

Women and the Dynamics of Representation: Of Cooking, Cars, and Gendered Culture¹

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Introduction

In June of 2010 the African Women's Development Fund and the Lufodo Academy of Performing Arts (LAPA) took note of and entered into the raging and ongoing discussions about the Nollywood² film industry by organizing an African Women in Film Forum on the subject of "Women and the Dynamics of Representation". For some the existence of this industry is a reason for celebration, to others it is rather cause for anxiety. However, that such debates even rage is a sign that Nollywood has become an institution to reckon with.

Th[e] gargantuan production of video-films constitutes a social, economic and cultural phenomenon without precedent. It is culture that is not the reserve of the so-called 'cultured classes'. Aside from the music industry, there has never been any other aspect of African culture that has resonated in such a way, achieved such a high profile and above all made such a big impact on the population.³

Being an institution brings with it responsibilities. Nollywood can no longer be indulged as the "Johnny-come-lately" bad boy of movie making; recently recognized as the second largest movie-making business in the world, after Bollywood and before Hollywood. This means it produces more feature-length films (in video format)⁴ than industries of older standing such as in England and Italy. Thus, it is an industry that can no longer be treated as a child passing through its terrible twos. At the very least it is an industry that has gained its first degree, and we expect more of college graduates than we do of those still struggling through high school.

In many ways, a part of its success can be attributed to the phenomenon of technology. Nollywood is an industry that by and large skipped the film stage, and went first to video⁵, then was truly liberated by going digital. As with

music making, the symbiotic relationship between technology and creativity must be acknowledged. This even affects what I can call the social relations of film-making; as, for instance, that location work predominates over studio work, and, as is common with Black independent film makers in Europe and the United States, producers and directors and actors work constantly with each other in stable communities which resemble the early Hollywood contract studio system but without either the studios or the contracts, which has proved a way of promoting and supporting each other in their careers as artists.

The issues to be addressed by the film forum on “women and the dynamics of representation” have been of concern for those of us who have been thinking about such things as “representation” for centuries. But let me begin first with the word “dynamics”, a term that suggests forces that produce change or motion. Nollywood is indeed a force: the existence of such a mass of films, now available and watched in every corner of the globe, has indeed produced change. It is the nature of that change with respect to women that we are here to deliberate on - we are concerned here with what the force of the dynamo means for those of us embodied to walk this earth as women, and at this forum we are as concerned as much about women *in* film as women *on* film. That is, the dynamics of representation ultimately have as urgent a force when thinking of women in the film industry *behind* the scenes as in the more self-evident sense of women projected *on* the screen, which is my specific concern here.

Representation and Context: External Images

First, a confession, of sorts: much of my response to the issue of women in Nollywood film has been driven not simply by living outside of Africa most of my life, but more specifically by the fact that, beginning with my doctoral dissertation on “Images of Africa” in post-war popular fiction, questions of representations of Africa and of Black women have been the foundation of my career as a researcher and reader.

I have been in good company: how women are presented to audiences in various media has also been of concern for a number of women and women’s movements around the world. As human beings we all become concerned about how we are seen by others, how we are re-presented to the world, especially by others who do not count themselves as one of our number. And when we do not see ourselves reflected, or reflected as we would like, the

need for redress, to challenge the discrepancies between how we see ourselves and how we know ourselves to be seen, becomes a powerful driving force, and not just for women. It is of no small consideration, for it has led around the world to powerful social movements. As we know, centuries of being seen as “niggers”, being denigrated (which in its Latin root means literally to blacken or “niggerfy”), and being classified as social inferiors with attendant social consequences and legal restrictions—has led to revolutions from the American South to South Africa.

It is therefore an important context for this forum that it rests firmly in the arena of a very broad historical context, where issues concerning “the image of Africa” meet those concerning “the image of women”, black women in particular. In this regard, because of the former- the image of Africa- women of African descent have not always even been seen as a subset of “women” in general but somehow of a species apart from female humanity. Out there in the world the image of Africa, and the women in it or who have historically come from it, is not positive. There is no time to rehearse these images here, neither do I at this juncture wish to launch into a history of the genealogy of these images about which countless books have been written⁶, and numerous graduate and undergraduate courses taught by people like myself.

In ‘the West’ we are still ‘the dark continent.’ In today’s more politically correct world we speak more euphemistically of ‘underdevelopment’, ‘necessary aid’, ‘culture bound’ etc. Yet our people are still somehow spoken of as lesser, less intelligent, less capable, less...whatever! Among the list of works we could turn to regarding Black women and representation, perhaps the best iconic figure is that of the silenced Sarah Baartman, erased of name and history, body on display in life, body parts on display in death.

Yet why does this anxiety about historical images matter? Surely we tell ourselves the marketing of such images is over, or, since we have become independent, we have control of our own representation, so what does the colonial past matter? It matters for two reasons: the first is that the success of Nollywood means that what we do is avidly received in those very places that have created and marketed these negative images, and they have not gone away. The second is indeed that the major audience is ourselves, *whether at home or abroad*, (a point to which I must return), so what are we telling ourselves and the rest of the world about ourselves? Are we countering or feeding this legacy of hostile images of ourselves?

The Nollywood film industry, willingly or unwittingly, carries on its shoulders the hopes and expectations of us Africans whom it is presumed to represent. In the realm of popular culture this is what film has come to do. Perhaps the situation can be compared to the burdens placed on the shoulders of African-American writers in the middle of the twentieth century, who had to grapple with the interface between artistic freedom and social expectations. Was Richard Wright⁷ justified in creating a monster like Bigger Thomas to prove his ideological point that desperate social circumstances beyond one's control produce desperate people, or did he merely validate the negative stereotype that all young Black men are brutes and rapists? A generation later, when Alice Walker gave us Celie in *The Color Purple*, was she showing how, no matter what the degradations, women's sisterhood and solidarity could lead to personal emancipation or was she justly accused of merely adding further fuel to the fire engulfing the besieged masculinity of Black men⁸.

It is not insignificant that the furor over *The Color Purple* blazed more furiously, leading to demonstrations against the actors and the picketing of the Oscars when it was turned into a successful film by Steven Spielberg in 1985.⁹ It is not necessary to say, especially in a forum such as this, that, in terms of contemporary entertainment, film is arguably the most popular art form of narrative communication around the world today. Something that causes a spark when published in print can turn into a forest fire when presented on the screen. Controversial as the novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* was when published in 1960 by Nikos Kazantzakis, that uproar paled when compared to the fury unleashed when it was made into a film directed by Martin Scorsese and reached a much wider general audience in 1988. It can also work the other way: I am sure J.K. Rowling, the writer of the Harry Potter series of children's books, today goes to the bank quite happy that she need never write another word in life if she doesn't choose to! Nollywood faces the same agonies and choices that all the other '-woods' have faced. The point I am emphasizing is that the question of the responsibility for images is not peculiar to Nigeria or to film-makers, but is the concern of all artists; however that responsibility becomes magnified when the medium is an influential and popular one, such as is film.

If I can digress for a moment on one small point, looking at Nollywood films from the perspective of someone who has spent her life wrestling

with the question of the “image of Africa” in the Western world, I must say that, for me, one of the huge benefits of the success of this film industry, regardless of the quality of the stories being told, is finally we have a huge body of work which show what the exteriors and interiors of modern Africa look like. Most of these films are shot on location and convey the grittiness of the streets, and have made these streets familiar. There is a texture to the look of Lagos or Accra that is refreshing to see, especially after having to contend with the notion that there is no modernity in Africa, that we have no capital cities that can rival those of the West, and wouldn't know a skyscraper if it fell on us. The first time I showed a slide of Abidjan to a class of students (at a University in the middle of the U.S which will remain unnamed) they all but thought I was lying!

Multiplier Effects

But to return to the point that I was trying to make: that of the variability and unpredictability of audience. Kazantzakis was careful not to betray the end results of the biblical account of Jesus of Nazareth- he did not in the end succumb to the temptations of the flesh. Nonetheless, there were Christians who considered the very idea of the temptation of Jesus the Christ tantamount to blasphemy. However, even when not dealing with theologically sensitive subjects, the concerns raised by images projected upon us or any individual or group we identify with, we carry with us. Thus, a forum such as this must raise acute questions regarding the impact of the production and proliferation of the images that concern us here, the images we produce and promote ourselves and send out into the world. We are concerned with film and with women in film in every aspect. How do we tell our stories? Who is to tell them? Who has access to the storytelling apparatus that film embodies? And what legacy do these images leave?

It is always a heated debate whether artists are creators or reflectors of the society that support their work. There can be no doubt that we can learn a lot about a people through what we read and see about a society. Still, sorting through the manifold impressions and emotions that art evokes can be complex in a number of ways. One film about a drug addict could be seen as an exploration of a social problem. A number of films from the same place in which drug addicts routinely appear, or are referred to, spoken about, drop in casually or are otherwise a part of the fabric of the life being portrayed,

can leave the impression that this is a society where drug addiction is endemic if not epidemic, that it is an integral part of everyday life, and the source of a massive social problem.

Thus, we also need to take account of what I call the “multiplier effect”. We must respect the integrity of every individual story, but we must also be concerned with the multiplier effect of a number of individual stories conveying similar things, which then multiply to become a collective story. When this happens, it must give us pause for thought. For example, my mother had three sons. My brothers have each of them married between 1978 and 1984; that is, they have all been married for between twenty-five and thirty years, giving our mother, cumulatively, in excess of one hundred years of being a mother-in-law, before she passed away. And in all that century, I do not remember any violent disagreements, of her calling or being called a shrew by my sisters-in-law, any necessary escapes by them to avoid her witchcraft or any attempt by her to undermine their marriages because they were unsuitable harridans who on top of everything could not even cook a decent meal! As wonderful as I know my mother to have been, I do not believe she was the only mother of sons in the whole of West Africa who appreciated the complexities of married life, appreciated that the sons had made the best choices they could and the women they married were doing the best they could to lead their lives with integrity and raise their children in unanimity and was thus prepared to leave all three couples to it! But perhaps you will all now say that is because they had at least provided her with a dozen grandchildren and therefore could be exempted from the general box of unpleasant spells that mothers-in-law cast! I think you get the point. The mother-in-law as witch and fertility police is a staple of Nollywood film we all recognize. This multiplier effect can be most instructive for good or ill. At face value this is a disturbing image to have constantly reflected out. But what does it tell us about the makeup, the concerns, of modern society?

With respect to representing contemporary African women to a larger audience, Nollywood has had, sometimes deservedly, a lot of hits. But the critiques arise out of respect for its successes; if no one watched the films it would not matter quite so much. I have been told that the largest market outside Nigeria is not Ghana, or even London, but Canada, where a large film festival¹⁰ has recently been established. Wherever it is, Nollywood has put African filmmaking on the world map in spectacular ways, and with

incredible alacrity. Its products have become widespread enough to bear many discussions on the implications of its extraordinary communicative power.

Let me illustrate: reviewing a number of films in preparation for this forum¹¹ made me sub-title these remarks “Of Cooking, Cars, and Gendered Culture”. Why? Because, in everyday parlance, when we speak of “culture” with respect to the African continent, people’s minds go to Zulu spears, Ndebele beads, Igbo masquerades or Asante kente cloth, depending on which part of the continent we are focused on. However, we should recognize that the real essence of culture is not so much the things we see, but the things we take for granted; not the song and dance routines we “Third World” peoples put on for tourists to admire as proof positive we do even have culture, but the things we believe and to which we hold fast because they structure the sense of meaning in our lives, including why and when we sing and dance, regardless of audience.

Although the things mentioned above are important to their peoples, their importance does not lie primarily in the chic market value they have now come to have. Furthermore, there are other, non-marketable things, which are so ingrained in us, we scarcely notice; e.g., the different ways in which we greet each other - bowing to our elders, shaking hands from right to left, and so on. These are the deep-strata cultural things that are seldom articulated and that reflect our sense of our selves as people, and film can speak to these deep-structure needs.

Sandra Grady, in her essay “Role Models and Drama Queens: African Films and The Formation of Good Women”, makes reference to both the invocation of a mythic African past called up by such traditional modes of dress, *and* the impact of constant repetition in the watching of such films. She argues from her work amongst Somali Bantu refugees in the United States that the increased consumption of such media becomes important in the context not only of domestic consumption but human migration, because ‘they influence the social imagination and consequently shape personal and cultural identity (Appadurai)’¹² Her study reveals that, at least amongst this group of East Africans, the consumption of Nollywood films, which has become common cultural practice, has the impact of the inculcation of learning traditional gender roles directed in particular at young girls.

If watching films acculturates us, inculcates in us a sense of collective identity, then what was I learning when watching all those kitchens and cars? I became aware of these two striking motifs, both of them used as reflections

of our societies, one idea ancient, and the other far more contemporary. Strikingly, in these films, food remains an index of gender relations and in particular of a woman's moral standing. And I do not mean only the idea of the rural woman's sweat in her determination to grow crops to feed her children. The films also reflect what appears to be an abiding social truth that, in heterosexual relationships, whether or not a man has a "good thing going", the real value in a woman is how well she feeds you. Urban or rural, professional, unemployed, or a homemaker, no matter what, feeding remains, apparently, an index of a woman's moral worth. I have seen only one instance of which feeding a woman with the labour of his own hands (as opposed to in a chic restaurant) was indicative of a man's seriousness in a relationship. We can, and perhaps should, have a conversation about what the automatic and assumed acceptance of this means for us in the early twenty-first century. However, the point I want to make here, is anyone watching these films, en masse, will learn quite correctly that, rightly or wrongly, in West African cultures, at least into the first decade of the twenty-first century, the cooking and sharing of food remained a major index of cultural significance. As students and critics of popular culture this can be important to note.

What of the cars? These were as noticeable as the plates of badly or well-cooked food, but they seemed to have a different cultural resonance. Where the matter of food seems an almost unquestioned sign of womanhood, to be taken for granted, as it were, the cars were not an *unconscious* signifier: A woman is expected to be able to cook; what is noteworthy, to her detriment, is when she cannot. The ability is the status quo. In contrast, men are not *assumed* to have cars; so every car redounds to their worth and value on an ever-increasing scale according to the value of the car:

Both separately and together, the moving vehicle and the moving image have become perhaps the most emblematic commodities of twentieth-century modernization. Throughout the history of cinema—from colonial propaganda documentaries to Hollywood blockbusters—the habitual appearance of the automobile on screen has affirmed the ability of moving technologies to embody many of the ideologies central to modern, liberal societies: progress, speed, autonomy, mobility, displacement, and image value. However, in West Africa, where the rate of automobile ownership is one of the world's lowest and where technology is notoriously prone to breakdown, the functional car

remains a commodity that is, by and large, out of reach. Thus, the automobile in West African cinema has become a particular vexed sign of development...however, in Nigerian and Ghanaian video films the cars that had been displaced and made strange in the celluloid films return with all seriousness and fully imbued with their fetishistic valences. Like the global soap operas and *telenovelas* that have influenced them, these video films often focus on the highly commodified world of the urban upper class. Yet, while most Nollywood films are unflinching in their depiction of wealth, prosperity, and unbridled consumption as wholly desirable, they have also made the darker sides of power and success central to their narratives (Green-Simms, 2010, p. 210-11)

In film after film, where cars were associated with women *owners*, they came to represent that darker side of power. Singled out by the camera, frequently lovingly caressed by it, not as a taken-for-granted aspect of character, but as a potent symbol of a man's (frequently rising) power, so fixed a sign of potent masculinity has the car become, that in one film – *Ghana Girls I believe*¹³ – it was also used as the index of the extent to which the men who drove them were held in regard or pampered by the sugar mamas who kept them happy. Interestingly in that film, though they acted as a sign of *her* buying power, they reflected socially to *his* glory. In this particular film, the women's access to cars was indicative of their corruption. Furthermore, by providing the men with those cars they provided them with the instruments with which those gigolos could then play them for fools by using the cars to impress and win women *other* than the ones who had purchased them. The point I am making here is that, for good or ill, these films give us clues to world views and culture of the societies which support them, whether by indicating fixed assumptions – as in the case of women and cooking- or signifying a symbol of flux and change- as with men and cars, or women with cars.¹⁴

We do have plenty of storylines which reflect our lives as they are lived; sort of. That is, we do have films depicting young people in love, and young people having sex, and the women are not necessarily required to be virgins. Yet, if we study carefully the development of the storylines, a number of issues arise. Even Nollywood's college girls find more time to pursue and seduce men using their cars as well as their bodies, than for their studies. Yes, when unmarried women own cars, it is seldom to any good end; it is a sign of women who do not know boundaries, of women who transgress.

Tradition, Change, and Artistic Responsibilities:

This is why the plethora of “saints, whores, nags and witches”, the title given to the session for writers at the forum, raises such concern. The sessions of this forum tell the story of the complexity of the issues we face. In the films made by us, we must acknowledge we have made great strides in the images we present of ourselves in our stories. But we still have a great way to go. After the struggle waged by, e.g., African American women in Hollywood to even be allowed to represent beauty and glamour, not to speak of sexuality, we are ahead of the game, but still need to ask, to what purpose? On that side of the Atlantic they had to struggle to be regarded as a socially acceptable and respectable body beautiful. Over here, we have no problem with the concept of an African woman’s body as beautiful; our actresses are manifestly attractive and flaunt it on screen, though we do have to ask sometimes to what end this glorification of the body¹⁵ especially in a context where the validation of woman’s sexuality outside of heterosexual marriage is still seen as a potential source of problems. Ultimately, we are still not permitted to be respectable and sexual at the same time.

The choice of the tongue-in-cheek title of the session for writers is unfortunately not so tongue-in-cheek. Much of the ire against the Nollywood industry has come precisely because these are the dominant images that we grapple with. I often wish, when I visit yet another office with television screens turned permanently to the “African Magic” cable television channel showing movies of wicked wives and greedy mistresses 24/7 one more time, I could issue a blanket decree banning it from the airwaves! I do not want to see anymore women actually turning into snakes before our eyes, or metamorphosing into blood suckers for the sake of gold, truly believing that that is the sole objective of life. What sort of social anxiety do such scenes reflect? In a very important critique of our ability to interpret the narrative of video productions Onookome Okome observes:

What is designated [...] as fetish is indeed symbolic fetish, the narrative of explanations that the society seeks at a crucial juncture of its cultural flux. The symbolic fetish flourishes in the industry because it is part of the psychology of a large proportion of Nigerians. Nollywood uses this fetish to explain to a bewildered population the drift and rot in contemporary Nigerian society. (Okome 36)

I confess, as an artist, I recognize that this gut reaction of wanting to switch off not to say ban some television stations borders on policing. Where do we draw the line between demanding socially responsible art and policing the artist?¹⁶ And besides, can we police morality or demand, as opposed to desire, socially responsible art forms? And again, as I asked before, must our art be required to be what we consider positive? For then when does it become propaganda? Why not be content with reflecting what is, however discomforting that may be? And in all this, what commentary is being made about our contemporary life?

[E]ven when the home videos exaggerate as is their wont, hitching implausible situations to the most banal sequences, the films manage to confront us with what is true of the way we are, and the way we live, while reflecting the difficulties we have in admitting it. We live in societies groping rather haphazardly towards modernity; societies in which women and children are ritually maltreated even in the most enlightened and liberal communities; societies in which those who should bring a sense of orderliness to situations are generally backhanded out of the way by those who have the power to make changes. (Ofiemun 13)

In short, what is the purpose of our modern storytelling, for, make no mistake; filmmaking is simply the latest, or one of the latest, forms of collective storytelling. But modern storytelling faces a complex set of situations. If I may be permitted the resort to the cliché of grandmothers by the compound fireside or under the village tree, what happens when the audience is no longer a cohesive clan with shared history and antecedents and a relatively shared common set of goals, but has translated into the “global village” of both kinsmen and spies?

[Nollywood] focuses... on the social and cultural forces of the local and how they cope with the global on their own terms, Nollywood films are consumed in the homes, the video parlors, the convention grounds of Pentecostal churches, and the many unorthodox viewing venues found in poor neighborhoods. As the vernacular of the poor who live the “lottery capitalism of the millennium” Nollywood film draws its own map of social and cultural programs and narrative responsibilities. (Okome 37)

Nollywood narratives are like all human stories, whether mythic tales told by grandmothers, or proverbs and riddles, they serve the purpose of enabling, and even empowering the societies that support them, to make sense of the world around them. When they encompass the grand issues of human existence: What is the source of life? Or what the nature of the divine?—they exist in the realm of sacred myth. Yet, as we know, even good local stand-up comedians can help us comprehend the messiness and the seemingly intractable problems of human living. A Concert Party skit or a cartoon about a disgraced politician or destooled chief can be more powerful than volumes of ink spent on condemning the moral turpitude of their behavior.

And, on the subject of chiefs and village grandmothers, what indeed do we do with our past and its legacies and continuities? What do we do with those stories, those forms of living, those ways of being? And certainly, one of the issues indeed facing us as modern people is making clear to ourselves and others the fact that there is no rupture between “then” and “now”. Some years ago I used an illustration for this point, which I would like to repeat here:

A few years ago I was invited to Rochester Institute of Technology to conduct a faculty development workshop. So, whilst there, I took the opportunity of visiting the Eastman Kodak museum. I was fortunate that it was the year of the centenary of the “Brownie” camera, and amongst the many events celebrating that little camera, which was the first camera of almost everyone I know, was a glorious display of every brownie ever made, displayed in chronological order. We could all mark our age group by the camera we first knew. What was very striking was that, if you looked at only the first and the last in the series, the two cameras had nothing in common. Yet, seen on display with the dozens of intervening cameras also displayed, the differences between each were only small and incremental, at times barely perceptible, and the links between the cameras at their different stages, irrefutable. It might be fruitful to think of that vexed word tradition in that manner. With each manifestation of a “traditional” ceremony, what is produced is its own variant, dependent on its own time, space and ritual acts and immediate needs. Nothing remains static ... This is the health of ritual. [Each re-enactment] in form and performance carries the echo of that remembered form which each performance both recalls and gives the

lie to. So, [for example, to commemorate deaths that occur among exiles,] instead of sitting in open spaces outside the family home, we hire church halls, and do the things that need to be done, improvising from necessity to create something new that we dress in the language of tradition, sometimes amazing and bemusing our neighbors because of the sudden influx of people, [particular] colour, public ceremony and noise that Ghanaian funerals generate, which seem incomprehensible unless you understand the culture of mourning. The danger is the extent to which we are all capable of [genesis] amnesia, forgetting the cameras in between.¹⁷

So, how do we deal with tradition and change? How do we film those translations of traditional mores into contemporary life and modes of existence? How do we make the invisible visible? This is not a simple task, yet it is a relevant question, first because there are as many films set in our ancient, or at least pre-colonial, pasts as there are in our contemporary societies. More important, however, it is a relevant question because these references to our past, however facile and problematic they may be in some films, are evidence of a perceptive recognition of concerns about our “traditions” in our “modern” worlds. The issue may not be so much with the references to “old gods” as with a failure to take on board with integrity what those traditions *in change*, or changes in tradition, might mean.

Derek Walcott (1970) once admonished, “If the old gods were dying in the mouths of the old they died of their own volition”¹⁸. What do we do about “old gods” who are not necessarily old? Their mores, strictures and worship are still an integral part of our daily lives. In particular, how do we deal with them in the face of continuous changes, also evident in many recent films through the fundamentalisms of every kind that have swept through our world in the latter part of the twentieth century? I am a Christian myself. Yet at the same time I can not, in all honesty, help but baulk at the ways in which fundamentalist faith is presented and/or deployed, sometimes almost as a *deus-ex-machina*, suddenly appearing at the end of a complex and intricate set of plot lines to make all things right by the easy solution of sprinkling a little scripture on top, when nothing at all in Parts One, Two and Three of the film has in any way given grounds for such a possibility as acceptable.¹⁹

The Challenge of Good Scripts and Believable Stories

If so many of our films lack a satisfying sense of an ending, it is because we are dealing here, amongst other things, also with the quality of writing, not to say, of re-writing! If I may be forgiven, I would like here to quote Steven Spielberg. A year after the Academy of Motion pictures effectively turned its back on him, by nominating *The Color Purple* for 13 Oscars and awarding it not a single one, he was given the Irving Thalberg award for his consistently high quality of motion picture production. He started his acceptance speech by talking about how he was a movie junkie, and then continued:

That the whole idea of movie magic is that interweave of powerful image and dialogue and performance and music that can never be separated, and when it's working right, can never be duplicated or ever forgotten. I've grown up—most of my life has been spent in the dark watching movies. Movies have been the literature of my life. The literature of Irving Thalberg's generation was books and plays. They read the great words of great minds. And I think in our romance with technology and our excitement at exploring all the possibilities of film and video, I think we've partially lost something that we now have to reclaim. I think it's time to renew our romance with the word. I'm as culpable as anyone in having exalted the image at the expense of the word. *But only a generation of readers will spawn a generation of writers.*²⁰ (emphasis mine)

I confess, when I heard those words, literature teacher that I am, I stood alone in my living room and cheered. That short statement reminds us of a number of things that are crucially important here: that film is a collective art form dependent on co-operation; that it is an art form dependent on technologies of great possibility; and that, in the end, it all begins with the writing.

Thus, one other question we face is this very question of language: In which language do we make our films? Again this discussion goes far beyond the concerns of the film industry. In truth, in this respect, the filmmakers have a real edge over the writers, as proportionally there are far more films made in Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Akan or Ga, than there are either books written in those languages or even films by African filmmakers made in English. This is important, because I believe it helps account for the massive popularity of film as a medium, regardless of the challenges of the democracy of its art form or the challenges faced concerning the quality and integrity of translations

and sub-titles. Undeniably there can be an expressiveness available, for actors in particular, when working in a mother tongue as opposed to a second language, (however fluent one may be in it), that can affect the body language, tone, and gesture that gives texture to performances on stage or celluloid, or in cyberspace.²¹

Yet, no matter the language in which we write, we must deal with the stories we tell. This forum has been occasioned by a general concern about the way in which women are presented and the stories told about them. And there seems to be a kind of social malaise that has difficulty juggling the ideal and the real. At times we seem to have difficulty actually dealing with who we are, though perhaps the films do reflect a general social inability to deal with the world in which we live when it comes to the changing roles of women in society. To illustrate with an anecdote from a class assignment: some years ago when on leave in Ghana, I taught an undergraduate class on “Rights, Ethics and the Rule of Law”. I gave an assignment to describe and discuss the power and authority structures in any small unit to which each student belonged. Most of them chose the family unit. When they handed in those assignments, in a class of 50 students, all but one of them who described the family launched into descriptions of the ideal patriarchal nuclear family where the father was the breadwinner and the mother stayed at home taking care of the children. But when I asked in the class, only ONE of them actually had a mother who stayed home full time as a housewife; all the other students had mothers in full- or part-time employment. They were surrounded, at home and at school, by women in full-time employment, but seemed to have difficulty even articulating this when it came up against some imagined sense of what a modern middle class family should look like; and this was a class in Accra, not in New Jersey. What place do women occupy in the cultural imagination? This may seem a trivial example, but it makes me wonder about the relational continuum of social attitudes that begins with women’s work being disregarded from the authority of the household and ends with their work not being factored into the statistics of national economies.

Yet we must acknowledge that there are changes being made. The question of a new future was the subject of our last panel and there are some things we ask for which should not be too hard to accommodate: that the stories reflect our lives as lived a little more – for instance that female college students be seen a little more in classes and discussion courses

and a little less in the beds of their lovers; that professional women be seen acting professionally in professional settings; that complex situations, including those involving conflict situations be presented without necessary demonization, and that the concerns with which we live be struggled with integrity.

Our lives, contemporary and historic, are food for story enough; we live through coups, countercoups and corruption. Beyond the drama of such incidents themselves, they take a toll on everyday life. Even in democratic peacetimes we pass through road blocks on our city streets on peaceful Sunday afternoons; we have to balance between snacks for our children or having their bus fare, we get sick, get well, lose our mothers, and we do all this without always being charged by circumstances to refer to demonic interferences. The place of women at the interface of tradition and modernity remains a vexed one. We are not asking for easy answers. Rather, we contend that the images we object to are a sign of easy answers in circumstances that demand a fiercer kind of truth.

The career of a filmmaker such as Tunde Kelani, whose commitment to the issue is such that he is sitting here amongst us, is evidence that it is not only women who can tackle these questions with courage. In his films women are bright, articulate, and face the dilemmas of our day, whether the legacies of ancient customs or the consequences of contemporary social forces.²² Yet we must also support the growth of women in an industry which has traditionally limited their roles in front of the camera and severely restricted their roles behind it. Tough as the industry is for everyone involved in it, it is especially so for women in general, and Black women in particular, have a much tougher time gaining access to all aspects of filmmaking, from the equipment to the financing. They are also, as some here will attest to, amongst those who are the most enterprising and risk-taking in getting their work out. The central issue remains: how hard is it to create an industry which projects the complexity of the way in which we live our lives from a humane, ethical standpoint?

Endnotes

1. This paper is based upon the opening keynote address delivered at the *African Women and Film* Forum organized to initiate its new section on popular culture by the African Women's Development Fund in Lagos Nigeria June 16-17-2010. I underscore its origins as a keynote address because the immediacy of the situation gives the necessary context for the issues I undertook to explore.
2. Nollywood is the popular expression for the West African, principally Nigerian, film industry, which has flourished since the 1980s and is, of course, mirroring Bollywood, used to designate the Indian Film industry based in Bombay, and Hollywood, based in Los Angeles CA.
3. Preface to *Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria*. Pierre Barrot (ed.), (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) p. xi.
4. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Biennial Survey for 2009. (www.vis.unesco.org/culture/pages/cinema-data-release-2011.aspx). Accessed 15 March 2011.
5. Much of the early debate concerning "Nollywood" did indeed revolve on the technologies upon which it thrived. I will not enter into that debate here and use the word 'film' loosely to cover the whole range of feature film production, in this case mostly video and digital DVDs. However, for an interesting perspective on the efficacy of changing from film to digital, see Tunde Kelani "Spielberg & I: The Digital Revolution" in Barrot (2008) ps 90-94.
6. See, in particular: Deborah Willis, *Black Venus 2010: They called Her Hottentot*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010; Michael D Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* Chapters 4 & 6 "Jezebel, Olympia, and the Sexualized Woman", and "The Language of Appropriation: Fantasies and Fallacies"; Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark; Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Visions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011
7. Richard Wright's *Native Son*. 1940. Bigger Thomas is the name of the hero of his novel, who, at the end, is executed for murdering the daughter of his white boss. Wright's social realist novel was intended to dramatize the consequences of the oppression under which Bigger lived.
8. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982)..
9. Spielberg, Stephen, dir. *The Color Purple*. 1985. Film.
10. Victor Osazuwa, CEO/Founder of Global Benefits, organized the first Nollywood Film Festival in North America, in Mississagua, Canada in May 2009.
11. The list of films that inform this paper includes, but is not limited to the following:

Basorun Gaa: Afan Productions & Remdel Optimum Communications;
Bitter Generation 2: A Lucy Awoji Film, All Mark Movies,
Broken Soul:
Campus Queen: Dir Tunde Kelani, Mainframe Productions;
Evil Woman Part 1: 2010

Ghana Girls: Peace Productions, Kumasi;

Let Them Say: (Egbayi) Parts 1 & 2 Kleem Image Pictures, Jummai Joseph Producer;

Narrow Path: Director Tunde Kelani;

Thunderbolt: (Magun) Dir Tunde Kelani, Mainframe Productions, 2000;

White Handkerchief: Director Tunde Kelani;

12. Sandra, Grady, 2011. 'Role Models and Drama Queens: African Films and the Formation of Good Women'. In Mary Celeste Kearney (ed.). *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture*. (New York: Peter Lang) 189-202
13. Here I must make a confession. My initial "consumption" of these films was indeed in the mode of a consumer, not a researcher. Hence, I failed to make the usual preparations for citation should I need to refer back to these films. I borrowed films from a wide variety of people that included AWDF staff members, relatives and friends, and members of my mother's household, such as her driver. The list of films I watched is included in the bibliography, but unfortunately, by the time I realized I needed correct citations, I could track very few of them down again: People had lent them out to friends who had not returned them; they had been replaced on the market and were considered ephemera, ("Oh *Ghana Girls* is old now, watch this instead, the same actress") and there was insufficient documentation on the internet to confirm what I needed to know. *Ghana Girls* is a Peace Productions, Kumasi film, I have been unable to confirm the date.
14. In one interesting twist on this convention, in the film *Bitter Generation 2*, the first sign that something is amiss following the death of the wife is that her son, who, unknown to the rest of the family, has killed her, can't spark her car. Everyone else who tries, can, but he can't, which makes those around him suspicious about what is the offense he has committed against his mother's spirit.
15. On this question, see Tam Fiofori "The reel and real women of Nollywood (<http://nigeriafilms.com/news/7860/10/the-reel-and-real-women-of-nollywood.html>) on the issue of women as commodities, not only on-screen, but off-screen in the attitude early producers had towards the "marketplace" of actresses themselves
16. Tam Fiofori, in the same piece cited above which takes a broad brush to sweep into view all the issues concerning women in Nollywood, goes on to demand: "In a country that has female chief justices, deputy governors, ministers, professors, pilots and bank chief executives, where are these women featured in Nollywood as nation and home builders? Where are the model roles for mothers, sisters and loving peace-makers? For every wayward undergraduate soft-prostitute there should be a female Deputy Vice Chancellor putting right the savage male cults on campus" Though it would be hard to disagree with this as a sentiment, I am troubled by the mandatory "should".
17. "What Is Africa to Me? Knowledge Possession, Knowledge Production, and the Health of Our Bodies Politic in Africa and the Africa Diaspora" 2005 Distinguished Abiola Lecture, *African Studies Review* 49:1, April 2006, pp. 15-30.
18. Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*, 1970. p. 8.

19. On this issue I could not help but be struck by the following comment by Unoma Azuah in “The Near Nullity of Nollywood” posted on 2-28-2008 on a thread on Making African Movies: “Most often writers of Nollywood scripts bypass the complex process of problem-solving people use in real life. As a substitute for engaging their characters in applying intelligence, discernment, inner strength and tempered faith to resolve conflicts, the challenges faced by Nollywood film characters are saturated with a sensationalist depiction of voodoo practices conquered by a cartoon-like Christian force that makes all well within minutes. Routinely, this force is tritely manifested in the invocation of the supernatural: a shoddier version of the mechanae in Greek theatre, I’d say.” Accessed June 14 2010
20. <http://www.oscars.org> Home : Research & Preservation : Resources & Databases Academy Awards Acceptance Speech Database: Year: 1986 (59th) Academy Awards Category: Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award Winner: Steven Spielberg Presenter: Richard Dreyfuss Date & Venue: March 30, 1987; Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.
21. I speak not a word of Yoruba, but certainly find that it is the quality of the acting, the body language and expressive tone that make clear the meaning of the unknown words, the force and import of the drama can be conveyed with minimalist sub-titling,
22. His commitment in thinking through the images of women and using film as a medium to challenge and change social conventions can be easily indicated with reference to his two films *The White Handkerchief* and *The Narrow Path* made in association with AWF. These films, based on the same story about the consequences of families and societies demanding the bride be a virgin in her wedding day, revise the original tragic story of death into an empowering story of love defying convention.

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