywood’s invention of Africa.” As we have earlier hinted, African cinema ought to have succeeded as the best medium within which the cultural pan-Africanist message could be distilled to a larger audience beyond the highfalutin conceptualizations of the intellectuals and philosophers. Unfortunately, African cinema was so hamstrung by global neocolonial influences and local national circumstances that its radical messages were not available to the very Africans the filmmakers so urgently wanted to identify with. Thus, it must have been a combination of regret and grudging pride that led Ousmane Sembene to acknowledge Nollywood’s achievement where African cinema failed. Sembene, in McCall’s words, said: “the [Nigerian video films] had found a way to reach the African audience.”¹⁴

How is Nollywood, in McCall’s reckoning, reinventing Africa? “[N]ot that Nollywood provides a coherent philosophy or world-view that might be called ‘pan-African’, but that Nollywood is a primary catalyst in an emergent continent-wide popular discourse about what it means to be African.”¹⁵ Both Okoye and McCall agree on the significance of Nollywood in this regard, as already facilitating the shaping of a postcolonial African identity even in its chaotic vibrancy and proliferative energy. For Okoye, the beauty of Nollywood is essentially that it represents a postcolonial reality which creates it in the first place: “Being inward-looking and largely independent of state agenda and foreign determination, it reflects the people the way they are and the way they aspire to be, in a manner that is insensitive to the way others see them.”¹⁶ This capacity to capture the incoherent potpourri

of postcolonial realities, in McCall's sense, is actually Nollywood's fundamental virtue; it is generating "continent-wide discourse about the problem of representing African life and its diverse cultures.... [T]his discourse is truly pan-African because it engages the common villager as well as the socially privileged."¹⁷ Thus:

What positions Nollywood as a catalyst for pan-African discourse is precisely that it has no view, no agenda, no ideology. It is a sprawling marketplace of representations. Its storylines are plucked from newspapers, political rumour and urban folklore. In the scope of the industry's brief lifetime we can already see Nollywood writers responding with new and increasingly provocative perspectives to the currents of popular discourse that respond to their work. We should resist and challenge the elitist impulse to dismiss Nollywood's potential on the grounds that they are too commercial, too vulgar or too popular to take seriously as a significant cultural force on the continent. Unlike the more sophisticated work of the canonized auteurs of African cinema, Nollywood has created a pan-African forum that makes speaking of a pan-African cinema and indeed pan-African culture possible for the first time.¹⁸

But then there remains a catch, and this is a critical point that undermines this unique achievement: Nollywood's (in)capacity to transform the postcolony by transforming the very act of postcolonial worldviewing. This simply means that its trumpeted achievement was more unconscious than through a direct directorial act of re-presentation that is required as the first condition for emancipating Africa.

RETHINKING DECOLONIZATION, REINVENTING THE AFRICAN AUTEURS

In *Auteuring Nollywood*,¹⁹ I initiated a deeper interrogation of Nollywood cinematic practices in relation to the exigencies of fabricating an African modernity. At the heart of the contemporary African philosophy discourse is the dilemma of how Africans can reclaim their self-esteem while simultaneously achieving internal development which also involves engaging and adapting global developmental offerings. How does Africa become modern while establishing a suitable modern identity for itself as a continent? Osha, however, argues that Africa is still at a loss what to make of the modern:

The point is that Africa has not yet quite decided what to do with modernity, has not discovered what version[s] of modernity best serves its interests, and has not resolved the contradictions of the continual tussle between its indigenous traditions and the wide ranging transformations proposed by the project of modernity. This is a crucial problem that faces projects geared towards the construction of African modernities. African modernities have never been the same as Euro-modernity. Modernist expressions in Africa are instead a combination of aspects of Euro-modernity, secularism, Christian cosmology, Islamic beliefs, indigenous African systems of knowledge and other syncretic cultural forms that lie outside these categories. Indeed, African modernist expressions are an invention of post-coloniality and are as such suffused with a profound hybridity.²⁰

Thus, the significance of decolonization as a liberatory project is made all the more painful by its failure to arrive at its intended destination. Decolonization is the process whose ultimate objective is the achievement of modernity that is specifically African in form. Fanon is unequivocal about what is intended:

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding.... Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity.²¹

As a historical process, decolonization is meant to initiate a radical reconstruction of the ex-colonies in a manner that undermines the entirety of colonial structures, values, and ideologies. This historical liberation process, commencing with political independence for most African countries, has, however, been almost irretrievably arrested by the same forces it was meant to displace. The "order of the world" that placed Africa in its present disequilibrium has not been changed and rather than ushering in a "new humanity," Africa is still struggling within its crippling status as a subaltern continent.

In Biodun Jeyifo's provocative essay on the "great paradox" of the "arrested decolonization" on African literature, he says the "historic de-colonization having initially enabled the curricular legitimation of

African literary study in African universities and schools, the equally historic arrest of de-colonization has swung the center of gravity of African literary study away from Africa to Europe and America.”²² The career trajectory of African cinema also demonstrates this “great paradox” of arrested decolonization—the African filmmakers are fired by the need to decolonize cinematic re-presentations but they must go, cap in hand, to foreign sponsors, usually their former colonial masters, for funding and infrastructures. Thus, as we have earlier argued, Nollywood shares some critical commonalities with African cinema, especially the urgency of catalyzing the emergence of “a postcolonial pan-African consciousness.”²³ The significance of Nollywood, for Mistry and Ellapen, consists in “its grassroots status, and that the people themselves create it represents at once a confluence of folkloric traditions and practices while also engaging with ideas of what might constitute African modernity as evidenced through narrative choices.”²⁴ With Nollywood, we have a radical manifestation of deploying emergent video technologies for the purposes of self-expression and self-representation. Unfortunately, it would seem that Nollywood has actually overreached its own significance through an effulgence that threatens to submerge the very significance of self-expression and self-representation. Dudley Andrew typifies Nollywood, as currently is, as a collection of self-generating and unauthored “movies-that-are-missing”; “movies that circulate outside our discourse; they are significant by virtue of being insignificant to us—or, better yet, by virtue of frustrating our critical radar.”²⁵

To be able to adequately extend the critical objective of African cinema—the possibility of facilitating the emergence of an autonomous African identity—the Nollywood video film industry needs to consolidate what we can call its auteur phase of development.²⁶ This phase is characterized by the (re)emergence of a new breed of directors who are motivated by a different set of challenges, apart from making money, to mediate the predicament of African modernity. If, as Larkin asserts, Nollywood represents “a radical reworking of the basis of African cinema and visual culture,”²⁷ it then requires an equally radical directorial intervention that would motivate a metamorphic transition from self-representation to self-representation, mediated by content, aesthetics, and ideology.

This stage has already been jumpstarted. In *Auteuring Nollywood*, I signaled the arrival of neo-Nollywood and a host of directors who are concerned with rethinking Nollywood’s cinematic practices: Tunde Kelani, Stephanie Okereke, Kunle Afolayan, Mahmood Ali-Balogun,

Chineze Anyaene, Jeta Amata, Lucky Ejim, etc. The “neo-” marker is used deliberately and in contrast to the “post” (as in “post-Nollywood”). In other words, the new development called “neo-Nollywood” is a necessary one motivated by dynamics internal to cinematic practices in Nollywood itself. Its development was occasioned by the long-standing disaffection with Nollywood negatively unnerving production. Thus, Nollywood cannot be transcended into a different cinematic space or dynamics that subvert the achievements and failures of Nollywood; rather, Nollywood has to reengineer itself from within its own shortcomings. Neo-Nollywood is therefore meant to be a re-fabrication of the video films in terms of better storylines and improved quality. It is a move toward cinematic creativity channeled toward the urgency of an alternative and emancipatory cultural decolonization in Africa. Deleuze’s distinction between the *commercial* and the *creative* gives us an appropriate register to understand the relationship between Nollywood and neo-Nollywood. For Deleuze, while the commercial is concerned with the need to further the capitalist creed of a rapid turnover, a creative work of art,

...always entails the creation of new spaces and times (it’s not a question of recounting a story in a well-determined space and time; rather, it is the rhythms, the lighting, and the space-times themselves that must become the true characters). A work should bring forth the problems and questions that concern us rather than provide answers.²⁸

Deleuze calls the creative “a new syntax” that is characteristic of a minor cinema; the latter is that “which a minority constructs within a major language.”²⁹ With this new syntax, the auteur is expected to create a work of art “from the unexpected, the unrecognized, the unrecognizable.”³⁰

Auteurism first came to Africa through the anticolonial cinematic activities of the early African filmmakers. But, as we saw above, its vitality was compromised by the very neocolonial and globalizing forces it was meant to oppose. While the swan song of African cinema is fading, Nollywood stands to inherit its auteurist orientation. In fact, we can hypothesize that with its rapidly evolving modern transformations, Nollywood indeed spells the renewal of the waning energies of African cinema. Nollywood therefore urgently needs auteurism. But to effectively consolidate a full transition to this auteur stage, an urgent

act of resurrection is required to get the cinematic author out of the silencing grave dug by postmodernity and what Derrida calls “post-modern thought.”³¹ I will be outlining this resurrectional necessity through a complex play of interaction between the postmodern and the postcolonial.

In 1968, Roland Barthes proclaimed the death of the author in an article of the same title. In his reckoning, we have venerated the author too much in the history of writing and in the literary enterprise when, in actual fact, linguistic dynamics reveals that meaning is so dispersed in any text that it does not demonstrate the need for such an author. Consider this example:

In his story *Sarrasine* Balzac, describing a castrato disguised as a woman, writes the following sentence: *‘This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility.’* Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing ‘literary’ ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.³²

At the end of this iconic essay, Barthes arrives at the conclusion that it was neither Balzac the author nor Balzac the man who was asking those questions about the “woman.” In fact, no one was asking those questions; in any piece of writing or text, the identity of the body writing the text is not just lost; the “author” is destroyed by the very act of writing. The death of the author is supposed to signal the significance of the order of intertextuality, the capacity of texts to stay permanently imprisoned in one another. The death also liberates the ceaseless proliferation of untamed meanings as well as the birth of the reader.

Textuality, postmodernism and poststructuralism have had an ambivalent reception in African studies, as contributors to Magubane’s *Postmodernism, Postcoloniality and African Studies* (2004) demonstrate. In the now famous Mbembe/Zeze debate at CODESRIA, the two brilliant scholars disagreed on what intellectual future CODESRIA ought to chart for Africa. While Mbembe unrepentantly argued that

African scholars ought to get out of their nativist ghetto by considering “Africa” as text rather than context, Zeleza championed an understanding of Africa grounded in her postcolonial materiality. In this regard, for instance, Marxism cannot be said to be dead or to have entered a “post” state. This trajectory of argument motivated Okoye; it is the same argument deployed by Ofeimun in “Postcolonialism and the Impossible Death of the African Author” (1998).

Ofeimun’s strategy in this essay rests on what we can call the exigencies of contexts. In other words, different worldviews and predicaments predispose different societies to different theories and theorizations. Even though Barthes’ idea of the demise of the author arose from within the European context, the proclamation was meant to have the force of the universal. The author everywhere is death. For Ofeimun, textuality threatens Africa in so many ways, and that is apart from the arbitrariness of killing off the Author while surreptitiously bringing in the Reader who, surprisingly, is meant to be a definite consciousness. First, Barthes’ idea and the intertextual paradigm it canvasses enforce dissociation between art and “the big issues which shake and condition the cultural economy of the times.”³³ Second, “it becomes the case that in a society where there is no text, it is not just the Author that dies, it is the whole society, its history and culture, its philosophy and science that is presumed to have died.”³⁴

Postmodernity therefore enforces the silence of Africa. Yet, Africa’s postcolonial condition is without form and void. Africa is covered in the palpable darkness of vulnerabilities, incapacities, deriving from underdevelopment, which surge over the presumptions of textuality. The postcolonial condition dictates the need for creators, political and artistic, who, in the similitude of God, can speak material forms to what is absent. Postcoloniality requires the emergence, or resurrection, of the creative authors. Ofeimun therefore argues that while the historical context of the West could accommodate Barthes’ singular declaratory death of the author because this society is believed to have arrived at its destination—or has lost sight of it:

What must be confronted is that societies in Africa are not just spatially but historically distant from those for which the idea of the Death of the Author has been hatched. To be historically distant is not here a reference to temporality but differences in social and economic yoking. While great violence, if not injustice, is often done and also often removed by

yoking the world into a common globality, necessary indifference to either is called for to acknowledge the very banal fact that African societies unlike Western ones have not yet arrived at their destinations nor have they finalised what the destination should be. Nor have they reached an establishmentarian consensus that there should be no looking forward to a destination, as the open-ended discourse of the *Death of the Author* suggests. At any rate, unlike the European societies of Barthes' background, contemporary African societies confront the crisis of existence in the Twentieth century within the logic of scarcity rather than abundance, mass illiteracy rather than a surfeit of literacy, the brazenness of oppression, both inter-racial and intra-racial, and deprivation rather than the effluence of the freedoms of speech and association. The daily lot for many is the rank distortion of choice and life-chances by personalised power strutting at the expense of institutional designs.³⁵

Once the African cinematic author regains life, her responsibility is already cut out: To creatively explore the social pathologies that lie at the heart of the postcolonial condition. S/he is charged with participating in the dynamics of postcolonial survival, broadly conceived, in terms of cinematic re-presentation. Unlike the erstwhile African auteurs, the new filmmakers may not be required to "speak back" to the West. But they must speak to their people by making their suffering more sufferable through the provision of a cinematic context within which we can rethink the questions of modernity—the questions of who we are and what we want to be. The challenge, however, is that modernity has become a battle ground for the hegemonic control of agency. It is a violently contested ground where postmodern and globalizing forces threaten to impose a spurious normality. The Nollywood auteurs cannot therefore escape intervening creatively in the ideological discourses of modernity that inflicts on Africa the "sentence of history."³⁶

NOLLYWOOD DIRECTOR AND THE BURDEN OF CREATIVITY

The interesting fact about Nollywood is that it generates both the commercial and the creative. While there are many criticisms about the commercial import of Nollywood, not much has been said about the creative energy, its dynamics, and its significance. To critically unpack this creative impulse, one must begin by first undermining the postmodern playfulness in Deleuze's understanding of the creative. If, as he says, creativity creates a new syntax, and "syntax in cinema amounts to the linkages and

relinkages of images, but also the relation between sound and the visual image,³⁷ then cinema becomes essentially a *textual* achievement—the adroit weaving of images, sounds, and lighting into a tapestry of syntactic cinematic structure.

Nollywood is definitely more than a body of textual cinematic practices. To deploy the language metaphor, Nollywood is more of a semantic dynamics of images and sounds that projects imperfect meanings and imperfect answers creatively. How then is the (neo-) Nollywood auteur expected to be creative? Creativity is a huge problematic concept that is frustratingly ambiguous at almost every turn. For instance, in what sense is creativity conceptually different from intelligence, innovation, adaptability, originality, imagination, discovery, ingenuity, etc.? Is “creative intelligence” a tautology, for instance? Is creativity deliberate or unconscious? We can begin unpacking this concept by considering Margaret Boden’s distinction between *historical* creativity (H-creativity) and *psychological* creativity (P-creativity). Creativity is historical if the idea or insight in question is surfacing for the first time in history. P-creativity, however, involves ideas that might have occurred in history but that are new to the persons to whom the ideas occur. For Boden,

P-creativity involves coming up with a surprising, valuable idea that’s new to the person who comes up with it. It doesn’t matter how many people have had that idea before. But if a new idea is H-creative, that means that (so far as we know) no-one else has had it before: it has arisen for the first time in human history.³⁸

Since H-creativity is near impossible in this regard, we are obviously concerned with P-creativity here, even though it raises severe problems of its own. Creativity here implies newness and surprise. For Boden, a conceptual space is required to understand how an idea becomes surprisingly creative. A conceptual space is the structured style of thought unique to particular groups or cultures, and governed by constitutive rules. A creative idea becomes surprising, first, if it allows for “the unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas.” Second, such an idea can also be surprising if its possibility has remained unsuspected within the thinking pattern characterizing the conceptual space. This exploratory creativity enables “someone to see possibilities they hadn’t glimpsed before.” Third, an idea becomes surprising if it possesses the capacity to transform the conceptual space rather than just exploring its possibilities or combining the unfamiliar. Creativity in this sense requires,

...someone's thinking something which, with respect to the conceptual spaces in their minds, they couldn't have thought before. The supposedly impossible idea can come about only if the creator changes the pre-existing style in some way. It must be tweaked, or even radically transformed, so that thoughts are now possible which previously (within the untransformed space) were literally inconceivable.³⁹

Within the conceptual space of Nollywood, creativity implies *refreshing* cinematic re-presentations of the postcolonial condition. What is refreshing in this sense is the capacity of the film to compel thinking *differently*. It is the cinematic capacity to make us see the everyday realities in a new light (rather than routinizing those realities). The everyday pathologies of the postcolony are, in effect, defamiliarized enough for us to grasp their essence as well as engage them critically. The Nollywood director-as-author encodes in a film a particular issue, vision, idea, or a portion of reality which engages the viewers perceptually and conceptually such that they can arrive at the unseen through what is seen. This creative encoding leads to a re-visioning of the familiar, arriving with the full aesthetic and technological sophistication reminiscent of African cinema.

Let me illustrate this point of creativity with the (neo-)Nollywood film, *The Meeting* (2012; dir.: Mildred Okwo). Most Nigerians have come to associate Abuja, Nigeria's capital city, with a lot of things—power, wealth, and the administrative nerve of Nigeria. Abuja also participates, and even more so, in the administrative laxity and executive highhandedness that pervades almost every administrative cranny in Nigeria. This is to the extent that power breeds a form of arrogance that generates some sense of superhuman overestimation of oneself. This is further compounded in Nigeria by the citizens' perception of government work as some sort of sinecure. When we castigate leadership as the bane of Nigeria's problem, we have our eyes on the president, governors, ministers, local government chairmen, and politicians as the driving force or disabling obstacles to democratic development. Yet, we have a movie that reveals the complicity of the rank and file in national debilitation. We have all at some times encountered such executive highhandedness, but *The Meeting* forces us to think about the "executive" secretary, and how such a seemingly inconsequential part of the executive framework could actually derail democratic aspirations.

In the movie, the saucy, sharp, cosmetically heavy and gum-chewing secretary “effectively” blocks the entrance that ought to lead to her boss. Throughout the movies, we saw the Minister only once. His absence, even when he is all the time present in the office, is a democratic deficit. Only his girlfriend and members of his constituency have direct access to him. Others with more cogent reasons have to go through the secretary, and she is a real bulwark against all forms of democratic grievances. Her face blazes anger, fire, and sarcasm throughout the movie. She only laughs when some money or gifts pass from the “wise” visitors to her hands. Any time the camera pans the faces of the citizens in the waiting room, you see boredom, resignation, anger, bafflement, and shock. Mr. Makinde Eso, the project manager for Tekmast Ltd. who has an appointment for 9.30 a.m. on a Monday, and who nurses the futile hope of catching an afternoon flight back to Lagos to prepare for his daughter’s graduation ceremony at the end of that week, is told that his appointment has been arbitrarily shifted to 4.30 p.m. He ends up staying the entire week! And that was about the least temporal provocation, at least amongst those he meets at the reception. All his preconceived notions about democratic civility went out the window. The dramatic stasis in that waiting area constitutes an allegory to Nigeria’s underdevelopment. In that reception area alone, several fissures of Nigeria’s ailing nationality manifested—ethnic division, class antagonism, religious jingoism, and even gender rivalries.

Thus, in *The Meeting*, the director brought us face to face with an everyday postcolonial pathology in the form of administrative high-handedness. We are forced to reflect on Nigeria’s intractable predicament from the perspective of a small administrative office housing an absent Minister and a very present but anti-democratic secretary. But there is more. The movie transcends the regular “emphatic narrative” of the vicissitudes of contemporary postcolonial experience. At a point, the audience is forced to ask if Mr. Eso would be compelled to spend an extra week in that office. Then the twist in the tale: the frustration pushed the frustrated into a clandestine but collective citizens action that breaks down the door of administrative obstinacy. The Minister is already in the car with the girlfriend. Mr. Eso dares the gun-toting security details and forces himself into his presence. He eventually gets his appointment confirmed and the presentation made. The scene where he confronts the Minister is a beauty of democratic anger. But the preceding

scene where the “conspiracy” is hatched demonstrates the possibility of national consensus that forces ethnic, religious, class, and gender differences into the background of collective action.

CONCLUSION

Nollywood has entered its auteur stage. That is, only if those who have been frustrated by the formulaic proliferation of the old Nollywood could actually overcome the subsisting economic challenge of making a creative and surprising movie that speaks to our postcolonial condition. It is not easy to make films with bigger budget that can compete at the level of aesthetic and technical sophistication required to have them projected at international film festivals. Kunle Afolayan, one of the emerging directors of neo-Nollywood, has been at the forefront of making blockbuster movies—*Phone Swap*, *The Figurine*, *Irapada* (The Redemption), *October 1*, and *The CEO*. *October 1* cost him more than \$2million, won many awards, but gave him a high blood pressure! A further existential dimension of filmmaking that threatens the emergence of the Nollywood auteur is the commercial act of aggressive piracy. Haynes sums up the challenge:

New Nollywood producer/directors are in a situation more like that of celluloid filmmakers from the rest of Africa, in which the financing of each project is a unique, long-drawn-out, frequently picaresque adventure. In fact the Nigerian case is more radical in that New Nollywood filmmakers do not have the familiar set of European funding sources with which to begin their campaign to raise money.⁴⁰

Yet, it seems to me that the greatest challenge which neo-Nollywood and its emerging auteurs face is that of creativity—the challenge of extracting the existing material or creating entirely new ones to tell and retell our stories in new and fascinating manners; the challenge of making movies that instigates reflections and disturbs our complacencies; the challenge of making us look into our mirror to see who we are and what we really want to be. It is by responding to this creativity problem that these new Nollywood directors can escape Haynes’ question of “whether New Nollywood, as currently structured, is actually viable or sustainable except as a minor practice and perhaps as a feeder for a few directors to integrate themselves into the international circuits of African cinema.”⁴¹ True, the challenges are many, but the gains are much more.

NOTES

1. Chukwuma Okoye, "Looking at Ourselves in Our Mirror: Agency, Counter-Discourse, and the Nigerian Video Film," *Film International* 5, no. 4 (2007): 24.
2. Steve Ogunsuyi, "Double Game: Issues of Overlap and Convergence in the Nigerian Video Film," *Nigerian Theatre Journal* 5, no. 1 (1999): 69.
3. Okoye, "Looking at Ourselves in Our Mirror," 24.
4. *Ibid.*, 22.
5. *Ibid.*, 20.
6. *Ibid.*, 28.
7. Aboubakar Sanogo, "Regarding Cinephilia and Africa," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 50, no. ½ (2009): 227.
8. Jonathan Haynes, "African Cinema and Nollywood: Contradictions," *Situations: Project of the Radical Imagination* 4, no. 1 (2011): 67.
9. Kenneth Harrow, *Introduction to African Cinema: Postcolonial and Feminist Readings*, ed. Kenneth Harrow (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999), xvii.
10. Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2.
11. Okoye, "Looking at Ourselves in Our Mirror," 20.
12. Haynes, "African Cinema and Nollywood," 73.
13. Sanogo, "Regarding Cinephilia and Africa," 228.
14. John C. McCall, "The Pan-Africanism We Have: Nollywood's Invention of Africa," *Film International* 5, no. 4 (2007): 96.
15. *Ibid.*, 94.
16. Okoye, "Looking at Ourselves in Our Mirror," 37.
17. McCall, "The Pan-Africanism We Have," 94.
18. *Ibid.*, 96.
19. Adeshina Afolayan, "Philosophy, (Neo-)Nollywood and the African Predicament," in *Auteuring Nollywood: Critical Perspectives on the Figurine*, ed. Adeshina Afolayan (Ibadan: University Press PLC, 2014), 1–50.
20. Sanya Osha, "Appraising Africa: Modernity, Decolonisation and Globalisation," in *Philosophy and African Development*, ed. Lansana Keita (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2011), 170–171.
21. Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Groves Press, 1963), 36.
22. Biodun Jeyifo, "The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory," in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia (London: Arnold, 2003), 164.
23. McCall, "The Pan-Africanism We Have," 94.

24. Jyoti Mistry and Jordache A. Ellapen, "Nollywood's Transportability: The Politics and Economics of Video Films as Cultural Products," in *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry*, ed. Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), 46–47.
25. Dudley Andrew, "The Roots of the Nomadic: Gilles Deleuze and the Cinema of West Africa," in *The Brain Is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, ed. Gregory Flaxman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 245.
26. I have used the word consolidation deliberately because this is not a phase that we are looking to happen; it has already begun. But in "New Nollywood: Kunle Afolayan" (2014), Jonathan Haynes provides compelling argument about why this consolidation of the auteur phase may become herculean for the new Nollywood directors.
27. Brian Larkin, quoted in Mistry and Ellapen, 46.
28. Gilles Deleuze, "The Brain Is the Screen: An Interview with Gilles Deleuze," in *The Brain Is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, ed. Gregory Flaxman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 370.
29. Flaxman, "Introduction," 34.
30. Deleuze, "The Brain Is the Screen," 370.
31. Simon During, "Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 125.
32. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142.
33. Odia Ofeimun, "Postmodernism and the Impossible Death of the African Author," *Glendora Review* 2, no. 3 (1998): 32.
34. *Ibid.*, 35.
35. *Ibid.*, 39–40.
36. Homi K. Bhabha, "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 190.
37. Flaxman, "Interview with Gilles Deleuze," 370.
38. Margaret A. Boden, "Creativity in a Nutshell," in *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms* (London: Routledge, 2004; Reprint), 2.
39. *Ibid.*, 5.
40. Jonathan Haynes, "'New Nollywood': Kunle Afolayan," *Black Camera* 5, no. 2 (2014): 60.
41. *Ibid.*, 69.



Nollywood in Rio: An Exploration of Brazilian Audience Perception of Nigerian Cinema

Kamahra Ewing

Historically, Africans and their descendants lack positive representations within literary and media spheres. A scarcity of favorable images, negatively affects Africans and their descendants throughout the world. Brazil is one such example of a nation suffering from insufficient visual representations of Afro-Brazilians within the mainstream media (Borges and Borges 2012). In many senses, African culture has been appropriated and commodified, while in daily practice Blacks are treated as non-citizens. This is what African Diaspora scholar Antonio Tillis (2011, p. 2) describes as Brazil's paradox as "a nation that 'pimps' a cultural, racial identity that does not have a similar cultural collateral within the public sphere of Brazilian society...Brazil is replete with contradictions that show a nation that continues to battle with, yet exploit, the ideology of blackness as a national marker of identity." Indeed, several scholars (e.g. Lima and Obianuju 2006; Lima 2011; Hamilton 2006; Tillis 2011;

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Telles 2004; Hanchard 1999; Butler 1998; Andrews 2004) argue that Afro-Brazilians are disregarded as true members of society in education, media, social, political, and economic spheres (Ewing 2016). This treatment also extends to newly arrived immigrants from Africa in Brazil.

While Brazilian media has begun to explore cultural diversity on the African continent, simultaneously the persistence of negative and exotic images remain prominent within the country. According to researcher Wangui Kimari (2008) the most common ways immigrants enter the country is on a tourist visa, for business, as students, for religious reasons, as war refugees, or as *clandestinos* (those who illegally board ships and arrive in unknown destinations) (Kimari, pp. 136–137). Most new African immigrants are unaware of racial issues within the country which could be problematic. Several immigrants and refugees reported incidents of Brazilian harassment and violence towards their community (Vargem and Malomalo 2015, pp. 111–112). Although the refugee asylum law covers foreigners, many are left to die at sea while attempting to enter Brazil. The physical torture and destruction of Black African and Afro-Brazilian bodies within Brazil delineates the subaltern non-human positionality (Vargem and Malomalo 2015, p. 115). Thus, new African immigrants are perceived as “threats” to the existing society and in turn are unfairly labeled as drug dealers and cases for the police or “caso da policia” (Vargem and Malomalo 2015, p. 122). The surge of immigrants entering the country deepens the layers of complexity towards understanding the African Diaspora. Based on the negative media narratives within Brazil, Nollywood productions could provide a counter narrative of Nigerian culture (Ewing, p. 83).

One way to begin to combat negative stereotypes is to familiarize a country with under-represented populations through media. Given the Eurocentric direction of Brazilian media, Nigerian videos, or *Nollywood*, could fill a void by providing diverse images of contemporary heterogeneous Africans. Nollywood is a vehicle connecting Africa to its diaspora in ways that significantly diversify—maybe disrupt—Black Western media’s representation of Blackness. This exploratory qualitative research explores the relationship between identity and media consumption, particularly African videos, amongst African and European diasporas in Brazil. On one hand, some Euro-Brazilians may have interest in counter-hegemonic cinema similar to *Third World Cinema*, and may appreciate Nollywood productions by relating it to Global South alignment versus the *Hollywoodesque* Global North. On the other hand, Afro-Brazilians may align according to their understandings of African diaspora homeland connections. In Brazil, the “Racial Equality Law” has invigorated

numerous public and private agencies to create legislature that mandates African and Afro-Brazilian education (Stam and Shohat 2012; Ewing, p. 220). Current Brazilian political legislation attempts to remedy the underrepresentation of 51% Black and Brown populations within media, social, political, and economic spheres by including Afro-Brazilian and African culture within the education system. The sponsorship of Nollywood in Brazil seems to coincide with recent transformations among African descendants in Brazil. These policies, especially, serve to promote the historical imprint of Afro-Brazilians (Ewing, pp. 3–4).

Outside of film studies, Nollywood is often an overlooked industry creating vibrant modes of African cultural productions in a global setting. Nigerian directors produce a total of 40–50 movies a week, normally within 5–14 days of production time (Ihidero 2014). As a result, Nollywood produces more video-films a year than Bollywood and Hollywood on an extremely cost-efficient budget. Within Nollywood there are numerous genres in the form of melodrama that normally deal with stories of daily lives, or commentary on current events, religious, or moral subject matter (Haynes 2010).

Within the Caribbean and Latin America Nollywood videos exist in English speaking countries such as Jamaica, Barbados, and Guyana (personal observation 2014 and Bryce 2013). Nollywood literature published in Portuguese (Meleiro 2009; Aquino dos Santos 2009; Libano 2011) describe the film industry as an economic powerhouse and a technocratic equalizer, forming Pan-African alliances, being negatively associated with pirating, and arguing in favor of copyright laws. Affirmative action policies have caused an increase of exploring African culture within Brazil, the news praises Nollywood for being a Nigerian phenomenon; however, the Brazilian commentators overlook the local exhibition audience reception. Similarly, one problem within both Portuguese and English empirical literature is that many Nollywood scholars indicate a connection with Nollywood and Brazil without describing the phenomenon within Brazil (e.g. Esan 2008; Lobato 2010; Haynes 2013; Meleiro 2009).

The consumption of Nigerian productions is relatively small within Brazil, unlike in Barbados (Bryce 2013). Nigerian movies covertly manifest informally in Brazilian shopping centers within São Paulo and Salvador da Bahia, where some African business owners have within their shops. West Africans residing in Brazil bring the DVDs to share amongst friends and family abroad when traveling to Nigeria (Ewing 2016). Within São Paulo African shopping centers provide spaces where

Brazilians interested in African culture can find products, styles, and food from first generation African diasporas. The same African shopping spaces are non-existent in Rio de Janeiro, where the Nigerian populations are less, and the Lusophone African country diasporas are more prevalent, with communities such as Angolans.

Through exploratory research I explored how Brazilians viewed Nollywood in São Paulo and Salvador da Bahia, Brazil (July and August 2012). Six participants within each city explained how informants used Nollywood to connect to Africa and in particular Nigeria. The participants were selected based on their Nollywood reception habits. My exploratory research intended to include Rio de Janeiro, but I was unable to locate Nollywood movies within the city due to the small Nigerian population. Thus, the opportunity to conduct Nollywood research within the ideal city was impossible, since reception is scarce within the city. The previous exploratory research questions were modified for the exhibition located in Rio de Janeiro (November 2012). Different from the previous investigation this site location provided a space for mostly first time Nollywood viewers in Brazil to express their opinions concerning Nigerian culture by screening a Nollywood movie or learning about the Nollywood industry through a documentary. The “Nollywood Mostra” (Nollywood Show) was sponsored by the *Caixa Econômica Federal* Bank in a museum exhibition hall located in downtown Rio de Janeiro, Brazil from November 6th to November 17th, 2012. The exhibition was the first of its kind to bring movies from different time periods together, along with key film-makers and directors (Brazil Africa Institute 2015; Ewing 2016).

During the last week of the screenings, I gathered semi-structured qualitative data exploring how consumers identified with Nollywood cinematic stylings, storylines, characters, and dialogue, relative to those of mainstream cinema. Due to time constraint, data were only collected during the last week of screenings. Within the museum, participants independently volunteered to complete questionnaires before or after movies. *Nollywood Mostra* provided a unique opportunity to examine Brazilian audience perceptions of Nollywood movies from mostly first time movie goers. In 2011, curator Alex Andrade hosted the first Nollywood exhibition in Latin America featuring three movies from world renown Tunde Kelani. Unlike the São Paulo exhibition, within the Rio de Janeiro showings there were diverse Nollywood movies from new and classic Nollywood eras. The screenings were held in a movie theater

built for approximately 80 viewers. Daily, the viewing audience consisted of approximately 25–60 spectators, of these, 19 participants agreed to answer 30 closed and open-ended questions in Portuguese. Field notes were taken of the audiences' reactions to some of the Nollywood video-films, and parts of the exhibition's round table discussion were recorded. This essay reveals data from the questionnaires to examine audience reactions to the Nigerian cultural productions.

This chapter explores whether or not movies can reconnect cultural diaspora communities to have a better understanding of African popular culture via the apparatus of Nollywood. The questionnaires address the following: (1) Who voluntarily participated to consume Nollywood in Brazil? (2) Do some Brazilians of African descent identify more with Nollywood than Euro-Brazilians? and (3) Does Nollywood serve as a vehicle for cultural production impacting Brazilian perceptions of Africans? This project explores the cultural value of Nollywood in a country linguistically different from the Nigerian diaspora (in England or Italy) and the English-speaking African diaspora communities (in Barbados, Jamaica, or Guyana). Additionally, my study contributes to the literature concerning Nollywood within the African diaspora by contrasting them to non-African diaspora communities. Furthermore, the following research probes the audiences' reaction to Nollywood in Brazil by concentrating on three themes: (1) How the audience identifies with Nollywood video-films; (2) the importance of Nollywood outside of Nigeria; and (3) visions of the future success of Nollywood in Brazil. By investigating these themes, the audience will reveal how they perceive Nollywood as an African cultural production. Overall, this chapter expands our understanding of Nollywood audience reception beyond the geographical empirical borders of Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean to include Portuguese-speaking Latin America (Cartelli 2007).

BACKGROUND

African and African diaspora representations are mostly relegated to an inferior status within global media. Sociologist Ruth Simms Hamilton's African Diaspora Research Project (2006) examines the African diaspora based on the four major changes over time: geosocial mobility and displacement, African diaspora connections (myths, symbols, and realities), agents of resistance, and social identity and struggle: change and continuity. Afro-Brazilian identity has been overshadowed by an artificial notion

of racial equality, which simplifies the racial diversity of Brazil's population within the media. Media is a primary motor for the creation of a national Brazilian identity, often catering to Eurocentric notions of Brazilian life, leaving Afro-Brazilians to look for alternatives to define their ethnic identity (Katia Regina Rebello da Costa, in Borges and Borges, p. 47). Oftentimes, both African and Afro-diaspora identity is attained through the consumption of imported African American and Jamaican cultural productions such as hip hop, soul/funk, and reggae (Crook and Johnson, p. 8). Nollywood serves as an innovative cultural device. The ingenuity of some Nigerian productions has been acknowledged in many nations, such as Brazil. Some Brazilian curators within São Paulo (2011, 2014), Salvador da Bahia (2014) and Rio de Janeiro (2012, 2014) formally illustrated their interests as evidenced by Nollywood exhibitions or Nollywood screenings. These public settings afford Brazilian audiences a hint of Nigerian perspectives regarding what it means to be African.

Nollywood represents a powerful post-colonial phenomenon within globalization. Post-colonial scholars argue that within globalization Africa is left in the shadows, cut off from the world, with few exceptions (e.g. Said 1979; Mbembe 2001; Gilroy 2005; Ferguson 2006; Bhabha 1994). Media studies and Nollywood scholar, Brian Larkin observed in Northern Nigeria that Bollywood videos were consumed more than Hollywood and rival Nigerian cinema. He asserts that Bollywood offers a "third space" between Islamic tradition and Western modernity that exerts a powerful influence over Hausa popular culture (2002, p. 320). Thus, within the Global South it is difficult to constitute the local global cinemas worldwide. Larkin concludes that regional power and influence of local popular cultural productions is often overlooked (2002). This argument could extend to the African diaspora where many films have a similar impact. Thus, post-colonial Nollywood could change the notion of African and Black Diaspora identity. The significance of cultural relevancy debates in Nollywood, within primarily new Brazilian viewing audience settings will be explored in the following sections.

African cinema scholar Olivier Barlet (2010) explains, how Africa is revered as a global shadow and despite success they continue to be overlooked. Although online technology is seriously assisting Nollywood film distribution, since Africa belongs to the Global South and continues to be overlooked. The invisibility of the Global South is what Barlet explains is due to a lack of movie houses similar to the Global North (2010, p. 224).

While Nollywood may not receive full attention within the Global North in other places in the English speaking Global South they are also consuming their films and are just as eager to consume the video-films as Nigerians. For instance, the Nollywood films exist in Barbados, Guyana, and Jamaica and diversify television stations dedicated to African movies. Similarly, they also have access to American films that are not exclusively African-American. Thus, one could argue that the Nigerian films have just as strong or stronger influence on former English colonial Caribbean culture than African-American culture. Nonetheless, Nigerian films vary depending on the community, socioeconomic background, and other demographic indicators (Esan 2008; Ewing 2016).

Several scholars concur with the cosmopolitan idea of globalization. For example, Anthony Giddens (2000) argues that we are forging upon a “global cosmopolitanized society” that has never existed before (19). He later argues in favor of more government that are non-dictatorships to help democratize the world making the world a better place. Thus, for Giddens through democracy a global cosmopolitan society is possible. Within each society there is a local vernacular that may be unique varying based on the geographical region. Durovicová explains, “‘Vernacular’ is instead a concept conceived as projecting a scale on which local elements are mutually constitutive with a cosmopolitan circulation where ‘coeval and uneven modernities connect, intersect and compete’” (Durovicová and Newman 2010, p. xiv). These intersecting and competing modernities describe Nollywood’s place within the world. While Nollywood competes for a place, and space within the world, it is constantly patronized as a celebration by former colonizers, or a disgrace to the African race by several African scholars, and first generation film directors. Similarly, Western media treat Nollywood as inferior to other first generation Francophone films and other cinematic art forms (Okome 2010; Ewing 2016).

Third World Cinema, Third Cinema, and World Cinema are non-Western or non-hegemonic subjects or directors within the globalization model. Sociologist Jan Nedeerven Pieterse, a globalization scholar, argues that there is no longer a cultural hegemony as evidence of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) countries and that hybridity is increasing globally (2009). There are various ways to view cultural hegemony within the world. Some globalization scholars act as if there are equal hegemonic cultural flows while, others argue that the media

flows are uneven and change according to the aggregates. Global media studies scholar Bhaskar Sarkar suggests a global multiculturalism that combines former nationalist terms in a global setting. Sarkar explains, “Global multiculturalism would appear to provide the cultural basis of neocolonialism, arranging various local cultures in a global hierarchy, exhibiting them to a cosmopolitan audience as a global menagerie, and foster in exceptionalist nativism and civilizationism” (2010, p. 42). Shohat and Stam concur, “In a globalized world, it is perhaps time to think in terms of comparative and transnational multiculturalism, of relational studies that do not always pass through the putative center” (2003, p. 4). Therefore, Nollywood usurps Global North models of influence and power within globalization.

Global African films have traditionally been co-produced in Europe, primarily France, for foreign non-African audiences. Some scholars and directors critique the Nigerian movie industry for lacking a political agenda and having poor technological quality (Okome 2010). Film studies scholar Akin Adesokan describes how the political branding of Nollywood ignores the existence of the Nigerian movie industry from the 1970s and 1980s (2012, p. 81). According to Adesokan the New Nollywood is returning to the previous high technical aesthetic quality. Unofficially, Nollywood began in 1992 with Kenneth Nnebue’s VHS video titled, *Living in Bondage*, shot in the Igbo language. Initially, Nigerian home movies followed a political shift in Nigerian governmental regulations that afforded Mexican and Brazilian *telenovelas* the ability to replace Nigerian movies on prime-time television (Haynes 2000). Thus, Nigerian directors had to procure new alternative spaces to exhibit their movies given that television was no longer an option (Adesokan 2011). With the emergence of Nollywood, Nigerian media consumption patterns changed over time, from Chinese videos, to Indian movies, to Mexican *telenovelas* and later to consuming Nollywood movies (Esan 2008). The inception of Nollywood in Nigeria also demonstrates a circulatory transnational media flow between Latin America and West Africa. The examination of the Nollywood phenomenon, primarily occurs in Europe, Africa, and North America (Haynes 2010). Several Nollywood scholars and film-makers support and oppose Nollywood movies as vehicles to represent African culture (Krings and Okome 2013). Many Nollywood directors claim that within their video-films are themes that Nigerians and other Africans can relate to, meaning that the productions are for Nigerians, by Nigerians (Okome 2010).

The proponents supporting Nollywood argue that the African cultural production is autonomous and that the audience consuming the movie-films relate to what directors are producing. Thus, Nollywood illustrates the reflexive power dichotomy between consumer and producer creating renditions of what it means to have authentic African cultural productions (Okome 2010, 2013).

Conversely, many canonical African scholars and film-makers are against Nollywood's cultural production, considering it a "lower" sub-genre, lacking ideology, merely a base movie production that is "ghettoizing" African cinema (Okome 2010). These arguments illustrate the concentration on the aesthetic gaze of some African cultural mediators unable to move past the low aesthetic production qualities of this video movement. The debate between the value of these films, for cultural identification and their potentially detrimental effects on cultural representation, remains unresolved.

THE RELEVANCE OF CONTEMPORARY NOLLYWOOD IN BRAZIL

Who Voluntarily Participated to Consume Nollywood in Brazil?

The participants provided basic demographic data, including information regarding personal racial identity, education, sex/gender, and age (Fig. 6.1). Out of 19 questionnaires, 7 respondents racially identified themselves as Black using the terms: *Negro*, *Preto*, or *Afro-Brasileiro*. Officially seven informants identified themselves as White using the terms: *Branco* European, human race [White], *Caucasian*, and *Branca Brasileira*. One informant responded that they were of the human race, two respondents identified as Brazilian, and two refused to respond. The researcher noted that the informants who responded as Brazilian, as the human race, were unresponsive appeared to be White Brazilians (by North American standards), and were classified as such by the researcher. Thus, there were 12 White participants in comparison to 7 Black participants. The Afro-Brazilian racial identity appeared to have a more collective group consciousness versus European-Brazilians who appeared confused and, at times, angry that the question of personal racial identity was posed.

The top professions amongst the informants were professors, students, and journalists. There were seven students, six professors, three journalists, one technological analyst, one entrepreneur, and one person did not respond. Most participants' professions indicated they attained

Gender	Female: 8/19 (42.1%) Male: 11/19 (57.8%)
Age Range	21–86
Average Age	38
Education	15 completed higher education courses (79%) 4 taking higher education courses (21%) [3 were post doctorates]
Race	7 Black (36.85%) 12 White (63.1%) ----- 7 white Brazilian 2 n/a 1 human race 2 Brazilian

Fig. 6.1 Questionnaire participant's demographic information

high levels of education. Of the 19 informants, 15 completed higher education courses, and 4 were taking courses towards an advanced degree. Eight of the participants identified as female, while 11 identified as male. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 86, with an average age of 38.

Within the questionnaire four questions examined how Brazilians consumed Nollywood productions. The first question explored whether respondents enjoyed the movie(s). An overwhelming 17 respondents affirmed that they enjoyed watching the films, versus 2 who had mixed reactions. Afro-Brazilians enjoyed the movies 100% in comparison to 83% of the European-Brazilian participants. Some Afro-Brazilians revealed that they enjoyed the richness of African culture, praised Nollywood productions, felt it deepens knowledge about African culture, revealed simplicity, and was interesting. Whereas Euro-Brazilians enjoyed the plethora of representations, themes, often praised the directors, and were grateful to have watched the films.

Kingsley Ogoro's bi-national film *Osuofia in London* (2003), was also produced in London and the sequel in Nigeria. Nonetheless, the *Nollywood Mostra* only featured the first film which was problematic to

one of the audience members. One participant was completely appalled at the glorification of European culture as apparently being better than Nigerian culture. Nollywood scholars (Adesokan 2011; Okome 2013) describe this film as intentionally creating a mockery of Nigerian culture, while simultaneously critiquing the hypocrisy of the British cultural system. Post-colonial scholar Akin Adesokan (2011) confirms that *Osuofia in London* critically evaluates the relationship between the newer and older Nigerian diasporas. During the showing, the Brazilian audience actively engaged in laughter and commentary throughout the film. After the film, one Afro-diaspora respondent concluded that, based on Nigerian tensions within the film that Black people were the same everywhere. That is, she felt when people are oppressed they will attempt to assert superiority often through the tactics of European assimilation and capitalism. Similarly, she further added that within the Afro-diaspora community alienation and exploitation may occur in order to progress towards the ideal Brazilian notion of whiteness.

By consuming this particular Nollywood production, the respondent revealed that her vision of a romanticized diaspora unity was not always possible. Therefore, she identified with the Nigerian characters as universal by extending the actions and behaviors to that of the Afro-Brazilian community. Following the movie, the participant revealed personal experiences of mistreatment by two Black women in graduate school who ignored her and practically left her isolated. As an outcast, she felt abnormal, rejected and saddened that this occurred within her own community. Through isolation she realized the systematic necessity to identify as a Euro-Brazilian created a slicing divide amongst members from the same ethnic background. Therefore, the informant's recognition that Nigerian identity did not automatically equate to an African utopia helped her to interrogate her own Afro-Brazilian identity within society.

In contrast, one of the 12 Euro-Brazilian informants could not identify with the film and left feeling confused. Her response illustrates the polemics of showing one of two films without providing cultural context and the necessity to explain the director's intentions to a foreign audience. Additionally, the respondent shared that she had never traveled to a country culturally different from her own. Due to the deep cultural context of these films, Nollywood could cause spectators to feel contempt, anxious, or unsettled by what may be perceived as directors reinforcing historical cultural productions of inferiority and stereotypes of internalized racism. Nonetheless, most Euro-Brazilians praised Nollywood and felt the films deepened their knowledge about African culture.

The second question inquired participants' opinions concerning Nollywood characters. Over half of the respondents ($n=9$) revealed identifying with the characters in either a strongly positive ($n=6$) or positive way ($n=3$), while three were neutral ($n=3$), and two had negative comments ($n=2$). Five out of seven Afro-Brazilians expressed, that it had been interesting to see the relationships between the Nigerian actors and that Nollywood was very professional and offered congratulations to the directors of the films. Euro-Brazilians regarded Nollywood productions in a different light. The respondents saw the films as profound, not the usual, well interpreted, good, illustrated local Nigerian characters, real life unlike the Bollywood fantasy, sometimes cliché, complex, overall good work, and interesting. The one confused Euro-Brazilian participant questioned if the directors were trying to represent their culture. Several Brazilians who watched Mahmood Ali-Balogun's film *Tango with Me* (2010) were extremely impressed with the film and the complex characters. Therefore, Brazilians revealed that the characters were universal and thus, they could relate to them.

The third question inquired whether informants could identify with the characters (Fig. 6.2). Nine respondents reported that they could identify with the characters, four respondents could not, one respondent created a category of yes and no, and the rest were unresponsive.

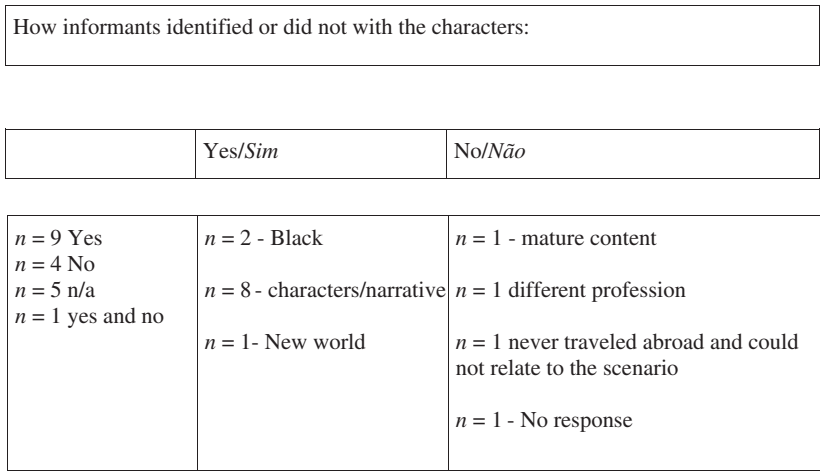


Fig. 6.2 Brazilian respondent's identification with Nollywood characters

Eight of nine respondents revealed that they could identify with the characters or narrative, two responded they could identify with Black characters, and one stated that it was a “new world” meaning different from Hollywood and Brazilian cinema. Of the four respondents who could not identify with the films, one respondent did not explain, one explanation was based on mature content, another replied they were in a different profession, and another responded that they had never traveled abroad and the scenario was unrelatable. Therefore, most participants revealed that they could identify with Nollywood characters and a fourth revealed that they could not identify with the characters.

Five out of seven Afro-Brazilians identified with Nollywood films. One participant did not respond and the other did not identify with the films due to mature content. The majority of Afro-Brazilians illustrated a diaspora connection to Black identity. Afro-Brazilians could identify with a milieu of themes such as: being a developing country, familiarity, because they are Black, universal language, the characters, and had appreciation for the aesthetic contribution. The assumption that most Afro-Brazilian audiences would identify with Nollywood based on African diaspora connections, solely resonated with 29% of Afro-Brazilian audiences ($n=2$). Therefore, most Afro-Brazilian respondents viewed films independently as universal plots and characters as well as through Global South connections.

By contrast Euro-Brazilian identification responses were diverse: five were unresponsive, three could identify, three could not identify, and one both could and could not identify with the characters. The respondents revealed how they identified or did not identify with Nollywood such as: windows to a new world, diverse characters, could identify with most characters, could not identify with characters because had another profession, and had never experienced life as a foreigner abroad. The responses reflected the different days the surveys were administered, some participants only saw one film, while others viewed numerous screenings.

The fourth question probed how viewers felt concerning the quality of the films (see Fig. 6.3). Four informants mentioned low quality in their responses, two excellent, two very good, six good, two were mixed, and one was neutral. Overall, the majority of respondents positively described the quality of films. Afro-Brazilian responses varied from agreeing, to neutral to disagreeing explaining film descriptions as: low quality however good themes, has a lot to improve, quality is developing, good,

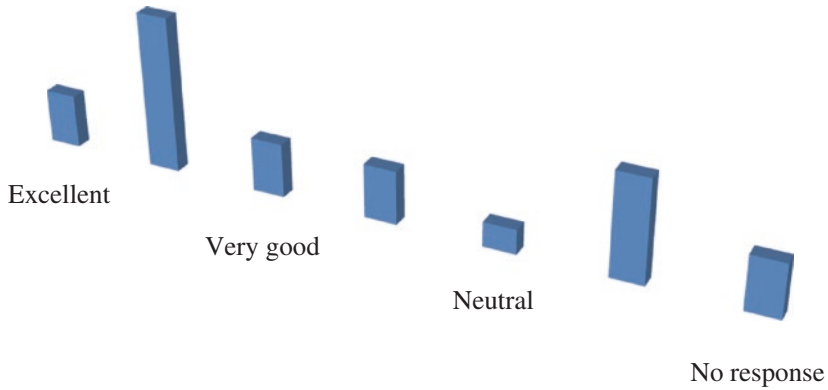


Fig. 6.3 Audience responses to the quality of Nollywood films

they are doing the best with their technology. Respondents revealed how they identify and did not identify with the Nigerian productions. One respondent explained: “I think the quality was barely reached due to the technology that they used. I believe that the fact of the matter is what we are technologically accustomed to, is more advanced and we could be a little impatient. We are indoctrinated to see technologically beautiful films.” Although audience members were accustomed to viewing films with better aesthetic appeal, the story was the most important feature. Thus, respondents indicated that cultural production, content, and plot were more important than aesthetic production.

Similarly, Euro-Brazilians were overwhelmingly supportive of the aesthetic quality as one respondent explained “the creativity supersedes the negative aesthetic qualities.” Another respondent mentioned that simple productions illustrate the unimportance to create a super-production. Other respondents observed improvements in the movies aesthetic qualities over time. The audience responses mirror many Nollywood producers who are attempting to create new waves of movies that continue to captivate audiences with complex narratives while, also increasing the sophistication of productions.

Overall, Brazilians enjoyed the films as evidence of the four questions that scratched the surface of why the audience identified or did not with the films. Preliminary research indicates the possibility to use Nollywood as a technological tool to diversify negative stereotypes concerning Africans;

conversely it could also be just as harmful as evidence of one participant's articulation. Thus, providing supplemental information concerning the video-film may be useful if the director is not present.

BRAZILIAN PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN IDENTITY VIS-A-VIS NOLLYWOOD CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS

Nollywood functions as a powerhouse within the African continent, within Ghana, Tanzania, South Africa, Kenya, and Francophone countries (Krings and Okome 2013). Nigerian productions have yet to spread to Lusophone (Portuguese-speaking) countries, however, it could commence in Brazil. The exploration of how Brazilian audiences perceive Nollywood indicates whether these cultural productions can be used as an instructional text by supplementing recent Brazilian affirmative action legislature. The comprehension of Brazilian perceptions of African identity provides evidence of the efficacy of Nigerian cultural productions as a means to educate. Indeed, the inclusion of Nigerian movies in Portuguese could begin the eradication of global cultural illiteracy concerning contemporary African culture.

Participants revealed whether their opinion concerning Africans changed after viewing the film(s). Three participants were uncertain ($n=3$) and three were unresponsive ($n=3$). Six participants agreed ($n=6$) that Nollywood consumption had changed their opinion concerning Africa; two Afro-Brazilians ($n=2$) and four Euro-Brazilians ($n=4$). One Afro-Brazilian woman explained "I think that I have a formed opinion about them and this opinion is they [Africans] are the best. Certainly, the quality of the filmmakers' work is motivating for me, and I have great admiration and pride, especially, by being an African descendent." This informant elucidated the power of Nollywood in the African diaspora as a culturally relevant tool positively reinforcing cultural roots. Slightly over a third of participants (37% $n=7$), four Afro-Brazilians ($n=4$), and three Euro-Brazilians ($n=3$), revealed that Nollywood had not changed their perception of Africa since they already had information concerning Africa and the films confirmed previous knowledge.

Informants were questioned whether Nollywood provided them with more information about Nigeria and 79% agreed ($n=15$), while one disagreed ($n=1$) and three were unresponsive ($n=3$). Some Afro-Brazilians revealed that Nollywood illuminates: daily life, struggles,

values, city life, hierarchy, and distinct Nigerian customs. Similarly, Euro-Brazilian respondents answered accordingly, adding that Nollywood provided a gateway to understand Nigerian situations, representations, different significations, and diversified their perception of Nigerian culture. Conversely, one correspondent said that it did not reflect Nigerian culture well.

The audience was split in terms of whether Nollywood films appeared similar or different to Brazilian films. Most respondents, 26% felt that the films were similar and different ($n=5$), 21% revealed they were similar ($n=4$), 11% equally shared they were very different ($n=2$), 11% felt they were different ($n=2$), and 5% responded very similar ($n=1$). Thus, the audience answers varied, however most felt the cultural production shared commonalities with Brazilian films.

All of the Afro-Brazilian respondents provided answers, and the majority revealed the video-films were very similar ($n=1$) or similar ($n=3$). The rest of the participants were spread equally amongst the categories of similar and different ($n=1$), different ($n=1$), and very different ($n=1$). Afro-Brazilians recognized similarities and differences between Brazilian films in the following ways: very similar, Nigerians improvise with excellence, national cultural films, completely different, no difference, beautiful stories, depends on the time period, similar to Brazilian films from the 1990s. One Afro-Brazilian respondent explained, "The films are excellent and I do not see a difference in their narrative essence and narration. The Nigerians beautifully tell their stories." The largest percentage of African descendants acknowledged the resemblance between Nollywood and Brazilian films.

By contrast Euro-Brazilians responded concerning whether Nollywood films seemed similar or different to Brazilian films. The largest category was 33% similar and different ($n=4$), next 17% of the responses were uncertain ($n=2$), 8% were similar ($n=1$), and 8% were very different ($n=1$). None of the Euro-Brazilians felt that the video-films were very similar or different, and 33% did not answer the question ($n=4$). Euro-Brazilians revealed how Nollywood resembles and counters Brazilian films: [both] idealize country, [films are] good when there is universal comedy, Brazilian films are homogeneous [Eurocentric] except in Bahia, united families, similar cultural aspects, different acting and directing, very different, different [in that the Brazilian] production is more restricted, and less localized, and similar [in terms of] popular subjects. One respondent described Brazil, the country globally recognized as a multicultural melting pot as

having Eurocentric films. The respondent stated, “very different more African than homogenous Brazilian films; only in Bahia do you see blacks on screen so it is not like Brazil; here also as in Nigeria there are united families.” This respondent explained how over half of the populations of African descent, Native American, Asian, and Arab descent are practically overlooked within Brazilian media. Another respondent recognized similarities and differences within Nollywood films, “[t]hey are similar in some cultural aspects, but different in acting and directing.” This respondent identified the cultural connections within Nigerian video-films as African cultural continuities persisting within the Brazilian films. Thus, although the respondents were dispersed in their responses, these aforementioned anecdotes illustrate how Euro-Brazilians created connections between the Nollywood and Brazilian films.

Respondents revealed whether they would consume Nollywood films in the future and approximately 84% ($n=16$) revealed that yes, they would, while 5% responded no ($n=1$) and 11% were unresponsive ($n=2$). 100% of Afro-Brazilians ($n=7$) desired to consume Nollywood productions in the future. One respondent explained, “Yes, of course I liked them a lot, I hope that my Nigerian brothers are successful.” Correspondingly, 67% of the European Brazilians ($n=8$) desired to consume Nollywood in the future. One informant explained his interest Africa via other Lusophone countries. These examples revealed the different rationale for future consumption. Some Afro-Brazilians felt diaspora kinship connections as evidence of the usage of the expression *irmãos* or brothers.

Additionally, informants shared whether they felt Nollywood would have success in Brazil: 63% were uncertain ($n=12$), 32% reported yes ($n=6$), and 5% was unresponsive ($n=1$). One Euro-Brazilian shared his appreciation for the future possibilities of the industry, “I think it is interesting to see the evolution that Nigerian cinema will probably have.” These results, indicated that although most participants desired to consume Nollywood videos in the future, they were uncertain as to the availability of the productions in Brazil. Similarly, the audience revealed the uncertainty of a cultural cinematic space within Brazil.

Finally, respondents were asked whether the movies offered an accurate portrayal of Nigerian culture; 63% of respondents said yes ($n=12$), 21% said no ($n=4$), 5% said yes and no ($n=1$). The following question asked if Nollywood was important for Africans outside of Nigeria: 74% agreed ($n=14$), 16% were uncertain ($n=3$), and 11% were unresponsive ($n=2$).

Some respondents revealed their opinions about Nigerian culture were unchanged due to previous knowledge. Overall, informants indicated that Nollywood complements prior acquired information concerning African culture. Thus, respondents shared that Nollywood productions increase their understanding of Nigerian culture, as evidence, Brazilians desired to consume movies in the future.

Nollywood cultural productions overwhelmingly appear to inform Brazilian audiences about Nigeria. Indeed, Nigerian movies both inform novice audiences about Nigerian culture as well as, additionally, Nollywood complemented educated audiences with prior knowledge about contemporary Nigerian society. The majority of respondents desired to continue consuming Nigerian movie-films, yet they were uncertain of the possibility to obtain the films in Portuguese. Therefore, within educated Brazilian circles there appears to be a market for possible Nollywood consumers if the movies were available for the local market. Given that 100% of Afro-Brazilians desired to consume Nollywood and over half Euro-Brazilians also yearned to consume, illustrates possible future markets in Brazil. Furthermore, many Afro-Brazilians aspired to understand their historical cultural heritage. Both Afro-Brazilians and Euro-Brazilians who desired to sample a new cinema, identified with other Global South cinemas, or wanted to educate themselves about the industry. Nonetheless, in terms of the success of Nollywood within the Brazilian market most Brazilians were uncertain, and a third felt that the industry would achieve success.

CONCLUSION

This research complements previous diaspora and Nollywood research, exemplifying how it serves as a vehicle for cultural production to increase knowledge. Nollywood scholar Okome states that, “[t]he videos are so fundamental to Africa’s self-representation that it is impossible to understand contemporary Africa and its place in the world without taking them into account” (2010). In my research, Afro-Brazilians and Euro-Brazilians overwhelmingly identified with diverse representations of Africans through the Nollywood screenings. Afro-descendants appreciated diverse Black images as an indication of an increase in pride, revealing how Nollywood fostered visual homeland connections. Euro-Brazilians appreciated the alternative Global South diversity that the movie-films provided by capturing what it means to be African in contemporary society.

As such, this study indicates the potential power of African global media in its diaspora. As with any film that is shown in a foreign context, explication may be necessary. The one participant that indicated feeling uncomfortable, elucidates how people interested in Third World Cinema or a counter-hegemonic stance from directors, may be disappointed to understand that within Africa many people do glorify European culture. Ogoro's film overtly glorifies European culture in order to critique it as well. Given the respondent's repulsion, it would be beneficial for future curators to share the directors' intentions with the audience, to provide a background that may be critical in order to avoid harming future audiences.

Overall, Nollywood benefits the Afro-Brazilian populations that yearn to capture what it means to be African. Similarly, it benefits Euro-Brazilians by connecting them to Africa by providing Nigerian representations of identity. Through Nollywood consumption audiences gained awareness of heterogeneous Nigerian culture in contemporary settings. The admittance of autonomous Nigerian productions within the African diaspora could begin to dismantle and diversify the understanding of Black identity. Thus, Nollywood movie translations could function in accordance to Brazilian governmental policies, facilitating African pedagogy and increasing knowledge concerning Nigeria. Indeed, for teachers or audiences interested in Africa, Nollywood is a fertile resource to grapple with the complexities of contemporary and historical African cultural identity, representing a robust industry that is constantly adapting to produce images of what it means to be African, in particular Nigerian. Overall, Nollywood audiences appreciate the ways that directors creatively package Nigerian culture in the form of traditions, religion, wedding, fashion, food, law, and the latest news topics which provide examples and probe further questions of inquiry. Moreover, Nollywood can be used a tool for cultural literacy as a means to understand diverse ways of being African and Black in modern globalization.

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CHAPTER 7

Re-producing Self, Community, and ‘Naija’ in Nigerian Diaspora Films: *Soul Sisters* in the United States and *Man on the Ground* in South Africa

Olaocha Nwadiuto Nwabara

INTRODUCTION

In America: The Story of the Soul Sisters, a 2010 Nigerian-American film directed by Rahman Oladigbolu, won the Best Film by an African Living Abroad award at the 7th Africa Movie Academy Awards. The film was described by New York-based syndicated columnist, satirist, and an actor in the movie, Rudolf Okonkwo, as, “A movie that speaks to two worlds at the same time: Africa and America, by unfolding the iconic experience of a Nigerian immigrant...in the United States.”¹ *Man on Ground* is a 2011 Nigerian South African drama film directed by Akin Omotoso. The film, screened and premiered at the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival, tells a story about xenophobia—or Afrophobia, acts of prejudice or violence toward continental African immigrants—in South Africa. The film’s eye-opening statement establishes that racial violence is not just in

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the past, but in the very real present. The film reveals how the continued racialized fight for resources amongst South African communities poured into their relationships with African foreigners. It is a statement on the xenophobia still present in the new South Africa, thus revealing the dark and sordid underside of the immigrant experience in the country.²

Rahman Oladigbolu and Akin Omotoso are Nigerian Diaspora filmmakers who, I argue, are shaping and representing the ‘Naija’, or Nigerian Diaspora, identity. The emergence of postcolonial Nigerian cultural producers in the West created a route of communication between the members of the African Diaspora and Nigerian communities around the world who are representing the ‘Naija’ identity in their works. Regarding filmic and televised productions, these representations of ‘Naija’ identity can pass through high volumes of the global public sphere. Nollywood, for instance, has emerged as a major Nigerian film industry, whose high-volume productions have reached, and have been translated in places such the United Kingdom, the United States, Brazil, Tanzania, and South Africa through video-based and digital media.³ Global African television outlets, such as *Africa Magic* and DSTV, have also been major outlets for the distribution of Nollywood and other Nigerian films. In these spaces, filmic and beyond, producers are specifying belonging to a Nigerian homeland, culture, or tradition within and outside of their artwork. This chapter particularly examines cases where Nigerian cultural producers specifically draw attention to their belonging to ethnic and racial groups, sometimes simultaneously.

As within other diaspora communities, the works of Nigerian Diaspora artists become the vessels that historically capture how its members understand themselves, and their cultures, within a hostland that often dominates cultural expression. The late Cultural Studies scholar Stuart Hall provides an indispensable analysis of Black people’s relationship with their artwork, which he characterizes as black cultural repertoires. In his essay, “What is the Black in Black Popular Culture?” Hall examines the critical role Black popular culture plays as counter-narratives and contradictions to mainstream representations of Black people across the Diaspora. To define “black popular culture,” Hall analyzes its dependent relationship with Black Diaspora communities.

It has come to signify the black community, where these traditions were kept, and whose struggles survive in the persistence of the black experience (the historical experience of black people in the diaspora), of the

black aesthetic (the distinctive cultural repertoires out of which popular representations were made), and of the black counternarratives we have struggled to voice. Here, black popular culture returns to the ground I defined earlier. “Good” black popular culture can pass the test of authenticity the reference to black experience and to black expressivity. These serve as the guarantees in the determination of which black popular culture is right on, which is ours, and which is not.⁴

According to Hall, Black communities become the repository of their traditions and experiences. Authentic Black cultural artifacts are those that draw from this repository to represent the Black community. Hall also contends that these Black cultural repertoires are laced with evidences of their heritages from African homelands that are thus expressed and represented from diaspora perspectives. In any African diaspora then, the repository of knowledge is comprised of both the community’s heritages and the conditions that forged and maintains their diaspora. Embedded in each cultural artifact are stories that explain and express some snippet of personal knowledge drawn from the community of the person or people that make it up.

This chapter focuses on the lived experiences of Nigerian Diaspora cultural producers, specifically filmmakers, following Hall’s analysis. It presents findings from semi-structured interviews and public interviews of Nigerian Diaspora filmmakers Rahman Oladigbolu and Akin Omotoso by providing detail about who they are, what they produce, where they are, and how their expressions of their ‘Naija’ identity are increasingly being represented in the Diaspora. By introducing both Nigerian cultural producers, as well as their productions, the chapter provides data useful to understanding the extent to which their transnational, racial, cultural, and ethnic identities of Nigerians Diaspora are also represented in the cultural productions they create. By looking at Diaspora themes of race, ethnic identity, culture, and transnationalism, in Rahman Oladigbolu’s *In America: The Story of the Soul Sisters*⁵ and Akin Omotoso’s *Man on Ground*,⁶ this study provides insight into these artists’ lived experiences as well as describes how they have come to understand themselves and their communities as a result of being a part of the Nigerian Diaspora.

The essay is based on research drawn from findings from public interviews collected during fieldwork in 2013 and 2016. Each filmmaker was asked three major categories of questions—who they are (i.e., biography, identities); homeland/hostland relations (i.e., the question of,

“where is home?,” experiences coming to the African Diaspora, relations with other African diasporas); and cultural productions (i.e., their perspectives of and intentions with their work). The interviews begin to flesh out responses that pinpoint, or at least query, the complexities of how Oladigbolu and Omotoso understand their identity(ies). Who does a Nigerian become after coming to and experiencing the African Diaspora, and where does he consider home? How does who they are, and/or who they have become inform their how they engage their art, and the decisions they make about representing Nigerian Diaspora people and communities?

Through these interviews and analyses of their diaspora-based films, the chapter will distinctively depict the experiences of Nigerians as a transnational Diaspora group whose journeys to the African Diaspora are determined by the ebbs and flows of modern globalization. In doing so, the chapter also addresses the lived experiences of the Nigerian Diaspora, and how Nigeria contributes to the New African Diaspora by providing critical context to begin to understand the diaspora communities themselves.⁷ As such, it serves as means to understand the connections between the cultural producers, as members of their communities, and the work they create. I further argue that like other African Diaspora communities, the works that best represent the Nigerian Diaspora communities are those that come from within the community. Understanding the lived experiences of the artists is vital to understanding not only the content and trajectory of their cultural productions, but also to provide insight into how they understand their own identity in transnational diaspora spaces.

THE NIGERIAN CULTURAL DIASPORA AND IDENTITY SHAPING: *NAIJA* AND THE NOLLYWOOD FILM ABROAD

The Nigerian Diaspora is characterized by the connections the Nigerian country and its cultures and people have with its Diaspora communities. Nigerians have migrated to virtually every country all over the world, and between the Europe and the United States alone in 2015, there were approximately 453,000 Nigerians in their countries.⁸ Like other country-based African Diasporas, the reasons they leave include education and work opportunities, seeking asylum, and human trafficking.⁹ Specific to the sites of analysis used in this study, the United States

is home to 376,000 first- and second-generation Nigerians,¹⁰ while South Africa has an estimated 12–17 thousand Nigerians (as at 2012), a majority of them residing in the Gauteng province.¹¹ Transnationalism is a major contributor to the texture of the contemporary Nigerian Diaspora, as these globally dispersed people find various ways to communicate between geographical spaces. Transnationalism addresses the circular movement of people, information, cultures, and citizenships that the Nigerian Diaspora communities form by constructing multiple locales of home. James Clifford suggests that Diasporas can be considered “transnational migrations circuits” that represent experiences of displacement, of constructing multiple locales of home, of constantly transformed identities, and of interconnected cultural relationships.¹² This not only refers to African migrants, but African Diasporan communities who also maintain transnational networks based on contemporary constructions of home.

Scholars examining the construction of identity within the African Diaspora, as an emerging field of study, often point to the complex and transformative nature of *becoming* in a diaspora hostland. That is, negotiating one’s individual and collective belonging is a major characteristic of diaspora making.¹³ What does a national of one country become, once they leave their homeland and how does that vary from place to place? Paul Zeleza offers a definition of the African Diaspora, which attempts to incorporate its multifaceted and shifting existence. He defines diaspora as...

...a process, a condition, a space and a discourse: the continuous processes by which diaspora is made, unmade and remade, the changing conditions in which it lives and expresses itself, the places where it is moulded and imagined, and the contentious ways in which it is studied and discussed. It entails a culture and a consciousness, sometimes diffused and sometimes concentrated, of a ‘here’ separate from a ‘there,’ a ‘here’ that is often characterized by a regime of marginalization and a ‘there’ that is invoked as a rhetoric of self-affirmation, of belonging to ‘here’ differently.¹⁴

The African Diaspora’s existence is subject to the conditions (i.e., political, social, and economic) of the geographical spaces (i.e., ‘here’ and ‘there’) where its members imagine collective memories and mold their cultural expressions. Ato Quayson argues that the process of becoming in the diaspora, or diasporization, must be documented because mobility and

movement play important roles in how communities shape narratives of “how we got here” and who they are in relation to non-diaspora people.¹⁵

Cultural identity in the African Diaspora has been used to examine how African descendent people identify themselves by expressing their communities’ lived experiences that are continuously determined. Stuart Hall defines cultural identity in relation to the African Diaspora and its artists. It is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ Far from being grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past waiting to be found and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past.¹⁶ Stuart Hall shows us how diaspora communities produce and reproduce their identities through culture understood as style of life, life worlds, and artistic productions. The African Diaspora subject’s cultural identity is constantly in a transformative state of becoming. On the one hand, culture may consist of its recovered histories, but on the other, cultural identity is also determined by the context in which the culture is produced—in this case, the rules, repressive restrictions, and normalcies of Western cultural hegemony. Cultural identities of the African Diaspora, as transformational, are also defined by their relationship with Africa, a mythical or physical home. One’s cultural identity must be considered in relation to her culture as it is, and as she defines it (i.e., the lived experience).

Achille Mbembe in his essay, “Afropolitanism,” defines multinational and multicultural complexities of African identities using a “worlds in movement” approach wherein Africans’ dispersal and immersion are the markers of who they are across the African world. He examines Afropolitanism as a transnational culture by noting some of the major voluntary and involuntary movements of Africans across the Sahara, Atlantic, and Indian Ocean to mark forced and chosen contexts where African people must negotiate the interweaving of various cultures. The perpetual movement of Africans, along with the presence of foreigners in Africa itself, has, over time, created a complexity of blended, mixed, or hybridized African cultures. Being aware of this complexity is a key component of Afropolitanism.¹⁷ Taiye Selasi, who originally coined this term, vividly displays this interweave by creating an imaginary of Afropolitan individuals who are recognizable, for instance, by their “funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes.” While she refers here to physically mobile individuals, this term

can also be attributed to those who remain and are affected by their ability to access and disseminate their cultures through various communication avenues (e.g. social media, phone, and television).¹⁸ Their transnational and transcultural experiences equip them with multicultural normative that they share, but individually distinguish to define themselves. For this, Mbembe recognizes, Afropolitanism becomes a powerful aesthetic, or a poetic of the world. It is a way of being in the world, refusing on principle any form of victim identity—which does not mean that it is not aware of the injustice and violence inflicted on the continent and its people by the law of the world. It is also a political and cultural stance in relation to nation, race, and difference in general.

In a sense, the 'Naija' identity can be examined as a country-specific manifestation of an Afropolitan identity. While it is used throughout the Nigerian Diaspora, 'Naija' has not been properly examined. 'Naija' is a self-determined cultural identity that has emerged due to the global presence and movement of Nigerians around the globe. Like Afropolitan identities, it is formed as Nigerian culture, art, people, knowledge, and ideas move between global spaces to interact with mobile or stationary Nigerians there, and then are transformed and disseminated outward yet again, continuously. A BBC article that polled Nigerians in the UK about what 'Naija' meant to them found that it is understood as Nigerians asserting pride for Nigeria, wherever they may be in the world. When the word is said correctly, emphasized with "a hook for the 'Naij' and a jab for the 'ja'," then one knows that they are part of a community, that they are trusted and accepted. Guarded by its community, 'Naija' was described by some interview respondents as representations of Nigerians' history of resilience in the face of negative images of home, and expressions of pride in their cultures, identity, and industriousness.¹⁹

The 'Naija' identity is being forged through cultural, geographical, and national affinities to Nigeria in an era of globalization and transnationalism. The term, 'Naija' itself is used to refer to a location, person, or event. In *Naija No Dey Carry Last: Thoughts on a Nation in Progress*,²⁰ Nigerian Diasporan scholar, Pius Adesanmi, refers to 'Naija' as not just the country, or a mere geographical location, but also as an 'attitude,' a way of being and acting in the world. Similarly, a popular translocal show (i.e., UK, US, Nigeria), *Naija Bites*, uses 'Naija' in its title as a demonstration of the global reach, presence, and impact that Nigerian Diaspora communities currently have on each other and the world.²¹ The Nigerian

Diaspora identity has been forged in the postcolonial era to represent the transnational experiences of Nigerian and Nigerian descendent people in Africa and the African Diaspora.

The ‘Naija’ identity is represented, for instance, through cultural identity and within cultural productions. Nigerian cultural producers today are asserting their ‘Naija’ identity through their names, national and ethnic identities, and sometimes in combination with their diaspora identities. Actors like Chiwatel Ejiofor, Adewale Akinnouye-Agbaje, and Chukwunonso Anonzi have asserted their Nigerian names, either publicly or by choosing not to change them, while singers like Joy Olasunmibo Ogunmakin took up a Yoruba translation of her name ‘Joy’, or ‘Ayo’, to forefront her Nigerian identity to the public.²² Cultural producers and members of the Nigerian Diaspora must negotiate their ‘Naija’ identity and what it means outside of Nigeria. As will be shown, ‘Naija’ producers negotiate their cultural identities while also processing the imposition of racial and ethnic identities while in the African Diaspora. Beyond their works of art, cultural producers are also able to use interviews and public appearances to tie their personal ‘Naija’ identity to who they are as artists representing themselves and their communities in public spaces across the world.

Filmic representations of ‘Naija’ identities have reached global audiences, most notably through its most prominent film industry, Nollywood.²³ Nollywood’s high production of films and easy accessibility of these products have provided a space for its films to reach global ends such as other parts of Africa (e.g., Tanzania, South Africa, and Uganda) and the African Diaspora (e.g., UK, US, and Brazil). However, which Nigerian films are considered “Nollywood” is in a continuous flux. For instance, Kannywood,²⁴ New Nollywood,²⁵ and Nollywood Diaspora²⁶ film industries have emerged to address nuanced manifestations of ethnic identities in the Nigerian film. The Nollywood Diaspora Film Series at New York University aims to explore notion of cultural confidence. Its founder, Ololade Siyonbola, says that the series is meant to elevate the “social consciousness of Nigerians and the image of Nigerians across the world.”²⁷ Nigerian films have provided space for Nigerians to share their localized lived experiences on a global platform on their own terms. It is a chance for filmmakers to tell their stories of who they are and how they understand Nigerian society and economy. It is this ability to represent narratives of “primary society” through Nigerian experiences that allows Nollywood to reach the popular public.²⁸

RAHMAN OLADIGBOLU AND AKIN OMOTOSO AND THEIR SELECT FILMS

Rahman Oladigbolu (*In America: The Story of the Soul Sisters*) from the United States and Akin Omotoso (*Man on Ground*) from South Africa are both Nigerian cultural producers who present prototype case studies for understanding culture and the diasporization of Nigerians. First, they are immigrant, or first-generation, members of the Nigerian Diaspora and their productions of cultural artifacts have the potential to be widely distributed through global media industries such as film and television. Their cultural productions also represent at least one of the four tropes—cultural, racial, ethnic, or transnational identities. Prior to their journeys to America or South Africa, these first-generation members of the Nigerian Diaspora grew up in Nigeria. Rahman Oladigbolu and Akin Omotoso are both Yoruba men who grew up in Ibadan, south-western Nigeria. However, Omotoso's mother is from Barbados and Omotoso spent some of his childhood between Barbados as well as the United Kingdom. The framework of his worldview was constructed in Barbados, learning his culture intimately, and later considering himself a Pan-African for his multiple locations of home.

When returning to Nigeria, he was sent to school in Benue State, and it was there he was exposed to a diverse array of Nigerians from ethnic backgrounds other than himself, especially Igbo, Tiv, Hausa, and Urhobo. By the time he was 17, his father, Professor and novelist, Kole Omotoso, decided to move his family to South Africa after accepting a position at the University of the Western Cape in 1992. They came before the upsurge of West African immigration to South Africa, and even before the referendum that led to the end of apartheid was passed by then President F.W. de Klerk. Akin Omotoso felt that for his father's generation, South Africa was always a place of interest because it was the last African country to end its colonial rule.²⁹ Oladigbolu, on the other hand, chose to leave Nigeria and study in the United States. A mentor and friend from his hometown, a recent returnee from New York University, had encouraged him to learn about film before producing one because, the friend had argued, that the quality of production in Nigeria was not adequate. Leaving Nigeria was a decision Oladigbolu made because the options for film school in Nigeria were scarce. Before leaving, however, Oladigbolu spent a long period in the hospital, and this experience significantly impacted his perspective as a Nigerian and

his initial experiences in the United States. Both producers began their journeys with obtaining bachelor's and/or master's degree in fields that incorporate filmmaking and acting.

Coming to the African Diaspora

Rahman Oladigbolu describes his initial experiences in the United States as pleasant, because of his early immersion into a diversely black community in Boston, Massachusetts. However, as a caveat to these positive experiences, Oladigbolu notes that there are ways that his understanding of racism in America is hindered. For instance, because of having to undergo surgeries prior to his coming to America, he walked with a cane when he initially came to the United States. This caused people to see him first for their perception of his ability, rather than his race. He found himself fighting for his agency, that he did not need help getting around. Since then, he has kept the same focus during his time in America: to learn as much as possible about how things are done, and how different people approach different experiences.³⁰ Oladigbolu acknowledged not being able to fully grasp the history and contemporary context of racism in America. He and a close African American friend would get into racist interactions, and while Oladigbolu would find racism comical, his friend found it infuriating. This was because he was unable to grasp or recognize those negative experiences as racist. This is a problem he feels faces most African immigrants in America, and therefore, his work attempts to help Africans understand race in America. He recalled the US-based Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's description of children of African immigrants (second-generation) and the suggestion that their parents must recognize that their experiences align more with the experiences of other African Americans than that of African nationals. When asked how becoming Black or African plays into his experience in America, Oladigbolu responded,

...people see me and they see a Black person, where as it was different in Nigeria. But the truth is also that when we saw a white person in Nigeria, we saw a white person. And you know, we would call ... 'eh heh! Oyibo'. So I know that there are some, how do I call it, some adverse way that that identity play[s] out here. ...I know I have a problem with some people when it comes to that, but I feel like it's my experience and I may always come back to this. You see the time that I was ill, I was on bed,

it's a significant part of me and what that did to me, still does to me, it's in my perspective. ... So when I look at a situation like that – which is why when I said 'yea, I came here and I know that I become more black than I was when I was over there' – I was quick to mention that the same way. Simply because I look at these things as a function of people's minds, rather than to see someone act towards me and I say 'oh, you're being discriminatory.'³¹

Here, he articulates that he within a racialized society understands himself as Black. His analysis of racialized experiences is to first assess the mentality that is created by race, or racial prejudice, before assessing the physical response.

Rahman's experiences with other African and African Americans were profoundly positive and critical to his understanding of the United States, especially the Boston area. He describes Boston as extremely diverse, and that it was there he met many other African people from non-Nigerian countries. He says he formed friendships with people from "Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia – and I'm talking of real strong friendships – South Africa, Sierra Leone, Cameroon. You know I loved that idea so much that I feel, even every time I went back to Nigeria now. The fact [is that] you don't have this kind of mix."³² His experiences befriending Africans challenged him to reconsider ethnic-based stereotypes that his people in Nigeria had of foreigners. When he came to Boston, he quickly came to meet African Americans there. He met a couple who were affiliated with Boston University, but additionally led an Afrocentric Black community film organization. He joined their organization, and felt his connection to the community was instant. To this he says, "With Black America, it was pretty easy. ... The organizations that I talked about with everyone there, it was natural. You know? 'Oh our Brother from Africa, come on!' Then we were just... but yes, you learn about the differences and all of that."³³ He suggests that while the differences were clear, an African or Black commonality and unity were easily established.

Akin Omotoso's diaspora experiences come from the context of the Western Cape and later Johannesburg, South Africa. Coming to South Africa just prior to the end of apartheid, Omotoso recalled that his most shocking experience was his classmates' lack of knowledge about Nigeria. His command of the English language baffled them, which surprised him, having come from a context where learning English was the norm. Omotoso has been in South Africa for 24 years now, and he speaks of

having close relationships with people of various races, ethnicities, and backgrounds.³⁴ When asked about his experiences between various communities or groups of people, Omotoso replied that he tries not to focus on analyzing ethnic differences, while still being aware of them.

I generally take people as people and haven't spent a lot of time analyzing people's various ethnic backgrounds in my experience. That's not to suggest a lack of knowledge of various ethnic/racial groups or awareness, it's a life view that attempts to not generalize or stereotype people.³⁵

At the same time, he recognizes how his own identity is constantly simplified and negated. Even traveling in and out of South Africa became an added issue, given that his passport was from Nigeria. He noted that while his late mother and sister rarely ran into issues with their Barbadian passports, he and his father, with their Nigerian passports, were constantly stopped. While taking this into account, Omotoso also has a method he uses to combat racist and xenophobic encounters and experiences.³⁶ The response is always the same, "I don't let it slide."³⁷ He calls out these discriminations, and takes them into consideration in his work. When asked how he responds to stereotypes of Nigerians, he responded, "*Man on Ground*"; a reference to his film starring a Nigerian immigrant who is a victim of xenophobic attacks in South Africa.³⁸ He found that a conscious response also became necessary when being cast for roles. He would reject most of them because they cast Nigerians in simplistic and negative roles such as drug dealers or criminals. For Omotoso, the simplifying of his identity, as a Nigerian, and more specifically as one with mixed heritage, becomes a boring encounter and one in which others "fail to embrace the complexity of what it means to be somebody." However, he finds that there need be moments of empathy regarding these tensions in the South African context, and one must ask the difficult questions, "Where does that stuff come from? What does it mean? And how willing are you to engage...? How much does it define you? And I think that's a constant journey."³⁹

Transnationally Determined 'Naija' Identities

While Oladigbolu and Omotoso consider themselves Nigerian, they both variously describe the nationality out of only a national context to include global identities, a consequence of their diaspora journeys.

Both speak to moments of engaging diversity within African contexts in and out of Nigeria (i.e. Boston, Benue State) as relevant to this experience. Omotoso's multi-ethnic African identities, and time spent in Barbados, the United Kingdom, Nigeria, and South Africa also inform his Pan-African identity. Oladigbolu considers his solitude as an additional way to connect with the world on a more intimate space of being a perpetual outsider. Rahman Oladigbolu defined home in relation to his identity. He considers himself a universalist, because he occupies multiple spatial and physical homes.

...since I moved here what I considered home hasn't changed. Probably that already started before I moved here, because I heard that question a lot, like 'where is home?' Because for me, since I finished secondary school in Nigeria, ... that passion ignited in me to make films. It has just become -that's the world I want to be. That's the only place I want to be. And it doesn't matter where that world is situated. And I think that world, so I feel like whatever, my story, that I have to make a film, whatever it takes me is home for me. So that's the way I see it. So even now, yea, it's still the same. ... I make films not just wanting to make a film for – it's like a fire of a story burns in me, And I just want to see it through no matter how long it takes.⁴⁰

Oladigbolu defines home in relation to the locations that his work brings him, which does not need to be a physical space. It is instead a space in which he can create his art, and produce film. For instance, with his current project, the film *The Theory of Conflict*, he suggests that this is the most difficult film for him to make and this is due to the world he currently occupies. His desire to tell this story occupies his world, and as a result it does not matter where home is physically situated. He makes regular trips to Nigeria, and he is working toward spending 50% of his time there.

While Oladigbolu sees himself as a universalist, he considers himself black and strongly identifies with his Nigerian heritage. He recognizes that much of what he understands about the world came from his readings while recovering from his surgeries in Nigeria. He explains it as a "stepping away from society," that largely impacted his universalist identity and making himself "hungry to be part of all this humanity." However, at the same time, he believes that where he was born was not an accident, and it becomes one's responsibility to articulate their knowledge of the world. "I feel like there is a responsibility that you

owe, something that you need to do. That is something I believe that I am striving to still maintain while here... I believe that that Nigerian perspective is important, because that [identity] is how we can do a little as we can to [contribute to] the world, you know?"⁴¹ Omotoso also identifies as "Pan-African" as well as, quoting CLAM magazine's tagline, "local everywhere."⁴² He recognizes that his diverse background, Nigerian and Bajan, as well as multiple locals of living, Nigeria, Barbados, England, and South Africa, have given him a global perspective of looking at the world and imagining himself within it. Similarly, he also suggested that if he were asked to identify where he is from, like the ethos of his film *Man on Ground*, he would respond "I am from Planet earth." When asked if who he was changed as a result being in South Africa, he replied "...my worldview is vast so I never see myself as belonging to just one group. West African and West Indian food is one thing that I do seek out. So, I find where these restaurants are and visit them regularly in whatever city I am in."⁴³ While Omotoso can identify globally, he also acknowledges how his own cultural inheritances, West African and West Indian food, contribute to how he engages with the places he travels.

REPRESENTING NAIJA DIASPORIZATION IN NIGERIAN FILM

Once the Nigerian cultural producers made their way to the United States or South Africa, they negotiated who they are in relation to the people they engage in the hostland. Determining whether to embrace, reject, or maintain culturally determined along with imposed identities is a part of their lived experiences. Interviews with them revealed some of the artwork of the cultural producers through their personal perspectives of their work. As they engage this process personally, they have attempted to represent these experiences through their artistic means.

Pan-Ethnic Heritage and Oladigbolu's Soul Sisters

Rahman Oladigbolu considers his work *In America: The Story of the Soul Sisters* as connected to the experiences he and others he knows have had in America. Specifically, the storyline is based on the experiences Oladigbolu's friend. *In America* is about Sade George, a Nigerian immigrant to the US Northeast for education. She moves in with her uncle, and constantly keeps her connection to her family in Nigeria

by phone. She encounters various Black people during her time in the United States, most notably an African American woman named Sonya Ibrahim. Sade learns that the Ibrahim family is Pan-African, and later she lives with them after an abusive encounter with her uncle. Their friendship provides Sade a space to articulate and discuss her experiences with both race and immigration in the United States. Struggling to make it in America, and learning to be Black in America are major themes that emerge through the story. Through her friendship with Sonya, Sade is brought into a Pan-African community, and learns more about herself as both Black and African.⁴⁴ Oladigbolu also sees the film as one that attempts to ease tensions between African immigrants and African Americans. This film becomes part of Oladigbolu's responsibility to share the stories of African immigrants as well as African Americans to correct many misunderstandings that exist.

...strongly, I believe ...that the interracial tension between African immigrants and African Americans, I think, was destructive. And it was coming out of misunderstanding from both sides, ...not only as Africans. ...We would come here and we'd say, it's like we pick up on the white narrative. But also, there's a reason why we tend to pick on the white narrative, simply because many of us are economic migrants. And for us, we grew up in an environment where there was no racial discrimination. We had fought the white people out of our continent, in that kind of role they love to play, you know, for decades. Many of us that were even here today, we weren't even born then. So we are economic migrants and when we get here, we move towards things that would improve us -you know at that level.⁴⁵

Oladigbolu believes that this experience encourages African immigrants to push away from African Americans, as well as to reject a 'Black' identity and assert an 'African' identity. He feels that their experiences of knowing only the white narrative of race blind them to the 'social ills' of American society, in this case, racism. Because he understood that Africans would not understand the racial context of America, he altered the film's title to feature a common desire among black immigrants: to be in America with African Americans. He suggests that while living in America as black and with black people is the perception for immigrants who were raised on American media, once they arrive from Africa, they begin to distance themselves from African Americans.

That experience is important because people didn't know really much about the relationship, which is more important, is equally important here. So that's why I thought to change it to 'In America'. It wasn't just me, it was me with a group of friends... So we came with that name, but we didn't want to just call it 'In America', because there was already a film called *In America* with Jim Sheridan and I didn't want to lose that relationship to *Soul Sisters*. So we gave it a long name that's common for films, *In America: The Story of the Soul Sisters*.⁴⁶

The title 'Soul Sisters' was also important in its American release, because it projected the close relationship between a Nigerian female immigrant and an African American woman. The film becomes a narrative that moves away from the tensions between African Americans and Africans, and rather portrays a sisterly bond between Sade and Sonya. Their friendship and love for one another is a major theme of the film. By adding, 'In America', Oladigbolu tied this diaspora experience to a feeling he believes Africans can identify with: wanting to be in America. He hopes the film can entice an immigrant and potential immigrant audience, and provide a roadmap to the Nigerian (and African) immigrant experience. As such, he calls the film *In America*, when he's Nigeria or Africa in general, and *Soul Sisters* when he is in America. He quotes writer Elie Wiesel, to describe his relationship with *Soul Sisters*, "Wiesel said, 'God must have created the world out of His love for stories'... I added that, without stories, maybe life would have no engine to run on."⁴⁷ To Oladigbolu, his responsibility is telling stories about his, and others' experiences. By presenting the problem, perhaps others understand and contribute to the solution.

Intra-Ethnic Conflict and Xenophobia in Omotoso's Man on Ground

Akin Omotoso is no less determined to produce stories that portray well-developed characters and that achieve complex identities. He attempts to draw from universal themes while telling stories from the African continent. For instance, Omotoso finds that music has the potential to cut across definitive lines and can speak to multiple people. He used the song "Oliver Twist" by Nigerian mix artist, D'Banj as an example. While it is a Nigerian song, D'Banj references famous Nigerian and African American icons, and because the language is in both English and Pidgin, the track is played around the world. Keeping to this idea of a

global experience, his goal as a filmmaker, referencing the late Chinua Achebe, is to make sure he tells a story that people can see themselves in. His favorite movies are those that resonate with him. He challenges himself to achieve this goal within his own work.

In 2008, the burning of Ernesto Nhamuave, a Mozambique immigrant to South Africa, was video-taped and broadcasted locally and internationally. In response, Omotoso, along with other immigrant filmmakers, created films to respond to the attacks on African immigrants in South Africa. Akin Omotoso's film *Man on Ground* was a product of this, which he put together with other actors and filmmakers Fabien Lojede and Hakeem Kae-Kazim. The film focuses on the story of two Nigerian brothers Femi and Ade, played by Lojede and Kae Kazim, respectively, who at the time of the movie were both located in South Africa. In the film, Femi had come as a refugee from Nigeria after being tortured by the Nigerian government for his radical activism in school. He had successfully acquired asylum status and began his life in South Africa. The story uses letters from Femi's mom, written in English and Yoruba, referencing Yoruba traditions (i.e., marriage), to maintain transnational and cultural connections to Nigeria. Femi shares his experiences, moderated to exclude his economic hardships and xenophobic encounters, focusing instead on his positive experiences as well as his hopes and dreams. It is also a love story, where Femi falls in love with a Zulu woman, Zodwa, who is faced with the burden of worrying about her boyfriend being attacked by South Africans in the township where they live.

Once Femi goes missing, Zodwa contacts Ade who happens to be in town to support his wife who was giving a conference presentation. Ade, a migrant to the United Kingdom, arrives in South Africa to search for his brother without much understanding of the ethnic tensions in the country. Ade befriends a South African, Femi's boss, Timothi, who also lives in the township. Together, they search for Femi. While the story tells of violent encounters between various native and foreign African ethnic groups through a constant theme of fire, it also shares a vision of unity through the relationship between Timothi and Ade, as well as between Femi and Zodwa.⁴⁸

Omotoso explains this vision further when he discusses that the goal of the film is to focus on the commonality of the characters as human being, rather than on difference, which he believes blinds people to the other's experience.

This is exemplified by Hakeem's character's speech in the film about an astronaut looking down from space at Planet Earth. He observes of Planet Earth that this: "*is our collective home. I only hope people realize the labels 'us' and 'them' are one and the same*". This came from the research. One of the little boy's displaced after the violence was asked what he would tell his attackers if he met them and he said: "*I would tell them I am from here*". For us 'here' meant 'Planet Earth'. This speaks to a bigger concern. The film wanted to portray a diverse range of Africans and ideas of migration. [Omotoso's emphasis]⁴⁹

For Omotoso, the goal of *Man on Ground* is to smear and erase the lines that divide people as 'us' and 'them,' and find a means to focus on the commonality of their humanity. He and his colleagues gathered data about communities of African immigrants in townships, or those who have faced xenophobia, to use for the texture of the film. They also incorporate a strong theme of language and culture, through a "kaleidoscope of language and experience" that primarily includes that of Nigerians and South Africans, and of Ethiopian and Somali immigrants. The film was taken for public viewing in four South African communities: Musina, Mpumalanga, Durban, and Cape Town. The goal was to create a documentary, *Tell them We're From Here*,⁵⁰ which articulates South African foreigners' and nationals' responses to *Man on Ground*. They then took the documentary and exhibited them in other communities to continue the discussion. They hope that, in future, this can create practical means of providing solutions to the problems facing African people in South Africa.

WRITING TRUTH: RACE, ETHNICITY, AND TRANSNATIONALISM

From their respective hostland Diasporas, Omotoso and Oladigbolu gradually found ways to visit or maintain homes in their home country. They learned of racial and ethnic contexts that force them to reconsider their identities, or to reconsider who they are as a Nigerian in the African Diaspora. The 'Naija' identity has a multitude of manifestations that are determined by the collective of individual experiences, or individual agencies,⁵¹ depending on where a Nigerian might be in the world. This follows Stuart Hall's determination of cultural identity; the producers' experiences help to visualize the process of becoming, and the transformations of 'Naija' identity between Africa and the African Diaspora.

Oladigbolu eventually proudly came into his African and Black identity by coming to America. That is to say, being Black and being African were imposed identities that he negotiated alongside his Nigerian and Yoruba heritages. His disability was an added experience that determines his experiences abroad. Oladigbolu points to his universalist identity, which was born during the time of his isolation in the hospital, and his experiences in Boston, both offering opportunities to engage other African and world communities from a Nigerian perspective. Omotoso shares a similar worldview to that of Oladigbolu, but his Pan-African identity is born of his multinational and multicultural background from Barbados and Nigeria. However, his work's goal is the same: to draw connections to the similarities between humans, rather than focusing on the differences.

From both cultural producers, while negotiating these identities, the artists also considered the social implications of who they are and found it necessary to write translating their experiences, or their truths, into their work. Oladigbolu critiques race and racial belonging in his life and work. His work aims to specifically examine racism as an American problem from an African perspective, while also finding ways to encourage diverse Black communities to consider pan-ethnic Black and pan-African identities. He does this by articulating the impact of his own confusing and difficult experiences in becoming Black in the United States. His critique of race in America is also personally attributed to college courses in African American Studies and History, as well as his engagement with African American and other African descendent communities. Oladigbolu found that these courses and their readings helped him to understand the nuances of Blackness and of race in America. As a result, he felt a sense of duty to share these stories from his various perspectives.

Omotoso's work focuses on racism within ethnic and national contexts. The ethnic and national differences, especially between Nigerians and South Africans, are centered to present Pan-African and global perspectives of the African lived experience. Omotoso identifies as Pan-African, and 'local everywhere,' while recognizing the role Barbados, UK, Nigeria, and South Africa played in helping to shape that identity. It follows in his work, where *Man on Ground* tells the story of Nigerians within South Africa that can resonate in other parts of the African world. In doing so, he tries to create work that can help to bridge cultural and ethnic divides between African nationals and African foreigners in South

Africa. Omotoso took his film throughout South Africa to share with various African communities. It becomes clear that the cultural producers find a strong connection between their experiences and their art, as well as to their activism.

The notion of writing home can be loosely tied to the experiences of Nigerian cultural producers, who find it necessary to express their truths through their experiences and identity and, as a result, define multiple locales of home. While in the African Diaspora considering home, Nigeria, the producers determine what it means to them now that they have left. This is a transformative process that they undergo while simultaneously processing imposed identities in their diaspora hostland. While most of them identify as Nigerian, many of them are also quick to also explain other cultural, racial, ethnic, and transnational identities and incorporate these experiences into their work. In all cases, the artists expressed their feelings of responsibility for producing cultural works that express the experiences of themselves and their communities. Carole Boyce Davies' notion of "writing home" comes from her analysis of the Black female migrant, who negotiates her dispossessed identities and then must remember them in order to write of her experiences.⁵² Writing home is the process of self-definition, which "takes into account the multifaceted nature of human existence and female identity." Said differently, writing home allows the Black female migrant to remember and articulate her identities, which moves beyond linear histories and metanarratives of self and identity. It is a form of resistance to domination, re-membering and articulating where one is from and "locating home in its many transgressive and disjunctive experiences."⁵³

For instance, Oladigbolu considers fictional and non-fictional storytelling as one and the same. Fiction is often pulling from real experiences. His work certainly aims to tell whole and partial stories of the people he has encountered in his life. Omotoso, when he makes films about Nigerian characters, uses a research team to collect data in South African communities for his film so that he can make accurate portrayals of people's experiences. In the case of these productions, the cultural producers articulate personal experiences in either the United States or South Africa that define their work themes. While the stories vary, they all carry humanistic approaches of supporting their communities. They all recognize the power of sharing stories, so as not to sit by and watch mainstream media perpetuate, as Adichie calls it, 'the danger of single story.'⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

The 'Naija' identity provides a prism to understand and analyze the lived experiences of the Nigerian Diaspora. Like other communities in the African Diaspora, cultural works produced from their own communities by their own members provide them visual and spoken representations of themselves. The cultural producers analyzed here are examples of members of the diaspora asserting 'Naija' pride, through their explanations and representations of their diversely transnational Nigerian identity. More importantly, the increased popularity of their work and their articulations of who they are provide an interesting space to discuss resistance and self-definition through art. While their individually determined and socially enforced identities are diverse, they are also unified by their sense of belonging to a Nigerian homeland. This study reveals not only the usefulness of the lived experiences of Nigerian cultural producers, but also its centrality to understanding their art. The proximity of their works and their experiences becomes an important factor in understanding the ties that bind fiction to non-fiction. As a case study of a larger African Diaspora, this study reveals the importance of defining the nuances of one's diaspora. In my case, it is the Nigerian Diaspora. By sharing the lived experiences of Nigerian cultural producer, I contribute this study to understanding the texture of the worldwide African Diaspora.

NOTES

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4. Stuart Hall, "What Is the 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Journal of Social Justice* 20, no. 12 (1993): 104.
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6. *Man on Ground*, directed by Akin Omotoso (TOM Pictures, 2011), DVD.

7. The movement of Africans around the world from the 19th century onward defines the New African Diaspora, or the modern African Diaspora. It solidifies after the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the beginning of African colonialism, consisting mainly of Africans leaving their countries and the continent, and often for economic opportunities. See also Colin Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora," last modified September 1998, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-1998/defining-and-studying-the-modern-african-diaspora>.
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- an “ongoing phenomenon powered by personal ambition, political strife.” See also this edited volume for examples of Afropolitanism in conversation with African art, intellectualism, and culture: Jennifer Wawrzinek and J.K.S. Makokha, eds., *Negotiating Afropolitanism: Essays on Borders and Spaces in Contemporary African Literature and Folklore* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011).
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30. Rahman Oladigbolu, interviewed by Olaocha N. Nwabara, April 2016, transcript.
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43. Omotoso, March 2016.
44. Oladigbolu, *In America*.
45. Oladigbolu, interviewed by Nwabara.
46. Ibid.
47. Oladigbolu, interviewed by Nwabara.
48. Omotoso, *Man on Ground*.
49. Omotoso, March 2016.
50. Omotoso, *Tell Them We Are From Here*.
51. Smith suggests that assessing one's "individual agency" is a critical way to access an identity-to-politics link and to understand individual, and carefully consider collective, processes of diaspora consciousness. Watts Smith, *Black Mosaic*.
52. Black women's writings, as re-memory, not only reveal their identities but also establish it and in doing so define home. The migrant is often dispossessed of a home, leaving her homeless, homesick, displaced, and subject to metanarratives of home. For the Black woman migrant, home can be

dispossessed when she is asked where she is from which suggests that she is an immigrant and ultimately belonging somewhere else. Davies uses Stuart Hall's analysis of an "immigrant" which "places one so equivocally as *really* belonging *somewhere else*. 'And when are you going back home?'" See also Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 114.

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CHAPTER 8

“A Single Story”: African Women as Staged in US Theater

Lisa B. Thompson

This essay is part of a larger project in its formative stages, entitled “The African Image in the African American Mind” that examines representations of Africa and Africans in contemporary theater and film by African American cultural producers. The title is in reference to both George Frederickson’s landmark study, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (1971) and *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas About White People, 1830–1925* (2000), Mia Bay’s retort to Frederickson. I excavate the ways Africa, when depicted as the homeland, or Motherland, resonates across genres in post-segregation US and post-independence Africa. I am interested in the representational strategies that contemporary African American cultural producers utilize when characterizing Africa and Africans. The images of Africa and Africans that circulate in contemporary US culture tend to be drawn in two significant and significantly distinct ways: either as a romanticized and utopic homeland; or as a region with great state and interpersonal violence and dysfunctional infrastructure and communities. My chief concern is not in reconciling the US black imaginary with more factual data on African

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societies and peoples. Rather, I want to consider the ways that Africa and African-ness operate in the African American imagination. Beginning with the slave narratives and the poetry of Phyllis Wheatley, and continuing through the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, the iconography of the Black Arts Movement and the flourish of black women's writings since the 1970s, invocations and depictions of Africa have ranged from the salvific to the horrific. With the rise of African immigration to the US and the concomitant notability of certain African and African immigrant artists, new visions have entered into the black American mind when it imagines Africa and Africans. However, while individual writers, artists, and actors have received popularity and some critical attention as well, there remains a dearth of scholarship on this expanding field and repertoire.

In this essay, I discuss what I have identified as a dominant narrative, a single story about African women in US theatrical productions. I am specifically interested in the work of US black women playwrights whose plays often feature iterations of sexual assault or abuse that the African women characters experience or have as their traumatic backstory. I will begin an analysis that maps out how depictions of sexual victimization experienced by African women evolved into what Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes in her 2009 Ted talk as a "single story" about African womanhood. In the present, Adichie expresses that this singular story is derived: "from popular images ... a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves." Adichie credits John Locke as the one who "represents the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West: A tradition of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness, of people who, in the words of the wonderful poet Rudyard Kipling, are 'half devil, half child'."¹

Stories about African women that focus on their sexual victimization are in no way limited to theater or to the output of black women creative artists and intellectuals. While I want to question this hegemonic portrayal of African women, I begin with the recognition that rape and sexual assault have been used strategically to terrorize African women since colonialism, the slave trade, and in contemporary African nation states experiencing civil wars, ethnocidal conflicts, and the growth of theocracies. Sexual atrocities in Africa have been documented by the United Nations and reported widely by the BBC and other international news

outlets. Female genital mutilation, sex trafficking, rape as a war crime, and child marriage have each been addressed by politicians, activists, and social organizations. These issues have also become the cause célèbre of some prominent black women in the US such as Alice Walker, Tracy Chapman, Oprah Winfrey, along with politically engaged philanthropic white feminists such as the writer Eve Ensler and film actress and humanitarian Angelina Jolie.² These prominent cultural figures in literature, media, theater, music, and publishing are not the only ones calling attention to the horrors suffered by African women. These issues have also been examined in documentaries, studies, programs, and organizations not linked to those with substantial media access and clout.³ The World Health Organization's 2005 study found that "domestic violence is a global problem affecting millions of women ... Violence against women goes beyond beatings. It includes forced marriage, dowry-related violence, marital rape, sexual harassment, intimidation at work and in educational institutions, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, forced sterilization, trafficking and forced prostitution."⁴ The African woman's body and her sexuality are the focal point and recurring image of it, much of this investigative work. Other pressing issues such as access to clean water, mortality rates of children, literacy, and educational opportunity receive less engagement. Moreover, the rise of theocratic terror cells, oil crises, political strife, governmental corruption, exploitation by transnational conglomerates in modern African nations, as well as the stark consequences of climate change on the African continent are rarely depicted as being women's issues. The representational totalization of the African woman as sexual victim, as nothing but a victim of this kind, repeats across fiction and nonfiction, internet platforms and broadcast media, and in the theatrical work of black women playwrights.

While Adichie points to John Locke as an original teller of a singular African story, this narrative is now being told and staged in celebrated work by US black women playwrights such as Suzan-Lori Park's Obie Award-winning *Venus* (1996) and Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* (2009) for which she received the Pulitzer prize. African and African immigrant women writings in English for the American theater have also depicted women of the continent in relationship with sexual violence and disease. The Zimbabwean American actress and playwright, Danai Gurira's *Eclipsed* (2009) won an LA Critics Circle award, was nominated for a Lucille Lortel Award, and when it transferred to Broadway, it was directed by South African Liesl Tommy and starred the Mexican-Kenyan

actress, Oscar winner Lupita N'yongo who had first performed the play while receiving her MFA in acting at the Yale School of Drama. *Eclipsed* received considerable press, making theater history as the first Broadway show written and directed by, as well as starring, African women. Gurira was also co-author with the Los Angeles born Nikkole Salter of *In the Continuum* (2005), an Obie winning and Pulitzer nominated two woman-show. Though these plays take place in different historical epochs and countries, each depicts African women as victims of sexual violence and exploitation.

Suzan-Lori Park's *Venus* is set in Africa and Europe's colonial past and concerns the sexual commodification and fascination with African women's bodies that derive from the colonial encounter. In a conceptual and anti-realist manner that has its theatrical lineage in US avant garde theater, *Venus* tells the story of Saarijtee or Sarah Baartman, the South African woman (born in the Eastern Cape) who was brought to the UK in 1810 and put on display at the Picadilly Circus and other venues until her death at age 26. Upon her death:

The naturalist Georges Cuvier ... made a plaster cast of her body before dissecting it. He preserved her skeleton and pickled her brain and genitals, placing them in jars displayed at Paris's Museum of Man. They remained on public display until 1974.⁵

Baartman's remains were finally repatriated in 2002 after being in Europe for nearly 192 years. With the recovery of her story by feminist writers and visual artists of the US, South Africa and Europe, she has become trope and totem of colonialism's dehumanizing voyeurism and the invariably tragic outcomes for the subject/object of its gaze. Black women photographers, installation and performance artists, as well as hip hop journalists have portrayed themselves as Baartman and analyzed images of black women's excessive flesh in video, film, and commercial photography as originating in and being haunted by the history and imagery of Baartman and her buttocks. Parks's *Venus* explores the relationship between Baartman and those who displayed her both in life and death, as it questions racialized constructions of agency, desire, and power.

Both Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* and Danai Gurira's *Eclipsed* represent the struggles of women victimized within sexual economies created in the political instability and military upheaval of African nations

experiencing civil wars and/or ethnocide. Male warlords in both shows use women as more or less enslaved concubines. *Ruined*, set in the Congo, and *Eclipsed*, set in war torn Liberia, illustrate the ways women become sexual pawns in war zones and the resulting damage done to their bodies and psyches by men engaged in war. In both works, the women characters are surrounded not only by men who seek power but also by other powerless women who find themselves caught in an impossible historical situation violently played out on their bodies. These circles of women in *Ruined* and *Eclipsed* are imagined as focal sites of acrimony and harmony with the female characters driving the story; rivals and sisters competing among each other for some vestiges of joy, relief, and hope. Like Park's rendering of Baartman, Nottage and Gurira depict traumas and war crimes committed against their flesh and spirits in order to give African women's suffering a body, voice, and narrative beyond what is conveyed in newsfeeds internationally.

In the Continuum (2005) departs from Parks' experimental approach and historical critique, and is the only work under consideration that comparatively represents US black women and women of the African continent. Gurira's and Salter's play shows the impact of HIV/AIDS on a black woman in Zimbabwe and a young girl in South Central Los Angeles. As in the plays already discussed, the focus here is the fraught arena of the black female body. Crucial to this play's intervention is the knowledge that urban black women in the US and Sub-Saharan African women have higher rates of HIV infection. In linking these disparate voices and staging national and local difference between women of the diaspora and those dwelling in a contemporary African nation, *In the Continuum* chooses not to tell a single story. Here, we see a departure from the received narrative of African women's bodies as targeted sites for violence and their memories as containers primarily for this trauma. Given that all these plays were developed and premiered within the American theater, Salter and Gurira's choice to depict black women in Zimbabwe and in South Central US is decisive, in that it creates a comparative and contoured representational system for its characters.

In the Continuum brings to life their characters' specificities beyond stark statistics of transmission and infection rates, forming a more dialogical representation of women separated by oceans, histories, and economies. *In the Continuum* hews closely to theatrical, televisual, and cinematic realist works that document the AIDS crisis and depict characters coming to terms with infection and illness. Both characters in

the play confront what it means to have an intimate partner unknowingly infect them with the virus. This allows the writers to expand the horizon of representations of those living with HIV/AIDS to include a Zimbabwean and American moving beyond the well-worn narrative in the US about African sexual backwardness. Yet, while there are surprising differences between how the play portrays an HIV diagnosis and its effects on the life of a married, upper middle-class woman in Africa and a young, uneducated girl in the US, ultimately, we still remain frustratingly bound within the single story of African women's bodily risk and victimization.

This African woman-as-victim narrative remains a vital plot in American theater by black women playwrights and has brought awards, exposure, and productions to these deserving playwrights. US audiences and the American theater overall have used these scripts to diversify their seasons, and educate their audiences regarding contemporary Sub-Saharan political circumstances while working with a bevy of black talent on and off stage. Within a diasporic context, these plays put black Americans and Africans in conversation about the after-effects of colonialism, appropriation, civil war, and genocide. The importance of these stories cannot be stressed enough, but their theatrical dominance raises an important question: what stories about the lives of African women remain untold on American stages, and who is permitted and commissioned to tell them? Which narratives about the lives of African women and girls are being neglected for yet another iteration of that single story? I seek narratives and strategies of representation that work against this trope consciously as well as others that eschew it entirely in order to stage new themes of African womanhood. In some ways, Danai Gurira's most recent play, *Familiar* (2016), answers my questions, and is a departure from some of the overdetermined representations of African womanhood in black women's contemporary theater.

Of all the writers I have mentioned, Gurira, a first-generation Zimbabwean American best known for her roles in *Black Panther* and *The Walking Dead*, has worked most diligently to broaden the stories about African women on the continent and in the diaspora, beyond the single story of sexual victimization. She is engaged in what I consider an Afropolitan theatrical aesthetic that challenges this narrow representation of African women.⁶ In my formulation, the Afropolitan theatrical aesthetic is an artistic, cultural, and political mode of representation that fosters performances of African identity that are often divergent

from conventional representations of the continent and its inhabitants. Narratives engaged in the Afropolitan theatrical aesthetic depict people who have lived in, emigrated from, and/or travel to multiple locations across the globe—often major cities such as London, Lagos, New York, Accra, Paris, Johannesburg, Houston, Addis Abba, Berlin, Cairo, and Rome. The protagonists are often multilingual, and live multicultural existences, yet they regard their specific African culture as a foundational and intrinsic part of their identity.

Derived from the term "Afropolitan" popularized by novelist Taiye Selasi, my formulation makes visible this emergent aesthetic in contemporary theater.⁷ Often, the writers are much like the characters they portray. Many of them are either the first generation born to immigrant parents, or they accompanied their parents to the new country (or countries) at a young age. In both instances, they must navigate the challenges of assimilation and displacement as well as an affinity for their adopted home. Most importantly, embedded in the works is a refusal to accept a single story about Africa, Africans, or African immigrants.⁸ Gurira herself is exemplar. She stands at the intersection of African and Africa-American (or more specifically, Zimbabwean American) as she describes herself. Her "bifurcated cultural formation" as one reviewer puts it, has made her privy to the fact that Americans understand very little about Africa and even less about Africans.⁹ Born in Iowa, raised in Zimbabwe, and educated in Minnesota, Gurira has a familiar but not yet dramatically represented experience. Gurira's most recent play sets out to change that. Ironically entitled *Familiar*, since this story is both very familiar in terms of US theater and very unusual in terms of representations of African women on US stages, the play is an example of this Afropolitan theatrical aesthetic. *Familiar* departs completely from the dominant trope of black female sexual abuses and representations of African women who find themselves disempowered within the social structures in which they exist. Gurira's play also insists on the cultural specifics of Zimbabwe instead of presenting a nebulous notion of Africa.

The comedic drama tells the story of an upper middle-class Zimbabwean immigrant family in suburban Minneapolis on the eve of a family wedding. Their eldest daughter Tendikayi (Rosslyn Ruff) is a successful lawyer who is following in her father Donald's (Harold Surratt) footsteps. She is marrying Chris (Joby Earle), a white American who co-founded a global human rights nonprofit. This becomes the major crisis and plot conflict that force the characters—upper middle-class

immigrants seemingly living the American dream—to either embrace or distance themselves from their Zimbabwean heritage. It is not a perfect family. Despite their class and social privilege, the family experiences major conflict, but instead of focusing on the sexual trauma of black women, Gurira presents a less familiar narrative about African people in the US. By exploring such themes as sibling rivalry, immigration, celibacy, and interracial marriage, she is disrupting the single story. *Familiar* raises issues such as the challenges of interracial and intercultural relationships, the losses caused by African immigration to the US in particular, and the lasting violence of colonialism on the black family as well as different experiences of racialization in different national spaces. Gurira renders the story of people in transition who must finally make peace with their family and home country's legacy, both the good and bad. Her take on all of these concerns reflects the experiences of Afropolitans whose relationship with “home” includes both adoration and ambivalence toward the place and people they are from, and toward the place (or places) where they now reside.

Reviews of *Familiar* acknowledge Gurira's departure from the conventional narrative—described as “seamlessly blending farce, social provocation and old-fashioned melodrama to create a thoughtful, tremendously entertaining whole.” Gurira is credited for her “nuanced world view.”¹⁰ Others note that “cross-cultural conflicts are at the heart” of the play and that “her unfolding of the family dynamics feels like genuine insight, and it is not limited to the issues facing immigrants.”¹¹ This reaction to Gurira's narrative as being universal or some how less limited than other stories about African people underscores the concerns some have with the notion of Afropolitanism in general. Some may find suspect the depiction of Africans or immigrants who are easily associated with and assimilated into American and/or European culture, but *Familiar* still embraces Zimbabwean culture, history, and its people. Instead of accepting US culture uncritically, Gurira makes the effort to balance and acknowledge both one's homeland and new-found home central to the narrative.

Class anxiety and tensions within the family erupt as do the history and significance of their homeland. Zimbabwe is symbolized by the silent war waged between the parents about a placement of a visual rendering of the country. Donald places a painting of his home country on the living room wall of their well-appointed bourgeois home. The family matriarch, Marvelous (Tamara Tunie), “a successful biochemist, an

elegant dresser, and a churchgoing Lutheran, who shops at Nordstrom and cooks salmon croquettes, lasagna and American baked goods for her family" repeatedly takes it down from the wall, replacing it with a more culturally and politically neutral piece of artwork (2). The painting seems out of place, a rupture in the gorgeous, comfortable home with the studied and casual elegance of a Pottery Barn showroom. In the Playwright's Horizon production, the play begins without a curtain so that when audiences take their seats, they face the living room of Clint Ramos's set and are immediately disoriented. This is not what American audiences expect when they think of the home of an African family. While one would be hard pressed to identify it as a home of an African immigrant, the constantly placed and displaced painting becomes an important symbol throughout the play—it raises questions about what one retains from their country of origin (accent, language, traditions, cuisine, and stories) and what one dispenses with in order to survive or thrive in one's adopted home. When the mother encounters Americans, she engages in elaborate code-switching and the suppression of her African accent. Marvelous's decision to distance her daughters from their Zimbabwean heritage is challenged by both her sister Annie (Myra Lucretia Taylor) who comes to celebrate the nuptials (and receive *roora*: the bride price) and her youngest daughter's yearning for information and a deep connection to her family's culture, history, and past. In fact, issues of class and education operate in this tale as both liberating and oppressive elements and influences.

Gurira refuses to present a simplistic family drama absent of political realities for Zimbabwean people. *Familiar* also addresses the aftermath of violent conflict in Africa, but from a specific time and place—unlike the film *Beasts of No Nation* (2015), for example, with its mad child soldiers and barbaric dictatorial militia leaders associated with a nameless country and people. The guerilla war in Zimbabwe during the 1970s and the start of independence are integral to the narrative. Relatives from home act as reminders of what the family has left behind and still yearns for, dramatizing Africa as a place an immigrant wants to return to, a notion underrepresented in American theater and culture in general. Matters of sexuality are not absent from *Familiar*. However, issues of the colonial sexual objectification of African women, as in *Venus*, and rape as part of the chaos and strategy of armed conflict in modern African nations, as in *Eclipsed* and *Ruined*, are not represented. Instead of fetishization or victimization, Tendakiya's choice to be celibate and wait

for her wedding night to consummate her union with her husband is foregrounded and a crucial aspect of her distinct characterization. This decision is steeped in her need to adhere to conservative ideas about piety, purity, and chastity as a Christian woman. Her Christian devotion and morals are rendered with complexity. In a moment of crisis that is played out comically, Tendakiya throws herself at her fiancée in hopes to banish her sadness and shock at discovering a long-held family secret. The show explores Tendakiya's sexuality along with other characters' desires as well. The desires and desirability of her younger sister Nyasha (Ito Aghayere) are also considered when she has an awkward and flirtatious encounter with Brad (Joe Tippett), her future brother-in-law. That Nyasha's potential lover and Tendakiya's fiancée are both white (and brothers) adds another underexplored element to the tale. African women choosing white men as romantic partners becomes another story—one underrepresented in many plays for the American theater, including those authored by black women. Not only is the lead's storyline unique and layered, the supporting female characters in *Familiar* offer an expansive view of African womanhood. The play dynamically gives nuanced image and voice to five distinctive African women, comprising two generations of sisters: Annie, Margaret, and Marvelous who were born and raised in Zimbabwe, and Nyasha and Tendakiya raised in the US. Their portrayals provide one of the broadest representations of African womanhood seen on American stages.

In her promotional video for *Familiar* at the Yale Repertory world premiere production, Gurira states that “the story is the first generation voice in America, specifically the first generation voice of the African in America and that I just seriously haven’t seen.”¹² She also speaks about this story being inspired by friends and colleagues with parents who speak very differently than their children, sometimes in completely other languages, but they themselves go about undetected by their colleagues who do not realize that the person before them is a child of immigrants. Gurira explains people like herself who “are able to swim without any notice in America, without anyone knowing we are one step away from being foreign. Why is that story never told? That’s so fascinating ... I see the same stories explored or similar stories explored but not that one.”¹³ Gurira's Afropolitan theatrical aesthetic honors this “first generation voice” and inserts their stories into US drama. The women Gurira represents in this play are both familiar and foreign. Sisters Tendikayi and Nyasha are familiar because they do not speak with an accent but they

are foreign because their story—of upper middle-class life of Africans in America—has not been told. This story is certainly not more important than the women of the Congo victimized by warlords. By penning both *Familiar* and *Eclipsed*, Gurira is insisting that the story of two Zimbabwean daughters in Minnesota is not less important either.

I want to return once more to Adiche's TED talk. She explains:

Of course, Africa is a continent full of catastrophes: There are immense ones, such as the horrific rapes in Congo and depressing ones, such as the fact that 5,000 people apply for one job vacancy in Nigeria. But there are other stories that are not about catastrophe, and it is very important, it is just as important, to talk about them.

... it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar. (7)

For the predominant narrative scripted about African women (by African American women playwrights, no less) to be about sexual abuses amounts to a single story that is limiting and harmful. The sexual victimization or hyper-sexualized image of black womanhood is in many ways the single story of the black female throughout the African Diaspora.

Repeated depictions of African women's sexual traumas—no matter how artfully executed or carefully crafted—still amount to a single story. Seeing these plays causes audiences to feel significant emotional fatigue. Although these narratives are meant to educate, if consumed in absence of other narratives, they have the potential to desensitize audiences to black pain. Despite that risk, I do not believe that cultural producers should only depict "uplifting" tales; suppressing traumatic stories presents its own danger. Perhaps that is why it is important to stage more plays like Gurira's *Familiar*. Having both *Familiar* and *Eclipsed* in US theaters allows audiences to appreciate the broad spectrum of African women's humanity and experiences. The fact that both these narratives come from a single author is remarkable—and that these plays appeared on and off-Broadway in 2016 is the miracle. There remains an overwhelming impulse to rescue and educate African women from sexual abuse and torment without considering their lives outside of that story. Perhaps, we might find the antidote in storylines about Nigerian women

who exhibit sexual agency, in recent Nollywood films such as *Lagos Cougars* (2013), *Road to Yesterday* (2015), or *Fifty* (2015), *The Wedding Party* (2016), and US films such as *Mother of George* (2013). Now that Nollywood films are easily available on streaming services such as Netflix, perhaps cultural producers in the US will move beyond the single story of African women's sexuality as fraught, troubled, and tragic.

The most important intervention is that in this richness, the stories of sexual abuse and trauma can be more fully understood (as forms of terror and violence) and considered within a broader, more nuanced context because additional narratives are familiar to audiences. This allows for a fuller depiction of African womanhood. In this way, audiences do not continue to be inured to the violence enacted upon black women's bodies, sexual and otherwise, and understand their full and rich humanity.¹⁴ As I write this, a great deal of attention is being showered on emerging playwright Mfonso Udofia; her rise may signal a more sustained shift in the narratives about African women on US stages. The first-generation Nigerian American is the author of *The Ufot Cycle*, a nine-part series she plans to craft about Nigerian immigrants and their American born children, a narrative which has African women at its center. The epic series currently includes the critically acclaimed *Her Portmanteau*, *Sojourners*, and *Runboyrun* as well as the unproduced *In Old Age*. Udofia engages in an Afropolitan theatrical aesthetic similar to Gurira, offering her audiences an even broader tapestry of images of African women.¹⁵ Diep Tran's *New York Times* profile on the new playwright suggests that critics are taking notice. Tran observes that "[B]y writing 'The Ufot Cycle,' Ms. Udofia is determined to show the nuances within African immigrant experiences—that the continent isn't tragic and its people aren't 'broken.'"¹⁶ Since her characters are not all affluent, highly educated immigrants and travelers who jet between capital cities in the US and Europe, Udofia's plays escape the critique most often leveled at Afropolitanism as elitist. Some of her characters demonstrate a deep ambivalence about migration and experience mixed results as they navigate life in their homeland. By insisting upon these unfamiliar theatrical narratives, playwrights such as Gurira, and now Udofia, have room to craft broad, complex, and multifaceted depictions of African womanhood on US stages and shatter the single story.

As playwright Ama Ata Aidoo suggests, the theater is an importance space to make such an intervention, because "the purpose of theater is to entertain people and inform them, and if possible inspire them, by

bringing societal issues upwards. It is immediate in a way that nothing else is."¹⁷ Anthologies such as *African Women Playwrights*, and *Black South African Women: An Anthology of Plays*, both edited by African American scholar Kathy A. Perkins, provide US audiences and theater producers an opportunity to read and possibly produce plays by African women playwrights such as South Africa's Sindewe Magona and Geina Mhlope, as well as Kenya's Andiah Kisia. Texts written by playwrights from throughout the continent provide an effective remedy to a monolithic view of African womanhood. Perhaps it is not until audiences turn to African women themselves, for stories of their homeland and of their lives in the Diaspora, will those outside the continent understand and appreciate their complex and diverse stories.¹⁸

NOTES

1. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of the Single Story," Presentation, *TED Global*, July 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en.
2. See also Zeba Blay, "Angelina Jolie's Powerful Speech on What Women Really Need from Men," last modified June 15, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/15/Angelina-jolie-africa-summit_n_7585514.html; Eve Ensler, "Women Who Are Left for Dead—And the Man Who's Saving Them," last modified July 31, 2007, <http://www.glamour.com/story/rape-in-the-congo>; *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women*, directed by Pratiba Prammar (England: Women Make Movies, 1993), DVD; Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (New York: Pocket Books, 1992).
3. See also Samer Muscati, "South Sudan's War on Women," last modified August 8, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/05/south-sudans-war-women>; "Slow Progress in Ending *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*," 2014, 92: 6–7, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2471/BLT.14.020114>; *Uncondemned*, directed by Michele Mitchel and Nick Louvel (New York: Film at Eleven, 2015). *Uncondemned* documents first international criminal tribunal since WWII and Nuremberg Trials of individuals charged with crimes against humanity the first to be prosecuted for rape in time of war.
4. See also Mary Kimani, "Taking on Violence Against Women in Africa," in *Africa Renewal Online: Special Edition on Women*, 2012, 21, <http://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/special-edition-women-2012/taking-violence-against-women-africa>.

5. Justin Parkinson, "The Significance of Sarah Baartman," last modified January 7, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35240987>.
6. See also Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007); "The Case for Contamination: No Purity, No Tribalism, No Cultural Protectionism, Toward a New Cosmopolitanism," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 1, 2006, 30; J.A. Mbembé and Sarah Nuttall, "Writing the World from an African Metropolis," *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 347–372; Taiye Selasi, "Bye-Bye Babar," last modified March 3, 2005, <https://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>; Ibid., "Teju Cole Talks to Taiye Selasi: Afropolitan, American, African. Whatever," last modified August 5, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/05/teju-cole-taiye-selasi-interview-known-strange-things>; Mark Tutton, "Young, Urban, and Culturally Savvy: Meet the Afropolitans," last modified February 17, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/02/17/world/africa/who-are-afropolitans/>.
7. Selasi, "Bye-Bye Babar."
8. Public figures such as architect David Adjaye, and authors Teju Cole, Chimamanda Adiche, and Tayie Selasi, who are credited with popularizing the term, can be considered Afropolitan. Some find the notion and term problematic. Playwright and essayist Ama Aidoo charges that it masks self-hatred and sees it as a "'fancy moniker' that tries 'to mask the terror associated with Africa'." See also Susanne Gehrman, "Cosmopolitanism with African Roots: Afropolitanism's Ambivalent Mobilities," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28, no. 1 (2016): 61–72; Aretha Phiri, "Literatures by Africans in the Diaspora Can Help Create Alternative Narratives," last modified June 26, 2016, <http://theconversation.com/literature-by-africans-in-the-diaspora-can-help-create-alternative-narratives-60941>.
9. David Rooney, "Familiar: Theater Review," last modified March 3, 2016, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/danai-guriras-familiar-theater-review-872391>.
10. Jonathan Mandell, "Familiar Review: Danai Gurira's Other New York Play," last modified March 3, 2016, <http://dctheatrescene.com/2016/03/03/familiar-review-danai-guriras-other-new-york-play/>.
11. Ibid., "Danai Gurira's Other New York Play," last modified March 1, 2016, <https://dctheatrescene.com/2016/03/03/familiar-review-danai-guriras-other-new-york-play/>.
12. Danai Gurira, "Familiar: Interview with Playwright Danai Gurira," YouTube Video, 1:06, posted by "Yale Repertory Theatre," January 19, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2eBmtkFOs-4>.
13. Ibid.

14. Since many of the women in the films are wealthy, or upper middle class, the films are vulnerable to the same critique of Afropolitanism as elitist.
15. Stuart Miller, "Mfoniso Udofia's Unfolding Immigrant Family Epic," last modified May 4, 2017, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2017/05/03/mfoniso-udofias-unfolding-immigrant-family-epic/>.
16. Diep Tran, "Nine Plays, One Truth: Mfoniso Udofia on Her Immigrant Experience, and Ours." *The New York Times*, May 31, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2sos5nf>. In her epic series, Udofia draws from her experiences and those of her Ibibio family to present a wide tapestry of experiences. Tran reports that Chinasa Ogbuagu, who performs two characters in the 2017 New Theater Workshop productions of both *Sojournors and Her Portmaneau*, "emphasized the importance of audiences being able to witness "this narrative of an immigrant that has a house, and is coming from a place that they love, just going somewhere else for another sort of opportunity, and not escaping something horrible."
17. Kathy A. Perkins, *African Women Playwrights* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 12.
18. This challenge to single depictions of African women goes hand in hand with the social media campaign #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou, a recent Twitter hashtag that sets out to demonstrate the diversity of the continent's landscape, class, regions, people, cultures, and religions.



CHAPTER 9

Silêncio: Black Bodies, Black Characters, and the Black Political *Persona* in the Work of the *Teatro Negro* Group Cia dos Comuns

Gustavo Melo Cerqueira

INTRODUCTION

In 2007, Cia dos Comuns,¹ a prominent Brazilian *teatro negro*² group, premiered its fourth original play, *Silêncio*³ [*Silence*] in Rio de Janeiro. According to the program of the play, *Silêncio* was prompted by the following question⁴: “What is the silence enclosed within the body of a person who, throughout his or her existence, thinks that at any moment he or she might be a victim of racism?”⁵ Different from the vast majority of *teatro negro* plays, however—including the first three plays written and performed by the group—*Silêncio* would not use black characters. In the words of actor, director, and cultural producer Hilton Cobra, founder of Cia dos Comuns and director of *Silêncio*, “Not characters. EXPERIENCES. I am tired of having others, in theater, speaking in my name. Give me a break!”⁶ Cia dos Comuns’s decision to not use black characters in the play could be seen as a mere aesthetic/dramaturgical

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choice were it not for the relevance of the black character as a political-aesthetic device in the group's trajectory, and in the politics and aesthetics of Brazilian *teatro negro* writ large.

This essay examines how Cia dos Comuns's decision to dismiss the black character in *Silêncio* impacts the group's development of what I call the black political *persona* in Brazilian *teatro negro*. By "black character," I refer to the black fictional character in dramatic texts and performance in any theatrical genre, such as tragedy, drama, or comedy. When I use the term *teatro negro* in this essay, I refer specifically to the theater, performed by black people, that explicitly engages black people's "existential and political-ideological issues"⁷ with political and aesthetic purposes, especially to fight against antiblack racism and correlated forms of oppression. By emphasizing the lived experience of black people in the development of *teatro negro*, especially in its teleological-political dimension (to battle racial, sexual, and class oppression, among others), I neither mean to overlook other forms of *teatro negro*, nor am I implying that such forms lack political relevance.

However, as I will demonstrate throughout the essay, the emphasis on the lived experience of black people is the bedrock of Cia dos Comuns's political-aesthetic project. As for "black political *persona*," in this essay, I draw the initial contours of this notion. I propose it to refer to a kind of socio-political mask (*persona*), shaped by several activities developed by *teatro negro* groups, both onstage and offstage, to enhance black people's—and not only black performers'—participation in society and politics. *Persona* is a Latin word that is the root of the word *personagem*, the Portuguese equivalent to what in English is referred to as "character." Daniel Furtado Simões da Silva states that, "The Latin word *Persona* initially referred to the mask used by the actor and through which his voice should resonate (*persona* derives from *personare*, to sound through)."⁸ In this sense, the black political *persona* refers to how *teatro negro* groups, including Cia dos Comuns, develop political and artistic processes that create a mask that influences—or attempts to do so—the ways in which black people are heard and perceived in society and politics.

It is important to preemptively argue that the black political *persona* should not be understood as a particular form of black character, nor does it refer to the particular ways deployed by the black performers of Cia dos Comuns to act on stage. Rather, I want to emphasize that the black political *persona* results from the ways in which the black character

is deployed on stage, along with the political content that is engaged by Cia dos Comuns, both in its plays and in the seminars, forums, conferences, and other off-stage activities developed by the group to enhance the possibilities of black people's social and political participation, especially in the group's political activities. It is beyond the scope of this essay, though, to analyze how Cia dos Comuns deploys its black political *persona* in offstage activities in relation, for example, to state agencies and community projects. This aspect will certainly be discussed in other studies, but this essay limits itself to some of the preliminary elements of the notion of the black political *persona*.

This essay aims to offer a critical analysis of the interplay between black performers and black characters as a key political-aesthetic device in the work of Cia dos Comuns. *Silêncio*, by dismissing the black character, complicates Cia dos Comuns's black political *persona* and questions some general aspects of the politics and aesthetics of Brazilian *teatro negro*. I argue that, rather than dismiss the black character, Cia dos Comuns in fact puts greater emphasis on the black body as a political-aesthetic device in *teatro negro* and thereby complicates how the group engaged, in its first three plays, with notions of national belonging, alterity, and the cultural and political references to African and Afro-Brazilian culture. In this essay, I will engage with theories and methods from the fields of theater history, performance studies, and black studies. These fields foreground the study of the black character as a political-aesthetic device in the first three plays of Cia dos Comuns: the historical formation of the black character in Brazilian theater and its political relevance in the formation of Brazilian *teatro negro*; and the political dimensions of the black body explored in Cia dos Comuns's *Silêncio*.

Although my own positionality as both researcher and former member of Cia dos Comuns—where I performed several roles (actor, assistant director, assistant playwright, among others) between 2001 and 2010—gives me a certain privilege regarding knowledge of the group's aesthetics and politics, I ground most of my analysis in the close readings of the programs of the plays—which also include the texts of the plays—as well as the video footage of the plays and a few other archival materials such as articles from Brazilian newspapers. In this sense, I do not primarily ground this study in my personal experience as a performer in the group, even though such experience certainly informs my approach to the aesthetic and political relevance of Cia dos Comuns's work. This essay not only builds upon and expands current scholarship on *teatro negro*, but

it also extends the exploration of my previous research.⁹ In an earlier study, I concluded my analysis of *Silêncio* by suggesting that its engagement with certain aspects of anti-black violence might indicate innovative political-aesthetic paths. In this essay, I return to the same *teatro negro* play to unveil more layers that encrust *Silêncio*.

THE BLACK CHARACTER AS A POLITICAL-AESTHETIC DEVICE IN THE WORK OF CIA DOS COMUNS

It is important to go over some of the political and aesthetic foundations of Cia dos Comuns to better understand the centrality of the black character in the formation of the group's black political *persona*. To do so, in this section, I will analyze some texts written in the program of the group's first play, *A roda do mundo* [*The Wheel of the World*],¹⁰ which premiered in 2001, where the director of the Cia dos Comuns, Hilton Cobra, and the director of the first three plays of the group, Marcio Meirelles, establish some of the poetics of the group. The political and aesthetic agenda proposed by the group in *A roda do mundo* was developed in the following plays, *Candaces – a reconstrução do fogo* [*Candaces—The Reconstruction of Fire*] (2003)¹¹ and *Bakulo – os bem lembrados* (2005). [*Bakulo—The Well Remembered*] (2005).¹² This information will allow me to better explain how the group refined the interplay between black performer and black dramatic character as a central political-aesthetic device to engage with themes that became relevant to the development of the group's black political *persona*.

Actor, director, and cultural producer, Hilton Cobra founded Cia dos Comuns in Rio de Janeiro in 2001. In the program of *A roda do mundo*, the group states its mission: “to depict the richness and singularity of black culture in contemporary society through the performing arts”¹³ by emphasizing the “relevant social function of performing arts—and of theater in particular.”¹⁴ At the same time, the group argues that,

It is paradoxical that in the country that is home to the second biggest black population in the world and evokes black music, dance, and cuisine as its cultural [national] symbols, theater expresses in such a timid way the influence of the black [person] in Brazilian society.¹⁵

The same text goes on to express the importance of black culture as a featured element of “our singularity, our alterity as a nation,” which is

considered particularly relevant at a time when “national identities have been so intensely discussed in face of the political cultural challenges that have come to us with globalization.”¹⁶ The text still asserts the centrality of the black person in the work of Cia dos Comuns, “without losing sight of the multiracial character of Brazilian society.”¹⁷

To accomplish its mission, Cia dos Comuns developed, along with its trajectory, two main branches of activities—offstage and onstage—that encompassed the artistic and political dimensions of the group’s agenda. Offstage, Cia dos Comuns developed a range of social, cultural, and political activities such as seminars, forums, and publications. The purpose of these activities was multifold: (1) to offer general society the opportunity to learn about the artistic processes of a politically engaged *teatro negro* group; (2) to inspire black youth to engage with black performance as a vehicle of expression and political organization; (3) to create an archive of black artists’ political and aesthetic mobilization; and (4) to bring together black performance groups to debate their artistic practices as well as formulate proposals for public policy on black arts. Onstage, Cia dos Comuns produced and performed original plays in which the group articulated cultural, social, and political aspects of the lived experience of black people in Brazil, especially those from poor black communities.

In the text entitled “Por que a roda roda?” [Why Does the Wheel Turn?], Meirelles reinforces the political dimension of the artistic work of the group. Meirelles describes *A roda do mundo* as a *peça/agenda* [play/agenda], in the sense that the play frames the aesthetic and ethical principles and references that will guide the group:

This is a play/agenda of a group that has just begun. Within it we state the reasons why this company was created, how it will work, upon which themes it will discuss; which corporeal language, which system to prepare the actor, which creative methods it will use to express itself (...) [t]o continue a project that started perhaps with Abdias do Nascimento and his *Teatro Experimental do Negro*, in 1944.¹⁸

It is worth noting that, in these texts, the specificity of the lived experience of black people, especially concerning a sense of alterity, as well as an understanding that antiblack racism—and correlated forms of oppression based on gender, class, and sexuality, among others—became the *prima mater* of the group. It is also apparent that Meirelles dedicates

attention to the creative process of Cia dos Comuns's black performers, which results in the development of the interplay between black performer and black character that amplifies the political debates proposed by the group on stage.

The main creative method utilized by Cia dos Comuns to shape both plot and characters in the first three plays was the improvisation of scenes based on situations that dialogued with the themes of the plays, such as poverty and racism, globalization, and religious intolerance. This creative method was suggested to the group by the director Meirelles, based on the method he developed with the black performers of the *teatro negro* group Bando de Teatro Olodum.¹⁹ During those improvisations, Meirelles proposed situations which the black performers would discuss and improvise based on human behaviors drawn from their own lived experience and which would ultimately be incorporated into the characters used in the play. The dialogues from the improvisations would be recorded by the assistant directors and eventually refined by Meirelles to become the scenes that made up the central plot of the play. To say that the cast produced scenes based on their lived experience, however, does not mean that the scenes were necessarily biographic. Most of the time, they resulted from the recreation of a given situation that the performers lived, observed, or simply imagined. Often, the dialogues reflected what the performers would like to say about a particular situation, for example, how they felt, or how they would react, during a violent police search.

The black characters created through that process were anchored in the notion of "*personagens/função*" [characters/function], as the group states regarding its dramaturgy:

Construction of an original dramaturgy, based on each performer's personal experience with the themes approached [in the plays], derived from their personal archive of human types, making possible the creation of social characters and not psychological ones, characters/function as in the purest tradition of popular theater.²⁰

It is noteworthy that Cia dos Comuns links the idea of *personagens/função* to the "purest tradition of popular theater," while placing it in opposition to the idea of psychological characters. The *personagens/função* are probably a reference to the development of the character prior to bourgeois drama and, subsequently, to realism and naturalism.

As argued by Patrice Pavis, the character has changed throughout history,²¹ and the hegemonic ways in which we understand it today were consolidated during the period of bourgeois drama, realism, and naturalism, as demonstrated by Silva:

The possibility—or necessity—of thinking about the creation of a character from the point of view of a human being is a consequence of the aesthetic transformation of Western theater. Bourgeois theater and, subsequently, realism and naturalism, seek to bring to the scene characters that are similar to individuals and no longer depict legendary heroes, myths, archetypes or types that exacerbate a trait of human personality. It is increasingly perceived as a concern when depicting the human being as a whole, that is, as a person, full of contradictions and idiosyncrasies.²²

Still, according to Silva, in bourgeois theater, the focus shifts from the story toward the character.

Cia dos Comuns's proposal regarding the ways in which the group developed and deployed the character is certainly grounded in its critique of the values embedded in the bourgeois drama, but it is not based solely on this opposition. In fact, Cia dos Comuns envisioned the development of a proper dramaturgy that reflected the political-aesthetic project of the group—based on the specificity of the lived experience of black people—and assisted in the formation of a black political *persona*. In this process, the black performer was not simply interpreting the black character but rather, establishing a relationship with it that was made explicit to the audience.

In *A roda do mundo* (2001), the black performers in Cia dos Comuns utilized *capoeira*²³ movements as a metaphor to articulate survival strategies and how the conditions of poverty and social marginalization affecting the majority of poor black people in Brazil were connected to the processes of slavery, colonization, and neo-colonization in the Americas. The story presented situations lived by mostly poor black people who engaged in different kinds of work in order to survive, sometimes in unethical ways: a female domestic worker who works hard to improve her life; a samba dancer who is the lover of the big-boss drug dealer named Gringão (Big Gringo, a character that never appears in the play); a homeless girl; a social worker; a healer who sells sacred herbs in the open market; a fake *pai-de-santo* (a male *candomblé* priest), among others. All of these characters are black and are performed by black male and female performers, except for Gringão, who is referred to as white but never physically appears in the play. The characters in the play were not always

ethical in their everyday life. In fact, some of them were very unethical, such as the fake *candomblé*²⁴ priest who was only concerned about the money he would receive from people seeking his help, or even the healer who was a true connoisseur of herbs but, since he did not have all the herbs at his disposal, would only use a single herb for everyone who sought his help, regardless of the person's health, emotional or spiritual needs.

As part of the scenery of the play, a standing microphone was placed on stage which the performers approached—sometimes as performers, sometimes as characters—to comment to the audience on the reasons that informed some of the characters' actions or, at times, to directly reflect upon how the actions of certain characters were the consequence of the transnational oppression, displacement, and exploitation of black people. The play did not focus on the psychological reasons for the characters' actions, nor did it focus on the psychological consequences of the oppression they suffered. In fact, the group was more concerned with the denouncement of several forms of oppression—some of which became the themes or subthemes of later plays—and ended with no answers, solutions, or propositions to overcome the issues presented on stage. The play did not want to depict heroic characters who would be able to make any sacrifices to overcome their difficulties. Many of them conceded to engaging in marginal, or even criminal activities, such as the healer's daughter who became involved in drug dealing. This was criticized by Bárbara Heliodora (1923–2015), one of the most prominent theater critics in Brazil:

Surprisingly, besides the injustices, such characters point out in several moments the most negative aspects of the black community, without being able to establish the fight for survival in more a creative and innovative way, and at times support (or, at least, give strong indications of supporting) various forms of criminality, without ever saying how this “other path” to society, to which the text frequently refers, would be.²⁵

Heliodora does not make clear what she considers to be “the most negative aspects of black community.” However, regarding the group's choice of not presenting actual solutions to the problems denounced in the play, the group intended for the spectators to leave the theater with a critical social and political awareness to help them think about how to find, in their everyday lives, the solutions to those and other problems affecting black people, instead of leaving the theater with a feeling of relief.

The *personagens/função* and several elements in the play also provided more resources for the spectator's critical thinking in *A roda do mundo*, such as the use of video footage of interviews with black intellectuals such as the geographer Milton Santos (1926–2001), whose intellectual work would later be utilized by the group in *Bakulo – os bem lembrados*.

Candaces – a reconstrução do fogo premiered in 2003. The play addressed Brazilian black women's tradition of political struggle in defense of the black community and how this political power is being jeopardized by the economic interests of neo-Pentecostal Christianity in Brazil.²⁶ *Candaces* was a play with multiple layers of discourse: the first layer was a mythical one, based on the religiosity of *candomblé*; four female *orixás*—Nanã, Oxum, Iemanjá, and Oyá—inspired the acts of the play. This mythical layer drew a connection with the second layer of the play, which referred to certain historical facts about Candaces, especially concerning how they resisted and also negotiated with the Roman Empire. The third layer was composed of interviews conducted with Brazilian black women, famous and anonymous, who spoke of their struggles and social and political engagements. Recordings from these interviews formed part of the play's soundtrack. The fourth layer was the fable, the part where the characters interacted with each other, and the theatrical scenes.²⁷

The play tells the story of a black community that was built up around a *terreiro de candomblé*²⁸ whose leader Tia Daiá (performed by the actress Vânia Massari) is supported at the *terreiro* by a group of black women. Her nephew, who had left the community long ago, returns to invoke his right as the heir of the land where the *terreiro* was built. He wants to sell the *terreiro* so that he can invest the money either to give to the church to which he now belongs, or to build a new church. Tia Daiá gets the cooperation of other black women and men from the community to find a legal solution that overrules her nephew's plan. Eventually, she succeeds in having her *terreiro* recognized as intangible cultural heritage, a guarantee that it would subsequently be the legal obligation of the state to protect it. As for the characters, the strategy of commenting on their actions and motivations was used, as it was in *A roda do mundo*, though less frequently. Likewise, the play did not use video footage, only audio recordings of the interviews. Many times, the performers would go to the center of the stage, and only there would their physical and corporeal organization change to perform their characters. Only once does

the performer go to the front of the stage and talk to the audience, not as a character, but as a performer. In that instance, an actress goes to the forefront and talks about herself as an actress who will perform a scene where a black mother loses her son. The actress Tatiana Tibúrcio prepares the audience for the scene that would come next: a scene in which the character Juça (interpreted by Tibúrcio) will talk about the pain of a black mother who loses her son. Tibúrcio recites a text emphasizing that she is a black actress and, as such, she will perform the pain of a black mother, not just any mother. The idea is to talk about the pain specific to a black mother who loses a son because of social inequalities and the hard work invested in education to face the likelihood of losing her son to violent death or to criminalization.

JUÇA/TATIANA

I am an actress.

As you can easily see,

A black actress

Now I have to demonstrate the pain of a mother who loses her son.

I must represent a black mother.

It is still necessary to carry the racial adjective

In everything we do in this country.

I cannot represent any given mother,

But a black mother,

Who feels as a black one.

Because my skin and my body with which I demonstrate this mother's pain are

Black and have a history.

We still need to tell this history.

Therefore, now I must demonstrate the pain of a black mother who loses her son.

And when a black mother loses a son

She loses almost everything because she does not have much more.

A black mother does not lose a son only when he dies.

One might think that this is the same for every mother.

But I am a black actress.²⁹

It is worth noting the use of the name of the actress (Tatiana) immediately after the name of the character (Juça), making explicit that there will be an interplay between performer and character. The excerpt above

is said by Tatiana, the actress. Immediately thereafter, Tatiana performs the same series of gestures she performed the first time she appears in the play. Only then does she perform as Juça, speaking to the audience about her feelings, as a character, of losing her son. Such interplay between performer and character raises the audience's awareness and engages their critical thinking, especially before an emotionally charged scene. This device is even more intensively deployed in Cia dos Comuns's third play, as I will show next.

The theme of the third play of Cia dos Comuns, *Bakulo – Os bem lembrados* (2005) was critical resistance by the poor black community against the political-economic process of globalization. In *Bakulo*, a filmmaker named Ernesto (Hilton Cobra) intends to make a documentary about the people of the poor neighborhood where he was born and raised. As he tries to engage community leaders in his project, he faces support from some as well as resistance from others. In the process, the play shows poor black people's struggle to participate in a globalized world of instantaneous information and circulation of economy.

The plot, based on the character Ernesto's desire to film a documentary, prompted the play to be written with some structural resemblance to a film script, with indications of lighting, camera position, and a brief introduction of upcoming scenes. Such structure is performed in the play by having the performers actually narrate parts of the scenes. In the text of the play, it is clear which lines must be said by the performers as performers, and which ones must be said by the performers interpreting their respective characters. In this sense, *Bakulo* is possibly the play where Cia dos Comuns makes more radical use of the interplay between black performer and black character.

In addition to narrating the set-up of the scenes, performers approach either of the two microphones placed downstage in the right and left corners of the stage in order to read scholarly texts written by the geographer Milton Santos (1926–2001) about globalization. Several devices used in the previous plays, such as the video footage in *A roda do mundo* and the audio recordings in *Candaces*, were not used in *Bakulo*. Instead, the black performers were the elements which greatly developed the interplay between themselves and black characters to enhance the spectators' critical thinking.

The relevance of the black character in the work of Cia dos Comuns is rooted in a long tradition of black struggle against antiblack racism. In the next two sections, I will analyze the formation of the black character in Brazilian theater, especially in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. In the following section, I will then analyze how black intellectuals and artists reshaped the notion of the black character in the mid-twentieth century by emphasizing its political function in the fight against racism. This analysis is necessary for a better comprehension of the implications of Cia dos Comuns's choice to not use black characters in *Silêncio*.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE FORMATION OF THE BLACK CHARACTER IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRAZILIAN THEATER

For at least the last 200 years, the black character has been a focus of political-aesthetic disputes in Brazilian theater. Nelson Araújo³⁰ and Miriam Garcia Mendes³¹ argue that black actors, most of them mixed race, made up the majority of Brazilian theater casts until mid-nineteenth century. Araújo goes on to affirm that such was the engagement of black actors in Brazilian theater that the first stable cast in the stage theater of Lagos, Nigeria, was composed of black actors from Brazil who had returned to West Africa.³² Mendes argues that one of the reasons for the massive presence of black actors in Brazilian theater until the first half of the nineteenth century is because at that time, theatrical practice was seen as an abject activity which employed the labor of social pariahs, mostly black people who, if not still enslaved, carried the stigma of slavery,³³ which was associated with their skin color.³⁴ According to Mendes, after the arrival of the Portuguese royal family in Brazil in 1808, however, this perception changed because theater had achieved a different status in Portugal and the Portuguese Emperor D. João VI was an admirer of its practice. With the arrival of D. João VI, a number of European artists performed in, or even moved to, Brazil. Another factor that contributed to the decreasing number of black actors in Brazilian theater was the increasing concern among white Brazilians regarding the social and political place of black and indigenous individuals in Brazilian society. Especially after 1822, when Brazil declared its independence from Portugal, Brazilian theater reflected the social and political concerns surrounding the black individual in Brazilian society. This became evident with the creation of the black dramatic character as a device that transformed the black individual into an object of debate. Since the black person was seen as a threat to the integrity of Brazilian family and society,³⁵ it became a theme embraced by Brazilian dramaturgy, either in

bourgeois realistic drama or comedy, where the stereotypes associated with the black person (laziness, brutality, hypersexuality, and disloyalty) informed some of the basic forms of representation of the black person and became encapsulated in the stereotypical depictions of the black character.³⁶

The black character was mainly deployed in two different and almost opposite ways in Brazilian theater, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, there were the stereotypical representations of the black individual which helped to consolidate and disseminate characteristics such as laziness, brutality, hypersexuality, and disloyalty, seen as inherent to the black person. This informed what Leda Maria Martins identifies as “models of fictionalization”³⁷ of the black character, characterized primarily by submissiveness, criminality, and grotesquery. On the other hand, there were the abolitionist narratives that aimed at deploying the black character as a critical “symbol within the political issue” of slavery, as argued by Christine Douxami.³⁸ Scholars such as Miriam Garcia Mendes, Evani Tavares Lima, and Christine Douxami, among others, agree that even from the abolitionist perspective, the black character was not depicted with “psychological and emotional dimensions.”³⁹ As argued by Martins,

In the mirror game of theatrical scene, the black [person] is, thus, not only an inverted, but also an averse image. The experience of alterity, under the aegis of slave ownership discourse, is the very experience of negation of the other, reduced and projected as a simulacrum or antonym of a narcissistic white ego.⁴⁰

Martins goes even further in discussing the denial of the status of humanity to the black person by arguing that it belongs to, “the white elite’s desiring discourse to deny to the black element the status of being.”⁴¹ In a certain way, the black character was one of the elements that preserved some of the oppressive aspects of slavery Brazilian society even after the abolition of slavery in 1888, especially concerning the perception of black people as inferior and prejudicial to the Brazilian family and social cohesion. This is to say that the stereotypical representations of the black character remained prevalent in Brazilian dramaturgy after the abolition of slavery. In this sense, even when present on stage, the black performers’ presence was constrained by the stereotypical black character that was born in the era of slavery

and constantly reproduced in Brazilian dramaturgy, particularly in the early twentieth century.

THE BLACK CHARACTER IN *TEATRO NEGRO*

Martins argues that the persistent stereotypical portrayal of black people only changed in 1944 with the founding of Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN) by Abdias do Nascimento (1914–2011). According to Martins, TEN produced a dramaturgy that challenged the dominant representation of the black character and dismantled the dominant narratives that depicted the black individual as “antonymous and inverse of what is elected as the paradigm of humanity.”⁴² In this sense, the creation of TEN cannot be separated from the project of creating a black dramaturgy, that is, dramaturgical texts that value the lived experience of black people in Brazil. TEN did not come to prominence, however, solely because of its theatrical practice. Abdias do Nascimento, in his reflections about the trajectory of TEN, emphasizes that the foundation and *modus operandi* of the group were a response to the urgency of

a simultaneous action, inside and outside theater, aimed at changing the mentality and behavior of artists, authors, directors, and businessmen, but also among leaderships and people responsible for the formation of consciousness and public opinion. Above all, it was necessary to develop actions in favor of Afro-Brazilian collectivity, which was discriminated against in the job market, housing, access to education and health, income, ultimately, in all aspects of life in society.⁴³

Because of the prominence achieved by TEN, its political agenda and methods became the main reference in the scholarly research and practice of *teatro negro*. Evani Tavares Lima provides a broad definition of *teatro negro*: “the range of *negro-mestiça* spectacular manifestations, originated in Diaspora, that resort to the cultural and aesthetic repertory of African matrix as a means of expression, recovery, resistance, and affirmation of black culture.”⁴⁴ Christine Douxami also proposes a categorization of *teatro negro* divided into two groups: *teatro negro popular* [popular black theater], which she defines as a form of black theatrical endeavor concerned with the affirmation of black influence in Brazilian folklore and stylistically more connected with theater

and dance, and *teatro negro*, which is characterized by political engagement with a black political agenda.⁴⁵ *Teatro negro*'s general objectives are expressed in the founding manifesto of TEN, and summarized by Lima as follows: "to integrate the black individual into Brazilian society; to criticize the ideology of whiteness; to value the black contribution to Brazilian culture; to show that the black person is gifted with intellectual vision; and to fulfill the stages with an intrinsically black dramaturgy."⁴⁶ The integration between the political and artistic dimensions is a central feature in the work of TEN which, because of its prominence, deeply influenced the political agenda of *teatro negro* groups that appeared in the second half of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century.

Considering the political agenda of TEN as the reference for the political discourse that generally frames the work of several *teatro negro* groups, some aspects can be highlighted: first, *teatro negro* intends to inscribe the black individual within the sphere of the human through the development of a black dramaturgy that counters the stereotypical representations of the black individual, who is ultimately objectified and dehumanized by these representations. Second, *teatro negro* is concerned with the affirmation of black people's cultural belonging to the Brazilian nation. This can be seen not only in the aforementioned references to the affirmation of black people's participation in Brazilian culture, but also in Nascimento's argument that the foundation of TEN was "the defense of Brazilian cultural truth and contribution to the humanism that respects every man and the diverse cultures with their respective essentialities."⁴⁷ Third, and related to the previous topic, *teatro negro* invests in the idea of alterity. At the same time that *teatro negro* reclaims integration into Brazilian society and the recognition of black people's contribution to Brazilian culture, it requires that such integration preserves the particularities of black culture and experience.

THE BLACK BODY AS A POLITICAL AESTHETIC DEVICE IN CIA DOS COMUNS'S *SILÊNCIO*

Silêncio proposed a radical shift in the interplay between black performer and black character in the group's work. By dismissing the black character, Cia dos Comuns draws greater attention to the black performer's body as the group's main political-aesthetic device. In this section, I will first look at the relationship between black performer and black character

through the lenses of the tension between fiction and reality as proposed by Erika Fischer-Lichte, along with other correlated concepts she uses to develop her theory, for example, the tension between the semiotic and the phenomenal bodies, and the orders of representation and presence.⁴⁸ Then, I will examine Silva's argument that the performers' presence onstage is in constant relation to fiction because of what he calls the "theatrical frame."⁴⁹ Finally, I will discuss how the black body is always already affected by "mis(recognability)"⁵⁰ and how *Silêncio* establishes a proximity to this notion. This brings some new complications to certain aspects that are relevant to the black political *persona* developed by the group in its earlier plays, namely the discussion of black people in relation to Brazilian national identity; how alterity shifts from a relevant notion in the process of integrating black people within Brazilian society, into the reference to African cultural elements as sources of empowerment toward revolt; and, finally, and closely related to the previous topic, the revolt as an imperative.

Fischer-Lichte argues that in theater, there is always a tension between the real and the fictional that can be seen in several elements of the theatrical event:

Whenever and wherever theater happens, it is characterized by a tension between reality and fiction, between the real and the fictional (...) [T]he real space, the stage, may signify various fictional spaces; the real time, the duration of the performance, is not identical with the time represented; and the real body of each actor usually signifies the body of another, a stage figure, a character.⁵¹

Regarding the relationship between actor and character, Fischer-Lichte argues that the actor's body, or the phenomenal body, and the fictional character, or the semiotic body, operate through different orders of perception in relation to the audience. Fischer-Lichte names these two orders as "order of representation" and "order of presence," which are related, respectively, to the semiotic body and to the phenomenal body.⁵² According to Fischer-Lichte, in the order of representation "the perceptual process selects only those elements that can be perceived and interpreted with regard to the dramatic figure itself. It is performed as a result-oriented process, and is, in this respect, predictable to a certain extent."⁵³ The order of presence, in turn, "induces a number of associations, memories, imaginations, which, in many cases, are not directly

connected to the perceived element. When this order of perception stabilizes, the process of perception and the generation of meaning becomes absolutely unpredictable and even chaotic.”⁵⁴ Fischer-Lichte’s categorization of these two orders of perception does not suggest that they are absolutely separated in the theatrical event.

Regarding the interplay between order of representation and order of presence, Silva argues that the “*enquadramento teatral*” [theatrical frame] has the potential to fictionalize the performers’ presence onstage, even when the artistic performance explicitly rejects the deployment of fictional characters. According to Silva,

[I]t is considering the frame that we can observe whether a phenomenon can be considered an artistic performance. In some way, the performance needs to be “marked” to be experienced as such; these “marks” are very diverse by nature, and range from announcements that communicate the conditions of the realization of the event (day, hour, place, access restrictions, etc.), to the ways in which this event is inserted in the social life of the community (its tradition, periodicity, the communal psychological structures involved).⁵⁵

Silva goes on in his argument by stating,

The theatrical frame, which frames the actions performed in the scene, keeps this fictionalization as something that is not erased; it allows us not only to recognize the event as “theater”—even when the scene is no longer perceivable as the carrier of a “fictional universe” that is characteristic of a more traditional theater—but also to recognize another here and now that permeates and at times even interposes itself between the scene and what is simultaneously lived by actors and spectators in the moment of the scene or the theatrical event.⁵⁶

In this sense, to say that Cia dos Comuns dismissed the use of black characters in *Silêncio* does not mean, necessarily, that the black performers of the play were able to totally eliminate the characters. In the case of *Silêncio*, it is evident that Cia dos Comuns does not give up on the theatrical frame, despite dismissing the black character. *Silêncio* followed all the traditional paths of developing and promoting a theatrical play (announcements in the press, dress rehearsal, ticket sales at the box office, etc.). The play was also presented in conventional theatrical setups, that is, in a frontal theatrical stage with a division between audience

and performers, announcement of the play's sponsors, the traditional sound cues and a blackout to inform that the play is about to begin, among other elements. In this sense, the audience entered the space to watch a theatrical play and, although the play's program, distributed to the spectators beforehand, contained a text stating that the play had no characters, the theatrical frame certainly influenced the spectators to engage with the fictional dimension of the play.

Silêncio starts in blackout. A female voice comes over the loudspeakers and begins the performance:

Voice-over: What remains from silence is heaviness. That's what crosses my discolored skin of hope. Silence picks me up at the doorstep, at the exit when I meet the crowd that is going to find me alone. Again, the skin, all mine, that makes me afraid. Here, deeply, without a surface in the soul, my body sees the crowds the wrong way around. They take my hand but leave me with no destiny...⁵⁷

Right after the voice-over, light illuminates the stage and the original music, composed by Brazilian black musician Jarbas Bittencourt, starts playing. The audience can better see the scenario, which is composed of a red rectangle on the floor delimiting the acting area. The rest of the stage is bare except for the proscenium, which has strings entangled in the manner of an irregular spider web.

Regarding the ways in which the black performers present themselves onstage as a political-aesthetic device, it is also evident, from the very first appearance of the black performers onstage that the black performers in *Silêncio* were also very stylized. Besides the performers' costumes—which did not replicate everyday clothing but clung very tightly to the performers' bodies, composed of a material that allowed for the intricate movements they performed onstage—their movements were all choreographed and did not replicate, for the most part, everyday movements. This is to say that their onstage actions were not completely devoid of theatricality, especially because their bodies performed in ways that were distinct from their daily life/everyday behavior. In the first appearance of black performers in *Silêncio*, a black female performer comes from the stage left and occupies the center of the stage, her body turned toward stage right. She repeatedly undulates her body, starting from her toes and moving upward to her head, while her right arm points directly in front of her. Her movements seem to indicate a path, a

direction to be followed, and the waves in her body suggest hesitation. She suddenly turns back and shows the palms of her hands to the other black performers, who slowly walk from the stage left toward the center of the stage. The show of her hands is like an invitation: a black male performer jumps ahead of the group that is slowly walking to the center of the stage to repeat her movements. The black female performer who initiated the action turns back one more time and shows the palms of her hands. The remaining seven black performers repeat these actions, showing the palms of their hands, then pointing ahead and undulating their bodies. When all the actors, five black women and four black men, are almost at the center of the stage repeating the same sequence of gestures, the first black female performer abruptly changes her gestures and starts to perform actions resembling martial arts movements. She joins the bigger group while another black female performer detaches herself from the group to perform another sequence of what also resembles martial arts movements. During this choreography, the performers say the following lines:

Ana Paula

In a paralyzed body, the mind accelerates.

Centuries of scenes follow

This person's steps.

Everybody

Thousands, at nothing, aimlessly.

Rodrigo

Thousands of black people with no pleasure

Thousands of steps in the iridescent colored wave.

An intense and constant training

Is necessary for the street's routine.⁵⁸

Notice that the names used in the text of the play are the performers' actual names, and not the names of fictional characters. This is a device used in some parts of the first three plays of *Cia dos Comuns*, but in *Silêncio*, the performers are never referred to by a fictive name. This does not have a greater impact on the audience's perception of the actual performance on stage because there is not a single moment when the performers call themselves by their names, since there are no dialogues in the play. All lines are spoken by the performers as they physically interact with each other. Most of the time, the interlocutor is the audience, to whom the performers usually direct their lines.

The physical action between the actors somehow approximates some of the characteristics of Silva's considerations on *teatro físico* [physical theater] in the sense that it,

contributes to a change in the statute of the gesture that is realized by the actor, setting it free from the logical-causal flow that characterizes naturalist theater and conferring on it an unusual formal and symbolic freedom. This freedom puts it far from the need to depict a character, bringing the actor's scenic presence to a limit where this very presence can convert itself into a character.⁵⁹

Although *Silêncio* has elements that would approximate it to *teatro físico*, it is important to keep in mind that Cia dos Comuns's concern is with the specificity of black people's lived experiences and how this is intimately connected with the black body. This is not to say that such specificities should impede the researcher from contextualizing *Silêncio* within *teatro físico*. However, to make such a contextualization would distract the reader from the focal point of this essay, which is to delve into how the process employed by Cia dos Comuns in *Silêncio* complicates the group's black political *persona*. Although in dialogue with the aforementioned theatrical languages and concepts, in *Silêncio*, such a process departs from a more specific trigger factor and is conveyed through a more specific medium: the black body.

Harvey Young argues that certain ideas related to blackness, by being constantly projected onto bodies that carry phenotypical characteristics of African descent, especially regarding skin color, trigger a process of (mis)recognizability.⁶⁰ In this sense, (mis)recognizability constrains the perception of black people's individuated characteristics and experiences. I want to suggest that Cia dos Comuns's choice to engage with the black body as a main political-aesthetic device in *Silêncio* juxtaposes the chaotic order of presence with the (mis)recognizability of the black body. Instead of investing in the construction of individual characters that would favor a plural, diverse, individuated, and ultimately human representation of the black person in order to advance his or her integration into the Brazilian national project while preserving the alterity of his or her cultural references and lived experience, *Silêncio* moves almost in the opposite direction.

This is emphasized in several passages of the play, as in the following excerpts:

Bruno

To follow this mind's speed
 To keep this body standing
 This body...

Everybody

It's not only a body...

Sarito

This person.

Everybody

It's not only one.

Cridemar

This person brings the shouts and silences of thousands of black people. His mouth swallows and responds as many...and vomits, just that.⁶¹

This idea of a collective experience of blackness is also asserted as taking place across gender and age:

Everybody

I am Black.

Bruno

Millions of pores perspire
 In intense systoles and diastoles
 Of a people.

Rodrigo

In the body of a man.

Gabi

In the body of a woman.

Negret

In the body of a child.

Cridemar

In this body, the parturition.⁶²

It is worth noting that even though there is an affirmation of a racial experience that is lived across different ages and genders, the play is also concerned with how such experience manifests in certain specificities of gender, especially regarding black women. The following sequence, for instance, addresses the loneliness of black women, in this case, in relation to black men's fascination with white women:

Ana Paula

He fucks me and I look at the ceiling. I see children running, the children he does not want to have with me. His children shake their hair in the wind. They are just like their mother, he tells me proudly (...) he does not want to have children who look like me, or like him.⁶³

The same can be said about age. In a sequence performed by the youngest performer in the play, it is articulated how early death haunts the lived experience of black people:

Bruno

(...)

This fabric, lost in the wind,
 Brings the smell of our quotidian holocaust.
 Of the red blood that coagulates on the earth,
 [He/she] died with the flavor
 Of the kiss [he/she] did not give.
 And with the messages of love [he/she] has never sent to you.

Even considering that *Silêncio* addresses the specificities of gender and age in the lived experience of black people, still there are no suggestions of individualized characters or individuated experiences. However, it is noticeable that the group matches gender and age when it selects the female performers to say the parts of the text that specifically address issues of gender and younger performers to talk about the specific impact of lethal violence on black youth.

Another aspect that needs to be considered in *Silêncio* regarding the ideological and political discourses that animate the black political *persona* in *teatro negro* is national belonging. In *Silêncio*, the text does not use regional expressions that would allow the audience to identify a particular territory in Brazil. Except for the language in which the play is spoken, Portuguese, there is only one Brazilian reference in the text, which is about the Candelária Massacre.⁶⁵ The black performers instead constantly refer to the African continent as their origin and the place to which they want to return. In this sense, instead of advocating for belonging to the Brazilian nation-state, the play refers to a transnational experience of subjection to racial violence that originated in the dispersal of the African continent. In this sense, the connection to that geographic space provides the symbolic and ideological resources to resist

and eventually destroy racial oppression. The following passages give a sense of *Silêncio's* diasporic and Afrocentric perspective:

Ana Paula

And diaspora
That does not translate the scream
Will be unable to unveil the primordial secrets,
That our urban,
Quotidian,
And trans-Atlantic silence
Is incapable of translating.

(...)

Rodrigo

From this skin is the flame of origin, of my mother of color, with deep womb, which are all the colors wintered in this sweat that smells like the desert. There is, close to the skin, the color of savannah, of the curled-up mountain, the color of glass spikes. The color of the placenta of Africa. The mother of liquid womb.⁶⁶

Silêncio, thus, asserts a bodily connection with the African continent, which operates beyond Brazilian nation-state borders.

There are other forms of connection to the African continent that can be seen in *Silêncio* that show how alterity animates the black political *persona* in the play, albeit differently from how it is typically advanced in Brazilian *teatro negro*. A good example of that difference can be found in the ways in which *capoeira* and *candomblé* are deployed in *Silêncio* compared to how they are deployed in the first two plays of Cia dos Comuns: *A roda do mundo* and *Candaces – A reconstrução do fogo*. In *A roda do mundo*, *capoeira* movements were used throughout the play as a metaphor for the survival strategies of black people in Brazil, whereas in *Silêncio*, they are one of the resources used to amplify the bodily presence. In a sequence with no words, the black male performers initiate a struggle resembling a *capoeira* fight. As the movements evolve, they become increasingly stylized, and what began as a fight evolves into a dance. The velocity of their movements changes, drawing the spectators' attention to the performers' balance, contractions, and flexibility.

Regarding *candomblé*, it is twofold reference in Brazil, since it certainly refers to the formation of an Afro-Brazilian religion, which implies

its national character, but it also makes clear that there is a reference that comes from outside of Brazil. In *Silêncio*, the latter aspect seems to be emphasized, since the reference to the *orixás* is used to emphasize black people's connection to Africa, rather than to Brazil. For example, immediately after a sequence where the performer Cridemar invokes several *orixás* for confrontation and racial justice, a voice-over is heard reiterating the bodily connection of black people with the African continent. Furthermore, the reference to Afro-Brazilian culture is connected to the gathering of strength to fight, to go to war. It is not for peace that the *orixás* are invoked in *Silêncio*, but for war. It is not a difference that is invoked in order to preserve a cultural identity during the process of integration. In *Silêncio*, alterity comes as a factor which must give strength for confrontation in the process of destroying racial oppression. The justice that is reclaimed in *Silêncio* does not come with any possibility of harmony but, rather, through revolt.

CONCLUSION

Close to the end of the performance of *Silêncio*, the male performer Cridemar speaks:

Cridemar

And here inside where we rehearse our jumps and fantasies.

Walls and doors try to protect us.

We open the door.⁶⁷

The statement seems to approach the main plot of the play, which posits the black body as the space where several silences are enclosed in order to survive in a world dominated by anti-black violence. But the statement might also refer to the theatrical space as a place where it is safe to unlock those silences, where revolt is a safe move. After the analysis I have made in this essay, however, I would say that the lines above are also applicable to the political-aesthetic move made by Cia dos Comuns in *Silêncio*, shifting from the black character to the black body as a main political-aesthetic device. This is not to say that the group has successfully eliminated the black character on stage because, as I have discussed throughout the essay, the formation of the character depends on a series of formal aspects that go beyond the group's choice to not propose a fictional story line with characters' names in the text of the

play. However, by dismissing the black character, the group also partially distanced itself from the political and aesthetic components that have historically informed the black character, not only regarding its stereotypical representations, but also the ways in which the black character has been predominantly deployed in Brazilian *teatro negro*.

It is in this sense that *Silêncio* troubles Brazilian *teatro negro*'s—and even Cia dos Comuns's—black political *persona*. *Teatro negro* traditionally has produced a black political *persona* that intends black people to be recognized in society and politics as human beings who deserve to be included in the Brazilian national project, while still preserving the specificity of their lived experiences. In *Silêncio*, however, Cia dos Comuns proposes something else: Cia dos Comuns's black political *persona* in *Silêncio* disregards the relevance of presenting themselves as individuated human beings, radicalizes the group's critiques of the marginal status of black people in Brazilian society and politics, and invests in a sense of lived experience and cultural connection with African culture as the means to ignite revolt. Similar to what happens in the group's previous plays, especially in *A roda do mundo*, where the group does not present concrete propositions to change black people's conditions of oppression, in *Silêncio*, Cia dos Comuns does not present solutions. However, as Cridemar goes on to say in *Silêncio*, "The exit is the way. Inertia does not allow us to dream."⁶⁸ In this sense, the group's investment in not only questioning black people's social and political inequalities, but also the very political-aesthetic basis upon which the group has been created, indicates that there are political and aesthetic possibilities yet to be explored.

NOTES

1. Cia dos Comuns translates into English as Company of the Commoners.
2. I prefer the use of the term *teatro negro* [black theater] in Portuguese to emphasize its political and aesthetic autonomy in Brazil in relation to the theatrical practice of African-descendent people in other parts of the world.
3. Cia dos Comuns, Ângelo Flávio, Cidinha da Silva and Fernando Coelho Bahia, including fragments of poem "Ressureição," by Cruz e Sousa, extracted from *Poesia Completa* (Fundação Catarinense de Cultura/Fundação Banco do Brasil, 1993), edited by Zahidé Muzart. "Silêncio," in *Silêncio* (Rio de Janeiro, 2007).

4. Throughout this work, all translations from Portuguese are mine unless otherwise noted.
5. Hilton Cobra, “Racismo ou a infeliz nervura da realidade negra,” in *Silêncio* (2007). “Qual o silêncio contido no corpo de uma pessoa que, durante toda a sua existência, ao sair de casa, pensa que a qualquer momento poderá ser vítima do racismo?”
6. *Ibid.*, “Personagens, não: EX PE RI ÊN CI AS. Cansei de falar em Teatro através de outros. Dá um tempo!”
7. Evani Tavares Lima, “Um olhar sobre o teatro negro do Teatro Experimental do Negro e do Bando de Teatro Olodum” (PhD diss., Universidade Estadual de Campinas—Unicamp, 2010), 16.
8. Daniel Furtado Simões da Silva, “O ator e o personagem: variações e limites no teatro contemporâneo” (PhD diss., Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais—UFMG, 2013), 28, <http://www.bibliotecadigital.ufmg.br/dspace/handle/1843/JSSS-9EHH7R>.
9. Gustavo Melo Cerqueira, “‘To Be [Seen] or Not to Be [Seen]? That Is the Question:’ Presence in Black Theatrical Practice of Cia dos Comuns” (master’s report, University of Texas at Austin, 2013).
10. Marcio Meirelles, Débora Almeida, Gustavo Melo, and Cia dos Comuns. “A roda do mundo,” in *A roda do mundo* (Rio de Janeiro, 2001).
11. *Ibid.*, and Cia dos Comuns, “Candaces – a reconstrução do fogo,” in *Candaces – a Reconstrução do Fogo* (2003).
12. *Ibid.*, Felipe Koury and Gustavo Melo, “Bakulo – os bem lembrados” in *Bakulo – os bem lembrados* (2005).
13. Cia dos Comuns, “Cia dos Comuns” in *A roda do mundo*, Rio de Janeiro.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. Meirelles, “Por que a roda roda?” in *A roda do mundo* (2001), 3. “Essa é uma peça/agenda de um grupo que se inicia. Nele [*sic*] dizemos porque e para que essa companhia foi criada, como trabalhará, sobre que temas se debruçará; que linguagem corporal, que sistema de preparação de ator, que métodos criativos usará para se expressar (...) [p]ara continuar um projeto que começou talvez com Abdias do Nascimento e seu Teatro Experimental do Negro, em 1944.”
19. To know more about the history, creative processes, and political commitments of Bando de Teatro Olodum, see also Marcos Uzel, *O Teatro Do Bando: Negro, Baiano E Popular*, vol. 2, Cadernos Do Vila (Teatro Vila Velha, 2003).
20. Cia dos Comuns, “A roda do mundo – espetáculo,” in *A roda do mundo – projeto de circulação* (n.d.). “[C]onstrução de uma dramaturgia própria,

partindo da experiência pessoal de cada ator/atriz com os temas tratados, surgidos do seu arquivo pessoal de tipos humanos, possibilitando a criação de personagens sociais e não psicológicos, personagens/função, como na mais pura tradição do teatro popular.”

21. Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, trans. Christine Shantz, 1st ed. (University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1999), 47.
22. Silva, “O ator e o personagem,” 39. “A possibilidade – ou a necessidade – de se pensar a criação do personagem a partir do ponto de vista de um ser humano, é consequência da própria transformação estética do teatro ocidental. O teatro burguês e, na sua sequência, o realismo e o naturalismo buscam pôr em cena personagens que se assemelhem a indivíduos, e não mais retratam heróis legendários, mitos, arquétipos ou tipos que exacerbam uma característica da personalidade humana. Cada vez mais se percebe uma preocupação em retratar o ser humano como um todo, isto é, como uma pessoa, repleta de contradições e idiosincrasias.”
23. Lima, *Capoeira Angola Como Treinamento Para O Ator*, Coleção Selo Letras Da Bahia (Salvador, Bahia: Secretaria da Cultura, Fundação Pedro Calmon, 2008), 27. Evani Tavares Lima, emphasizing the characteristics of capoeira that would benefit its application to theater, defines capoeira as, “a corporeal practice, a fight/game of attack and defense [created by black people in Brazilian colonial period] that utilizes legs, feet, head and, occasionally, arms and hands as instruments. The player works mainly with the intention to unbalance the adversary, taking the adversary to the ground, used attacks to unprotected parts of the adversary’s body. The *esquiva* is the way to escape from the adversary’s attack, and complimentary movements are utilized so that a player’s action provokes a reaction on the part of the other player, thus, every movement provokes a defense and an attack.” (“...uma prática corporal, jogo/luta de ataque e defesa que utiliza pernas, pés, cabeças e, ocasionalmente, braços e mãos como instrumento. O jogador trabalha, sobretudo, no sentido de desequilibrar, levando ao chão e atingindo o adversário, através de golpes em locais desprotegidos do seu corpo. A esquiva é a forma de escapar ao golpe do adversário, e são utilizados movimentos complementares, de modo que a ação de um jogador provoca uma reação no outro, sendo que todo movimento provoca uma defesa e um ataque.”)
24. *Candomblé* is a religion that worships African gods known in Brazil, predominantly, as *orixás*, *voduns*, or *inquices*, depending on the ethnic region that is predominant in the historic formation of a particular *terreiro de candomblé* [candomblé house].
25. Bárbara Heliadora, “Contestação no universo do negro,” *O Globo* (Rio de Janeiro, 2001). “Surpreendentemente, a par das injustiças, tais

- personagens salientam em vários momentos os aspectos mais negativos da comunidade negra, sem conseguir estabelecer a luta pela sobrevivência de forma mais criativa e desbravadora e, por vezes, apóia (ou pelo menos dá fortes indícios de apoiar) vários caminhos de criminalidade, sem jamais dizer como seria o ‘outro caminho’ para a sociedade a que frequentemente se refere o texto.”
26. Meirelles, “11 Pontos de uma Encenação,” in *Candaces: a Reconstrução do Fogo* (Rio de Janeiro, 2003).
 27. Ibid.
 28. The space where *candomblé* is practiced, usually a house with a yard.
 29. Meirelles and Cia dos Comuns, “Candaces.” “Sou uma atriz./Como se pode ver facilmente/Negra/Tenho que mostrar agora a dor de uma mãe que perde o filho./Devo representar uma mãe negra./Ainda precisamos carregar o adjetivo racial/em tudo que fazemos nesse país./Não posso representar uma mãe qualquer,/mas uma mãe negra,/que sente como negra./Porque minha pele e meu corpo, com que mostro a dor dessa mãe, são negros e têm uma história./Precisamos ainda contar esta história./Portanto, agora devo mostrar a dor de uma mãe negra que perde o filho./E quando uma mãe negra perde um filho/perde quase tudo porque não tem muito mais./Uma mãe negra não perde o filho somente quando ele more./Pode-se pensar que é assim com todas as mães./Mas eu sou uma atriz negra.”
 30. Nelson Araújo, “Alguns aspectos do teatro brasileiro nos séculos XVIII e XIX,” *Latin American Theatre Review* 17, no. 24 (1977).
 31. Miriam Garcia Mendes, *A Personagem negra no teatro brasileiro: entre 1838 e 1888*, vol. 84., Ensaio (Editora Atica, 1982); Ibid., *O Negro e o teatro brasileiro*, Teatro 25 (São Paulo, Editora Hucitec; Instituto Brasileiro de Arte e Cultura; Fundação Cultural Palmares, 1993).
 32. Araújo, “Alguns aspectos do teatro brasileiro,” 19.
 33. Slavery was only abolished in Brazil in 1888.
 34. Mendes, *A personagem negra*, 21.
 35. Ibid., 22.
 36. Ibid., 23.
 37. Leda Maria Martins, *A cena em sombras*, vol. 267. Debates (Editora Perspectiva, 1995), 41.
 38. Christine Douxami, “Teatro Negro: a realidade de um sonho sem sono,” *Afro-Ásia*, no. 26 (2001): 317.
 39. Ibid.
 40. Martins, *A cena em sombras*, 41. “No jogo de espelhos da cena teatral, o negro é, assim, uma imagem não apenas invertida, mas avessa. A experiência da alteridade, sob a égide do discurso escravocrata, é a própria experiência da negação do outro, reduzido e projetado

- como simulacro ou Antônio de um ego branco narcísico, que se crê onipotente.”
41. Ibid., 43. “Desse modo, caracteriza-se, na alegoria teatral, o discurso desejanste da elite branca de negar ao elemento negro o estatuto de ser.”
 42. Ibid., 144. “antônimo e inverso do que elege em paradigma do humano.”
 43. Abdias do Nascimento, “Teatro Experimental do Negro: trajetória e reflexões,” *Estudos Avançados* 18, no. 1 (2004): 221. “uma ação simultânea, dentro e fora do teatro, com vistas à mudança da mentalidade e do comportamento dos artistas, autores, diretores e empresários, mas também entre lideranças e responsáveis pela formação de consciências e opinião pública. Sobretudo, necessitava-se da articulação de ações em favor da coletividade afro-brasileira discriminada no mercado de trabalho, habitação, acesso à educação e saúde, remuneração, enfim, em todos os aspectos da vida na sociedade.”
 44. Lima, “Um olhar sobre o teatro negro,” 43. “o conjunto de manifestações espetaculares negras, originadas na Diáspora, e que lança mão do repertório cultural e estético de matriz africana como meio de expressão, de recuperação, resistência e/ou afirmação da cultura negra.”
 45. Douxami, “Teatro negro: a realidade de um sono sem sonho,” 329.
 46. Lima, “Teatro negro, existência por resistência: problemáticas de um teatro brasileiro,” *Repertório*, Salvador, no. 17 (2011), 83, <http://repositorio.ufba.br/ri/handle/ri/5665>. “integrar o negro na sociedade brasileira; criticar a ideologia da branura; valorizar a contribuição negra à cultura brasileira; mostrar que o negro era dotado de visão intelectual e dotar os palcos de uma dramaturgia intrinsecamente negra.”
 47. Nascimento, “Teatro Experimental do Negro,” 210. “a defesa da verdade cultural do Brasil e uma contribuição ao humanismo que respeita todos os homens e as diversas culturas com suas respectivas essencialidades.”
 48. Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Reality and Fiction in Contemporary Theatre,” *Theatre Research International* 33, no. 1 (2008): 84–96.
 49. Silva, “O ator e o personagem,” 86.
 50. Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 10.
 51. Fischer-Lichte, “Reality and Fiction,” 84.
 52. Ibid., 88.
 53. Ibid.
 54. Ibid.
 55. Silva, “O ator e o personagem,” 62. “é a partir de seu enquadramento que podemos observar se um fenômeno pode ser considerado como uma performance artística. De alguma forma, a performance deve ser “marcada” para ser experimentada como tal; estas “marcas” são de natureza muito diversa, e vão desde anúncios que comunicam as condições de realização

- do evento (dia, hora, local, as restrições de acesso etc.), à maneira como esse evento se insere na vida social da comunidade (a sua tradição, periodicidade, as estruturas psicológicas comuns envolvidas).”
56. Ibid., 86. “o enquadramento teatral, a moldura que reveste as ações realizadas em cena, mantém essa ficcionalização como algo que não se apaga: permite não só que reconhecamos o evento como ‘teatro’, mesmo quando não se percebe mais a como portadora de um ‘universo ficcional’ característico de um teatro tradicional, mas que reconhecamos um outro aqui e agora que permeia e por vezes até se interpõe entre a cena e o que é vivido simultaneamente por atores e espectadores no momento da cena ou do evento teatral.”
 57. Cia dos Comuns et al., “Silêncio.” Originally written in English in the program of the play especially edited when Cia dos Comuns performed *Silêncio* in Dakar, Senegal, 2010.
 58. Ibid.
 59. Silva, “O ator e o personagem,” 76. “contribui para uma mudança no estatuto do gesto realizado pelo ator, desprendendo-o do fluxo lógico-causal característico do teatro naturalista e conferindo-lhe uma liberdade formal e simbólica inusitada. Esta liberdade afasta-o também da necessidade de caracterizar um personagem, trazendo sua presença cênica para um limite, onde essa própria presença pode converter-se em um personagem.”
 60. Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 10.
 61. Cia dos Comuns et al., “Silêncio.” Originally written in English in the program of the play especially edited when Cia dos Comuns performed *Silêncio* in Dakar, Senegal, 2010.
 62. Ibid.
 63. Ibid.
 64. Ibid.
 65. The Candelária Massacre refers to the execution of eight young black men in 1993 beside the Candelária Church, in downtown Rio de Janeiro.
 66. Cia dos Comuns et al., “Silêncio.”
 67. Ibid.
 68. Ibid.



New Orleans: America's Creative Crescent

Lucy Bartholomee

Creativity is ephemeral, mysterious, and impossible to quantify. Or is it?

Embedded in common societal belief about creativity is the concept that it is located in the mind, and is the purview of the lone genius who needs only the proper moment of inspiration for the magic (idea, object, solution) to be released from the brain. This traditional idea has been challenged in recent years by many leading authors (Csikszentmihalyi, Sir Ken Robinson, and Howard Gardner among them) as ignoring the reality of the physical work that precedes and follows the innovative breakthrough, and the need for collaboration, competition and a knowledgeable audience to perceive its creative worth.¹ What these authors have not discussed is that creativity is also vitally located within the active body, and when these bodies are geographically positioned in highly creative places, amazing creative events occur.

Through the phenomenological lens of Merleau Ponty and Dylan Trigg, supported by the vibrant observations of Rebecca Solnit, we will examine the nature of creative spaces, New Orleans, Louisiana in particular, to illuminate the effects of place upon the generative body. Indeed, the invention of Jazz and the practices of Mardi Gras Indians in select African-American neighborhoods of New Orleans will bring forth

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intriguing complications for arts education and practice. The visual culture of the streets offers a wealth of costume, dance, and song inspired by individuals with new ideas who are motivated by the joy of sharing their original creations with a receptive audience. Their organic creativity, unique in the invention of identity supported by handmade visual objects, offers a tantalizing contrast to the corporate effort to quantify and commodify creativity in society and in our schools.

I bring to this examination two decades of experience in education, more than half of that time specifically in visual art education, where I have often heard my colleagues express the belief that creativity cannot be taught. The phrase “either you have it or you don’t” is a common refrain among teachers. Although arts educators seem more optimistic, many continue to express a belief that creativity cannot be taught to students who do not arrive in their classrooms already brandishing an innovative spirit like a brightly colored battle flag. Yet Csikszentmihalyi, Beghetto, Gardner, and others propose that creativity is an inherent quality of all humans, and that we all possess the ability to innovate and create on various levels. Let us examine this proposal more closely.

The need and desire for more creativity in education is clear² yet definitions of creativity can be difficult to pin down. This one provided by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) is suitable for a starting point: “We define creativity as imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value.”³ The NACCCE report states that they consider creativity to be “a basic capacity of human intelligence,”⁴ something all people, and therefore all students, are able to exhibit to some degree. This idea of a universal, or democratic, demonstration of creativity is widely supported. Anna Craft states that creativity is a human practice available to all: “I have come to use the phrase ‘lifewide’ creativity to describe the application of creativity to the breadth of contexts in everyday life.”⁵

Ronald Beghetto defines creativity as “the interaction among aptitude, process and environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context.”⁶ He also promotes the idea of “pedestrian or everyday creativity” as the kind of creative productivity in which all people can engage.⁷ The suggestion of democratic creativity begins with simple problem-solving and life’s daily decisions and blooms quickly into building upon the innovations of others, overcoming immensely challenging obstacles, and embracing change with confidence.⁸

In *Five Minds for the Future* Howard Gardner looks towards upcoming societal needs, speculating about “the directions in which our society and our planet are headed,” wherein “political and economic considerations loom large.”⁹ He believes “the world of the future will demand capacities that until now have been mere options. To meet this new world on its own terms, we should begin to cultivate these capacities now.”¹⁰ The NACCCE reinforces the call for greater creative skills in socio-economic terms: “Creative abilities are being seen as fundamental in meeting the challenges of economic development. This process should begin in school.”¹¹ These authors and commissions are all dedicated to the study of creativity, and they do not hesitate to expect creativity to be taught and cultivated in schools.

How can the ephemeral, oft presumed mental act of creativity be taught and observed by these writers, the market, the teacher or the public? Because *creativity happens when a person's body acts*. Without action, without movement and production in some form, ideas remain locked up as neurological impulses in gray matter. Csikszentmihalyi reminds us: “Creativity does not happen inside people's heads, but in the interaction between a person's thoughts and a sociocultural context.”¹² Ideas must be freed, enacted and performed, spoken or written, *physically made* into something that others can perceive, before creativity can be acknowledged as having happened. One might argue that thoughts should count, in some way, as creativity. The desire to value human thinking is high, and I do not disclaim the possibility that remarkably unique thoughts are racing through our minds. However, the limitation of labeling thoughts alone is problematic. Thoughts that are never manifested in any way cannot be identified as creative nor put to any valuable use,¹³ and I include as valuable the enjoyment of art, music and dance as well as a new cell phone app or surgical procedure. But are we ready to accept that *anyone* can demonstrate creativity?

Consider the experience of walking down a long hallway, perhaps in a busy school, when a drink is suddenly spilled on the floor. A large puddle appears upon a once clear walkway. What happens? Students and teachers alike will step around the puddle, often without even breaking their pace to carefully ponder the event, or to consider and weigh out the options before acting. Rather, *their bodies shift direction and stride* to avoid the spill. Rerouting takes place without delay.

This is a phenomenon of creativity. It is surely a simplified example, yet every person can identify with it from lived experience. A problem

is observed, options considered, innovation occurs, solutions are decided, actions result. Our bodies, experienced as they are in maneuvering through space, incline towards innovation on a continuous basis. Merleau-Ponty, the father of modern Phenomenology, describes this kinetic innovation: “I hold my body as an indivisible possession and I know the position of each of my limbs through a body schema.”¹⁴ This body schema is presented as a way to understand the complexity of how our bodies operate and understand themselves in the world.

[Body schema] was assumed to provide me with the change of position of the parts of my body for each movement of one of them, the position of each local stimulus in the body as a whole, an assessment of the movements accomplished at each moment of a complex gesture, and finally a perpetual translation into visual language of the momentary kinesthetic and articular impressions.¹⁵

Thus, through these complex bodily gestures, humans all appear to carry at least an essential creative capacity.

World-renowned scholar of psychology Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has developed a “systems” approach for identifying creativity that is defined by three key elements: the *Individual*, who has mastered a discipline or domain of practice and is generating possibly creative innovations; the *Domain*, a category of expertise in which the individual is working; and the *Field*, the fellow experts in the domain who are knowledgeable enough to judge when in fact a domain-changing creative leap has occurred.¹⁶ The need for a *community* to appreciate the creative production is often forgotten in the romanticized ideal of the deviant genius or creative giant (da Vinci, Dante, Galileo...the list of cinquecento Florentine geniuses is long). In reality, it seems to be surprisingly more common for field-altering creative leaps to occur within a *community* of experts, whether the group gets credit or only the star genius, such as Alexander Graham Bell’s glory and assistant Watson’s relative obscurity.¹⁷ This observation is indeed supported by that list of Florentine giants from the emerging Renaissance, where many competitive experts eagerly critiqued each new achievement in art and architecture. Gardner’s observations dovetail with Csikszentmihalyi’s position that creativity by definition can only be achieved when it is possible for the relevant field to observe and recognize that an innovation has taken place.¹⁸

If creativity is an action, an outward expression of idea, discovery or invention, then creativity *is in the active body*. This move, once established, must acknowledge that bodies are geographically located in the world, and that these bodies are impacted by their surroundings. Scholar of phenomenology Dylan Trigg has explored the essence of places, and the influences that spaces can have upon embodied experiences. He observes: "As bodily subjects, we necessarily have a relationship with the places that surround us. At any given moment, we are located within a place, be it in the hallways of universities, the cockpits of airplanes, or lost in the forest at night. Over time, these places define and structure our sense of self."¹⁹ Whether we are attuned at a given moment to our location, or if it momentarily fades into the background, it remains present as our bodies continuously operate within the physical environment.

Csikszentmihalyi agrees: "Even the most abstract mind is affected by the surroundings of the body. No one is immune to the impressions that impinge on the senses from the outside."²⁰ Where should people go, then, if they seek to cultivate creativity? I doubt that there is one definitive answer. Creative places are personal, communal, and above all generative of creative expression and output. Seeking a fruitful example, then, let us consider the fertile land of creativity in the predominantly African-American neighborhoods of the Tremé (the Sixth Ward) and Ninth Ward of New Orleans.

New Orleans has been the site of origin for many thousands of creative works, attracting writers, musicians, visual artists, innovative chefs, actors, and street performers for three centuries. It is a place, a *place*, rich with deep, intense and vibrant history. And it is a place that continues to attract creative people from across the globe. It is not the purview of this writing to provide a broad review of that history, for many volumes have already been written,²¹ utilizing many lenses, seeking to provide a snapshot of the people and events of the Crescent City.²² Central to this discussion, however, is the awareness that New Orleans was the site of a massive convergence of diverse cultures from 1698 onward.²³ Native Americans were joined by Spanish and French colonists in a succession of land trades over the next century and a half.²⁴ New Orleans was also host to an unending stream of explorers and pioneers, and benefited from commerce of all kinds that flowed up and down the Mississippi River. Africans were brought to the Americas immediately, but unique to New Orleans was the emergence of *gens du colour libre*, free people of color, as wave upon wave of self-emancipated Africans were entitled to own property and run

businesses.²⁵ Early generations of African-Americans, including many from the Caribbean and Mississippi Delta, cultivated a thriving community in New Orleans. Understanding *who* was in New Orleans reveals the broad range of cultural practices at play by the late 1800s, laying the foundation for America's first new art form: Jazz music.²⁶

Jazz music is widely understood to be a powerful synthesis of African rhythms and European classical music, yet it is also specifically tied to African-American ragtime music, Blues from the Mississippi Delta, and the gospel music from churches throughout the south.²⁷ What was different about the specific place and time, in all of human history, that brought Jazz music into the world? There are other places (Gibraltar or Malta, for example) where the proximity of European and African music might have merged into a new sound. The creativity of the African-American people of New Orleans in the decades of 1890 through 1910 impacted music the world over in an entirely new way. Jazz could not have been born anywhere other than New Orleans, in the 1890s, and it was specifically the defiant and triumphant voice of the Tremé—a place fertile with creative frenzy.

The Tremé is the oldest African-American neighborhood in the United States, and is home to St. Augustine Church, the oldest continuously operating Black church in the nation. Louis Armstrong grew up quite literally on these streets, where Jazz music was born through his instrument in tandem with many other musicians playing in public, both formal and informal outdoor venues.²⁸ In 1890, all the elements were in place for a creative explosion, a view we can now bring into focus with the lens Csikszentmihalyi provides. Thousands of individual musicians were performing on a daily basis, experts in the domain of music composition, improvisation and performance. They comprised the Field, the community of knowledgeable experts, well-equipped to analyze the performances and compositions of their competitors. They could identify in one another when a truly new innovation had occurred, and would soon work to achieve something even greater. Collaboration is also inherent in this Field, as the performers were most often performing and improvising in groups. Soon recordings were made that fostered collaborative roles and generated uncountable creative achievements.

Considering the global impact that Jazz music has had upon the world, the Tremé neighborhood is a tiny place—less than one square mile. How did the vital elements for such impactful creativity appear in this small place?

The story of Jazz begins at Congo Square where Sundays were market day for the African-American community from the 1700s through the mid 1800s.²⁹ Under these ancient oak trees, slaves in New Orleans were allowed to sell goods that they made or food that they raised and keep the profits—a rare privilege in that era.³⁰ From these profits, many people were able to buy their freedom and that of their families, leading to a large population of free blacks in the city, the *gens de couleur libre*. After the markets ended on Sundays, a tradition of celebration through music and dance emerged and became a regular event.³¹ Although these festive gatherings were banned in Congo Square by 1850,³² the practice simply moved into homes and private corners of the Tremé neighborhood, which wraps around Congo Square even to this day.

Uptempo Ragtime was popular in this era, and the influence of Gospel hymns and the Blues from the Mississippi Delta were almost immediately incorporated into the music we now call Jazz. A wealthy Creole population, Black and White descendants of early European colonists, educated their children in the arts as well as shrewd business management, and sent their children to Europe for the Grand Tour. The shock of the Jim Crow laws during post-reconstruction was profoundly devastating for many of these families, who found themselves stripped of their wealth and scrambling for jobs for the first time in many generations.³³

The fertile ground of individual knowledge and community expertise are well established, and now the problem emerges. Classically trained African-American musicians who were put out of work by Jim Crow hired themselves out to any band that would take them, finding work all over town in many venues.³⁴ Street parades were already a popular event, and as the competition for jobs became fierce the musicians were driven to greater and greater levels of achievement. Further, the nature of group performance requires collaboration. Each musician must listen to what the others are playing, and responds with body and soul. Whether the group is a classical symphony or a heavy metal rock band, a successful performance requires that the musicians hear each other for tuning and tempo. That simple act generates a synthesis of sound, often inspired by one player who might produce a few notes that are more expressive, more festive, angry or mournful, than usual. The other musicians hear and respond, their bodies already vibrant with emotion as they seek to express it through breath, hand or horn. These events speak to the moment of performance, yet they nurture and empower the community: “In these frequent celebrations, New Orleanians renew their ties to tradition, place and each other.”³⁵

In the Tremé, Jazz music was born just as the nineteenth Century closed, a great shout of joy to celebrate newly won freedom—a freedom that would continue to be challenged in every forthcoming generation. Music played on the streets of New Orleans was and is received by a knowledgeable audience, equally eager to enjoy their favorite songs performed in a new way or to hear newly crafted tunes. This spirit of innovation and freedom is born from a people in the first decades after Emancipation, who could imagine for themselves a life free of bondage and injustice. Perhaps it is not surprising that the events of Plessy v. Ferguson happened there, and the fight for justice continues.

IDENTITY: THE ESSENCE OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION

The peculiarity of truly human life is that man has to create himself by his own voluntary efforts; he has to make himself a truly moral, rational, and free being. This creative effort is carried on by the educational activities of slow generations.³⁶

It began in the swamps. Mardi Gras Indian ties to Black Hawk, a Fox and Sauk Indian, thread through secretive communities spanning two centuries although most of the history available to outsiders reaches back only about one hundred years.³⁷ Acts of resistance to tyranny and protection of their tribes and families are essential to their practice, in addition to the amazing bead and feather costumes and music that are integral to Mardi Gras Indian life.³⁸ Two centuries ago, the mysterious bayous of the Mississippi Delta welcomed wanderers and self-emancipated slaves with a plentiful food supply and a myriad of hiding places.³⁹ Native tribes, well established in the region, interacted freely with Africans and others who were seeking refuge or preferred to live outside the city.⁴⁰ The tradition of the groups we now call Mardi Gras Indians sprang from this cultural marriage. These Black and Native Indians and their descendants eventually returned to the neighborhoods of New Orleans spiritually, linguistically, and musically changed.⁴¹

Over the decades of the twentieth and now the twenty-first century, the Mardi Gras Indians evolved into dozens of different tribes with different languages, practices, and signature visual cues.⁴² Many tribes were founded in neighborhoods of the Ninth Ward in New Orleans, made somewhat famous in the last decade due to the sweeping devastation

of the 'Lower Ninth' following Hurricane Katrina. After the flood, the houses were swept away and vast swaths of the Ninth Ward were destroyed (Fig. 10.1).

Some tribes are lost forever in the diaspora, while others have regrouped in new neighborhoods. Due to new city ordinances, the abandoned streets of the Lower Ninth, near the levies, have been captured through immanent domain laws, and those neighborhoods will never be restored. Yet the Indians resist elimination, and refuse to give up their cultural practices or ownership of the streets on Mardi Gras morning.

Often elusive, the Indian tribes are distinctively recognized to outsiders by their elaborate costumes of feathers, magnificent bold colors, fierce masks, and panels of beaded designs or portraits (Fig. 10.2).

The Indian suit⁴³ is hand sewn by the men who wear them, and new suits are devised and created each year to be worn only on a few sacred days. Weighing more than a hundred pounds and reaching upwards of



Fig. 10.1 The Ninth Ward in New Orleans, July 2006. Photo by Lucy Bartholomee



Fig. 10.2 Mardi Gras Indians perform at Jazz Fest, New Orleans, 2013. Photo by Lucy Bartholomee

eight feet tall, the apparition of the Indian tribe on Mardi Gras morning is a truly awe inspiring sight.⁴⁴ The men in each tribe meet on Sunday nights to practice songs (mostly voice, drum, and tambourine) enacting dance and movement with spiritual reverence.⁴⁵ As a cultural group, they have many unique practices, including distinctive death rituals, music, and language.

Identifying the costume and music making as a creative practice lends itself readily to this examination. Certainly the Indian suits are products of creative endeavor and have evolved over the decades from much simpler costumes. Csikszentmihalyi's systems approach to creativity is fully evident here. The Indians innovate on a continuous basis, performing for others in their domain who are experts in their fields. Competition and collaboration are present as well, as the tribes meet on select occasions to compete with other groups for music, costume, performance, and dance. Yet this creativity has far greater depth than the spectacular material

culture of the suits. The Indians are creating their identity *through* these objects and practices, through resistance to outside cultural norms, and through a continued resistance to police harassment. The tribes are known by warrior-like names such as Congo Nation, Creole Wild West, Seminole Hunters, or Wild Tchoupitoulas. The Big Chief of any tribe holds the respect of the community year round, including the esteem of the majority of New Orleanians, who are not part of any Indian tribe.

Why do they do it? Why spend hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars on costumes for an event that might last at most a few hours, and be worn only a few times that year? New Orleans inspires, and the active practice of creativity is the outward expression of the influence the place has upon the body. As Trigg explains, "Place is at the heart not only of who we are, but also of the culture in which we find ourselves. As invested with cultural, ecological and political ramifications, place does not simply designate a patch of land without value."⁴⁶ The community ties are deep, bonded with blood as much as geography. New Orleanians have an intense love of a place, and a sense of belonging that is rare in the twenty-first century.

A lot of people, rich and poor, live in the neighborhood, or on the street, or in the house where they were born and have a deep sense of belonging, to their networks of people and to the city itself—as though they had broad branches in the social present and deep and spreading roots in the historical past...many live in a forest of cousins, aunts, uncles, and ties of blood and of people they grew up with and presumed they would know forever, along with places, institutions, rites, foods, music and the other threads of the fabric of New Orleans.⁴⁷

The visual culture of the street inspires each successive event, costume, show, and song. This living inspiration is fully organic, welling up from the heart of each individual with new ideas, motivated by the pleasure of sharing new creations with an audience of neighbors, friends, and competitors. The body moves to collect materials, sew and construct the costumes and props or build ever more fabulous parade floats—sculptures on wheels. Further, these visual objects *are made for movement*, to be worn while dancing or in procession through the space of the streets, neighborhoods, parks, boulevards, and most importantly through gatherings of other people.

The visual expressions of the Mardi Gras Indians are deeply tied to the local audience. The second line umbrella, the spy boy and big chief, are embedded visually in the culture of the Crescent City. Removed to another location, they are a mystery, a shocking puzzle, baffling to an audience that cannot decipher the visual cues. Thus these particular acts of creativity are inspired by New Orleans in New Orleans; the creative act generates objects that are displayed and used in New Orleans for a local audience that understands the meanings and takes pleasure in the spectacle. One could paradoxically say that New Orleans creates New Orleans: “Experience, affectivity, and particularity are at the heart of place...that places have the power to disarm our memories and electrify our imaginations is due not only to the supposed centrality of human experience...[but also] from the human values that are coated upon the world.”⁴⁸

The Crescent City continues to generate a wealth of creative expression with a continuous stream of musical festivals, new generations of musicians, and the productivity of writers and artists of all kinds who are born and raised there. Creative practitioners from all over the world still visit, stay for a time to work, and some settle in permanently. The magnetic draw of this creativity has also pulled me back again and again, capturing my imagination and providing a haven for my creative spirit.

Yet many challenges continue to threaten this fertile culture. The horrific devastation of Hurricane Katrina, known locally as the Federal Flood, triggered a new diaspora as the citizens of the city, especially the citizens of color, were scattered throughout the United States.⁴⁹ Demographic studies reveal that the African-American population has not returned to the city at the same rate as the White population, and in particular the Tremé and Ninth Ward neighborhoods have not been restored to the previous population levels.⁵⁰ The impact of the creative practices and the presence of Mardi Gras Indians in those areas is forever changed, and in some cases lost, yet the resilience of the community is evident in the new Indian groups that have founded in recent years.

The Twentieth Century’s homogenization of America, negating the identity of place and re-placing it with a landscape of commerce, has not overlooked New Orleans. Outsiders exploit the unique cultural elements of the city, often without the consent of the practitioners. Unlike Michael P. Smith, many photographers and other media unabashedly capture and sell the images of Mardi Gras Indians, musicians, and other performers without a dime of compensation. Poverty and crime continue while residential property costs increase, rerouting even dedicated New

Orleanians into the outlying suburban sprawl, weakening cultural and creative communities. Such conditions are depleting the framework of society, further eroded by the rather famously impoverished educational system. Charter schools have offered some relief for elementary and secondary schools, but the long-term success of that system is highly questionable. The privatization of schools is nearly complete. Only three public elementary schools remain,⁵¹ erasing the communities that once formed around neighborhood schools.

Like the slow erosion of the Mississippi Delta, these elements tear at the hard won social structure of New Orleans neighborhoods that both support and are supported by the social aid and pleasure clubs, Mardi Gras Indian tribes, brass band and traditional jazz bands, churches and schools. In a word: *communities*. Indeed, it is a testament to the strength of the remaining communities that all of the creative practices previously discussed continue, in some form, with gritty and joyous persistence.

The organic creativity that springs up from the streets of New Orleans cultivates and nourishes the inventive impulse. Could it be that a genetic anomaly causes so many people who “have it” to be found in this small city? The argument could be made that several generations of creative-types have migrated and settled there, skewing what would otherwise be only average statistics. The phenomenology of place offers another perspective, that “some places transgress the weight of their own history, ascending beyond the bulk of their materiality, and thus [serve] as a beacon of something essential behind the flux of the world.”⁵² The aura of creativity calls to the body—any body—to be creative, to take creative action. As Solnit observes: “making and working [have] that crucial element of engagement of the body and the mind with the world, of knowing the world through the body and the body through the world.”⁵³ Location matters, and a sense of place in tune with creative practice can have an enormous impact.

What does this mean for our schools in the United States? Schools are often un-places, neutralized by uniformity and the strictures of scheduling, assigned seats and confining repetition. Trigg describes un-places as “a homogenous landscape of supermodernity, characterized by temporally compressed, indistinguishable and transient spaces.”⁵⁴ While our teachers strive to “engage the learner,” many students pass their confinement in crowded, dismal classrooms with mental absence; school is an un-place punctuated by the shout of freedom heard each year with the opening bell of summer. Dylan Trigg pushes back against

this homogenization, the un-place of schools and other institutions: “Phenomenological geography and architecture have tended to reproach aspects of modernity such as mass communication, global capitalism, and consumerist culture, all of which engender the production of homogeneous and atemporal flatscapes.”⁵⁵ Arts education then seeks to awaken the students to their surroundings, inviting them to participate in a vibrant and living learning experience as they become practitioners of emotive and meaningful art.

What if school learning environments were unique sites of creative stimulation? Imagine a classroom where the “aura of the localized place...was distinguished by its irreproducibility”⁵⁶ and teachers cultivated fertile environments where students felt an embodied welcoming of their presence and their contribution to the learning: “where belonging means contributing to the enduring character of an environment.”⁵⁷ If creative places can stimulate creativity, then a re-evaluation of the places of education is in high order.

WHAT MAKES A PLACE CREATIVE?

Abundant stimulation—an answer open enough to allow numerous elements for differing fields, and the variations needed for every individual. Access to the tools of one’s trade, along with the time and space in which to experiment and cultivate ideas, are necessary. But time and tools will not inherently generate inspiration and innovation.

For the artist, any artist, poet, painter, musician, time in plenty and an abundance of ideas are the necessary basics of creativity. By dreaming and idleness and then by intense self-discipline does the artist live. The artist cannot perform between 9 and 6, five days a week, or if she sometimes does she cannot guarantee to do so. Money culture hates that.⁵⁸

For the visual artist, a profusion of visual stimulation can generate the mood, the ambiance of creativity. Sites rich with historical significance may also stimulate creativity. Locating oneself in the geographic center of past events or achievements related to your field can open powerful connections that are intangible yet vibrant with energy; the creative mood generated by the creativity that has already happened in that place.

Collaboration and a knowledgeable audience can be accessed by settling into locations of an active community for your field. Universities are

often such sites, bringing together experts from distant arenas into close contact, ripe with possibilities for collaboration and often thick with competition. Conferences, think tanks, and dedicated internet sites can generate authentic collaboration. Such specialized communities are also privy to the newest innovations in their fields, and understand the context in which these innovations occurred. They also provide the first and most knowledgeable audience, highly interested and receptive to new developments but also the most qualified to challenge the limitations and champion the breakthroughs.

Many creative people seek isolation for creative work, and this can be a valuable geographic choice as well, for a time. Freedom to work long hours without distraction is vital, and a very different experience from the dramatic “Eureka” moments of popular culture. For me, this isolation is relative. Rather than absolute hermitage, I prefer good coffee and a quiet café.

I would argue, too, that after a long period of work, a place with great distractions can enhance creativity. When you need to come away from the work and engage your body with a different activity, distraction allows the fermentation phase to occur. For me, this includes great music, great wine, and a visual feast—lingering in a museum, a slow walk through Roman ruins, and yes, a second line parade in New Orleans. Once I am positioned in a creative place, I find not just Czychzetmahalyi’s flow but an abundant overflow, my body engaged and busily active, striving to *create* at a pace to keep up with my ideas.

A few months ago my family moved across town. The process of packing, sifting through the debris of our lives, and the physical demands of moving every *thing* from one place to another, became an enormous obstacle to my creative activities. After we arrived, all the tools of my creative life—paintbrushes, sketchbooks, canvases, writing supplies—were buried in boxes. My creativity was effectively packed away with them.

As I began to unpack into my assigned studio space, the feeling of disorientation only grew. Dylan Trigg discusses the ways our bodies open themselves to certain experiences that are phenomenological in nature: “We can phenomenologically attend to the space in which the body becomes the site of an experience that is independent from and at odds with our abstract assessment of that same experience.” Trigg calls this motion “transitional memory.” “Transitional memory is a memory that, while originating in the body, has nevertheless yet to be formally registered as becoming part of the self as a unified whole.”⁵⁹

As I read this one afternoon, I was surprised to find tears on my face. I was flooded with transitional memories: I could picture my old studio so vividly: the bookcases, the easel, the heavy wooden table I use for metalworking, the sensation of sitting at my desk to write, the long wall of sliding glass doors. How many paintings did I paint standing right there, over the last 14 years? I wrote a novel and many essays sitting at the pine desk handcrafted by my grandfather long before I was born. At arm's reach are postcards, trinkets from travel, surrounding my paintings and journals. A little green plastic table, lately piled up with books, used to invite my preschool sons to sit beside me to draw and paint.

This space is gone. It no longer exists. Another family lives there now, and the objects that once crowded my studio are mostly still with me, but are disarranged. Never again will I watch gray squirrels chasing each other across the grass and into those giant oak trees, nor will I enjoy the family of blue jays who discovered that the leaky faucet outside is always good for a drink of water.

Yet I grieve not only for the physical space, but for the access to creativity itself. The space was creative *because I created things there*. My whole body came to know, kinesthetically and primordially, that creativity happens in that space. I vividly recall the movement of taking that single step into my studio as delivering me into another world, where my body was inclined towards creative actions. The rest of the world fell away as I moved into that space, and the gears of my creative mechanism shifted into place.

In conjunction with the activity of the body, the surroundings of place gain a greater sense of their very presence. Contrary to the view that habit dulls our sensible experience, considered from the perspective of experiencing place through time...the taken-for-granted consistency of place allows for both surroundings and body to suffuse one another. The result is that the experience of place is heightened as the body, through its active but tacit engagement, literally absorbs the contours and textures of an environment.⁶⁰

The artist's studio has a long-standing aura of creativity. Even opening da Vinci's notebooks evokes the sensation of peering into his mind, where a wealth of ideas lived.

Now, as I unpack, I am conscious of the need to access as much of that past creative gearing as possible. Familiar objects re-orient my senses, where access to my tools and sitting at my desk are more than

mechanical practicalities. These actions will reconnect my “experience of place and memory of place.”⁶¹ Most importantly, I must create in this space; my body must come to know the actions and full experiences—the heights and the depths—of creation in this place. There is more than one reason that Picasso went to the same Montmartre cafés day after day, or why Monet poured a fortune into crafting his lovely home, studio and gardens at Giverny. These artists sought to create a space in which to create, or to access a place in which creativity had happened, and then they intentionally located their bodies geographically in those spaces for further creative acts.

The nature of creativity has historically been treated as an elusive mystery. Muses, tortured minds and the isolated genius are characters that loom large in popular culture. Yet geography is far more than numeric coordinates, and the body, engaged in creative activity, is profoundly influenced by its environment. The influence of creative places is felt by those who are open to the essence of the experience. Indeed, it is these bodies, busy creating things, who fuel the creative aura, tangible yet so evident in places like the Tremé and the Ninth Ward, art classrooms and my studio.

New Orleans is a place that inspires creativity for me, within me, and from me—in this I am not alone. The list of the city’s authors, visual artists, dancers, chefs, and actors is enormous, and yet is dwarfed by the incredible quantity and range of musicians who still spring forth from the Crescent City. The aura of creativity abounds, drawing us ever closer to a phenomenologically whole experience, and a life well lived.

NOTES

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CHAPTER 11

The Hashtag as Archive: Internet Memes and Nigeria's Social Media Election

James Yeku

The creative deployment of social media by netizens in Nigeria offers opportunities in this chapter to track the trajectories of citizens' engagement with Nigerian domestic politics. By discussing photo-based Internet memes and identifying the most viral social media hashtags since the inauguration of the present government in the country, my analysis uncovers and pinpoints how online popular images articulate social media as platforms that amplify, rather than depoliticize, the perspectives of everyday citizens with access to the Internet. The essay demonstrates the varied ways the intersection of visibility and popular culture challenge David Buckingham's reasoning at the turn of the millennium that, in relation to politics, "young people are not defined by society as political subjects."¹ Understanding the current political moment in which the Nigerian youth is situated, I deploy a methodology from cultural studies to address and critique Internet memes as a digital genre enabling an appreciation of power relations and as well as the larger sociohistorical and political contexts in Nigeria. I will be examining certain hashtags to emphasize how Internet memes in the last five years demonstrate that

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marginal political actors such as young people and women, previously excluded from political conversations, now have creative ways of reappearing in the arena of public dialogues.

One of the impacts of the 2014 #BringBackOurGirls hashtag that highlighted the abduction of the Chibok girls by terrorist group, Boko Haram, in Borno state, for instance, is its implications for the surveillance and restraining of juridical power in Nigeria by creative and dissident citizens in digital environments. These netizens utilize funny hashtags and viral memes as subaltern tactics for participating in public debates and for subverting normative cultural and political orthodoxies. The discussion of these hashtags and the political conversations organized around them also enable me to archive some of the most dominant Internet memes in Nigerian social media since #OccupyNigeria, the hashtag about the protest against the removal of fuel subsidy that occurred in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2012. Central to my reflections in this study are the various ways social media facilitates a discursive interplay of the performance of politics and the politics of performance—the latter having a theoretically inflected character that I shall attempt to unpack shortly. The creative deployment of memes in digital public sphere helps to document and analyze the entry of a previously excluded and marginal audience of Nigerian culture and politics into the realm of sociopolitical and cultural discourses. Because of user-generated technologies, this group has become more visible and involved in the expression of political voice and performative agency. Also, the presentation of self on social media, to illustrate, can be expressed performatively through virtual images, as in the case of protest bodies deploying selfies and self-portraits as forms of performances in the #BringBackOurGirls social media campaigns. Cultural practices such as the selfie serve as an embodied presence of its subject's intervention in resistance and underpin the ways in which the intersection of visual culture and digital activism is productive for thinking about social media articulations of subaltern politics. My reading of the subaltern as a digital subject presents an image of the subaltern enabled by digital technologies and social media sites of connectivity and interactivity. The digital subaltern reclaims agency through digital connections, emerging from the periphery of political history, as in the Nigerian context, to become more involved in the public sphere, even using social media platforms to rally support for elective positions.

By focusing on the popular images transmitted on social media, I stress the radical critique of both governmental power and the larger hegemonic culture mounted by Nigerian netizens seeking to initiate potential shift in the actions and directions of cultural and political institutions in the country. It is within this matrix that I, on the one hand, frame the discussion on the *performance of politics* on social media as the means through which online presentations of selves through visual signifiers such as the selfie and fictive images overlap with the production of political identities and subjectivities. On the other hand, and following from this view of performance, there is also locatable *a politics of performance* in the ideological range and political spectrum, signified in the cultural posts of users on social media such as YouTube and Facebook. This latter approach to performance imagines culture to be “saturated with discourses of power,” and conveys a functional perspective of performance that serves to “change the audiences’ community and culture.”² In other words, as Kershaw explains, a politics of performance is performance as ideological transaction, articulating the various ways in which spectators are actively engaged in the construction of meaning as a performance proceeds.³ Although Kershaw’s theory, unmindful of a social media field in which the spectator can also function as performer, relates mostly to the deeply political character of rural theater and community performances, his conception of performance as ideological transactions is productive to the ways in which I imagine performance through digital images as a political practice that asserts and promotes the democratic sensibilities of everyday people.

This conception of performance is articulated within the discursive sites of social media dialogues and networks that develop around politics and culture. Closely connected to my interests here are the symbolic ways social media users in Nigeria do politics with images (cartoons, selfies, etc.) as cultural expressions of performative agency online. I proceed shortly to discuss how photo-based Internet memes are presented as signifiers of the politics of performance, one that conveys social media performance as an efficacious media practice that can sometimes instigate and materialize social and political change. Within the context of electoral politics in Nigeria, this study identifies Internet memes as viral monuments of a specific political moment in Nigeria, namely the 2015 presidential elections, showing how the production of photo-based memes was crucial to an online political participation that resulted in political change. In a country in which 50% of the 180-million

population have access to the Internet, it is understandable to appreciate why, according to the *How Africa Tweets Report*, #Nigeriadeceides, the hashtag about Nigerian general elections, was the post popular hashtag in Africa in 2015. The 2015 presidential election was not only a social media election, it was also an election whose appropriation of social media returned the Nigerian youth to full political consciousness. While this report underscores the increasingly dominant role of digital technologies and social media in the political landscape in Africa, it also points to the expanded prominence of hitherto excluded groups such as young people in the Nigerian public imagination. These youths, like their counterparts in other parts of the world, resort to the creation and distribution of Internet memes for the expression and performance of a new regime of citizenship—mediatized or performative expression of citizenship orchestrated by digital media.

In April 2015, for instance, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) published an online story on how social media users in Nigeria relied on Internet memes to visualize the narrative contours of the 2015 elections. Titled “Nigerian election in memes,” the writer of the article concludes that “one thing [was] left to say from the social media world - goodbye to an old meme.” This “old meme” in the BBC story is a referent to a photo of the former Nigerian president that went viral on social media. The meme, both as a reproducible idea and a viral Internet image, has been used and reused by many social media users in Nigeria to parody and mock the former Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan, whose hand was “seemingly permanently stuck to his chin.”⁴ The rhetoric of the pose bears the image of a political leader who appears resigned to fate and unable to perform the functions of governance. Metaphorically, the photo is the face of political privilege in Nigeria and indicates the ruling elite’s indifference to those in the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Reproduced and remixed as Internet memes by netizens on different digital media platforms, including on Facebook and WhatsApp, the image is symbolic of the lingering perception among citizens that political passivity was the hallmark of the Goodluck Jonathan administration.

The intent of the focus on Internet memes is, thus, to explore the usage of these popular signifiers of visual culture by Nigerian netizens in the expression of civic and democratic agency with respect to the 2015 elections. I hope to show that the political memes from Nigerian new media spaces constitute an insightful visual language through which

subaltern Nigerians with access to digital media participated in electoral processes. There is value in the ways in which memes facilitate a visual field for cultural and political analysis in Nigeria, considering the evolving digital culture in the country. In addition to examining this productive arena of online communication, I also explore memes that served to express the major concerns of social media users during the election, as well as some of the ways memes continue to function as an expressive and playful mode of checking the excesses of power. This essay thus mounts its arguments as a way of furthering emergent scholarly conversations, such as Adegaju and Oyeboade's whose article locates humor and memes as discursive practices in the 2015 elections. Their essay, which, despite an extensive Internet culture in Nigeria, is one of few studies on the topic, is an analysis of "the appropriation of Internet memes in representing the two main aspirants in Nigeria's 2015 presidential election online campaign discourse."⁵

To be clear, the idea of a "presidential election online campaign" suggests that there were some members of the ruling elite who believed the Internet could be mobilized as a campaign space to further their political interests. However, it also suggests that Internet users were actively invested in the electoral process and the discursive layers of their participation are what Adegaju and Oyeboade analyze in their work. My intervention here extends their argument by tracking these political discourses by Internet users before, during, and after the election itself. This perspective stress the ways the production and circulation of Internet memes encourage practices, which serve to construct new types of online subjects, including networked netizens invested in a playful participation in digitally enabled public spheres. From this viewpoint, the production and distribution of Internet memes in Nigeria's contemporary communicative landscape is fundamental to understanding sociocultural and political processes. By critically analyzing Nigerian Internet memes of the political genre, I focus on how these digital media forms are mobilized by citizens to offer a critique of the state, and to express political dispositions informed by the social media modalities of interactivity and networking.

This example offers an instance of some of the ways through which the traditional media furnishes creative netizens with visual resources through which they recreate memes for their own alternative and playful performances of politics. The idea of play can be understood through the prism of what has been described as the performance of ludic selves on social media. Ana Deumert identifies digital communication as enablers of spaces in which people relate to themselves and others in a playful

manner. In her estimation, “the primacy of play”⁶ in social networking sites explains performative strategies of online-presentations that make participations in cultural and political conversations a fluid and pleasurable activity. The visual articulations of this participation not only frames netizens “playing politics” through online popular images as creative disruptors and interpreters of the normative culture, but also facilitate the emergence of performative citizenship, one that enables the convergence of new practices of self-fashioning directed towards performing the obligations of citizens through social media interactions. These memes serve to complement the practice of voting and other concrete electoral activities with the production and sharing of memes as digital cultural practices of uncovering and resisting electoral fraud in Nigeria. Figure 11.1 presents an analogy to the meme mentioned in the BBC article and illustrates another way the aesthetics and content of political images from the mainstream media are reorganized for critiquing the state.



Fig. 11.1 Four more years. <http://techcabal.com/2015/04/01/top-memes-from-the-nigerian-2015-presidential-election/>

The creator of this meme has used “4 MORE YEARS” to describe what the country could expect from a Jonathan presidency. The creator uses four different camera angles of similar photos to express the view of political incompetency that marked the administration of the erstwhile president. The rhetoric of these images is located in the different facial expressions of Mr. Jonathan as it seeks to persuade the reader not to endorse the passivity of his government.

INTERNET MEMES AS POPULAR CULTURE GENRE

Richard Dawkins proposed the concept of the meme as a “unit of cultural transmission”⁷ functioning within the regulatory frameworks of imitation as a self-perpetuating cultural phenomenon like the gene as a replica and replicator of biological data. Positioned within this model, memes function to spread, replicate and modify ideas and culture. The word *meme*, according to Knobel and Lankshear, is employed by netizens mainly to describe the rapid uptake and spread of a “particular idea presented as a written text, image, language ‘move,’ or some other unit of cultural ‘stuff’.”⁸ This description, like that of Dawkins, relates to the formal academic study of memetics that is different from the popular conception of Internet memes motivated by a digital culture that is non-hierarchical, user-based, and interactive. The field of this cultural production is constituted by online subjects fascinated with the deployment of social media as space for expressing a humorous and satirical critique of power and political institutions. Internet memes are the playful texts of this transmission, as they enable netizens to convey and replicate ideas, contest dominant ideologies, while affirming online visual culture as a domain of individual mythologies that are easily reproducible. Limor Shifman’s definition of Internet memes as products of a shared and interactive network culture says,

Internet memes are defined here as units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process. I suggest looking at Internet memes not as single ideas or formulas that propagated well, but as *groups* of content items that were created with awareness of each other and share common characteristics.⁹

There is the evident shift in this conception from Internet memes as unitary cultural forms to an expanded view in which they can be understood as a genre of popular culture. Shifman, who argues for a “cultural

logic”¹⁰ of photo-based memes, suggests in another study that Internet memes be regarded as “a group of digital items that: (a) share common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) are created with awareness of each other; and (c) are circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by multiple users.”¹¹ Shimor’s perspective is unlike Dawkins’s singularized notions of memes (pre-digital memes, for instance a stand-up comedy, can mostly be experienced singularly at a given time and place). By cultural logic, Shifman rightly argues that a meme should be understood as cultural texts that combine linguistic and visual metaphors to articulate reproducible versions of mini narratives. Shifman’s approach suggests that memes are best understood as iterative models of communication that constitute a genre deployed by ordinary users of media as creative interventions in cultural discourses. Seen as genre, therefore, Internet memes could be interpreted as a system of signs that function from person to person to represent and disseminate cultural and power relations. This cultural logic is certainly true of the “Skeptical 3rd World Child” which makes an excellent argument about the possible rhetoric and ideologies embedded in Internet memes. Of all the possible images a Google search for “African memes” might produce, the *Skeptical Third World Child* meme is almost guaranteed to be present.

Most of the narratives of the memes in this example demonstrate some of the ways the Internet meme genre can be used to disseminate and normalize racist epistemologies, affirming digital culture as a maelstrom of encoded textual moments that bring some netizens in arenas of ideological contestations. Since these memes reproduce dominant ideologies, and essentialize third-world conditions, it is important to engage critically with them and other similar memes because of their capacity to exist as viral media embodying negative and sweeping representations of the African child. In this case, memes become ideological texts of hidden power relations and reveal how the digital artifacts of global social media can also extend cultural polarities. Although it is easy to see how these memes and the ideas they stage demonstrate that there are persistent topographies of power and inequality in online communities, it is how they are organized as cultural texts around economic and political agonies in post-colonial countries such as Nigeria that is critical for me. In either case, it is fascinating to see how pessimistic memetic representations occasion ripostes, generated as counter-hegemonic derivatives to the grand narratives of memes created within a dominant culture.

While Fig. 11.2 does not relate directly to Nigerian social media landscape and electoral politics, it provides a premise for my idea that Internet memes are cultural texts that embed ideological assumptions, aside from their functioning as humorous popular “texts” that can be used as signifiers of participatory politics. As examples from online political conversations from Nigeria indicate, social media as new spaces for performing agency has been effective in the dissemination of the subjectivities and agency of ordinary citizens extending the frontiers of the country’s democratic imagination. By sharing humorous and satirical memes and other forms of online popular culture, Nigeria digital actors supplement social media’s positioning as a space for coordinating social activism with a practice, expressed through comical images that perform and narrate the voice of marginal and excluded groups such as youths. This practice identifies online subjects who circulate the images on social media as repoliticized subjects seeking political change through digital networks and communities. Examples from Nigerian digital culture demonstrate that these regular citizens can engage more with the political culture than they do through earlier forms of media, which, in



Fig. 11.2 Third World kid meme and some of its many variants

most cases, is partially regulated by the Nigerian state. Unlike the mainstream media, the more participatory and complex communication landscape enabled by Web 2.0 result in, as Shirky has argued, “gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action.”¹² The performance of this public speech through the apparatus of online visual culture, such as memes make digital media in Nigerian a new kind of cultural landscape within which democratic subjectivities indeed emerge and proliferate.

Internet memes are other forms of political communication, aside from actual performative forms such as the selfie, and fictional images that indicate how the Nigeria public sphere is being transformed by the digital symbolic representations of the ordinary users of the Internet. Memes in this view bring an evidence of “pop polyvocality” in the way they are a popular cultural common tongue that facilitates the diverse engagement and proliferation of many voices.¹³ Used together with popular hashtags, these memes shape and reshape the public consciousness of network subjects, enabling cultural and alternative spaces for resisting official sites of hegemonies. These young Nigerian netizens rely on a digital culture that enables an unmediated representational space for individuals, and a self-broadcasting agency that oftentimes brings individual users of new media technologies in direct confrontation with oppressive power and disempowering conditions. Brian Loader, Ariadne Vromen, and Michael Xenos have described the youths who participate in this “digital social mediation” of political power as the networking young citizen. As they put it,

Networking young citizens are far less likely to become members of political or civic organizations such as parties or trades unions; they are more likely to participate in horizontal or non-hierarchical networks; they are more project orientated; they reflexively engage in lifestyle politics; they are not dutiful but self-actualizing; their historical reference points are less likely to be those of modern welfare capitalism but rather global information networked capitalism and their social relations are increasingly enacted through a social media networked environment.¹⁴

Since there exists a vast army of networking young citizens around the world that invest political agency in online forms such as memes, the ideas in this excerpt can be extended to accommodate the operations of

online popular culture in pushing back oppressive political hierarchies. Also, a social media culture that promotes different expressions of networking and interactivity, makes possible a political order ensuring the destabilization of the traditional function and capacity of the state as the sole and legitimate organizer of people and resources.¹⁵ The creation and distribution of memes should be conceptualized as an important aspect of Nigerian digital culture that undergirds and intensifies resistance against totalities.

INTERNET MEMES AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN NIGERIA

In a country in which elections are still fraught with fraud, with most agencies of government out to serve and legitimize the ruling party's partisanship, netizens mobilize Internet memes as cultural tools of resistance. The participation of some of these Nigerian Internet users in a public sphere motivated by new media in Nigeria has resonance, therefore, both in cultural discourses and in the political landscape itself. Goodluck Jonathan was not only the first president to use social media to engage with these millions of young people, it is believed that the president and his political party also planted in online networks, apologists who defended his government's policies and activities. Whereas social media was helpful in the initial days of the Jonathan's presidency, it also became his nemesis eventually, as young people, prompted by user-generated media, invested creative energy in online debates. As one of the practices of countering the government's online propaganda groups, Internet memes became a political communication strategy of engagement in the public arena. The proliferation of digitally enabled mobile cellphones in many African countries at the turn of the millennium encouraged creative Nigerian youths to appropriate digital media communities to articulate their political perspectives more intensely and visibly. Besides the publication of political commentaries on social media and the use of the various network environments for holding government accountable, they also, through popular entertainment forms, such as Internet memes, challenge social conventions and confront normative modes of corrupt and institutional power. The creation and dissemination of memes is one of the avenues through which young people articulate a resistance and cope with hostile living conditions.

With digital media, however, the possibility of a direct engagement by individual citizens with politics and political actors suggests how

a multitude of Internet users, using humorous memes online, and the power of the thumb offline, can “authorize” possible change in governments. For instance, the examples below are some of the texts distributed online in the days before the 2015 national election in Nigeria. Particularly, they describe the electoral campaign process of the two major political parties and how their various supporters struggled for dominance in virtual space. Adegaju and Oyebode describe the dominant issues distributed on social media around before the 2015 elections, including (a) the perceived misrule of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (PDP) for 16 years (1999–2015) and the poise of the emergent coalition opposition party the All Progressive Congress (APC) to contest it; (b) the alleged ineptitude of the incumbent Dr. Goodluck Jonathan to fix some of Nigeria’s nagging problems such as corruption, insecurity, energy, and unemployment during his first term in office.¹⁶ In addition to these, much of the campaign discourses refracted through online memes include the oppositional counter-discourses of supporters of the incumbent president. They labeled General Muhammadu Buhari the standard bearer of the opposition party as a religious bigot and harped on an alleged high-school certificate scandal to disparage his candidacy. Other electoral topics include the ‘change’ mantra that dominated the campaign of the opposition party and which received enormous memetic attention among netizens.

PRE-ELECTION MEMES

Most of the memes circulated before the election were satirical critiques targeted at the Jonathan administrators by several netizens who desired a change in the country’s political leadership. Together with the Boko Haram terror activities in Northern Nigeria, the abduction narratives of the Chibok Girls, which had become politicized as an election subject, provided the most apparent contexts for most of the memes produced before the 2015 polls. Meme creators were responding to the Nigerian government’s handling of the abduction of an estimated 234 school girls by Boko Haram. These memes served to spread the political narratives and social criticism of regular citizens, critiquing Nigeria’s exploitative and corrupt power regime. The subversive and satiric images posted in new media environments were focused on resisting the political negligence of the ruling class and narrating alternative citizen perspectives.

I now consider some other images that were distributed by Internet users as memes before the election (Fig. 11.3).

This meme uses irony and ridicule to represent the response of the Nigerian state to a recent misappropriation of taxpayers' money. While the meme both disseminates, and records this actual event, it also caricatures the way Nigerian politicians, notable for their thievery and corruption, seek elective positions without any concrete developmental agenda for the country. The meme deploys satire as a strategy to interrogate political corruption in Nigeria, while lampooning a culture of graft that relates to shame as a non-existent emotion. This example projects



Fig. 11.3 A tearful image of former President Jonathan absolving himself of corruption

a netizen’s attempt to subvert and resist a normative political condition within what Ryan Milner identifies as a “logic of lulz”¹⁷ that serves as the dominant character of Internet memes. Internet memes exhibit the functioning of humor as important discursive practice in Nigerian social media. The idea that Nigerian politicians would contest leadership positions despite their questionable ethics is further demonstrated in one of the memes below, with the caption: “I Don’t Know What I am Doing. Just Vote for me” (Fig. 11.4).

The narrative of this first meme provides an engaging commentary on the perception that President Jonathan was clueless and unfit to lead Nigeria. The meme is an articulation of the views of several Nigerian Internet users who were supporters of Jonathan’s opponents, General Buhari. Functioning as a visual reinforcement of the “clueless” rhetoric the official opposition party resorted to when describing the former Nigerian leader, it legitimizes and replicates a common political narrative in the country. The verbal meme—in this case the idea of meme is understood as any infectious and reproducible idea that propagates easily from person to person—in the Nigerian political environment rematerializes in this example as an Internet meme. There is also a reinforcement of the belief that many African leaders choose to cling to power even if without any measurable political achievement, or specific plans for sustainable development. Both the creator of the meme and those who share and it on social media platforms suggest that the Nigerian president lacks political capability.



Fig. 11.4 A screen capture of two different memes satirizing President Jonathan

The second meme in the example envisions the censorship of the Internet in Nigeria, a topic that the state enlisted for juridical approval after the elections. The meme is a representation of government's response to citizen engagement with institutional practices. This meme is used to imagine the Nigerian president's criticism of social media interventions by Nigerian netizens. The "nonsense" here refers to the various creative sites of critiques contrary to the government's oppressive policies and actions. It may also signify the government's mode of delegitimizing the interventions of young people in Nigeria's political discourses, or their procurement of public speech through social media. The meme functions as a visual text calling attention to free speech and its constraints in Nigeria. In addition, we can still locate a second-order signification in the text, with the meme showing how online visual culture embodies mythologies, ideological persuasions that are culturally understood by the interpretive community of the text. The mythic significance of the meme is its representation of the Nigerian government's disdain of social media, since Nigerian political discourse is now being shaped and influenced on Facebook and Twitter. Nigerian users of these social media affirm them as network communities for claiming and reclaiming social and political agency. The president's identity is reproduced in dictatorial terms that imagine him as a leader the country does not deserve. Free media and censorship are other vital concerns of the meme. In a country with much state presence in the traditional media, social media and new media technologies in general give young Nigerians an opportunity to speak truth to power. These satirical forms of 'speech' threaten the normative order and operation of the state and its represses ideological apparatuses (Fig. 11.5).

This meme aptly reconstructs the historical legacies of General Buhari, a former military ruler of Nigeria. Having led a junta in Nigeria, Buhari was perceived as a high-handed leader known for human rights abuses. This meme is one of several images that were distributed by online supporters of Jonathan to critique and lampoon the president's political opponent. It is important to note that the *creation* and *sharing* of this meme, and other political memes indeed, can be understood as a practice of political identity and identification. By sharing a meme that criticizes Jonathan, a user can be perceived to be a Buhari supporter. Conversely, if a user shares a meme, like the one above recirculating Buhari's past human rights abuses, they not only perform a political affiliation, but also affirm themselves as supporters of the Jonathan administration.



Fig. 11.5 A photoshopped image of Muhammed Buhari (Nigeria's current President), in one of his addresses to supporters, showing a self-indicting message about his past legacy as a military dictator

The production and distribution of Internet memes during the 2015 elections was, thus, an expression of partisan ideologies, in most cases. In other words, Internet users who support either parties found in memes cultural mechanisms for performing political selves and expressing their political perspective. One can conclude that social media facilitates a shift in the political participation of several netizens, who swap their passive followership of politicians for an active engagement in the political process. This paradigm shift is made possible by new media, and a way the agency user-based media enables is used is this creation of forms of popular culture and entertainment. Aside from these examples, there were memes that were circulated within the contexts of viral hashtags on Facebook and Twitter. One of such hashtags, #BabaWhileYouWereGone, trended on Twitter as a form of bantering, which panders to satire.

THE #ISTANDWITHJEGA MEME

The next three examples highlight this likelihood of a relationship between social media posts and the electoral process, underlining the ways young people in Nigeria used Internet meme within the framework of hashtag activism to participate in democratic politics and push back against electoral fraud and corruption. The #IstandwithJega hashtag and meme was birthed within the social media context of support for the head of the electoral commission, Attahiru Jega. I am also using this section to highlight the close relationship between Internet memes and what Nathan Rambukanna identifies as “hashtag publics.”¹⁸ Unlike in spaces such as Facebook, hashtag publics on Nigerian Twitter enable citizens to assemble and cluster more effectively around trending and viral topics. While Facebook encourages more interactivity and dialogues, Hashtags serve public points of convergence for netizens to deconstruct and engage with power and its agents. As Bruns et al. assert,

Hashtags now serve a wide range of purposes: amongst them, the well-understood function of assembling an *ad hoc* public around a key issue; gathering of a community of practice engaging in shared, possibly concurrent activities (such as attending a live entertainment or sporting event, or using *Twitter* as a backchannel to radio and TV broadcasts); attempting to create and promote a (playful or serious) meme that is virally distributed across local, national, and global *Twitter* networks; or introducing a point of emphasis that – similar to an emoticon or emoji – carries a stronger semiotic charge than a word alone would be able to do.¹⁹

Of all these varied descriptions of the hashtag and its publics and uses, the most dominant in Nigerian online communication is the way hashtags can indeed be used to provoke and promote “a (playful or serious) meme that is virally distributed” across local and global *Twitter* networks. This transnational staging of political identities and the performance of citizenship through the hashtag makes the creation and distribution of memes a practice affirming online visual culture as an important form of activist speech that resonates beyond specific locations. Many Twitter users deployed the meme as a means of expressing confidence in Jega. Attahiru Jega was perceived by many in the country as a social justice crusader who would not be compromised in the electoral process like his predecessors. The meme was, thus an online response to rumors that the Jonathan administration was contemplating

replacing Jega with somebody who would aid the incumbent government and disenfranchise the people. In a country that is not generally known for free and fair elections, the meme was one of the significant ways netizens declared their desire for an electoral process not riddled with corruption. This citizen engagement with the political process was not merely a social media fantasy or engagement with mediatised representations and empty signs online. It was, as @dupekilla affirms in the tweet below, a process that can result in concrete political changes in the body politic (Fig. 11.6).

The immediacy of the social media platform results in the personalization of a hitherto distant political process, as regular citizens now participate more visibly through social media memes in the political process.



Fig. 11.6 An IStandWithJega meme. <https://twitter.com/dupekilla/status/583331446124843011>

Their consumption of media is simultaneously bound up with a disembodied distribution of resistance organized around the sharing of visual memes serving as vectors of online agency. @dupekillas tweet celebrates the recognition of the IstandwithJega meme by the mainstream media, with the user adding boastfully that: “And they say it is just #Twitter.” This statement justifies the use of social media in the electoral process. It also shows that arguments such as those of Russell Neuman et al. in *The Internet and Four Dimensions of Citizenship* that, “with the notable exception of political scandals, it is hard to find traceable instances where issues nourished online have driven broader public debates”²⁰ are indeed outdated. The user judges the success of the meme by the fact that the BBC TV program on Africa dedicates airtime to discussing the issue. “And they say it is just #Twitter” could also have been a response to detractors, mostly from the ruling government, who insisted the Twitter space was an illusory place incapable of enhancing productive political participation or the expression of contention politics in Nigeria. This example emphasizes the need to examine the relationship between power, discourses, and institutional practices in the frame of representation forms (Internet memes) utilized by regular citizens as playful markers of everyday online life. Although @dupekillas excessive techno-optimism may not be justifiable, one fact is clear, as Paul Mason asserts, “people know more than they used to ... they have greater and more instant access to knowledge, and reliable ways of counteracting disinformation.”²¹ Most importantly, they have, besides other tactics of performing political selves, visual images as important economies of subaltern meanings, deployed as signifiers of agency.

There are other variations of the #IstandwithJega meme that show the ways Internet memes as forms of popular culture intersect with power and sociopolitical discourses. Unlike what obtains through the exclusive reliance on modern technologies in advanced democracies, the Nigerian voting system largely depends on manual labor, with digital technologies having just been introduced in recent years. Because of this dependence on human labor, voter fraud is a recurrent issue in the country’s elections. During the announcement of electoral results in 2015, a representative of the governing PDP and cabinet minister in the Jonathan administration, Godsdai Orubebe decided to halt the announcement of results, sensing that the country was voting against his principal. While Mr. Orubebe’s hysteric disruption of the announcement results was being shown live on national TV, several memes were being

circulated by social media users participating in the process from home. The #IstandwithJega meme resurfaced in other forms on Twitter and Facebook as Attahiru Jega watched Orubebe's actions with a calmness that further endeared him to millions of Nigerians. The example below is an example of the #IstandwithJega meme refashioned and distributed to show the bravery of the INEC chairman in fighting against corruption (Fig. 11.7).

This image appeared in several online spaces when Godsday Orubebe interrupted the announcement of results, accusing the electoral body of bias. Social media users reacted to Orubebe's protest by using this image along with the #iStandwithJega hashtag to live-tweet support for Attahiru Jega's commitment to a fair electoral process. This deployment of social media to convey the real-time performance of civic speech through a meme documents an important political history of Nigeria, demonstrating how participatory politics on Nigerian social media can be productive outside of the medium. The meme creator, Famuyide

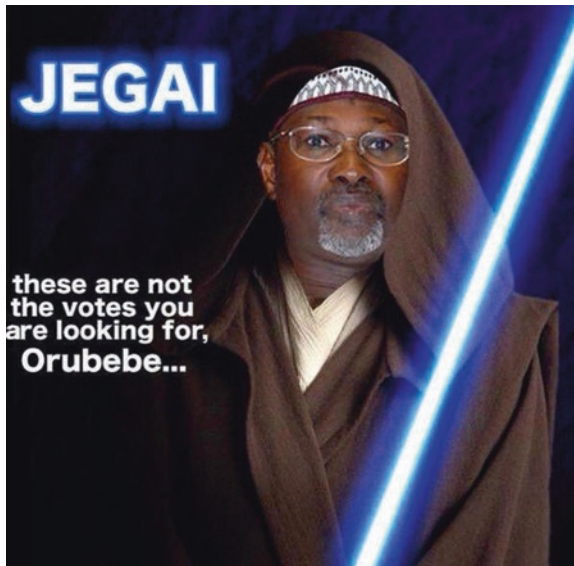


Fig. 11.7 The head of Nigeria's Electoral Commission INEC is cast as a Jedi to show his dedication to fighting electoral fraud. <https://twitter.com/famuyideolawale/status/583260624207155200>

Olawale has reproduced Jega's identity in a way that fits and parallels the identity of the Jedi in the *Star Wars* movie narratives. By invoking an important figure in a major Hollywood text, the meme is made to signify how Jega's wisdom and skill helped to master the forces of corruption that threatened the Nigerian republic at a crucial point of history. The rhetoric of the photo is particularly relevant within the domain of popular culture and its constitution by cultural forms from different media fields. The message of the meme—these are not the votes you are looking for—is both an intertext and a revision of a now popular meme “These Are Not the Droids You Are Looking For,” a statement by Obi-Wan Kenobi on Stormtroopers in *Star Wars* Episode IV. The statement is now popularly used in urban cultures as a reference to the pursuit of a wrong course of action.

In relation to the Nigerian election, the meme gestures toward Orubebe's lack of awareness of Jega's determination to safeguard the people's electoral mandate. Like the Jedi figure, who values individual freedom and self-determination, Jega appears to be interested in the realization of the people's right to dictate the outcome of the Nigerian elections. The creative translation of Jega to a Jedi in the meme is therefore a linguistic means of emphasizing his defense of justice and resistance against corruption. The meme exhibits a doubling of roles evident in how its creators and disseminators participate in a transnational discourse of popular culture, while they also engage humorously with Nigerian politics. Images such as these, point to one of the ways social media is construed in this chapter as cultural terrains for the expression of political identities, organized by everyday people around performative agency and resistance. Seeing that Goodluck Jonathan would lose the elections, some Twitter users began to distribute sarcastic memes that ridiculed the erstwhile president. Setting the narrative as a subversion of the #BringBackOurgirls social media hashtag, many of these users sought to mock the president and his inability to rescue the Chibok girls abducted by Boko Haram (Fig. 11.8).

The text in the meme is framed as a question from a losing candidate who appears to be desperate to save his presidency. While this is a fictional portrayal of the president, it enables an understanding of how regular citizens through Internet memes re-imagined and narrated the electoral process. Although there is the invocation of a traumatic event in the meme, it gained traction nonetheless because of the centrality of humor as a major cultural mode of engaging with adversity in oppressive

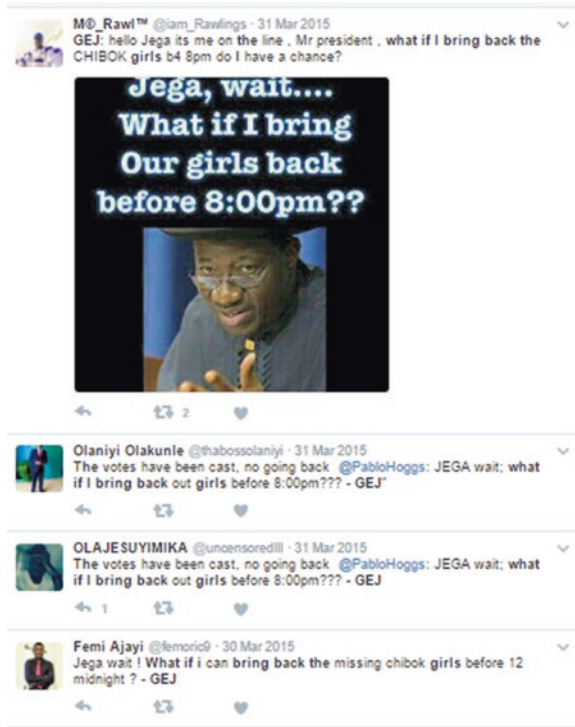


Fig. 11.8 “Jega, Wait... What If I Bring Back Our Girls Before 8:00 PM” Twitter. 31 March 2015. https://twitter.com/iam_Rawlings/status/582918466732044289

circumstances. This example, together with the two before it, play into the narrative that memes and tweets constituted real-time options through which netizens participated in the electoral process.

POST-ELECTION MEMES AND HASHTAGS

President’s Buhari’s electoral victory in the 2015 election was epochal not only because he was a Muslim from the North who won overwhelmingly in the majority Christian southwest, but also because it was the first time the country witnessed an incumbent president lose an election.

This relinquish of power is significant, considering that several African leaders are notorious for clinging to political offices. Most of the political images at the center of the conversations before and after the election focused on the inability of the Jonathan government to respond adequately to domestic challenges such as political corruption and poverty. Based on Buhari's victory at the 2015 polls and Goodluck Jonathan's peaceful transfer of political power, the throng of social media netizens who keep faith in the efficacy of the platforms to induce material change intensified their online advocacy, using hashtags as an important media archive of their resistance. #MinisterialList and #MissingBudget have been some of the most popular Twitter hashtags they employed to disseminate commentaries on the new policies and activities of the Buharu government. One of the lingering consequences of the 2014 social media hashtag #BringBackOurGirls, for instance, is its reconfiguration of contentious politics in Nigeria. Since then, netizens have produced many other hashtags that have been used to organize and shape online discussions on electoral politics and political governance.

In the first two years of the Buhari government in Nigeria, several Twitter hashtags that narrate and reflect the Nigerian political condition trended on Twitter. Some of the most viral hashtags during this period include: #NigeriaDecides, #NigeriaHasDecided, #Dasukigate, #MissingBudget, #BudgetofYams, #OpenNass, #RedefineNigeria, #NotoSocialMediaBill, #MarchonNass, #NeverToBeForgotten, #TheOtherRoom, #PMBwasted365days, #TheList, #FreeAudu, #IstandWithNigeria, #OccupyCBN, and #Takebackyourcountry. Anyone familiar with the Nigerian society can see how these hashtags also historicize and document contemporary politics in Nigeria. While hashtags are important symbols of the online public sphere, therefore, the Nigerian context shows that hashtags can also be regarded as archives of political narratives and resistance, especially in the manner they document important viral moments in contemporary Nigerian political discourses. As these examples affirm, most of these hashtags produced network publics whose interactions in the new public spheres facilitated by digital media are mostly politically oriented. Although these hashtags originate from the Twitter community, they migrate to other spaces such as Facebook and to offline environments of actual protest. One other thing these hashtags reveal is the way online debates in Nigeria are grounded in a contested space in which the political perspectives of regular citizens

can be censured by disruptive online voices working in the interest of government.

Another way this censoring of the expression of alternative meanings is evident can be seen in contexts, such as #Fergusson, for instance, is through “algorithmic filtering”²² of the hashtags themselves. Tufekci wonders if “Ferguson [would] be buried in algorithmic censorship”²³ had there not been Twitter. In the Nigerian framework, while the recent Cambridge Analytica data privacy scandal at Facebook may have a potential Nigerian dimension backed by the state, the politics of net neutrality and algorithmic filtering which is the focus of Tufekci’s article is not as pronounced as the careful ways government plants trolls in network communities to misinform progressive netizens having disinterested democratic conversations. To return to one of the hashtags above, the #MissingBudget hashtag, was a response in 2016 to news in the mainstream media that the country’s budget of the same year submitted to the Nigerian Senate by the President could not be found. The creative Twitter users who began to tweet on the topic by using different memes were motivated by the conviction that the missing document was symptomatic of political corruption; although there is the possibility that they were also responding to the hilarity of the situation. The incident provided another classic illustration of what it means in Nigeria to “Laugh out Loud” (LOL) at institutional power and its abuses in Nigeria’s online mediasphere. Images such as Fig. 11.9 is one of the many playful treatments of the subject on Twitter.

The example demonstrates one of the many modes of political conversations, in the days after the inauguration of the Buhari government, namely the deployment of random images as cultural resources for resisting systemic abuses of power. As “searching for the #missingbudget is a national task,” @Justinvictor and the other commenters are invested in a seemingly patriotic duty to the nation-state. The idea of invoking the nation suggests the ways netizens imagine the constitution of the “national” online. From the standpoint of government, the national is an uncontested and neutral space for all citizens. However, the usage of the word in this tweet uncovers a reading of the national as a politically charged space in which re-enfranchised citizens can recover political voice and visibility. Those who conceive of the search for the missing budget as “a national task” see themselves as citizens who now have some level of involvement in the nation’s political project, even if this participation is mediatized and, in the tradition of the carnivalesque, a temporary performance that subverts and mocks official power.



Fig. 11.9 “Searching for the #MissingBudget is a National Task.” Twitter. 14 January 2016. <https://twitter.com/Justinattor/status/687717589594849281>

There is something of a playful and performative reconstitution of citizenship at play both in the tireless effort to retrieve the document in virtual space and in the commitment to using meme to facilitate the search. The image in the tweets was shared by many Twitters who engaged its visual rhetoric to demonstrate the gravity of the search effort, hence they bend over sewage drains to find an important political document. That they resort to the sewage is a ridicule of governmental apparatuses in Nigeria. The larger critique of this meme is the way the #missingbudget hashtag is being used by these Twitter users to offer alternative meanings

and narratives to a systemic manifestation of corruption in the country. Aside from the humorous meme in this illustration, the words of the tweets are satirical commentaries on the appalling conditions in which governmental power thrives in Nigeria. While the political discourses and critical exchanges embedded in and enabled by these social media environments are vital, my more nuanced engagement in this intervention is how the deliberate production of popular and comical images by creative Internet users furnishes critics with a parallel discursive space for the analyses of power relations and the performance of agency online.

One of the hashtags that best represent this commitment to the production of subversive images mocking and satirizing operations of hegemonic power in the Nigerian state is #TheOtherRoom, used with the image in Fig. 11.10. Responding to his wife's criticism of his government on a state visit to Germany in 2016, Buhari told reporters, while taking questions alongside Chancellor Angela Merkel: "I don't know which party my wife belongs to, but she belongs to my kitchen, and my living room and the other room." The idea that the country's first lady belonged in the kitchen went viral on social media, as netizens used the hashtag #TheOtherRoom to engage in discussions on gender oppression and the female identity and presence in Nigerian politics and culture. The president's slippage received a more vehement attack on Twitter because of the way the hashtag functioned as an apparatus of collecting and organizing recalcitrant voices. The hashtag was used alongside multiple viral memes to reflect the criticality of visual and popular culture to the emergent hashtag publics in Nigerian social media.

This meme, published on Twitter by a blogger, has been redistributed 29 times by different users who have much larger number of Twitter followers who ensure the continued dispersal and mobility of both the image and its rhetorical persuasions. The image is an apt illustration of the mobilization of popular culture in the expression of participatory politics in Nigerian Twitterverse. The idea being invoked through a Photoshop design of a movie poster asserts the ubiquity of Nollywood as a foremost medium of African popular culture which is central to the playful presentation of political agency in much of Nigerian social media culture. By placing the first lady at the background of the poster, and foregrounding the image of the president, the creator of the meme deploys a visual language to re-narrate and emphasize the gendered nature of the president's statement.



Fig. 11.10 #TheOtherRoom. https://twitter.com/234stars_/status/788122256316719104

CONCLUSION

Internet memes constitute an important popular culture genre through which Nigerian netizens participate in political conversations. In the Nigerian social media framework, Internet memes mirror the visual rhetoric and ideologies of pre-existing cultural forms such as the film medium. Their production and circulation may be within the context of transnational digital networks and global media flows, their significations shape and are shaped by particular local narratives. During the 2015 elections in Nigeria, many social media users resorted to the creation and distribution of photo-based memes as forms of participating in an emergent hashtag

public in the country. Specifically, as I have shown in this chapter, the election that year provided a public platform for the mobilization of Internet memes and hashtags by netizens for electoral participation and political conversations. Similarly, as the 2019 presidential elections approach, more creative Nigerian netizens are using visual culture to shape and express their democratic subjectivities. These digital genres provide opportunities for media consumers to archive Nigeria's political history and add new narrative layers to Nigeria's digital culture and public sphere. Aside from actual voting and other expressions of electoral agency, many of these users rely on social media as the organizing space for the monitoring and critiquing of the electoral process. These acts are new expressions of democratic behavior grounded in and facilitated by an increasingly ubiquitous digital culture in Nigeria. Tracking and exploring the nature of this involvement in the political landscape through a sustained examination of memes and their rhetorical strategies has been the focus of this chapter. These Internet memes, like other subversive cultural products such as the selfie and political cartoons posted online reaffirm the point that political images posted on social media are new discursive avenues through which performative speech is mobilized by young people to resist and revise hegemonic culture as well as to critique abusive power in Nigeria.

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CHAPTER 12

Black Creativity in Jamaica and Its Global Influences, 1930–1987

Bernard Steiner Ifekwe

INTRODUCTION

Black creativity in Jamaica that came in different forms in the latter part of the twentieth century, such as Garveyism, Rastafarianism, and Reggae music, as this essay posits, were parts of the innumerable cultural edifices, which dotted the history of this Island nation. Their relevance to historical discourse most especially on creativity, debunked the much-vaunted belief that Africans in slavery and freedom lost all creative impulses and, therefore, became docile.¹ However, African enslavement in Jamaica laid the foundations for these creative directions.

When they were captured and sold to Jamaica as slaves, among them were men and women of different occupations such as magicians, healers, musicians, and even orators, who found themselves within their new environment, isolated from Africa, but were poised to continue with their traditional occupation in spite of their new state of servility.² In later years, they bequeathed these creative impulses to their descendants

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thus guaranteeing African survivals in the Caribbean. In this context, Jamaica was noted for her music and culture, which include Reggae, Dub Poetry and her language, the patois that permeated the Island and gave it an international image. Personalities involved in this creative history included Marcus Garvey, and artists such as Bob Marley, the Reggae musician, and authors, Claude Mackay, and Una Marson.³

Creativity connotes developing something anew. In the words of S.I. Hayakawa, creativity:

... suggests the entire process whereby things that did not exist before are conceived, given form, and brought into being. ... The *original* mind, slipping free of the conventional and the commonplace, comes up with things no one else has thought of – the new idea, the different approach: an original insight: a higher original poet. The *creative* goes further, combining the fruits of experience and imagination in an *original* way to create reality in new form: the *creative* process; a mind in *creative* ferment.⁴

These creative processes as written in this essay might be seen as being unwieldy but this seems not to be so. The peculiarity of the Black experience in Jamaica, especially in slavery, emancipation as well as colonial periods,⁵ including post-colonial epoch dominated the political discourse, which the Black Jamaican elites, the millenarian groups, and others highlighted to tell stories in political, social, and religious gatherings. These became quite current from 1962, at Jamaica's Independence to 1987 when Peter Tosh died.

Against this background, the thesis of this essay is that creative writers addressed the black experience in the twentieth-century Jamaica such as racism, malnutrition, unemployment and underdevelopment and politicians like Marcus Garvey, religious activists such as Leonard Howell, with their Rastafarianism, as well as eminent musicians, such as Bob Marley, Peter Tosh. Their efforts revealed politics of creativity, resistance and demanded an enforcement of their human rights. Their quest to use these institutions to campaign for black freedom, undoubtedly, exemplified the black creative ability. A number of scholars and publicists such as Horace Campbell, Timothy White, Chris Salewicz, John Masouri, Vivien Goldman, Chris Potash, Tony Martin and Helene Lee, among others, have expressed their views on these emerging Black consciousness or creativity.⁶ However, more needs to be done in this aspect of Black History.

The perspectives of this essay, along this line, are contributions to history. Therefore, as this essay will show, we will agree with Don Letts, a publicist, that Jamaica is “one Island that has culturally colonized the world”⁷ because of the influence of these institutions in black studies today.

BLACK CREATIVITY IN COLONIAL JAMAICA

The black man had entered the twentieth century Jamaica a devastated man in spite of the fact that he was free. According to a West Indian administrator, “A race has been freed, but a society has not been formed.”⁸ This statement is quite apt for by this time, British colonialism had instituted land shortage unemployment, poverty and hunger which forced many in colonial Jamaica to migrate overseas to build the Panama Canal, “to construct railways in Central America; to work on plantations in Cuba; to contract for farm - labour in the United States.”⁹ Internally, there was a massive migration of black Jamaicans from the rural areas to urban areas in search of gainful employment such as Kingston and Saint Andrew. They settled in squatter camps and ghetto areas,¹⁰ which in the words of Helene Lee, “offered a desultory welcome and a life of ruthless competition to successive waves of migrants”¹¹ because the contest for survival within the ghettos was quite violent in nature. The need to survive goaded them to try their hands on quite a number of issues they perceived were escapist measures affecting them. By then, Pan-African movement, meant for black liberation and spearheaded by some Caribbean activists had already taken shape.¹² Marcus Garvey’s Movement, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), was part of this historical movement along creative lines, for addressing black predicament through propaganda.

When Garvey launched his UNIA in 1914, he propagated his activities in the organization through lectures, speeches and writings. These approaches clearly defined his creative directions. Garvey toured various countries for personal assessment of the black plight, finally settling in the United States, where his movement gave him much creative directions as studies have shown.¹³ Through his “The Race First”¹⁴ philosophy, Garvey from the various conventions of his movement, pointed out that racism was at the center of the black predicament. He said: “we are the descendants of a suffering people; we are the descendants of a people

determined to suffer no longer”¹⁵ in order to underscore his creative direction. Garvey attacked the white man from all directions. He noted that the white man was poised “to destroy our hopes, our ambitions and our confidence in self”¹⁶ and in order to thwart such, a research on black history, religion, economy and political institutions was given much currency in his movement. According to Tony Martin:

Among Garvey’s feats was the thoroughness and success of his propaganda effort. He set out with self-conscious candor to oppose the propaganda of race pride and nationhood to the contrary ideas of white supremacy African inferiority, white man’s burden and Caucasian manifest destiny. ... As far as Garvey was concerned, everything—education, religion, history, the news media—was enlisted by the dominant race in the furtherance of propaganda designed to perpetuate its continuance in power. The time had come, therefore, for the black man not only to make his own propaganda available, but also to refuse to be guided by those who did not suffer and could not empathize with them.¹⁷

Against this background, Garvey emphasized that his UNIA was anchored on “black economic self-reliance, black people’s rights to political self-determination, and the founding of a black nation on the continent of Africa.” He equally proclaimed that. “There shall be no solution to this race problem until you yourselves strike the blow for liberty.”¹⁸

He gave the blacks a creative direction when he floated several newspapers. Such newspapers according to Martin were *Garvey’s Watch Man*, and the *Blackman*, published in Jamaica, *La Nacion*, published in Limon, Costa Rica, *La Prensa*, published in Colon, Panama, and a co-publisher of the *Bluefield’s Messenger*, in Costa Rica. Others were the *Negro World* and the *Daily Negro Times* published in Harlem, the United States as well as the *New Jamaican*. These publications lasted between 1910 and 1932 and were devoted to the black experience in world history and efforts to awaken them to take up the challenges towards their liberation. These papers awakened black people all over the world and caused much consternation within colonial entities. They were fingered as factors for “uprisings and unrest in such diverse places as Dahomey, British Honduras, Kenya, Trinidad and Cuba”¹⁹ and were banned in several of these countries by the colonial authorities. Possession of any of them could lead to sedition. Apart from these newspapers, Garvey floated the Black Star Shipping Line to show black ingenuity in business.

Although the business faltered because of managerial inefficiency, bureaucracy and state interference, most especially from the United States authorities and other critics, their appearance then dominated much discourse especially on black creativity.

Furthermore, Garvey used his platform to recreate African symbol of nationhood even in a colonial setting. He created African Knighthood for eminent persons of his movement such as “Knight of the Nile,” “Earl of the Congo,” “Viscount of the Negro,” and “Baron Zambesi.” He proclaimed himself the Provisional President of Africa with the title “His Highness the Potentate.”²⁰ African independence and her place in global affairs were paramount to Garvey’s ideology of nationhood.

Turning his attention to religion, his outbursts in Jamaica set the ground for the emergence of Rastafarianism as a black religion in that Island nation. He had said, “Look to Africa when a black king shall be crowned for the day of deliverance is near.”²¹ Marcus Garvey, from this perspective, had stressed that religion had some political connotations, that is, it could be used for the organization of the people and raise their political consciousness. To this end, he changed his religious faith from Catholicism to African-oriented one called, the African Orthodox Church. He equally appointed George McGuire as the first Bishop of his new denomination.²² Besides, after Garvey’s pronouncement about the coronation of a Black King in Africa, what the Black Jamaicans needed, mostly his followers, was “a new messiah, preferably black, and a king in *this* world.” Accordingly, for Garvey to succeed in his African centered philosophy, “blacks had to be able to identify with kings and princes, not with crucified slaves.”²³ When Haile Selassie I was crowned the Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930, those black followers of Garvey, the societal reject who had migrated to the Jamaican urban areas at the turn of the twentieth century, bound them in a new religion called Rastafarianism. They turned to the Bible, Psalm 68:32, and read “Princes shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands unto God.” Consequently, “The Rasta creed is probably the best example of the functional reinterpretation of African and Christian concepts in the Black Jamaican lower-class search for recognition and a positive identity,”²⁴ because this Ethiopian monarch appropriated titles such as “King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Light of Saba, the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah.”²⁵ From then onwards, the Black community in Jamaica, mainly the Rastas claimed the divinity of the Emperor.

Against the above-related developments, when they identified their god in the form of a mortal like themselves, the black creativity in colonial Jamaica, equally assumed a religious dimension.

THE GROWTH OF RASTAFARIANISM

Post-colonial Jamaica, which began its journey in 1962, largely, provided the platform for the global dimensions of black creativity through the intervention of the Rastafarians and their reggae music. This black creativity was a response to the challenges, which confronted their forebears and themselves since the period of the Atlantic slave trade.

Rastafarianism as an outpost of Garveyism was part of this black creativity. Arising from the belief in the divinity of the Ethiopian monarch, Haile Selassie I, a man like them, these black Jamaicans from many years of searching for identity through religion, found solace in the worship of this monarch. During the time of their ancestors, especially in the plantations, their white masters subjected them to Christianity thereby denying them religious rights. By then the Catholic Church, the Protestant Church, or the Dutch Reformed church dominated Christianity²⁶ but the blacks within the plantations tackled this religious prosecution with subterranean strategies such as Obeah, which was another traditional religious practice. Obeah was a man endowed with magical powers and commanded enormous respect among these black Jamaicans. In the British attempt to outlaw it, Obeah worship went underground and became part of the Rastafarian religious worship even until today.²⁷

The Rastafarians claimed that Garvey's pronouncement on the coronation of a black king in Africa inspired them to worship Haile Selassie I as the god of Africa.²⁸ Thereafter, Rastafarianism emerged with the following leaders: Leonard P. Howell, Joseph Hibbert and Archibald Dunkley, who propagated Garvey's "Back – To Africa" program and attracted the wrath of the colonial state. They encouraged the wearing of dreadlocks, the smoking of ganja, and the sale of Emperor Haile Selassie's photographs as passports for their repatriation to Africa.²⁹ Garvey repudiated them for these religious practices but acknowledged that his speeches and articles on Ethiopia were sources of these religious discontent. In this context, Rastafarianism became part of their quest to black creativity in Jamaica. One of Garvey's articles reads thus:

If the white man has the idea of a white God, let him worship his God as he desires. If the yellow man's God is of his race let him worship his God as he sees fit. We, as Negroes, have found a new ideal. Whilst our God has no color, yet it is human to see everything through one's own spectacles, and since the white people have seen their God through white spectacles, we have only now started out (late though it be) to see our God through our own spectacles. The God of Isaac and the God of Jacob let Him exist for the race that believes in the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. We Negroes believe in the God of Ethiopia, the everlasting God- God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost, the one God of all ages. That is the God in whom we believe but we shall worship Him through the spectacles of Ethiopia.³⁰

Rastafarianism, which emerged from this influence, reflected the planting of Ethiopianism in Jamaica's low-income areas.³¹ The early Rastafarian leaders, as already noted, became the conveyor of Ethiopianism, that is, the mixing of Christian beliefs with traditional practices such as Obeah. This assertion becomes fundamental in creating awareness within the black community in Jamaica that the absence of a religious motif, solely African, was part of the ideological weapon the whites used in containing their aspirations towards liberation. Consequently, when Jamaica became independent in 1962, the black Jamaican consolidated this religious consciousness through Reggae music. The Reggae artists such as Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer, U-Roy, I-Roy, Toot Hibbert, Sly Dunbar, Burning Spear and groups such as *Black Uhuru*, *Steel Pulse*, *Mighty Diamonds*, the Abyssinians, among others, wrote their lyrics to reflect the black experience in Jamaica and Africa. The energy they expended in composing those tunes, mainly on slavery, colonialism, racism and underdevelopment, such exemplified their creative directions. They were not educated but had their experience as creative writers from their ghetto environments where squalor and hunger gnawed their empty stomachs. Under these pressures, they unleashed much energy to reflect their predicament along music. According to Ken Pryce:

A valid sense of identity [for black Jamaicans] can only come from a deeply felt national consciousness and from pride in its own values, and achievements. Jamaicans will only be free when they cease to live on borrowed and hypocritical culture and begin to see themselves as a potential rival to the white man in creativity and achievements.³²

Because of these national values dominating their society, Black youths in Jamaica confronted the White-dominated political landscape, which had denied them equality since the colonial times. Reggae music was the best platform to make their voices heard. According to an analyst:

The world of reggae is a world of escape and refuge from white society. In that world, the Black West Indian is a King. He can relax and be himself without fear of being considered inferior. In this world, his disadvantages become virtues. What is more, the black music business offers the possibility of escape from obscurity and inferiority into a world of *hauteur* ostentatiousness and recognition. These are reasons why even the non-ideological teenybopper sooner or later comes spiritually to “identify” with the “blackness” in reggae.³³

Consequently, when they embarked on their global tours, the contents of their lyrics revealed substantially their grasp of black history in musical forms. The rhythm of reggae music reduced the potency of their historical, cultural and political lyrics into danceable steps for their fans. Moreover, in appreciating the significance of these lyrics these Reggae artists, helped in the global dimension of black creativity.

THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF BLACK CREATIVITY IN JAMAICA

Between the 1960s and 1980s, Jamaica attracted world attention because of the creative efforts of internationally acclaimed musicians and Dub poets. They were Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer, Jimmy Cliff, and a militant poet called Mutabaruka, whose poetic devices in musical form lent much credence to what his musical brothers did. Their creative impulses moved black liberation politically and mentally, composing their lyrics and poems towards these themes. Their efforts spanning several years of experimentation burst out of the Jamaican ghettos to grab global attention. In the words of Chris Blackwell one of their mentors:

Songwriters, artists, designers, producers, film-makers, recording engineers, video directors and many, many talented people who proudly worked at Island [Records] over the years [came to Jamaica] to introduce and promote their work.³⁴

These artists lived in the ghettos areas such as Trench Town, Salt Lane, Back O' Wall, Dungle Hill. These areas were constructed on slums, cardboard boxes, wood cabins, and in concrete block cells, and most importantly, “in the government yards,” as Bob Marley would sing in latter years.³⁵ Their compositions and influences in Jamaican cultural history became part of the themes covered in Chris Salewicz's book *Rude Boy: Once Upon a Time in Jamaica* (2000).³⁶

The Jamaican ghettos played a prominent role in this story of black creativity. Although habituated by the Rastafarians as black artists and social deviants as the case may be, there was much ruthless competition going on among them in order to survive. Such competitions revolved in-group survival as Jimmy Cliff depicted in the film, *The Harder They Come*. The film expresses the ruthless exploitation of the Black Jamaican creativity in musical forms by white producers in the midst of the poverty and competition among the composers. Jimmy Cliff, the lead actor, was among those hit by the White exploitation and he had to take up arms to challenge them. The importance of the film towards Black creativity in Jamaica was that it gave these artists the opportunity to see themselves on the screen as well as their creative abilities. In later years, when Jamaican creativity had attained global recognition, artists such as Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff, Lee Perry and Inner circle, ruminated on these developments, most especially on, “what reggae means in the context of Jamaican society.”³⁷ However, despite their survival techniques through reggae music, there were vicious competitions within the ghettos. These competitions came in their attempt to use *ganja* as protest or political violence coming from their political party partisanship for the two rival political parties, namely the Jamaican Labor Party (JLP) and People's National Party (PNP), which left the Island prone to assassination and other violent acts. In order to curb these insoluble problems, the post-colonial state built a Gun Court.³⁸ Despite these challenges, which confronted these black artists, they turned their ghettos as places to galvanize their music from its rural base to international stardom.

Chris Blackwell, a white record producer, and the owner of Island Records, was among the earliest personalities who understood the contents of these black creativities and gave them a global publicity. By the 1960s Reggae, music was still evolving, although its potency in terms of global acceptability was not in doubt and some white record producers and distributors who came earlier than Blackwell, cashed in on these inexperienced black artists and ripped them off. Reflecting on this period

of transition, Jimmy Cliff one of the artists involved in the growth of this cultural history stated thus, “I grew up economically poor, spiritually rich. Even though I had this condition, that kind of balance made me always take the downside and put an up to it.”³⁹

Against this background, their resistance to servitude through cultural means and though educationally backward, compelled them to adopt their local language, patois as a vehicle to their black creativity. Their compositions, speeches and interviews reflected their views on Pan-Africanism, African history, and liberation as well as their drive towards equality. Many prominent Black leaders in the twentieth century such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Sylvester Williams, Kwame Nkrumah, Macolm X, Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) proclaimed their stand on Pan-Africanism during their conferences or congresses. Their statements, speeches and press releases described the African predicament and avenues to ameliorate them. In the world of Reggae artists, their platforms to the exposition of Pan-Africanism were their compositions and live concerts. Their lyrics, in most cases, borrowed from these Black leaders, encapsulated their stand on black creativity. Peter Tosh, from his Pan-African perspective, sang, that: “Don’t you know where you come from, as long as you’re a black man, you’re an African.”⁴⁰ Peter Tosh’s statements here represented a clarion call to all Black peoples globally to see themselves as mainly Africans. His stand here popularized the Black struggle in their quest for identity, which an eminent African-American leader W.E.B. Du Bois had earlier identified as “the problem of the color-line.”⁴¹ This problem, according to Du Bois was what he called the “double-consciousness,” of the African-American, for instance, one seeing himself as an African and at the same time as an American.⁴² From this perspective, Peter Tosh had asserted a global dimension of this blackness in his lyrics. He also advocated for race equality through human rights dimensions in two tracks in the same album namely “Get Up Stand UP, Stand Up for your rights,” and “Equal Rights.”⁴³ Here, Tosh had expressed his feelings about human rights violations which were meted out to Black peoples globally, particularly in African colonial territories such as Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa in the 1970s. In other albums namely *Mama Africa* (1983), *Mystic Man* (1978), and *No Nuclear War*, released posthumously, his music clamored for political change in Africa in line with these developments. On African liberation for instance, Peter Tosh’s compositions captured these trends in tracks such as “Apartheid,” in *Equal Rights* (1977) album, and “Fight

Apartheid” in *No Nuclear War* (1987). His 1979 album, *Mystic Man*, with its track, “Fight On,” describes his penchant for armed struggle when he called upon Black peoples globally to join forces against their oppressors because when Africa remained under bondage, Black peoples globally would remain enslaved politically and socially. Excerpts from these lyrics read:

Fight on Brothers, Fight on, Fight On...
Cause if Africa is not free
Then we will be
Back in shackles you see
My Brothers Fight on...⁴⁴

Prompted by his belief on Pan-Africanism and liberations, he said:

I don't look at myself as a singer. I look at myself as a missionary who comes to preach, to reach and to awake the slumbering mentality of black people, because this is nothing new. From thousands of years ago, there have been preachers who go around and preach and teach and tell the people of the true and the living seen?⁴⁵

Peter Tosh's targets in these compositions were black liberation movements in South Africa, particularly the African National Congress (ANC). His compositions morally supported their struggle against racism in South Africa. Many other reggae artists joined in this Pan-African philosophy by focusing their attention on Marcus Garvey using his speeches and comments as parts of their lyrics. In such processes, Garvey's place in black creativity was reenacted.⁴⁶

His counterpart Bob Marley also reflected on his black creativity. When his story as an artist began, he teamed up with Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer in a band called *Wailing Souls* later called *The Wailers*. The band's name was in itself a creative direction because the trio adopted it to reflect their predicament as black men. Chris Blackwell, their mentor, understood their potentials and gave them his full support. However, when the trio split and pursued individual careers, Blackwell took Bob Marley, the prophet among them and brought him to global attention. In his 1975 tour to the United Kingdom, where he recorded his *Live* album, Blackwell projected the rural and black dimensions of Reggae music, which the West had begun to appreciate. In a track “Trench Town Rock,” Tony Garnet, Blackwell's compère, uttered as follows

“But this, I wan’ tell ya, is the Trench Town experience. All the way from Trench Town, Jamaica, Bob Marley and the Wailers.”⁴⁷ Marley’s stand on African liberation dotted many of his albums. Particularly, his 1979 album, *Survival*, clearly defined his stand on the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe. This song reflected his cultural intervention in an age-long rebellion that had erupted in that African country when Ian Smith’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) defiled world opinion and plunged that British colonial territory into armed struggle. Consequently, African freedom fighters, particularly the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) fought vigorously to wrest power from the white minority regime in Zimbabwe. Bob Marley grew up to meet these challenges and, therefore, incorporated these developments as part of his lyrics towards African liberation. He called for armed struggle among Black peoples globally in order to liberate Zimbabwe. According to Marley:

So arms in arms with arms
We will fight this little struggle
‘cause that the only way we
Overcome our little trouble ...
African a liberate – Zimbabwe.⁴⁸

Further, Bob Marley also expressed his solidarity with African liberation movements in South Africa, Angola, and Mozambique in a track, entitled “War” from his 1976 album, *Rastaman Vibration*. These pronouncements and actions exemplified the highpoint of black creativity in history. Bob Marley left exclusive tunes on black history in albums such as *Catch A Fire*, *Natty Dread*, *Survival*, *Uprising*, *Kaya*, *Exodus*, among others. When he died, his contributions to black history were no longer in doubt. In the year 2000, *Time* magazine awarded his track, “One Love,” in his *Rastaman Vibration* album, as the “Song of the Century,” while his *Exodus* album was awarded the “Album of the century.”⁴⁹ Both he and Peter Tosh were given national honors after their deaths. Because of these developments, an analyst insists that:

The goal of “freedom is also continually emphasized by Reggae singers, who reassure their listeners that revolution is on their side and that there is a glorious future to come”. But underlying this quest for freedom is the philosophy of “Peace and Love” which is fundamental to the creed of Rastafari despite its sonorous and racist overtones.⁵⁰

Another dimension of black creativity emerged in the poems of Mutabaruka, who was born as Alan Hope. Called a Dub Poet because of the uniqueness of his creativity where he mixed music with poetry and recited them in his country home speech, patois. His works were seen as “mission updates” in Black creativity as a result of “his continuing assault against the socio-political establishment” in Jamaica.⁵¹ Some of his poems were in albums such as *Check It* (1983), *Outcry* (1984), *The Mystery Unfolds* (1986), *Muta In Dub* (1998), among others.⁵² It represented a resistance to post-colonial problems which affected the blacks in Jamaica. Commenting on Mutabaruka’s creativity, Mike Alleyne, an expert on reggae music writes:

Following Jamaica’s severe economic crises of the 1970s, Mutabaruka emerged in the 1980s with a decidedly political voice. Emphasizing his Jamaican accent [patois], Mutabaruka established on record the themes he had already pursued in poetry: the plight of Africa and the lack of collective black consciousness, marginalization of ordinary people in society, religious hypocrisy, technological tyranny, the cultural importance of women, and all forms of exploitation.⁵³

One of his poems, with the title, “Call Me No Poet or Nothing like that”⁵⁴ captures this trend. Excerpts read thus:

I shall not never
write for lovers or
makers
Lillies
and moonshine romance
never
unless they are me
free
I have no time
there are police beatin’
brothers for bein themselves
runnin around in streets
7 O’clock

What?
Call me no poet
or nothing like that

poems are for lovers
and actors
poems are for joy
and laughter

This poem as stated above reflected a period of economic crisis in Jamaica when food was scarce and majority of the Black population lived in penury. By then, Jamaican economy driven by the policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) could not alleviate the Black people from the pangs of destitution. However, the island nation found itself in perpetual conflict. According to Okello Oculi:

On the import front, there was a rapid rise in the food bills, which hit the political volatile middle classes directly. On the export front, it soon became apparent that the small banana growers would rather consume their bananas in the place of grain whose prices were soaring beyond their excess than sell it...for export.⁵⁵

Against this background, Mutabaruka's poem already quoted was quite poignant and expressed a feeling of Black alienation in a post-colonial Jamaica. Such situations made the society to be volatile and equally exemplified Black resistance and "police beatings" against them. Mutabaruka, being a critic of post-colonial policies in Jamaica, used his creative abilities coached in patois to drive home his views on the Black predicaments in his country. From these lines, he continued with the same Marcus Garvey's position in Pan-African politics, religion and literature, which had formed the core of this essay and in the process; he contributed many albums to this cause. Given the foregone analyses, Mutabaruka's dub poetry retained that tradition and became an expressive platform to exhibiting the black talent in creativity.

CONCLUSION

One of the ways through which some black personalities such as Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and musical groups such as *Mighty Diamonds* and Dub Poets such as Mutabaruka expressed their leadership styles in twentieth-century Jamaica was through their creativity. None of them could be credited to have had a formal education but the black plight in Jamaica based on racism, hunger, poverty, powerlessness, and

homelessness drove them to adopt various strategies such as Garveyism, Rastafarianism, and Reggae music which opened a vista in black creativity and history. Their efforts laden with African history attracted the attention of scholars, journalists, writers, tourists and others who visited Jamaica and committed themselves to write, study, and analyze these black creativity and left much imprints in African studies.

Marcus Garvey was, in the context of this essay, a pioneer in this Black creativity by using propaganda as a major vehicle towards his aspirations. It is, however, important to stress that these three strands as related in this essay, played composite roles in the expression of Black creativity in Jamaica. Garvey's UNIA was a platform for Black mobilization which gave rise to other creative forces such as Rastafarianism and Reggae. His propaganda was an act to evoke emotions and political directions. He used that platform profusely in his various political and literary actions, now published as *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* (1986), and the accompanying volume, *More Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey* (2010). Towards the twilight of the twentieth century, his followers mainly Reggae artists, followed his footsteps and gave Jamaican history an international recognition. Their roles were quite complementary to reveal the role of these Black Jamaicans towards creativity. From this perspective, this essay has deepened our understanding of the role of black creativity in shaping a country's history and culture. It was in this regard that one will agree, in the words of Don Letts, already cited, that Jamaica was a country that culturally colonized the global community since the twentieth century. It has equally deepened our understanding of politics of creativity, resistance and social movements, which presently, are themes in African studies.⁵⁶

NOTES

1. The belief that Africans were docile and lost their identity during the trans-Atlantic slave trade were shared by scholars such as Stanley Elkins who claimed that it left the victims in what was referred to as a state of "Sambo." Other Africanists challenged such beliefs in their exploration of Africa's contributions to global culture. For details, see the following: Pierre Verger, "Nigeria Brazil and Cuba," in *Nigeria 1960: A Special Independence Issue of Nigeria Magazine*, ed. Michael Echeruo (Lagos: Ministry of information, 1960); Leonard Barret, "African Religion in the Americas: The Islands in Between," in *African Religions*, ed. Newell S. Booth (Lagos: NOK Publishers International, 1979), 230–231.

2. For details, see Horace Campbell, *The Rastafari Intervention: An Inquiry into the Culture of Rastafari from Garvey to Rodney*, For the Society of Caribbean Studies Conference, School of Social Sciences, University of Sussex, Palmer, Brighton, February 1978, 1–3.
3. See Alonford James Robinson, Jr., “Jamaica,” in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Civitas Books, 1999), 1024.
4. For details, see S.I. Hayakawa, *Modern Guide to Synonyms and Related Words* (n.p.; The Reader’s Digest, 1968), 136–137. The utilized words are in the original.
5. This view is extrapolated from Richard Hart, “Protest Organizations and Groups in Jamaica in the 1930s,” 1–7 unpublished essay in this writer’s possession. The present writer is grateful to David Johnson, a Professor of History, and his former lecturer at the University of Calabar, Nigeria, for this paper.
6. For details, see the following: Horace Campbell, “Garveyism, Pan-Africanism and African Liberation in the Twentieth Century,” in *Garvey: His Work and Impact*, ed. Rupert Lewis and Patrick Bryan (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1991), 167–188; Chris Salewicz, *Rude Boy: Once Upon a Time in Jamaica* (London: Victor Gollancz, 2000); John Masouri, *Steppin’ Razor: The Life of Peter Tosh* (London: Omnibus Press, 2013); Timothy White, *Catch a Fire: The Life of Bob Marley* (London: Omnibus Press, 1991); Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Dover: The Majority Press, 1986); Helene Lee, *The First Rasta: Leonard Howell and the Rise of Rastafarianism* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003); Chris Potash, *Reggae, Rasta, Revolution: Jamaican Music from Ska to Dub* (London: Books with Attitude, 1997); Vivien Goldman, *Exodus: The Making and Meaning of Bob Marley and the Wailers Album of the Century* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006); Chris Salewicz, *Bob Marley: The Untold Story* (London: HarperCollins, 2009).
7. See Chris Salewicz, *Rude Boy: Once Upon a Time in Jamaica* (London: Victor Gollancz, 2000), I.
8. Cited in Barry Floyd, *Jamaica: The Island Microcosm* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 63.
9. See Okello Oculi, *Political Economy of Malnutrition* (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University, 1987), 76.
10. Robinson, Jr., “Jamaica,” in *Africana*, ed. Appiah and Louis Gates, Jr., 1030.
11. See Helene Lee, *The First Rasta: Leonard Howell and the Rise of Rastafarianism* (IL: Chicago Review Press, 2003), 203.

12. For details of the background to Pan-Africanism, especially of the Caribbean influence, see Colin Legum, *Pan-Africanism: A Short Political Guide* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 13–37; P. Olisanwuche Esedebe, *Pan Africanism: The Idea and Movement, 1776–1963* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1982), 1–43.
13. Among black leaders who had the characteristics to mobilize people for mass action, perhaps none of them was as great as Marcus Garvey. He had little education but his contributions to black creativity was immense. For details, see the following: Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and They Universal Negro Improvement Association* (MA: The Majority Press, 1986); James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 251–259; Rupert Lewis and Patrick Bryan, eds., *Garvey and His Work* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1991).
14. The “Race First” Concept is adapted from Tony Martin’s book, *Race First*, 22–40.
15. For details, see Adolph Edwards, *Marcus Garvey, 1887–1940* (London: New Beacon Books, 1972), 13.
16. See Marcus Garvey, *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey, Volume I* (MA: The Majority Press, 1986), 15.
17. See Martin, *Race First*, 90.
18. For details, see Martha King, “Garvey, Marcus Moses,” in *Africana*, ed. Appiah and Louis Gates, Jr., 818.
19. For details, see Martin, *Race First*, 91–93.
20. See Edwards, *Marcus Garvey*, 15.
21. Cited in E.E. Cashmore, *The Rastafarians* (London: Minority Right Group, 1984), 5.
22. See Lee, *The First Rasta*, 37.
23. Ibid.
24. See Ken Pryce, “Black Identity and the Role of Reggae,” in *Society and The Social Sciences*, ed. David Potter et al. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 126.
25. See Lee, *The First Rasta*, 57.
26. Campbell, *The Rastafari Intervention*, 1.
27. See Robinson, Jr., “Jamaica,” in *Africana*, ed. Appiah and Louis Gates, Jr., 1027.
28. See Stephen Davis, *Bob Marley: The Definitive Biography of Reggae’s Greatest Star* (London: Granada Publishing, 1985), 90–96.
29. See Lee, *The First Rasta*, 97–151, 164–165.
30. See Garvey, *The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey, Volume I*, 48,
31. See Pryce, “Black Identity and the Role of Reggae,” in *Society and The Social Sciences*, ed. David Potter et al., 128.

32. Ibid., 131.
33. Ibid., 139.
34. Chris Blackwell, "Preface," in *Keep on Running: The Story of Island Records*, ed. Suzette Newman and Chris Salewicz (New York: Universe Publishing, 2009), 4.
35. Lee, *The First Rasta*, 206.
36. For details, see Salewicz, *Rude Boy: Once Upon a Time in Jamaica* (London: Victor Gollancz, 2000).
37. For details, see Mike Alleyne, *The Encyclopedia of Reggae: The Golden Age of Roots Reggae* (New York: Sterling, 2012), 50–51.
38. The paradoxical nature of the Jamaican ghettos as abode of crime and creativity has been explored by eye-witnesses, participants and writers. For details, see Rita Marley, *No Woman, No Cry: My Life with Bob Marley* (London: Pan Books, 2005), 3–16; Vivien Goldman, *The Book of Exodus: The Making and Meaning of Bob Marley and the Wailers' Album of the Century* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006); Adrian Boot and Vivien Goldman, *Bob Marley: Soul Rebel, Natural Mystic* (London: Hutchinson, 1981); John Masour, *Steppin' Razor: The Life of Peter Tosh* (London: Omnibus Press, 2013); Chris Salewicz, *Bob Marley: The Untold Story* (London: HarperCollins, 2009); Timothy White, *Catch a Fire: The Life of Bob Marley* (London: Omnibus Press, 1991).
39. For details, see Alleyne, *The Encyclopedia of Reggae*, 44–48.
40. Listen to Peter Tosh's Track, "African," in his 1977 album, *Equal Rights*.
41. See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1961), 23.
42. Ibid., 16–17.
43. Peter Tosh's album, *Equal Rights*.
44. Listen to Peter Tosh *Mystic Man* for details.
45. See Masouri, *Steppin' Razor*, 330.
46. A number of artists such as Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer, Burning Spear and groups such as *Mighty Diamonds* praised Marcus Garvey in their compositions.
47. Cited in Davis, *Bob Marley*, 204.
48. Cited in Horace Campbell, *Bob Marley Lives: Reggae, Rasta and Resistance* (Dar es Salaam: Tackey, 1981), 18.
49. For details, see Rita Marley, *No Woman No Cry*, 181.
50. See Pryce, "Black Identity and the Role of Reggae," in *Society and The Social Sciences*, ed. David Potter et al., 138.
51. See Alleyne, *The Encyclopedia of Reggae*, 191.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.

54. C.A. Campbell, “Current Revolutionary Struggles in the Caribbean: The Whole World Is Africa,” *Unpublished MSS*, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Bendel State University, Ekpoma, Nigeria, 1984/1985.
55. Oculli, *Political Economy of Malnutrition*, 95.
56. For details, see the following: Paul Wilkinson, *Social Movements* (London: Macmillan, 1971); Jacques Maquet, *Africanity: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).



CHAPTER 13

Ethics and Aesthetic Creativity: A Critical Reflection on the Moral Purpose of African Art

Modestus Nnamdi Onyeaghalaji

INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics or philosophy of art, as it is referred to in philosophy, critically appraises the idea or value of beauty and the beautiful, especially in arts and all forms of human creativity, such as paintings, sculptures, musical composition, dancing, and so on. Philosophy of African art, therefore, engages in the critical reflection on African art and all forms of aesthetic creativity. Incidentally, the idea of African Art has faced a controversy created by the Eurocentric narrative that presumed that non-western culture, such as Africa do not or did not have the idea of art and aesthetic attitude or even the cognitive ability to create one. This idea was advanced even though presents of masks, cloths, stories, and other objects that were made by Africans were used by Europeans for pleasure and delight. Incidentally, this Western presumption is premised on the Eurocentric criteria of rationality and artistic evaluation that excludes

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other cultural evaluative platforms. Writers in the past have contended that, indeed, Africans have an idea of art although different from that of the European. The difference is that the European held a conception of “art for art’s sake.” That is, they have an aesthetic conception of art while the African has a functional and symbolic conception of art. This idea implies that Western art is purely aesthetic, while African art is aesthetically deficient.

This distinction does not seem to be sustainable and scholars rejected this assertion based on such an erroneous valuation. For instance, Kwame Gyekye insists that the “distinction is incorrect, for in African art production and appreciation equal value is placed on functionality, symbolism, and aesthetic value.”¹ Even Innocent Onyewunyi who subscribed to this distinction when he states that aesthetic contemplation is secondary to African art because African art is primarily functional and symbolic, still argued that functional beauty is also beauty.² Another distinction that has been made between European and African art is that the former is individualistic and subjective, while the latter is communal and depersonalized. It is to be noted that the idea of individualism and communalism are stages of socio-cultural development. The European world was not originally and fundamentally individualistic. The phenomenon of individuation was contingent on the history of Western development. At some stage, the West experienced some sense of communalism which gave way to individualism. This implies that communal orientation cannot be said to be autochthonous to Africa. Notwithstanding, it would not be untrue to describe African art as those with inherent communal values. The question arises, in the light of the colonial influence, can it still be plausible to maintain that the contemporary African art is humanized, communal, and depersonalized? The paper insists that the contemporary African art is largely motivated by two dominant objectives: one is to satisfy the Western criteria of value and, two, is materialism and commercialization. These dominant objectives have implications for moral values that were embedded in traditional African art. While focusing on the moral implications, it argues that for contemporary art to provide moral ground for socio-political integration, it needs to be prognostic in its outlook, which means it needs to challenge the existing existential descriptions and identify visionary ways for moral integration.

AESTHETIC CREATIVITY, ARTS, AND MORALS

Aesthetics is concerned with beauty as it relates to arts. It is a term with convoluted history as it accommodated strands of meaning from the classical period to the present. The modern coinage is attributed to a German philosopher, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762). He appropriated the term from the Greek word, *aisthetikos*, meaning perception of the senses, and formulated it in epistemological terms to describe a cognitive area of philosophy that studies man's knowledge of beauty and artistic expressions.³ As a branch of philosophy, aesthetics is a field of discourse, which critically reflects on the various presuppositions and assumptions about art and beauty; the learning of artistic creativity. It can be referred to as the science of art. The Earl of Listowel defines it as "the science and philosophy of man's aesthetic experience and artistic culture which includes the lesser as well as the major arts."⁴ Scholars, such as Eugen Venon, Leo Tolstoy, etc. consider aesthetics as an analytic study of the essence of arts and sentiments expressed by the artist.⁵ Dagober Runes, as quoted by Onyewenyi, defines it as a field of philosophy that deals with beauty or beautiful, especially in art and with taste and standards of value in judging art.⁶ Philosophical aesthetics raises questions, such as, what is art? What is it that makes an art beautiful? Is beauty a quality in things or ascribed to things by the appreciators of art? What is the value of art? Thus, aesthetics is concerned with the appreciation of value in the works of art. It involves metaphysical, epistemological, axiological, ethical, and cultural evaluations of art.

Art is central to aesthetics as it can be seen already. It is etymologically derived from Latin word, *ars*, meaning *skill* and Greek word, *techne*, which means technique. In this sense, it is skills and techniques, rules and principles employed in creative conducts. A close examination of this root meaning reveals two senses of arts. The first sense refers to art as rules and principles in human creative potentials that ought to be followed for art creations. It is an intellectual virtue or right reason, in making things.⁷ The second sense refers to the material product or external realization of the acquired skills and techniques expressed in different art products such as music, dance, sculpture, literary works, paintings, weaving and crafts, etc. It is referred to as man-made artifacts. Carlos Miranda's conception of art as an "enduring and continually communicative record of man's emotional response to his environment"⁸ is an expression of this aspect of art.

Integrating the two senses, art can be conceived as a form of activity through which we skillfully reflect, communicate and express reality through symbols and images. John Dewey's conception of art is instructive here because it brings the two aspects of art into an integrated whole. According to him, art is a unified experience.⁹ What does this mean? It means that our experiences are fundamentally unorganized. The experienced world itself is precarious. An artist employs cognitive skills to organize an unorganized experience in a unified form and gives it expression. So an artwork is usually an integration of various experiences of the artist. An artist is creative to the extent that he or she helps, according to Susan Langer, to extend the possibilities in nature.¹⁰ An attempt to put an intellectual order in an organized experience is creativity, in this sense, it is aesthetic creativity. It is an employment of skills and technique to unify human experience for aesthetic expression, delight, and enjoyment.

Art object has aesthetic value. Aesthetic value refers to "feature of objects that are worthy of sustained appreciation, attention, and interest."¹¹ The value of beauty is central to aesthetic creativity. But does this aesthetic value harbor or reveal any truth about the reality of our existence? The response to this is varied among scholars. Some think that art does not reveal the truth about reality because it is far removed from reality. In book x of *The Republic*, Plato demonstrates that art is a copy or imitation of reality; two steps removed from reality. He uses the *Allegory of the Cave* to show that an artistic creation is a mere copy of the original idea or a copy of reality whose essence is in the kingdom of ideas or world of forms. According to Plato, the perfect prototype of everything that exists is in this kingdom of ideas. Imagine an artisan who constructs a table. He has the image of table or tableness that is already made concrete in a particular object. The constructed table is a copy of his image of a table. The image of table or tableness is, in turn, a copy of the original (or essence of) table that resides in the world of forms. So art is a copy of a copy of reality. As such, it harbors no truth but merely corrupts the mind. They are designed to appeal to dangerous emotions rather than powerful reason. He thinks emotions must be guided by reason in a well-ordered republic because he does not trust the world revealed by the senses. Plato advises that we should be careful of imitations because they are dangerous as they are corruptive of human mind and desires and cannot lead us to the truth.¹²

Some others maintain that aesthetic creativity and the value of beauty can reveal the truth that is useful for human existence and well being. For instance, Aristotle believes that art is imitation but of the different sort; which has the capacity to reveal the truth, such as dramatic tragedy that can stimulate pity and fear leading the audience to learning experience.¹³ For Aristotle, “looking at actual, material objects is a way to learn about their essences.” He is confident that art can convey the truth; it can “speak to the heart about what it means to be a human person.”¹⁴ In the same vein, Chinua Achebe, through his narratives in *The Arrow of God*, demonstrates that an artist could help us to point out that which the rest of the community could not ordinarily see due to their limited vision.¹⁵ Susan Langer, who defines art as “a practice of creating perceptible forms expressive of human feelings,”¹⁶ suggests that art teaches us a new way of feeling. Helen Mitchell describes as “really a new way of seeing.” Langer insists that art helps to objectify the inner reality that is quite inaccessible to the formative influence of language, thereby letting the spectators into the “imaginative insight that can help to stabilize a culture by letting the citizens to understand and manage what they are feeling.”¹⁷ So beyond the economic, social, and religious values and functions, art plays an important role in revealing some ideas, truths and morals for managing human social relations. The views of Aristotle, Langer and Achebe can be summed up in the belief that aesthetic creativity, through its objective symbols, stimulates imaginative skills and gamut of moral sensibilities. It has the potential to create forums of moral insight and true beliefs. In other words, it is prognostic. It is on this prognostic potential that our reflection on African art will be based.

PROGNOSTIC MORAL FUNCTION OF AESTHETIC

Aesthetic creativity—musical compositions, drama, poetry, folk-tales, literary arts—is said to have “preponderance for the promotion of moral education of men.”¹⁸ In other words, above other things, an art object has the potential to provide an ethical framework for guiding human conduct and social reconstruction. Morality is the principle of right and wrong conduct. It is the norms, rules or guidelines for human behavior. Moral principles are studied in a branch of philosophy called ethics. Ethics is the study of those moral values or rules with which human behaviors are judged to be good or bad. Aesthetic creativity can be said to have implications for ethics because it has the capacity to raise

moral consciousness, by identifying moral attributes and questioning the immoral ones. Through artistic creativity, literary works, drama and designs, an artist can stimulate, communicate and convey meaning and moral knowledge for human social relations.

It implies that aesthetic creativity has prognostic elements. To be prognostic is to have the ability to challenge the existing descriptions and insightfully stimulate new perceptions and directions.¹⁹ Prognostic outlook illuminates the existential realities and conveys knowledge that can engender new vision about life. Accordingly, through the objectification of emotions—personal or cultural—sentiments and imagination and aesthetic creativity presents material for contemplation and understanding. It becomes morally prognostic to the extent that it exposes socio-cultural moral biases and directs the attention to relevant moral orders. It is on the ground of aesthetic moral function that the paper interrogates African aesthetic creativity.

THE IDEA OF AFRICAN AESTHETIC CREATIVITY

It would be irrelevant, in this era of multicultural consciousness, to continue raising questions like, ‘is there African art?’ in the same way it might be to ask if there is an African Philosophy. However, in the time past, it was an issue of debate even among African scholars. The debate was positioned by Western conceptual schematic and criteria of rational value, on the basis of which Africa was “presumed not to have or at least not to have had a notion of art.”²⁰ Such presumption is an integral part of a broader denigration championed by the Western narratives in which Africa is described as people without philosophy and culture. Some anthropologists and philosophers who held this view include Levy-Bruhl, Thomas Hobbes, Friedrich Hegel, Jean Jacque Rousseau, David Hume, L.E.W. Smith, etc. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) insists that Africans had a pre-logical mentality and uncritical mind unlike the Western mind which he describes as rational and critical. Thomas Hobbes (1770–1831), a philosopher and political theorist maintained that “Africa is a timeless place in which there are no art, letters or social organization, but instead, only fear and violent death.”²¹ Rousseau insists that “black people are unable to think in any reflexive manner. Their engagement in arts is, therefore, a thoughtless activity which is the anti-thesis of the intellect.”²²

In the art history, the argument is premised on the prevailing definition of art which insists that “art includes only the objects and activities whose aim is aesthetic contemplation.”²³ This is alternatively referred to as art for art’s sake, in which the main purpose is aesthetic contemplation. Based on this, distinctions were made between arts and crafts, between arts made for aesthetic purposes and functional artefacts. Consequently, non-Western art or specifically, African art work is far removed from the conversational circle of artistic discourse. Accordingly, some writers, both non-Africans and Africans, Eurocentric methodological paradigm, argue that Europeans have an aesthetic conception of art while Africans have a functional conception of Art. This position insists that European art is purely aesthetic while African art is functional, symbolic and in the worst case scenario empty. For instance, in “Traditional African Aesthetics; a Philosophical perspective,” Onyewuenyi, even in the bid to defend African Aesthetics, insisted on this distinction and emphasized the symbolic and functional purpose of African art before going further to state that the functional purpose is aesthetic. Again, in making a distinction between African Art and European art, a Ghanaian author argues that “the aesthetic value of African art is determined by its functional or symbolic aspect.”²⁴

The emphases on this distinction seem to be inadequate, incorrect, and unnecessary. Fortunately, it has been rejected by more recent African scholars. They argue that the denigration is asked and erroneous, and the distinction itself is incorrect. Gyekye maintains that it is incorrect to insist on this distinction precisely because “in African production and appreciation, equal value is placed on functional, symbolic and the purely aesthetic.”²⁵ The only difference is that Africans and Europeans may have, as Onyewuenyi pointed out, different standards of art appreciation. Jennifer Wilkinson, in her historical analysis, argues that such distinction and dismissal of African art on the basis of the definition of “art for art’s sake” is a misnomer and misconception of what art entails and its historical progression. She affirms that every cultural art progressed from functional to aesthetic, such that the idea of “art for art’s sake” is a recent phenomenon in the progressive development of art in the cosmos, both in the European culture and African culture.

In essence, African art is art in the real sense of the term. It is equally symbolic, functional and aesthetic. For instance, a traditional artist who weaves ties and dyes traditional cloth like Adire (Yoruba traditional form of attire) would certainly be concerned about how her work will be

delightful or excite the aesthetic judgment of an observer or passers-by. If the observer finds it delightful she may be excited to buy it. African art is aesthetically valuable, functionally appreciable and symbolically significant. Its beauty can be defined in terms of “functionality and symbolic significance as well as purely aesthetic.”²⁶ An African musician sings to the delight of the audience. The music composition and drumming stimulates the aesthetic sense of the listeners.

Another relevant distinction that is made between European and African art is that the former is individualistic, arbitrary and representative of artist’s emotions while the latter is communalistic, that is, community-oriented, and depersonalized. This distinction is symptomatic of cultural and philosophical differences that are common among scholars. While the distinction could be helpful, it is important to note that culture is not fixed but dynamic. European culture was not traditionally individualistic. Communal orientations could be identified in their earlier state of civilization. Greek culture, for instance, practiced a participatory democracy, presumably because of its communal orientations. The emergent individualism could be explained as a stage in the history of civilization in Europe. In our time, post-modern posture, for instance, has even radicalized the European orientation to the stage of rugged individualism. Accordingly, art in Europe is now a reflection of such extreme individualism, which in Nietzschean expressionist spirit, is purely individuals representation of his/her feeling, thoughts, imagination, and so on.

In the same vein, African art is a reflection of African ontology and human relations. Some aspects of African culture, such as the Igbo culture in Nigeria, see reality as an integration of the physical and spiritual forces. As such, there is an ontological independent relationship among rational beings, which include the living and the dead.²⁷ Thus, African cultural worldview is known to be social, communal, and religious. African society builds herself around the community and the extended family. Traditional African art and aesthetic appreciation, therefore, is logically concatenated in the high system of African world-view. It is community oriented. It reflects the communal worldviews, interest, beliefs, wishes, delights, and teachings. It is a reflection of ideas the community holds and thus depersonalized. This means that artist’s concern is not to express his/her own individual ideas and feelings. The poets, musicians, artisans, painters, express both their personal needs and communal aspirations. In fact, the need of the larger community determines the artist’s production.

To say that African art is depersonalized does not imply lack of professional freedom. The artist freely objectifies the cultural experiences and existential needs as a matter of professional concern. The artist employs his or her professional skill and freedom to add value to cultural facts. It is in this sense that traditional African art is said to be culture-oriented. In Nigeria, for instance, styles of folk music are related to the multitudes of ethnic groups in the country, each with their own techniques, instruments, and songs through which they delight the audience and transmit cultural values, morals and beliefs. It is easier to identify the cultural origin of different music compositions and dance in the traditional African societies by simply listening to them and watching the dance. Even in a more recent time, there is Igbo high life (the music of the southeastern part of the country), Apala music or Afo-juju music that is identified with the Yoruba, southwestern part of the country. In sculptural art, distinctions were made between cultures such as Nok cultural arts, Benin bronzes, Ife terracotta and so on.

Notwithstanding, the element of individuality cannot be completely eliminated from the traditional African art creation, more so in the contemporary time. To do this would be to undermine the rationality of an individual African mindset. For instance, within any community, there are instances of individuals or families distinguishing themselves in their art creations. In Nigerian traditional music just mentioned names like Stephen Osita Osadebe, Oliver De Coque, Haruna Ishola Bello, King Sunny Adé, Ebenezer Obey feature prominently. From the analysis, it seems more appropriate to argue that African aesthetic creativity is an objectification of cultural experiences through the imaginative skill of the individual. The creative object embodies some communal values, sentiments, beliefs, ideas, and moral visions. Consider the making of *adire* in Yoruba culture. *Adire* means “that which is tied and dyed.” *Adire* is the traditional Yoruba hand painted cloth on which patterns are made by tying and stitching with raffia or cotton thread, or by using chicken feathers to paint cassava paste on the cloth which then acts as a resist dye, much like the wax method used on the batiks. *Adire* is creatively designed and used to make different wears and worn by the Yorubas (and now by any other tribe). It is a traditional Yoruba art fabric made by women and worn during the traditional religious supplications or for the purpose of communicating specific socially-coded messages. The patterns on *Adire* are encoded messages for the women in the community or for the member.²⁸ Traditionally, it is a cultural attire. However, there

are some individuals who have distinguished themselves in the making of *adire*. In the designs, they objectify the cultural experiences while expressing some beliefs, values and moral emotions through the patterns on the cloths.

The author had the opportunity of engaging one of the *adire* artists, Nike Okundaye, who specializes in painting and textile designs. Nike Okundaye, a Yoruba indigene of Nigeria, is the owner of Nike Center for Art and Culture, Osogbo established in 1983. Nike Center for Art and Culture, Osogbo, is a center for Yoruba “Adire” fabric processing and African traditional dyeing methods. She established other centers such as Nike Art Galleries at Lagos, Abuja, and Ogidi-Ijumu near Kabba in Kogi State, Nigeria that functions as a weaving and *adire*-making training center. In an informal interview with her, she reveals that in the past, women design the creative patterns in *adire* to pass or transmit messages to the women in the community. The designs are used as a medium for moral instructions and teaching of different cultural values and beliefs. At the same time, the fabrics are designed to appeal to aesthetic senses. African aesthetic creativity is traditional culture-dependent, social, aesthetic, functional, and symbolic. It delights the senses and provides a framework for value orientations, knowledge and moral. Can all these be said of the contemporary art production in the contemporary Nigerian society?

PROBLEMS CONFRONTING CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART

Can it be rightly said that contemporary African aesthetic creativity provides interpretative frameworks and symbols for cultural values and moral orientations? What implication does the condition of contemporary African art have for moral aesthetic and value in the society? These questions are necessary because it is obvious that African cultures are undergoing changes that impact on various aspects of human development, culture, economy, philosophy, politics, and art. To be sure, colonization, which was largely a process of domination, imposed Western criteria of rational value and concepts on the social fabric of African life. Because there were no art institutions or art as conceived by the European, it was declared as stated earlier that Africans did not have an idea of art and aesthetic appreciation. It took artists like Picasso, Vlaminck, Matisse, and Derain, who used aspects or elements of African art in their own works to begin to change this Western perception of African art.

Also, African scholars have tried to show that the idea of art existed—and still exists—in African societies. We argue that despite the concerted struggle to emancipate African art from Western denigration and imposition of rational category, African artistic productivity and aesthetic appreciation are affected by two interdependent conditions. The first is the struggle to meet up with the Western criteria of rational value; an adjustment to the Western rational criteria of value. The second is the quest for wealth, or materialism and commercialization.

Adjustment to Western Criteria of Value

There is a conscious and unconscious attempt by the African artist to adjust to meet up with the Western criteria of value. Accordingly, African artworks are created to appeal to the delight and interest of the west. This attempt is gradually undermining the moral elements that characterize African art. Some scholars like Wiredu and Oladipo have used the phrase “catch up with” the west to make a similar description. The sentiment is that there is a tilt towards meeting the approval of aesthetic appreciation by the Western prescription. The tilt tends to undermine cultural standards of evaluation and neglect of relevant cultural values.

It leads to cultural adaptation. To be sure, cultural adaptation is not wrong, but just as Ivor Powell, in *Ndebele: A People and Their Art* (1995) has argued, cultural adaptation can lead to disappearance of the adapting culture, and we can add, especially values that help to civilize human spirit and cultivate the society for humanistic development. Thus, rational, critical, and conscious cultural adaptation is more relevant than unreflective adaptation. The fact is that in an attempt to meet up with external criteria of value, art creators are imperceptibly undermining the basic moral elements of our social life.

Materialism and Commercialization

One of the conditions which seem to determine art creation in Nigeria is materialism and commercialization. The artists make their works according to the demand of the market. Music, masks, beadworks, painting, and so on are made according to the demand of the market—internal or external. Artworks meant for external market, which is for the Western customers are designed to attract attention and delight. In this regard, moral visions are undermined as long as it satisfies the material desires of

the artist, who twists his artwork to please the external buyers and brings food to the table. Wilkson calls this commercialization of African art.²⁹ While some contemporary music in Nigeria attempts to communicate valuable ideas grounded in morals, most are just put together for commercial purposes without any rational foundation, meaning or morals. For instance, when you listen to most contemporary music in Nigeria, one hears lyrics that project vices that corrupt the minds of the youth rather than point to the direction of virtuous existence. The two different but related conditions that influence contemporary art productions have, in no doubt, affected largely the moral values that were part of the fabric of African art production upon which social life is cultivated.

AFRICAN AESTHETIC CREATIVITY AND MORAL PURPOSE

We suggest that the contemporary aesthetic creativity is confronted by the general problems of social existence. We are living in an era of globalization where Western cultures are having determining effects on the African cultural realities. Accordingly, most African artists are adjusting towards Western criteria of value where materialism and commercialization are playing a determining role in the direction of aesthetic creativity due to the quest for survival and existential comfort. This gravitation towards materialistic criteria of value is eroding the fundamental social bonds, social cooperation and unity that traditional African Art fosters. It has, therefore, become expedient to seek for balance and adopt an attitude in which the artists create aesthetic forms of art that are worthy of African cultural dignity and capable of generating social platforms for the civilization of the human character.

In order to be very relevant in the contemporary time and without undermining the moral purpose of African art, the artist needs to adopt the prognostic attitude. Prognostic attitude requires the ability to challenge the existential situation. In this sense, an artist becomes both an imitator of reality and its critique. In other words, an artist should not be limited by the quest for materialism and Western criteria of value. The criteria of value should be African and moral. The artist is a being in a cultural space. The culture requires the artists' contribution to socio-moral reordering. The artist in Africa should consciously attempt to reconstitute the reality around them in new forms within the context of social morality, through their artistic interpretation of reality.

The artists should make more effort to recapture African socio-cultural feeling with contemporary aesthetic instruments. According to Susan Langer, one primary function of art is to objectify emotions so that we can contemplate and understand it.³⁰ When we have appreciated it, we can employ the acquired knowledge for social good. The artist should attempt to codify and objectify those cultural feelings that would create moral space for social bonds.

CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made to interrogate the moral status of the contemporary African aesthetic creativity. It is revealed that aesthetic creativity in contemporary Africa is largely determined by the quest for material value. This quest has gradually shifted the interest of aesthetic creators away from realizing the moral purpose of African aesthetic creativity. To reaffirm African cultural moral interest, there is a need for the artist to adopt moral prognostic attitude—to make conscious effort, not only to represent the existential cultural experience but present symbolic narrative that would interpret and reconstitute the cultural experiences within the context of social morality.

NOTES

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12. Plato, *Republic*, bk x; Hellen Buss Mitchell, *Reading from the Roots of Wisdom: A Multicultural Reader* (USA: Wadworth, 2001), 210.
13. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 6, 8, 9, 14.
14. Mitchell, *Reading from the Roots of Wisdom: A Multicultural Reader*, 201.
15. Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (New York: Anchor, 1964), 56–54.
16. Langer, *The Cultural Importance of Art*, 88–94.
17. Mitchell, *Reading from the Roots of Wisdom: A Multicultural Reader*, 227.
18. Ali, *Reading from the Roots of Wisdom: A Multicultural Reader*, 21.
19. Modestus N. Onyeaghalaji, “Philosophy and Social Purpose: Appraising African Socio-Political Philosophy,” in *A Study in African Socio-Political Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Okeregebe et al. (Lagos: University of Lagos Press, 2012), 246.
20. Wilkinson, “Using and Abusing African Art,” 383.
21. Sophie B. Oluwole, *Katanfuru: Who Are (They/We) Africans?* (Lagos: Ark Publishers, 2015), 6.
22. Ibid.
23. Wilkinson, “Using and Abusing African Art,” 383.
24. Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*, 127.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 398.
28. Nike Okundaye has an unpolished work where she describes different Adire prints with various patterns and designs. She explains their significance and messages that are encoded in the designs. See also Nike Okundaye, “Adire: An Unspoken Language,” 7–9, an Unpublished Work.
29. Wilkinson, “Using and Abusing African Art,” 389.
30. Langer, *The Cultural Importance of Art*, 225.



CHAPTER 14

From Saartjie to Queen Bey: Black Female Artists and the Global Cultural Industry

Olivier J. Tchouaffe

INTRODUCTION

This chapter's proposal is this: had she been alive today, Saartjie Baartman would have been like Beyoncé, or, Beyoncé is the contemporary Saartjie Baartman. By bringing Saartjie Baartman and Beyoncé Knowles together, this chapter relies on these elective affinities and connective thread that binds both black female celebrities to raise attention to the conceptual blind spots that affect the studies of Black female artists in the global cultural industry and particularly the relationships between genders, practices of power and forms of determinism, the legacy of obstacle and oppositional politics. At issue is how Saartjie Baartman, "The Hottentot Venus," became the archetypal figure of the famed buttocks. She found herself caught up between the work of Charles Darwin on scientific evolution and a P.T. Barnum-like freak show; cultural machines in perpetual search for the ideal savage to feed its gigantic spectacle apparatus. The whole project led to a gigantic

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conspiracy between science and spectacle perfectly captured in Abdellatif Kechiche's *Black Venus* (2010).

From the opening shots of the film, we see how Saartjie Baartman's case shaped the debate of the nineteenth century around the question of the unity of the human species and the gradation of the lower species of beings. Kechiche allows the audience to understand how the Western perception of human diversity was made from the very concrete view of white men in frock coats on nude black bodies. Also, this was also the foundation of white political equality and democracy on the back of blacks.¹ Baartman, moreover, was asked to play the part of the perfect ideal savage to fit the Eurocentric perception of nature and humanity. She was turned into a puppet character who babbles a wild language built to match the kind of racialized spectacle the growing white middle class, created by the industrial revolution, came to appreciate in the nineteenth century. On Baartman, multiple histories come into focus; notably, the history of colonization, science and the growing global cultural industry.

In *Black Venus*, the notion of the Hottentot Venus might come as pejorative but the label "Venus" was part of the fetishization of the black female body and the creation of a global industry of fantasy, desire, and marketability that gives a license to a voyeuristic crowd to act on these fantasies. In an additional sense, much ground still needs to be covered regarding an in-depth critical analysis on how the genealogy of the categories of gender, race, sexuality, and bankability are institutionalized and reproduce structures of inequality through the global cultural industry. In this industry, power, desire, and fantasies are manipulated, commodified, packaged, and sold to a captive audience. Consequently, it is a necessity to be attentive to the kind of racial, gender, and marketability politics black female artists have to face in the cultural industry that has less to do with talents than codified obstacles to their well-deserved achievements.

When I first studied Saartjie Baartman in graduate school, I was not aware that she could speak five languages, was an excellent and accomplished singer and dancer, enjoyed shopping, and had boyfriends from various backgrounds. In sum, she was a very self-aware and motivated modern woman for her age. She was not how she was constantly represented: an unconscious mute presence; a mummified icon of black female unlivable body and colonial victimhood. Consequently, the necessity to dig up Saartjie Baartman from the grave of white supremacy where she

was buried six feet under with her message effectively erased. Moreover, the necessity to account for different kinds of perspectives and tradition over this traumatic colonial history Saartjie Baartman came to embody unwillingly.

LEMONS AND LEMONADE

This chapter, in an additional sense, emphasizes the profound if somewhat invisible ways, Beyoncé's global success does justice to the career Saartjie Baartman was meant to have but never did because her skills were devalued by the Eurocentric politics of the cultural industry. This work attributes Beyoncé's success to her boldness to challenge the legacy of obstacles Baartman faced: the global socio-economic order that Jemima Pierre defines as anti-black.² This is where Beyoncé picks up in her album, *Lemonade*, to state that "I was served lemons, but I made lemonade." As with *Lemonade* and Baartman, Beyoncé, first, acknowledges how horrible things can happen to very good people. She then maps out the precarious terrain black female artists have to operate. To Beyoncé, she has had to make space for herself, to take what is hers, and show no patience to suffer fools. Thus, Beyoncé's success shines a light, unpacks, and lays bare the oppressive racial and gender categories, false dichotomies, the nature of exploitation of black female artist as the effects of the racist political economy, and ritualized forms of anti-black politics within the global cultural industry. In doing so, Beyoncé acts as a powerful manifestation of black female power to overcome a history of violence embedded in racial and gender barriers that Baartman could not overcome on her own but paid with poise and dignity.

Consequently, the recurrent emphasis in this work is that this historical duet reflects the society of their times and struggles, allows for a deep analysis on the integrated world they both produced, and what has remained unchanged over the years. In that universe, there are no intentions for mimicry and unproductive polemics. At work, in a crucial sense, are the ways Beyoncé managed to succeed by building her autonomy and agency drawing on an alternative network of community and artistic expertise. In her works, *Flawless* and *Formation*, Beyoncé reaches deep into the story of her origin, the legacy of slavery and the civil right movement as resources for emancipatory politics. She emerges as a Yoruba goddess, Osun, to emphasize trans-continental African tradition and her return to these traditions correspond to a calculated effort to

expand the function of the black female artist by providing fundamental insights on the genealogy of black spectral power. These significant references serve to complicate the role of the artist in this global popular culture in relation to time and the sacred, and the kind of recognition the black female artist deserves. Part of this has to do with thinkers such as Walter Benjamin with his notion of “profane illumination,” and the work of Pacome Thiellement who argued that the difficulties may come from a global music scene drowned out by the kitsch, noise, and out of control consumerism of the post-industrial secular societies.³ As a result, a lack of education about the residual power of the aura and secret knowledge embedded in cultural practices including some forms of global popular culture.

The greatest challenge for me was that Baartman never came up as a real living person. It was not until I watched Abdellatif Kechiche’s *Black Venus* that the movie provided a new epistemological structure to form new associations between Baartman and life, and not solely death.⁴ In *Black Venus*, Kechiche proposes that the line between success and servitude is very thin for a black female artist. In *Formation*, even Beyoncé has to defend herself against charges of being an “Illuminati” stooges or a “slave to the cultural industry.”⁵ Kechiche and Beyoncé point out that these artists are not simply unconscious presence. Instead, as with their unique embodied experiences, they signal black female artist’s tendency to become a “trickster.” In African folklore, the trickster is a person with a plenty of mischief and knowledge but who is, often not perceived as such⁶ because the trickster operates on the trilogy of self-knowledge, epistemology, and perception. The trickster communicates new language and new wisdom whose significance is reserved only for those who have reached a form of self-knowledge and maturity that only life experience can provide. This is an important difference between transmission, self-knowledge, and self-discovery. So the knowledge provided by the trickster is a not a form of transmitted knowledge but a knowledge that comes from within the individual.

My attraction to this work, consequently, is to pay attention to the condition of knowledge produced around these female artists and the complexity of black female epistemology. For example, Kechiche starts *Black Venus* with a “scientific expose” by the then respected figure of Pr. Cuvier dissecting at length how Saartjie Baartman belongs to a different yet endangered branch of *homo sapiens* en route extinction. The joke here is on Cuvier who despite his academic credentials and the respect he

inspired in the halls of the French academia, had no wisdom. Kechiche opens with a shot of Cuvier and a freeze-framed shot of the mummified Saartjie Baartman to demonstrate how academic knowledge institutionalizes itself to legitimate white supremacy. This work also recognizes that even the work of Beyoncé has been attacked in the academia by scholars such as bell hooks. There is a need to rephrase these attacks as opportunities to discuss conceptual blind spot when it comes to Black female artist research in the global cultural industry. Charles W. Mills' notion of "cognitive handicap" and its implications on black female artist's research is an important tool for that reflection.⁷ Mills studies how the interests of dominant groups shape "cognition, influence what and how we see, what we and society choose to remember, whose testimony is solicited and who is not and which facts and frameworks are sought and accepted."⁸

Dominant groups tend to be afflicted by some types of cognitive handicaps that distort their perception of reality. On the other side, some oppressed groups developed a form of "epistemic privileges" when it comes to the inner working of oppression. Consequently, the role that power and domination play in epistemic practices and the necessity to pay close attention to notions of epistemic impunity. To overcome that "cognitive handicap," there is a need to recognize that Beyoncé's work is about a new practice of productive citizenship inscribed within the situated knowledge that is embedded into the definition of an authentic experience rooted in the everyday life of blackness and the global cultural industry. Beyoncé participates in the redefinition and the maintenance of new epistemic forms and a production of a new epistemic order to complicate Bewaji's notion of "Epistemicide."⁹ "Epistemicide" defines stylized violence, anti-black politics and how, in essence, western metaphysics helps the reproduction of black suffering. Around this "Epistemicide" is the necessity to reconnect with notions of racialized time, reverse genealogy and the production of new fields of intelligibility as new forms of emancipatory politics regarding psychic and spiritual coherence. In short, the redefinition of a conventional dominant economy of global Black female discourse.

Vitaly, these new forms of attentiveness have to be aware of the inner working of global capital dominated by white supremacy and mediating access to resources and privileges on race and gender basis. This reality is highlighted by scholars such as Kevin Cokley and the uses of skin color for the allocation of privileges, and the disadvantage based on skin color.¹⁰

Even more so, how liberalism thrives on anti-black politics and has psychological and material consequences that are fatal. More particularly, the struggle of black female artists in a white-dominated cultural industry where Beyoncé's experience and the built-in epistemic privileges provide a crucial social epistemology that allows for an analysis of the determinisms black female artists have to confront in that cultural industry. How Beyoncé helps us challenge our unexamined subjective position when it comes to black female artists and how that ignorance plays in the lack of recognition, validation and the social and physical death of artists such as Saartjie Baartman,

It was also reported, moreover, that Beyoncé has shown interest in adapting the life of Saartjie Baartman for the screen. The point here is not, whether or not, she denied it but the pronounced evidence that she understands the black female struggle in the cultural industry within a framework that Jemima Pierre defines as "global structures that were, and are, anti-Black."¹¹ As with work such as *Flawless, Formation and Freedom*, Beyoncé positions herself as a black trans-media brand and a global consumer activist signaling a genuine interest in black political activism on the most significant contemporary civil right issues—slavery history, African colonization, and the lasting effects of these crimes against humanity. This is where Zandria Robinson in her critique of *Formation*, underscores the importance of "coordination" to "community organizing and resistance," especially the critical participation of "blackness on the margins." Indeed, it is this coordinated, communal "formation" that she observes in the album and which she eponymously titled the last track. Note that the track, "Formation" is placed at the end of the album, accompanying the film's credits, thereby acknowledging the names of all those involved in its making.¹²

In *Freedom*, moreover, Beyoncé sings about the blind spots created by and within the Enlightenment discourse, which accommodated slavery. For example, Enlightenment thinkers primarily commented on slavery as the failure of human sympathy, rarely addressing the humanity of the enslaved body. By placing emancipation within the purview of a reformed white sensibility (that is, at the behest of white Europeans to enslaved Africans), they deployed liberty and freedom as racialized terms. The imagination of freedom within Enlightenment thought could thus remain untroubled by the empirical reality of the black body and even rely upon this reality's erasure within much of the period's art and visual culture.¹³

NATIVE CONTEXT

Precisely, this work is drawn to Baartman and Beyoncé as a pre-text to historicize black female creative power on multiple levels. Beyoncé, I assert, is what Saartjie Baartman would have been if the racial and gender game had not been rigged by Eurocentric racial imperialism and global capitalist relations of production. To put it another way, Saartjie Baartman lives through Beyoncé as a spectral presence and an embodied experience now unbound, unbought, and un-bossed; a demonstration of the power of imagination and capacity for self-reinvention, and the importance of transgression in capitalist relations of production and desire. This connection between Saartjie Baartman and Beyoncé Knowles, aka “Queen Bey,” is also predicated on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of “Air de Famille.” Moreover, what Deleuze and Guattari define as rhizome (1980). The rhizome is about forms of interconnections that are not always visible. Taken together, how, in no small part, people can be different but similar and connected in many ways.¹⁴ Fittingly, it is important to clarify the resemblance between Baartman and Knowles, such as breaking up the complicity between white supremacy and the capitalism that still dominate the global cultural industry. To this extent, breaking down the concentric relationships between race, gender, ethics, aesthetics and the production of forms of black female lives.

Lastly, the connection between Baartman and Knowles are embedded in creative ways that theorize black female artists within a context of not becoming essentialized. Nevertheless, what can these bodies still do in environments that produce trauma? There is an existing affinity but it also needs to be re-invented constantly. Their different fortunes within the global cultural industry, consequently, constitute a reflection on the intersections of culture, economics, and history useful to highlight the forces of institutional creativity and advantages. How these new forms of institutional privileges translate on both sides of the ownership structures of production and consumption apparatuses are indicative of creative ways to achieve values and material payoffs that emphasize the power of self-reinvention. Saartjie Baartman could not achieve that objective. Beyoncé, however, did justice making the success of black female artists in the cultural industry a viable option.

To this end, consequently, this work goes on to reflect on the complicated usage of the past in popular culture, the multiplicity and inter-penetration of past, present and future, particularly, how economic history and artistic entrepreneurship is a legitimate site to discuss

black female empowerment and politics. That said, the creative work of Baartman and Beyoncé allow this work to confront a stylized genealogy of racialized valuation, devaluation, invaluableity, and the attributed gendered non-conformity in the development of a global popular culture industry from the objectification of Baartman to the self-made, self-defining, and powerful global iconography of Beyoncé. The aim is to emphasize the difference between alliterative non-entities, un-signified fleshes, to a new politics of recognition and entitlement claims. This new emphasis locates forms of the agency through the power of enunciation. Throughout history, black female artists have had to confront Eurocentric standards; the insurmountable task to overcome the weight of expectation in Western society. They have pushed against the struggle to adapt to Western perception of the Black female body and finding agency within a Eurocentric hierarchy of visibility and the re-appropriation of the black female gaze and agency as Beyoncé has done.

SAARTJIE BAARTMAN

This author delineates, at the outset, the symbolic economy of nineteenth-century global cultural industry and the powerful role that external structures such as capitalist relations of production, corporate administrative hegemony, and social arrangements came to bear upon the development of that global cultural industry and market economy formation. I reflect on the ways this development creates modes of knowledge and practices that conspire to produce alienation and exploitation for black female artists, such as Saartjie Baartman, the woman who was brought from South Africa in the early nineteenth century to be marketed to European sightseers as the “Hottentot Venus.” She was displayed like a caged animal in London. She was routinely violated sexually and even in death, she found no respite. She was still dissected by European scientists after her death; her brain and genitals pickled and put on display in a museum. Baartman turned out into the personification of what Giorgio Agamben calls bare or naked life.¹⁵ She personifies the interlocking forms of violence used against black women—the layering of sexual, scientific, economic, and political exploitation—and how these practices remain sharp and devastating in the contemporary.

Baartman, an object of cruel and inhumane form of de-subjectification, was stripped of individuality and objectified through the racist gaze of nineteenth-century freak shows in Europe. In no small part, this study recognizes that natural ability and talent in themselves are not enough

to guarantee equality of access and prestige within the global cultural industry. Consequently, a history of western imperialism, the monopoly of finance, aesthetic codes and libidinal economy of desire must be accounted for when producing the global artistic cannon. One must also consider a proper balance between the historical context, the material condition, resources inherent to the artistic success, the moral economy, and the ethics of cultural production regarding the production of cultural objects and the creation of enchantment circles. I will also be investigating how the artistic economy helps create associational autonomy, communal practices, and communicate specific forms of sociality around the cultural object to challenge the foundational presupposition upon which power is founded.

Saartjie Baartman's experience shows that Eurocentric power lay down its laws and practices through the symbolic. In turn, liminal spaces and performance explain why global popular mass culture can turn into a powerful contested terrain for the ways it poses the quintessential question of the mutable nature of existing laws and human right issues; the role that global mass popular culture can contribute in a world in constant need of reinvention and transformation. At the same time, the economics of art production facilitates a sociology of power and artistic production that planks artistic success on the contingencies of skin color, linguistic competence, body, and other aesthetic codes. Taken together, how cultural work participates in the production of objective and subjective practices embedded in particular logic and meaning. The point is to match both theory and action to explore practical horizon of possibilities in historicizing black female body and anti-black politics. I do this to emphasize forms of mediation in terms of artistic reception and the necessities of new practices of recognition that challenge and disrupt routine ways of seeing and negotiating historical structures of race, gender, and inequality.

BAARTMAN: THE MAKING OF AN ICON

Saartjie Baartman was labeled, "Hottentot Venus" and "the queen of freak show" although scholars such as Bernth Lindfors note that freak shows in Eurocentric culture were not solely racial. Race, however, was a defining factor in human exhibition. Black bodies were exhibited alongside broken white bodies that did not align with what white imagination thought fell below the perfection of their racial bodies.¹⁶ Saartjie Baartman's story has been narrated in artistic works such as

Zola Maseko's *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* (1999), Abdellatif Kechiche's *Black Venus* (2010), and *Venus*, by playwright Suzan-Lori Parks. They depict a complex victim: Baartman, ambitious and determined despite facing horror after horror, was still reluctant to simply give up and return home with nothing. Baartman's victimhood was thus not a lack of agency; it was that she was playing a rigged game. Each time Baartman fights for something better, she opens up the door to losses that are more devastating. The white doctor who both objectifies and falls in love with her is mocked for his affection. He thinks of her not as a partner, but as a scientific discovery that can advance his career. In the play, he sleeps with her, abandons her, and then dissects her. He writes up his analysis of her body in a scientific paper. Parks' play is particularly unsparing in its view of how the political debate and controversy over Baartman—her significance to English morals, to the abolition movement, to the sexual fantasies of English men and women, to the court of law that investigated whether she was being abused—was just one more layer of exploitation. Her body on display provided intellectual titillation for the thinkers of the day.

Only one person in the play is kind to Venus: Kevin Mambo, the Negro Resurrectionist; the play's narrator and the black prison guard paid to dig up corpses for scientific analysis. He knows he cannot save Venus. He knows he will be blackmailed into betraying her and giving her body up to scientists. Nevertheless, he stands witness as she lies abandoned, dying of disease and endless days of cold, mistaking the sound of rain for the far-off patter of applause. Near the end of the play, Mambo stands for a few moments with the body of a woman who has been killed by the violence of the spectacle visited upon her. The body is Baartman's, and it is also, in the absolute presence Mambo brings to that moment, many other bodies; many other determined black men and women and children who lost a rigged game. He waits with her body. He treats it with respect. His tenderness is revolutionary. Resistance is one body shielding another body. It is a man trapped in the system, a man without power or name, who has not given up his gentleness.

This observation is important to trace a history of desire beginning with Saartjie Baartman to Beyoncé Knowles. Moreover, how that desire complicates dominant racial logic and global racialized politics of desire where the acceptance of alternative forms of kinship structure can constitute a powerful radical political act. Hence, transgressing the racialized

hierarchy of desire where the white man and the white women are positioned on top, while the black man and the black woman are relegated at the bottom is imperative.¹⁷ This transgression not only disrupts white supremacist's notion of desirability, but it also raises the issues of how black female creative work and aesthetics come to be the central hub to explore non-white female processes of embodiments. Moreover, the sophisticated deployment of black female subjectivities on multiple levels such as the quotidian lives, intentional and conscious oppositional politics sparks incandescent aesthetic energy. This force animates the power of black sound and visual aesthetics to reconfigure and mediate claims of dignity between the material constraints and the brutal intrusions of the affective economy generated by the entanglements produced by Eurocentric dominated capitalist practices. In addition, anti-black politics that produce discursive practices that allow these bodies to be policed, often-according to Eurocentric politics of respectability and the institutionalized disciplinary power that assign psychic structures, identities, and opportunities- aim to de-politicize and disable black female conscious oppositional politics within the status quo. As I go along in this chapter, I highlight black female creative work and new techniques of representation and rituals deployed to express new creative formations and positions that maps new formations of resistance and unmasks naturalized oppressive social norms and the complacency and laziness of assumptions that come packaged with these disciplinary processes. Baartman lifted the veil of the racism and greed that underline the civilizing modernist project and the enlightenment, including the moral shortcoming of abolitionists in England who did not recognize her as an artist ultimately thwarting her chance to get into a willing legal contract with her manager Hendricks Cesar who sued her.¹⁸

BAARTMAN, BEYONCÉ, AND THE GLOBAL CULTURAL INDUSTRY

Saartjie Baartman and Beyoncé historicize and juxtapose black females' struggles to challenge the allocation of symbolic, cultural, and economic power within a system dominated by white supremacy and the color caste system. These two black women are exemplars of the struggle to achieve their own capital by becoming their best materials, production, and earning sources. In focusing on the black female power of imagination and the capacity for action within these imaginative practices, this work emphasizes the production of safe spaces of communication

for new conceptual logics and authentic self-realization. These processes build upon a wide range of issues: from the quest for consciousness and a tactile reality through political, social or artistic sovereignty, to the reclamation of the figure of the artist to reconfigure artistic sovereignty in terms of the re-interpretation of black archives, and, strengthening black communal utopia. Including also, how these processes are historically institutionalized or contested. As such, this analysis will pay close attention to the fetishized black female body and the internal contradictions embedded in claims of aesthetic autonomy and sovereignty and Black progressive feminist practices in a modern neoliberal society dominated by the constraints of an affective economy and material processes that challenge the black female's claims for dignity.

Bernth Lindfors allows this work to tackle the struggles between assigned identities and issues of aesthetic dispositions, sovereignty, and autonomy. The struggle to define universal aesthetic judgments and the roles that specific historical, political and intellectual discursive context embedded in the state and corporate disciplinary power play in shaping the self-definition, self-understanding and the reception of the black female artist's work add to the difficulties of defining stable concepts of the black artistic canon. By doing so, this paper aims to offer a diverse method to establish a legitimate line from Sarah Baartman to Beyoncé. Mine is an attempt to stretch the semantic field of the Black woman activism and communally shared experiences through encounters with primal, visceral, physical, and psychic sites where ordinary black lives encounter and resist hegemonic practices and norms. These cultural processes give insights into complicated issues of race, gender representation, subjective investments and popular culture, cultural ownership, acquisition, and appropriation re-branding. Their particular history of racialization and objectification, create new ways to think about black female canonical representation, performative and embodied practices, cultural authority and notions of practical versus theoretical knowledge and the danger of black female essentialism and monolithic frameworks.¹⁹

BLACK VENUS (2010)

I speculate the conjoining of Beyoncé's icon power with Saartjie Baartmaan's narrative by those who wanted the former to tell the latter's story through the prism of *La Venus Noire* (Black Venus), by

Franco-Tunisian Abdellatif Kechiche. Baartmaan's body is the ultimate real female black body for the cruelty that was imposed on her. In the film, Kechiche pins down Eurocentric gender normative power that was operating and being enforced in real time. This author, however, claims that the body has no value without the marks he can exhibit. Being alive is to feel the effects of time. Incidentally, Alain Badiou defines the real and the body as, "The real always ends up offering itself as an ordeal on the body."²⁰ The idea that the only real body is the tortured body, the body dismembered by the real, is a terrifying but ancient one. The wound is what testifies the body's exposure to the real. Badiou goes on to discuss the dialectic between the wounded body, the real body, and the impassive body; a body that remains to the status of an idea to highlight the idea that wounds of history always leave their marks on the body.²¹

Kechiche's *Black Venus*, by emphasizing the iconography of Baartman and the production of fantasy, interpretation and values around her body, challenges conventional Eurocentric logic of its symbolic system.²² Kechiche's aim is to create a space to discuss reception practices through ontological and metaphysical theories, and interlocking issues such as the nineteenth-century capitalist infrastructure and its ideological superstructure, the enigma of the beginning, hegemony versus domination, the negotiation between affective and ideological economies, black female bodies, desire, values and capitalism in its *longue duree*. *Black Venus* tackles these issues in the light of the nineteenth century anti-black politics. These anti-black politics are embedded in changes that run through the nascent industrial era. In addition, new ideas are coming to the fore such as the interlocking discourses of the mystic of progress, democratic utopia, freedom, and liberty. Moreover, sociological production and personal agency, sciences and its techniques have been sources of inspiration. There has been an arousal of the capacity to resolve problems, the development of mass-culture, the rise of middle-class prestige, privileges, culture and tastes, cultural democracy, and modernity. In addition, the creation of new lifestyles, and the relationship of art versus science that informed Baartman's world view are still valid in contemporary culture and carried on by figures of celebrity such as Beyoncé.

Baartman clears the ground for black female bodies and the extent to which global popular culture is wired and rewired around black female bodies. These figures become vessels to process model of identification, recognition, affect, and desire in a capitalist economy transformed by neoliberalism and individual entrepreneurship. Therefore, the discourse

and linguistic practices around these black female bodies have to be addressed; how the black body is never on time but always subject to compilations of fractured moments that never coalesce into a stable identity because it never settles into a representational adequacy predicated on healing the wounds of its traumatic past. Thus, language can be a creative asset to render the black body “Contemporain,” that is, to solve the conundrum of representational adequacy.²³ The method should be about language and its comprehension within the notion of usage and time. Moreover, how the concepts that we use have complex structures that are not reducible to essentialist interpretations. Baartmaan and Beyoncé are social facts that highlight processes community built around icons and symbols and the notion of collective construction and questions of practical knowledge, established knowledge and stability of knowledge creating spaces for creativity and progress.

Another message is to discuss what is considered normal. Reality shows today feature a contingent of new freaks that are productions of modernity. These cultural processes are uncoupled from what Beyoncé sings in *Formation* where she shows both allegiances to singing craft and the notion of the genealogy and the sublime and the carnivalesque. In *Formation*, Beyoncé draws her inspiration from the carnivalesque produced by marginalized black cultures from Louisiana and Alabama to contrast these cultural processes with the artificiality of the official culture. The carnivalesque heavily draws from black spiritual and ritualistic practices through patterns of creativity flows like the rhythm of the season and serves different functions such as cultural transmission through initiation, understanding of rituals, images and statues, representation and ecstatic transcendence. These cultural processes help to investigate logics and systems of dominance and eugenic practices.

Here, Kechiche links between the relationship with art and nature with the knowledge that if nature lets beauty die, art is the site of preservation and immortality. Art is the place where humankind can resist nature’s regular cycle of life and death. Second, movies such as *Black Venus*, are, beyond their commercial nature, civic spaces and sites of dialogue driven by a unique power to capture timeless reality. Kechiche emphasizes the opening shots of his film to highlight the power of the cinematic poetic license to legitimate nobodies, a form of legitimation outside of conventional institutions drawing the line between expertise and ideology. Precisely, the relationship between knowledge, representation and gate-keeping versus agenda setting and the tyranny to conform. Hence, *Black*

Venus complicates, as with Cuvier, our contemporary obsession with geniuses: Einstein's brain being sliced and kept into jars; multiple movies about Steve Jobs; how the obsession with the geniuses and the unique is an obsession that challenges our so-called egalitarian democracy. What is more, Kechiche with the *Black Venus* demonstrates how violence on the body is not simply a projection but also a form of embodiment and the necessary distinction between the gaze and embodied experience.

Through the portrayal of Cuvier, furthermore, Kechiche also demonstrates how science participates in the formative attitudes about the perception of women and the politics surrounding gender equality. In so doing, Jaime Schultz writes in a 2005 essay, "Reactions to Williams's rear end are reminiscent of responses to Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman known as the 'Hottentot Venus,' a powerful symbol of racialized difference. Framed within a context of freakery, fascination with Baartman's backside contributed to prevalent ideas of black female deviance and hypersexuality." On that notion of gender and somatic knowledge, Jane Caputi writes in *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power, and Popular Culture* that, "while the phallus is deified, its female symbolic equivalent is everywhere stigmatized." It became synonymous with "irrationality, chaos, the depths, and the common." Cuvier symbolizes the connection between patriarchy, racial, and gender domination. His Eurocentric's class tribalism stems from the western institutional building, the role of capitalism, and the modern-state formation driven by Machiavellian's ethics. Thus, at the root of the modern crisis we are discussing, depersonalizing neoliberalist state capitalism, if you like, is about freedom and dignity. Moreover, the way forward is anarchism. As Dostoevsky puts it in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "Equality lies only in human moral dignity. Let there be brothers first, then there will be brotherhood, and only then will there be a fair sharing of goods among brothers."

Emmanuel Levinas, however, describes faces and the poverty of the faces as the least protected and vulnerable part of the body. The face is neither a function nor an object of knowledge and is therefore independent of any other form of subjectivity. Thus, the face reveals our own humanity or in-humanity. The face is the site of alterity and vulnerability, and Kechiche plays on that dichotomy between the spectators and the doctors. The spectacle offers rooms for Baartman to mediate between the representation and the gaze even though while with the doctors she is reduced to a thing. Here, Kechiche complicates notions of the gaze, voyeurism and possession, the ethics of spectacle, and the relationship with the other.

Saartje Baartman stood as an icon of race and sexual difference, but I argue that this assessment must be a secondary one. Primarily, Baartman was a product of the economic predation and desire industries, which were informed by the global hegemonic expansion of neoliberalism and biopower. Biopower became synonymous with the dehumanization of large segments of the world population leading to the creation of what Giorgio Agamben calls the *Homo Sacer*. The *homo sacer*, here, is the representation of the salariat and the imposition of money as the only form to access capital and therefore the hegemony of financial production over modes of labor and compensation which is also the consequence of political domination and the asymmetrical power between western Europe and Africa. Sarah Baartman becomes the faces of a regime of exchanges, global circulation of goods and services that are incredibly violent. This is where not only Baartman confronts forces beyond her, but she manages to create a culture that still endures in the way she confronts her own being-toward death in the processes of subjectification-de-subjectification.

CONCLUSION

This paper all is a reflection on the notion of performance, art and the trickster and the creation of necessity and new forms of knowledge. Beyoncé's congruence with Baartman can be understood within a continuity of forms of knowledge with the conception of the artist as a demiurge. The reality is that Baartman became depressed for not being recognized as an artist. Bernth Lindfors writes that there are evidence that she was an effective performer and that she had enough pride and agency to stand up for herself and recognize that the abolition of slavery did not lead to an enlightened view of the Africans.²⁴ I have looked at the ways we recognize social agents and transition, and how black female artists operate within a Eurocentric capitalist market that is often dominated by anti-black politics. Most importantly, the differentiation within the corporate creative industry and different modes of operations that allows the space for genuine black female subjectivities and politics to build new forms of archives as critical interpretative resources for new forms of sense-making and meaning-making. And, ultimately, how creative work, despite the attacks on artists such as Saartjie Baartman and Beyoncé, is an expression of the black female agency that resists these kinds of social norms, formations, and ideology.

NOTES

1. The work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his notion of the noble savage is very informative here.
2. Jemima Pierre, *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 134.
3. Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, vol. 5 (University of California Press, 1995). In addition, see Sandra Laugier and Albert Ogien, "Le populisme et le populaire," *Multitudes* 4 (2015): 45–58.
4. *Black Venus*, directed by Abdellatif Kechiche (Paris, France: MK2 Production, 2010), DVD.
5. Beyoncé begins *Formation* with the line "Y'all haters corny with that illuminati mess." The Illuminati is a sect often associated with devil worshipper of Baphomet the antichrist. The main point is that Beyoncé does not succeed by her own talent and *Formation* is to prove her critics wrong.
6. Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (London: Macmillan, 1997).
7. Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* 247 (2007): 15.
8. *Ibid.*, 24.
9. John Ayotunde Isola Bewaji, "Chapter One: Liberation Humanities?" *The Humanities and the Dynamics of African Culture in the 21st Century* (2017): 4.
10. Kevin Cokley, "Critical Issues in the Measurement of Ethnic and Racial Identity: A Referendum on the State of the Field," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 54, no. 3 (2007): 224; Beverly J. Vander et al., "Cross's Nigrescence Model: From Theory to Scale to Theory," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 29, no. 3 (2001): 174–200.
11. Pierre, *The Predicament of Blackness*, 134.
12. It must be noted that the title *Formation* is poly-semantic and might as well refer to Omi and Winant seminal work *Racial Formation* or even hints at militarized black feminist formation Beyoncé displayed during the Half-time show of Super Bowl. See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2014); *Ibid.*, "Racial Formations," *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States* 6 (2004): 13–22.
13. The term "liberty" is used more frequently in eighteenth-century discourse with regards to self-possession, but primarily with reference to property rights. "Freedom," especially in the wake of Kant, instead refers to the cognitive ability to deploy one's faculty of reason. But philosophical debates in the eighteenth century about the origins of language highlight some channels for putting these two terms into conversation.

14. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Investigations Philosophiques* (1936). Trad. P. Klossowski, Gallimard, 1961. In addition, see also Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Bloomsbury, 1988).
15. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
16. Bernth Lindfors, ed., *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); *ibid.*, *Early African Entertainments Abroad: From the Hottentot Venus to Africa's First Olympians* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).
17. Neal A. Lester and Maureen Daly Goggin, eds., *Racialized Politics of Desire in Personal Ads* (MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 134.
18. Writers such as Syreeta McFadden argues that the success of black female artists such as Beyoncé Knowles explains the backlashes of white reactionary masculinity embodied by the like of Donald Trump. See also Syreeta McFadden, "We're in an Amazing Black Cultural Moment. Can We Avoid the Backlash?" accessed May 16, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/15/black-american-culture-movement-identity-racism-political-art>.
19. Lauren Duca, "Politicizing Beyoncé: Controversy After University Cancels Black Feminism Class," last modified December 16, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/dec/16/politicizing-beyonce-rutgers-controversy-after-university-cancels-black-feminism-class>; Soraya Nadia McDonald, "Every 16-Year-Old in Sweden Will Receive a Copy of 'We All Should All Be Feminists'," last modified December 6, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/12/06/every-16-year-old-in-sweden-will-receive-a-copy-of-we-should-all-be-feminists/>.
20. Alain Badiou, "Cruelties," in *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 111–130.
21. *Ibid.*
22. The Black singer, Marian Anderson was known as the first "Venus Noire." More by casting Yahima Torres as the Black Venus, Kechiche had in mind the effect of the "bootylicious" fashion launched by the like of Beyonce turning the contemporary black icon into a figure of the "revenant" theorized by scholars such as Achille Mbembe in *Critique de la Raison Nègre* (2013). In it, Mbembe defined the revenant as a transfigurative survivor of capitalist genocidal anti-black politics and who live to testify.
23. Giorgio Agamben, *Qu'est-ce que le Contemporain?* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2008).
24. Lindfors, *Early African Entertainments Abroad*, 186, 196.
25. Reiss, *The Count of Montecristo*.

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