

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF NOLLYWOOD STUDIES

Carmela Garritano

Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas
cgarritano@tamu.edu

Jonathan Haynes. *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. xxvii + 375 pp. Acknowledgments. Preface. Notes. Filmography. Bibliography. Index of Names. Index of Subjects. \$35.00. Paper. ISBN: 9780226387956.

Elizabeth Johnson and Donald Culverson. *Female Narratives in Nollywood Melodramas*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2016. xi + 167 pp. Foreword. Appendixes. References. Index. \$80.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9781498524742.

Noah A. Tsika. *Nollywood Stars: Media and Migration in West Africa and the Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. xxvii + 348 pp. Preface and Acknowledgments. Notes. Bibliography. Filmography. Index. \$32.00. Paper. ISBN: 9780253015754.

The three books considered in this article—Jonathan Haynes’s *Nollywood*, Noah Tsika’s *Nollywood Stars*, and Elizabeth Johnson and Donald Culverson’s *Female Narratives in Nollywood Melodramas*—appear during a period of rapid transformation in Nollywood, the English-language commercial movie industry in Nigeria. Since the appearance of the earliest Nigerian videos in the 1990s, the production and distribution of Nollywood movies have spread across the globe. In the last decade alone, advances in digital media and information technologies, coupled with the expanding reach of satellite signals, broadband cables, and cellular phone networks, have made connecting to Nollywood—both the individuals who participate in this loosely configured creative formation and the products generated within it—easier than was ever possible in an analog world. And as these three books illustrate, Nollywood’s broadening radius now enables research methods that might be described as deterritorialized. In 1999, when

I started researching the Ghanaian movie industry, travel to Ghana was absolutely essential to achieve even the most basic objective: to find the movies that were the center of interest. Today, a researcher can study Nollywood without spending any time in West Africa. Nigerian and Ghanaian movies are easily obtained online, and although less common than even ten years ago, they still are sold as DVDs and video CDs in African stores located in major urban centers throughout the African diaspora. Scholars can conduct interviews via Skype or over e-mail and track developments in the industry by reading online newspapers and blogs and following Nollywood moviemakers on Facebook or Twitter. The problem, of course, is that these technological entryways, many of which originate from within and reach out to African diasporic communities and customers, provide restricted views of Nollywood and Ghallywood, popular industries that remain grounded in Nigeria and Ghana where low bandwidth and limited and expensive Internet connectivity continue to restrict the accessibility of online content. Most Nollywood moviemakers, even those who travel transnationally to produce or promote their films, live and work in West Africa, and they, like their counterparts in Ghana, continue to churn out low-budget movies for local audiences using the straight-to-video release model that has dominated the industry since the 1990s.

Jonathan Haynes's *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* is an impressive historical survey of Nollywood genres based on the interdisciplinary methodologies developed within African area studies as well as on the author's ethnographic research conducted over the course of almost three decades, including hundreds of interviews with people working in all branches of the industry. Haynes's profound engagement with Nollywood and its places, the Nigerian cities and neighborhoods where Nollywood movies are made and sold, is immediately apparent in the beautifully written preface, which reads like an affective map of Nollywood in Lagos. Haynes begins in Surulere, "the Brooklyn of Lagos" (xv), a hub of production in Nollywood's vast and jumbled network, evoking its sights and sounds as he details the experience of moving through this part of the city. He observes that "walking is taxing and hazardous" as one navigates tangled wires from illegal connections that "[cobweb] the sides of buildings" (xv). As he fans out from Surulere and toward the port, he describes the material transformations he has witnessed on Adeniran Ogunsanya Street, once "dotted with cybercafés" that have now disappeared (xvii). We follow Haynes across the grounds of the National Theatre, where "casting calls take place under the trees" (xix), and to the "celebrity hangout" (xix) on the side of the National Stadium, O'Jez Restaurant. The preface serves to establish Haynes as an authority and provides an introductory sketch of Nollywood's history and geography; it also captures his affection for the industry and Lagos, which he understands as a metaphor for Nollywood itself. The landscape of Lagos, he suggests, is "the same as the structure of the film industry, which is also gigantic, astounding in scale, filling the

horizon farther than the eye can see, but all generated by small-scale producers” (xxi). The preface, like the entire book, is packed with captivating anecdotes from Haynes’s research, and the prose is vivid and clean, a pleasure to read.

Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres represents the first comprehensive and systematic study of Nollywood genres, and it is a major contribution to the study of African film and media. The book aims to bridge the geographical as well as the ideological and critical distance between readers and scholars in Nigeria and the Global North, who bring different critical methodologies to the study of Nollywood. Haynes’s method might be called “systematic genre criticism,” a critical mode, according to Tom Gunning, that “attempts to define the structures of genre [and] mark out their boundaries and their forms of combination, largely through an exploration of iconography, narrative patterns and essential structural oppositions” (“‘Those Drawn with a Very Fine Camel’s Hair Brush’: The Origins of Film Genres,” *IRIS* 20 [1995]). But Haynes goes further than categorizing movie texts; he investigates the origins and evolution of these unique genres within the history of the Nigerian industry and the larger structural and technological changes that have shaped it.

The book is organized chronologically according to the historical development of genres. Part I chronicles the beginnings of commercial moviemaking in Nigeria and discusses the earliest movies, which provided the foundations for Nollywood’s genre system. The first chapter situates Nollywood’s origins in Nigerian television in the 1960s, when it was “the largest and strongest television in network in Africa” (8), and describes the cross-pollination that took place between television and commercial movie-making. While other scholars have written about this subject, Haynes presents the most detailed account to date. In subsequent chapters he discusses two movies directed by Kenneth Nnebue: the Igbo-language movie *Living in Bondage I* (1992), a video movie that “demonstrate[ed] spectacularly that the market was there and that a lot of money could be made from it” (14), and *Glamour Girls I* (1994), the first video movie made in English. The success of *Glamour Girls I* motivated other producers to adopt English, revealing new reservoirs of acting talent and new markets for movies, and eventually establishing English as the language of Nollywood. Haynes then turns to “the queen of Nollywood genres,” the family melodrama, whose emergence reflected the growing importance of family networks under the repressive Abacha military regime and larger globalizing processes in the 1990s. Emerging during a period when “the breakdown of the institutions of the modern state and economy [threw] people back on family resources” (78), these films at once normalize the emergent conjugal family arrangement and sensationalize it, “revealing hidden secrets, sexual infidelities being their favorite topic” (79). Haynes is careful here, as he is throughout, to highlight the economic dimensions of the genre. To make a family film, typically located in one or two rooms of an interior location, “a producer needs to supply only a few actors in their street clothes, something for them

to sit on, and perhaps a bed” (104). This part of the book concludes with a consideration of the movies of Tunde Kelani, an auteur whose immersion in Yoruba culture and position on the margins of Nollywood contribute to the singular style of his movies. Haynes doesn’t elaborate on his justification for detaching Kelani’s films from the genre categories he has historicized except to say that “genre is uncongenial, even antithetical to [Kelani’s] thinking” (129).

Part 2 of the book chronicles the shift of movie production to eastern Nigeria, principally around Enugu, a small city with good infrastructure that is relatively close to the markets of Onitsha. Eastern Nigeria became the setting for the cultural epic, a genre demarcated principally by its *mise en scène*: “a ‘traditional’ past of thatched villages, spears and sometimes fanciful costumes” (141). This genre saw its popularity grow during the late 1990s, during “the dreadful days of the Abacha dictatorship” with its emphasis on “the strict enforcement of strict moral codes by indigenous spiritual forces” whose rewards and punishments are immediate and unquestioned (160). This period also witnessed the rise of the crime movie and comedies.

The third part of the book outlines recent changes in the industry, including the turn toward what Haynes calls “diaspora films”: films set abroad and produced largely for the emerging African diaspora market. Another new genre consists of the wildly popular “campus films,” which dramatize student life in the “bounded social space” of a Nigerian university campus (261). Like Nollywood diaspora movies, these films entered the highly competitive local market by seeking unrealized audiences, in this case, “a new younger generation . . . with money to spend and with distinct tastes and interests” (235). From this genre the “yuppie” love drama was born, in part to accommodate the aging stars made famous in campus films. These “glossy” movies center on the intrigue and melodrama that color the “love lives of young urban professionals” (280). Haynes sharply criticizes the global and “decultured” outlook of this segment of Nollywood for projecting a “normative order to a degree that requires ignoring much of the Nigerian national reality” (280). The book concludes with chapters that examine current processes of differentiation and diversification in Nollywood, including the arrival of multiplex cinemas in major cities in Nigeria and the advent of New Nollywood, “an aspiration and a strategy” (288) to produce higher-quality movies for theatrical release.

Noah Tsika’s *Nollywood Stars: Media and Migration in West Africa and the Diaspora* brings the author’s background in film and media studies to bear on the Nollywood archive. It eschews thick description of the industry and close readings or even systematic surveys of its films for a preliminary investigation into Nollywood’s star culture and the movies that represent or reflect it. The book’s field of vision is fairly narrow, focusing principally on the types of movies Haynes calls “glossy” and “yuppie” dramas—movies modeled on global popular culture and targeting transnational audiences—and it spotlights a relatively small group of young stars such as Funke

Akindele, Uche Jombo, Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde, Van Vicker, and Stephanie Okereke. Tsika's discussion also pays a lot of attention to movies streamed on Iroko TV, the largest online subscription-based platform for Nollywood movies, and to the stars who have promoted Iroko TV as well as those who have participated in reality television shows or who appear in Globalcom advertisements as brand ambassadors.

There is no doubt that this is a pioneering book, one that raises important questions about the transnational and transmedial dimensions of an emergent, corporate culture of stardom and models an entirely new approach to the study of African movies and media. Its major drawback, however, stems from its reliance on a small number of Internet-based sources; Tsika cites interviews published in various online venues and bases many of his arguments, about individual movies as well as about the debates and controversies surrounding those movies and their stars, exclusively on news reports and other accounts that have circulated on the Internet. This affords him a very limited perspective, which tends to diminish the strength of the book's analyses and conclusions. One wonders, for instance, if Tsika's claims about the scale and urgency of various issues are overblown, since many of the statements he makes about narrative patterns, people, and the state of the industry remain largely unsubstantiated. For example, he states in chapter 6 that "age-inappropriate casting" qualifies as a "contentious industrial trend" that has generated "overwhelming negative reactions" (250), but he provides no evidence to support this claim. At several points the absence of personal interviews with Nollywood actors, producers, and directors further undercuts the credibility of the analysis. This lack is perhaps the most glaring in Tsika's long discussion of child stardom in Nollywood, in which he alleges, without proof or qualification, that it is one of the most discussed and debated issues among Nollywood fans. Perhaps more troubling is that Tsika's investigation into Nollywood's "ongoing failure to engineer a discrete system for nurturing and publicizing youth performers" (219) never involves simply asking producers or directors why their movies feature so few children. Instead, he cites two or three articles that have appeared in columns published in online magazines. He also doesn't explore the economic imperatives that likely have hindered investment in child-centered movies, a topic that might have been explored based on the existing secondary literature on Nollywood.

Unlike Jonathan Haynes's book, which bridges the geographical as well as the ideological and critical distance between distinct discourse communities in Nigeria and the Global North, Elizabeth Johnson and Donald Culverson's *Female Narratives in Nollywood Melodramas*, a study of nine Nollywood films, makes no attempt to engage with Nigerian scholarship on Nollywood or to analyze the significance of African movies in Africa. The book aims, according to the authors, "to encourage more comprehensive analysis of the role of gender in new configurations of creative energy emanating from complex global interdependence" (130), but it excludes Africa

from that “interdependence,” making the Global North its reference point. This is a serious weakness of the book. The authors write, for example, that because Nollywood movies “have become globalized and easily accessible,” one subject that deserves critical scrutiny is their construction of women (2). Yet they ignore scholarship by Africanists on gender, sexuality, changing family configurations, neoliberalism, and urbanization in Africa. The book quotes numerous comments from African moviemakers and audience members, but most of the analysis is unconvincing, including comparisons between Nollywood and Blaxploitation films and rap music and the deployment of methodologies taken largely from critical race theory and black studies. Rather than explaining, for example, why and how theories that emerged from North American historical and institutional contexts are relevant to the representation of women in Nigerian movies, the authors simply state that “the black woman’s body, across the globe, is depicted in cinema and music video similarly” (27). *Female Narratives in Nollywood Melodramas* is further marred by the abrupt insertions of long quotations from secondary sources that are taken out of context, weak writing (especially in the first two chapters, where the organizational logic is virtually incomprehensible), and spelling errors. For students and scholars of African film, the reductive analyses and sloppy writing will prove frustrating.

doi:10.1017/asr.2017.78

ARTISTS OF LIBERIA AND THE IVORY COAST

Pascal James Imperato

State University of New York
New York, New York
pascal.imperato@downstate.edu

Eberhard Fischer. *Dan Artists—The Sculptors Tame, Si, Tompieme and Sõn: Their Personalities and Work*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 144 pp. Color and black-and-white photographs. Bibliography. Epilogue. Publications on Dan Art and Culture by Hans Himmelheber and Eberhard Fischer. DVD (“Dan Wood Carvers and Mask Performers, Liberia, 1960”). Cloth. \$49.00. ISBN: 978-3858817594.

Eberhard Fischer and Lorenz Homberger, eds. *African Masters: Art from the Ivory Coast*. Zurich: Museum Rietberg/Scheidegger & Spiess, 2014. 240 pp. Color and black-and-white photographs. Bibliography. Cloth. \$39.00. ISBN: 978-3858817617.

In 1960 Eberhard Fischer, then a nineteen-year-old student at Tübingen University, traveled with his stepfather, the eminent anthropologist Hans Himmelheber, to Liberia. There they spent two months in the northeastern