From Yorùbá to YouTube: Studying Nollywood’s Star System

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Close-Up: Nollywood—A Worldly Creative Practice

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Noah Tsika

Abstract

This essay argues that the study of Nollywood stardom can expand the parameters of scholarship on southern Nigerian video films, primarily by showing how the Nollywood industry relies on its remarkably diverse performers to promote its products and politics. Nollywood star images circulate through a variety of Nigerian and diasporic venues, and stars themselves often express complex conceptions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, reflecting the polysemic qualities of the films in which they appear. At the same time, Nollywood stars, who daily juggle a variety of languages and accents and whose on- and offscreen activities routinely adopt an anti-essentialist stance, suggest the extent to which this polysemy is structured, recalling Richard Dyer’s classic argument about transnational, transmedia stardom. By calling into question racist/paternalist assumptions about Black African identities, Nollywood stars also combat the stereotyped renderings of their industry, its politics, and its peoples.

There are, according to cliché, two types of film performers: those who play themselves (or some singular, steadfast variation thereof) and those whose fame rests upon a capacity for change. In cinema studies, however, there is a strong yet surprisingly underexposed subfield devoted to bridging the gap between these two perceived types. It goes by the name “star studies,” and its central tenets are as follows: film stardom is a discursive construction developed and maintained through a variety of semiotic means; an individual star persona is mutable (albeit in often subtle ways, and regardless of personal or corporate protestations); and the operations of a so-called “star system” provide an important window through which to look not simply at a series of film texts but also at entire film industries. In Nollywood, some of the top stars might seem equally unalterable, enshrined in typecasting and consistently associated with the genres that they have helped

to develop—such as, in the case of Stephanie Okereke, the lesbian-themed campus drama (in which young, female-identified university students explore same-sex desire).\(^3\) For Okereke, however—an especially in-demand and relatively well-paid actress—that genre represents only one facet of the kaleidoscopic Nollywood, whose producers, she maintains, “reward” her by permitting her to pursue a whole host of performance modes (from comedy to drama to just about every imaginable hybrid in between).\(^4\) Simply put, an industry as dizzyingly productive as Nollywood would seem to need a certain, stabilizing degree of standardization, but with productivity comes possibility—innumerable chances to change as a performer, and to evolve as a star, even within seemingly fixed generic confines. As Jonathan Haynes suggests, Nollywood’s immense annual output both requires and is the direct result of an “imitative and generic” process that Haynes, Onookome Okome, and Karin Barber have all linked to commercialized African popular arts in general—to the precise material conditions that tend to prescribe standardization and repetition.\(^5\) Since star studies, as a discipline, endeavors to elucidate what Marsha Orgeron calls the “multiple mediations” of stardom—including those that seem “unextraordinary, or even . . . shamefully unworthy,” such as salacious “news” items planted by producers for the purposes of publicity, or “gossipy” discourses in general—it can serve, in the context of the seemingly self-replicating Nollywood, to clarify the complex industrial permutations that depend upon, and extend, powerful public personas.\(^6\) At the same time, it can shed light upon the widely disseminated idea that Nollywood stardom is open to all Nigerians, both local and diasporic, and that stardom is the result of labor, rather than some innate sense of exceptionality.\(^7\)

Quite apart from the matter of deliberate performative development is that of the “accidental” persona shift, which can occur even when performers and producers agree to provide something comforting familiar—something standardized and redundant. In other words, the unstable, ultimately productive meanings that Haynes links to location shooting—to the documentary value of a “background” reality, caught “on the fly” by itinerant cameras—aren’t the only sources of unexpected variations in seemingly constant plots and themes.\(^8\) Similarly unplanned patterns of signification can accrue to the stars who (occasionally by contract, but most frequently by informal agreement) must promote their films in a range of venues and for a diversity of audiences throughout West Africa and the diaspora—and who, in any case, often experiment as performers, even within the confines of “franchise” roles.\(^9\) They, and the new directions in Nollywood studies that they can inspire, are at the heart of this essay, which traces the reflexive channeling of the industry’s star system through a series of promotional venues, as well as through the countless films that directly depict media stardom, drawing
upon the much-publicized, real-life experiences of their top-billed talents. If, as Barber contends, consumers are as instrumental as producers in keeping African popular arts alive, then those Nollywood films that focus on stardom conceivably satisfy their audiences in unique ways: as a series of Ghanaian and Nigerian theater managers have suggested to me over the past few years, such films can “flatter” filmgoers by furnishing an “insider” feel—appearing to obliterate the boundaries between production and consumption, between “backstage” processes and the on-screen representations to which they give rise. They can also, on an even simpler level, confirm for filmgoers what they already know, particularly if they read those print and online publications that address the central components of Nollywood’s star system. These components prominently include the promise—familiar from star systems the world over—that “anyone” can become a star, and that the hard work of self-promotion is universally practicable. Reflexive, star-driven films about stardom itself—of which there are seemingly endless examples—tend to suggest that Lagos, Nigeria, is not unlike Los Angeles, California: a metonym not merely for movie glamour but also for unceasing industrial activity and the shared consciousness of stars and their fans.

Practical Magic: The Basic Infrastructure of Film Stardom in Southern Nigeria

Plastered throughout Lagos and Abuja, audition notices—typically eight-by-ten-inch paper sheets upon which are printed information about when, where, and for what films one can “try out”—often seek to fill minor or even nonspeaking roles, but they tend to identify the allegedly democratic aspects of Nollywood’s star system. In June 2011, for instance, a much mimeographed, far-reaching flier for a “contemporary religious movie set to star Oge Okoye,” whose producers were “looking for patient cast members,” promised that “stardom can come for anyone,” since “all it takes is a simple start”; indeed, the age span identified as the most desirable—twenty-five to fifty-five—would seem so vast as to embrace a variety of adult “types,” and upholding “patience” appears to suggest a rather broad, fulfillable set of expectations; after all, who couldn’t claim to be patient, at least on occasion? Such seemingly egalitarian assurances are not necessarily reflective of the reality of Nollywood’s star system: since the industry is still so young, so too are the stars who emerged as such during the late 1990s, including Genevieve Nnaji, Ramsey Nouah, Desmond Elliot, and Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde, not one of whom needs to be “replaced” or “phased out”; indeed, each is now more popular than ever, as evidenced by his or her employment records, iconic presence on Nigerian magazine covers, and participation in diasporic modes
of publicity. Jalade-Ekeinde, for instance, recently made *Time* magazine’s list of the hundred most influential people in the world and shortly thereafter appeared, as herself, on VH1’s popular series *Hit the Floor* (2013). If the films that they have most recently completed offer any indication, Nnaji, Nouah, Elliot, and Jalade-Ekeinde are all still expected to portray romantic leads, although iconic actress Uche Jombo, who is still in her thirties, has suggested the pressures that come with aging, particularly for women, pressures that Jombo, as a prolific screenwriter, has woven into her work, especially the melodrama *Last Celebrity* (2011), in which the star plays a barely veiled, vulnerable version of herself. Indeed, Jombo’s star image as a “multiphyphenate”—an actress-director-producer-screenwriter—is hardly rare in an industry whose budgetary restrictions have long required individuals to perform double duty (and even, of course, as Jombo herself attests, “triple” and “quadruple duty”) on film sets, often for a single, fixed fee.12

To take just two prominent examples, when Jombo and Funke Akindele write scripts about Nollywood stardom, and eventually embody those scripts’ central characters, it is difficult for audiences not to see certain connections between performer and role; in fact, searching for such connections—a process aided and abetted by such Nollywood-centered magazines as *FAB, African Vibes, Reading Bridges, Complete Fashion, Exquisite, Flair, Totally Whole,* and *Nollywood Divas Awards Magazine,* which routinely publish both “behind-the-scenes” accounts of Nollywood film productions and “intimate” interviews with individual stars—can constitute a distinctly pleasurable activity. While magazine profiles, like printed audition notices, would seem to privilege the literate (and thereby limit the level of egalitarianism involved), the proliferation of “candid” star photographs in the popular press as well as on promotional posters and television programs helps to identify certain star-specific “personal” traits that can then be tested against the very same stars’ on-screen self-representations.13

As dramatized in a climactic sequence in *Last Celebrity*—in which Jombo’s character expresses her concerns about aging in the face of “fresh new talent” (a monologue that Jombo wrote and to which she added several improvised lines)—considerable competition for film stardom comes not necessarily from the ranks of “real people,” but from the commodified, heavily promoted realm of Nigerian reality television.14 For example, in the third installment of Ubong Bassey Nya’s now iconic *BlackBerry Babes* trilogy (2011–2012), Karen Igho, formerly a contestant on *Big Brother Nigeria* (2006–present), makes her Nollywood debut. Identified in the opening credits as “Karen Igho of *Big Brother Nigeria,*” she plays a rural outsider hoping to scheme her way into the inner circle of the film series’ titular women—an ultra-glamorous group of BlackBerry fetishists, each of whom is played by a major star (from Oge Okoye to Tonto Dikeh) willing to provide a wink-
ing awareness of her own public persona, contributing to the complex reflexivity of the series itself. Now a bona fide film star—a status solidified by the widely publicized, cleavage-baring dress that she wore to the 2013 Africa Magic Viewers Choice Awards—Igho symbolizes not simply the long-standing synergy between Nollywood and Nigerian television but also the very promise that is at the heart of the reality-TV genre: that “real people,” picked from a crowd, can become stars fit for the film canon.\(^\text{15}\)

In Nollywood, stardom does not guarantee a high salary. With the average Nollywood budget still sitting somewhere between 3 and 4 million Naira (\(\$20,000–25,000\) US), even the most popular stars cannot expect to earn more than 5 million Naira (or \(\$32,000\)) per movie.\(^\text{16}\) Since in-demand stars like Okereke, Nnaji, and Jalade-Ekeinde can make up to a dozen films in a year—one of the obvious economic as well as creative perks of so prolific an industry—their annual salaries can rise to 60 million Naira (or \(\$372,000\)). Such figures represent only a small slice of a lucrative pie, however; they do not include endorsement deals that run the gamut from the telecommunications sector to the sports world, or paid television, red-carpet, and nightclub appearances, or increasingly common Hollywood gigs. Those associated with *Hit the Floor*, for instance, maintain that Jalade-Ekeinde was well compensated for her cameo appearance; they’ve told me, in terms redolent of *Négritude*, that they view the series as its own archive of worldliness, within which this globetrotting Nollywood icon was indispensable. Investigating the abundance of professional opportunities available to individual stars, beyond those associated with film acting, is not merely one of the mandates of star studies; it is also a way of answering basic questions about compensation and exposure.

Of course, the constant creation of new vocational options for Nollywood stars can make studying the industry seem even more daunting, but it also presents practical challenges to the producer who hopes to promote a film on the basis of a stable star persona. I was struck by this dilemma when tracking the theatrical exhibition of Niyi Akinmolayan’s 2010 science-fiction film *Kajola*. One of the film’s stars is Desmond Elliot, typically a sympathetic romantic lead, the beating heart of over two hundred popular films. In keeping with this hyper-familiar persona, the official posters for *Kajola*, designed by Adonis Productions, presented a warmly beaming Elliot, his face far more prominent than those of his co-stars. There were two problems with this presentation, one being that Elliot is not, in fact, the star of the film, and the other being that the supporting role that he plays is, surprisingly, a villainous one. As a power-hungry, futuristic dictator (of sorts), Elliot delivers a transfixing performance in *Kajola*, but his rather misleading appearance in the project’s promotional materials suggests a certain reluctance on the parts of producers to advertise star-based change—although, ironically, such reluc-
cance only irritated audiences, who, in complaints filed with the Silverbird and Ozone theater chains, described being “deceived” on multiple levels.\textsuperscript{17} The infamous case of \textit{Kajola}—the first (but far from the last) Nollywood film to be banned from Nigerian multiplexes—complicates the familiar assumption that, from a basic economic standpoint, Nollywood \textit{needs} consistency from its performers, that an unvarying star identity is a useful, even indispensable source of product differentiation, a way of attracting and maintaining audiences. In relation to Elliot’s role in \textit{Kajola}, audiences apparently wanted not “more of the same” but, instead, simple truth in advertising, an acknowledgment of Elliot’s range as an actor, which could double, in this instance, as an “accurate” entrée into a new and challenging film.

Elliot’s villainous \textit{Kajola} character is compelling, in part, for its remarkable deviation not simply from the typical Elliot role but also from the typical Elliot biography, which upholds his offscreen status as “a wonderfully warm and loving family man.”\textsuperscript{18} Detailing the affective differences between Elliot’s \textit{Kajola} character, a man who articulates his own, devilish ideas about marriage and fatherhood, and the Elliot who, according to the “Father’s Day Edition” of \textit{Genevieve} magazine, “adores” his four kids and wife of many years, suggests a specific reception practice that star studies has long centralized.\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, the discipline has always seen its specific intellectual and also affective rewards as extending well beyond the academy, as already having enlivened popular reception practices. For her book \textit{Star Gazing}, Jackie Stacey studied women’s responses both to the “big stories” and “small details” associated with such stars as Lena Horne, Joan Crawford, and Doris Day; Richard Dyer looked at gay men’s seemingly stereotypical and consistent—yet surprisingly idiosyncratic and many-sided—“obsession” with Judy Garland (and Janet Staiger would later do the same); Brenda Silver considered the complex and multidirectional proliferation of “versions” of Virginia Woolf, and her elevation from writer to multimedia icon; but no scholar has yet considered what the “boundlessness” (Marsha Orgeron’s term) of stardom and of star studies can teach us about Nollywood and its audiences.\textsuperscript{20}

Recent attempts to “internationalize” star studies have incorporated comparative analyses of Hollywood and Bollywood, but they have largely ignored Nollywood, leading to a vast gap in the scholarly literature on stardom. Most practitioners of academic, film-focused star studies, from Richard de-Cordova to Martin Shingler, have used Hollywood’s internationally renowned, long-standing but frequently mutating star system as a template for analyzing the modes of publicity and of personality-shaping adopted by emerging national cinemas.\textsuperscript{21} These familiar methods of comparative media analysis remain valuable, but the specificity of Nollywood stardom suggests new ways of theorizing the relationship between Hollywood and African cinemas. Retaining the traditional focus of star studies on intertextual ma-
materials, such as magazine articles and filmed public appearances, that shape a star’s idiosyncratic identity and that strengthen that identity’s relationship to the star’s specific film industry and culture, it is possible to posit that the appearance of a star system in southern Nigeria over the past twenty years has been a uniquely transmedia phenomenon. Simply put, Nollywood’s star system emerged in an era of proliferating multimedia platforms, meaning that the simultaneity of various modes of transmedia publicity has been the chief condition of possibility for stardom in southern Nigeria, rather than, as in Hollywood, an eventual, often legally and ideologically fraught option.

As one examines the discipline of star studies, as entrenched in film studies, transnational, even transcontinental models of media stardom begin to emerge. In the case of Nollywood, this global model sees stars engaging in promotional activities throughout Nigeria, in venues that often require the use of Yorùbá rather than Nigerian Standard English, or that tempt actors to practice their Pidgin, occasionally breaking into the use of a British or Igbo accent as a means of garnering popular acclaim for their linguistic and phonetic facilities—a practice that is central to Nollywood stardom, both on-screen and “on the ground.” Beyond a star’s shape-shifting circulation among Nigeria’s thirty-six states, however, and even beyond his or her travels into, say, Sierra Leone and Ghana—two Anglophone African countries in which Nollywood products remain remarkably popular—there is the matter of transcontinental media flows, especially those that take Nigerian video films and their stars into such diasporic locations as London, Paris, Atlanta, and Houston. Paying close attention to stars’ promotional activities—a mode of action that star studies centralizes—can yield insights into Nollywood’s specific transnational victories, such as its growing popularity on satellite television channels in the United Kingdom and on the Africa-wide network Africa Magic, which originates with M-Net, South Africa’s first pay-TV company. As these references to cable and satellite suggest, stars’ promotional activities can also offer insights into the cultures of media convergence in which Nollywood plays an increasingly significant part.

In many ways, Nollywood stars have become emblems of transmediality. As soon as they have achieved star status and are therefore immediately recognizable to vast Nigerian and diasporic audiences, Nollywood performers are often recruited to promote converging media platforms, most notably VHS, VCD (or Video CD), DVD, analog broadcasting, and broadband digital distribution. Since December 2011, NollywoodLove, a Lagos-based online entertainment company, has been acquiring the distribution rights to thousands of Nigerian video films, uploading them for viewing on a dedicated YouTube channel (also called NollywoodLove), and watching that channel acquire an exponentially rising number of subscriptions. Since its inception, NollywoodLove has relied upon Nollywood stars to promote the
service. Significantly, not only do these YouTube commercials, like those for NollywoodLove's later, phenomenally popular incarnation as iROKOtv.com, provide stars with opportunities to define and publicize Nollywood according to the industry’s own convergent paradigms and within the global purview afforded by the Internet, they also provide opportunities for stars to practice and promote their own performative talents.

The element of surprise embedded in these strategies is resonant with broader efforts to present Nollywood stars as capable of astonishing their audiences. Sometimes, these efforts are as explicit as the online iROKOtv ads in which a star will employ the phrase “I bet you did not know that . . .” and then complete it with a personalized declaration, such as “I speak Pidgin” or “I can use a British accent.” Such ads would appear to speak not to a Nigerian audience, for whom linguistic and phonetic variations are the facts of everyday life, and for whom Pidgin remains prevalent, but to diasporic audiences for whom the social realities of Nigeria—and the associated shape-shifting talents of Nollywood stars—might seem surprising. Indeed, Nollywood star images have been crucial cross-generational tools for Nigerian-Americans worried that their children lack an awareness of Nigerian cultural practices.23 Furthermore, in a 2011 interview with journalist Christian Purefoy, Jason Njoku, the managing director of NollywoodLove, made clear that his company’s ads, especially its star-centered YouTube videos, are oriented almost exclusively to the diaspora, mostly owing to the realities of media infrastructures in Africa and to the relatively limited availability of broadband services in Nigeria.24 However, Njoku also stressed the significance of clarifying Nollywood’s contours for the unenlightened West, an ironic reversal of the classic colonialist and neocolonialist terms whereby Africa is seen as the site of sheer ignorance and as the object, as Brian Larkin has argued, of efforts to promote media literacy.25 Nollywood stars are now engaged—explicitly through their internationally circulating promotional activities—in teaching non-Nigerians to dispense with the sort of essentialism that led, for instance, to a recent CNN special report declaring the Nigerian accent the world’s fifth sexiest, as if a nation of 170 million could possibly yield a single speech pattern.26 The transnational task of Nollywood, beyond but immediately related to the matter of commercialization, is, according to Njoku, to “define” the phenomenon for its diasporic audiences. It is instructive that Njoku’s company has attempted to do so not through film clips or auteurist discourses but instead through stars. Fittingly, in films that focus on fame and its effects, such stars tend to articulate differing ideas about the path to renown. If the multiple platforms for Nollywood stardom all tend (with varying degrees of persuasiveness) to suggest that labor—something that everyone can conceivably perform, and that here includes the hard but familiar work of linguistic and phonetic flexibility—is at the center of Nolly-
wood's star system, then occasionally a film breaks free of this consensus to indicate that something amorphous is behind iconicity, something exceptional that cannot be taught.

“What it Takes to Make a Star”: Nollywood’s Reflexive, Fame-Focused Films

Toward the end of the second installment of Tchidi Chikere’s Efficacy (2006), a two-part romantic melodrama starring Stephanie Okereke and Desmond Elliot, a woman named Lucia Jacobs (Okereke) asks herself why she and no other Nigerian woman in sight is so “special,” so capable of commanding male attention. She answers her own question in voice-over, through a subjective narration that occurs throughout the film, privileging Lucia’s point of view. Lucia, it seems, is more “alive” than other women, or so she tells herself. Determined to overcome her rural origins and succeed in the bustling big city, Lucia might seem, upon initial consideration, to offer yet another example of Nollywood’s well-known obsession with representing the village girls who attempt to make good in Lagos. However, having decided that she is an instrument of God and that her deceptive, status-seeking ways must end, Lucia hastens to tell a successful businessman named Mr. Duke (Elliot) that she has lied to him about her own background. Duke, however, already knows of her talent for falsehood, having seen her present a range of personas during a special television program. Lucia, who has been blackmailing Duke since his Jeep splashed muddy water on her white dress, and who has been telling him that she’s unemployed, in need of food, and afraid of Lagos, is in fact a popular television reporter whose interview series PM Express is based upon the Ghanaian MultiTV program of the same name. It is through PM Express that Lucia comes into closest contact with other Lagosian women, interviewing those she meets on the street for a special report on sex addiction, and coming to discover that she cannot only interpret their responses but mimic their deliveries as well. While it fills her with professional pride, such a facility for shape-shifting doesn’t sit well with Duke, who is upset to discover not merely that Lucia is gainfully employed but also that she manages to imitate both “urban” and “rural” ways of speaking and dressing, and to express both religious and secular understandings of the world. Thriving in the fertile middle ground between apparent polar opposites and occasionally combining them, Lucia is a woman whose imitative acting talent, tied as it is to her “obvious life force,” makes her a star.

Such an extravagant conclusion might be perfectly permissible within the boundaries of a film’s melodramatic narrative, but it will not suffice as an explanation for why certain Nollywood performers achieve star status.
Strictly at the narrative level, *Efficacy* presents an outmoded model of media stardom, one that masks the actual industrial determinants of actorly success in today’s West Africa. While Lucia believes herself to be “simply gifted”—blessed with a talent that is beyond her control—she is played by a woman who has had to work in a range of media, promoting her films while finding new platforms for her stardom. What is exemplary about *Efficacy*, a film whose theories of media stardom seem so quaint and archaic, is that it stands in stark contrast to more recent efforts to dramatize the harsh practical determinants—and equally harsh consequences—of Nollywood success. Such films as the *Show Girls* series (dir. Afe Olu-mowe, 2005–2006) and *Last Celebrity* (2006) focus on an audition process that is especially taxing for women, since it requires them to compromise their “sincere” romantic relationships by sleeping with casting directors. The first installment of *Show Girls*, which is sometimes distributed under the title *Face of Africa*, cross-cuts between two crucial locations: the private home where five young women live and discuss their dreams of media stardom, and the casting suite where those dreams are frequently dashed. At one point in the film, the all-male casting directors seem to tire of their sexist, objectifying ways, but they do not repent. Rather, they simply fail to notice the umpteenth woman to “bump and grind” before their casting couch, preferring instead to stare at each other as they discuss the day’s events. The aspiring actress whose displays of flesh and dancing skills fail to merit much appreciation ends up asking the casting directors why they’re so inattentive, and the men respond by saying that female supplicants are beginning to blur for them; they can no longer distinguish between, say, a young woman and an old woman, or a beautiful woman and an ugly one. “A woman is a woman,” says one exhausted executive, as the actress stands before him, panting and sweating, her rear end the focus of a low-angle shot.

Full of misogynist cruelty, the moment serves as a commentary on the repetitive nature of many Nollywood devices—on the all too recognizable
recycling of scenes and sequences within individual films. It is also, like the female protagonist’s professional trajectory in *Efficacy*, an instance of a film’s narrative contradicting the determinants of stardom that actually operate in Nollywood. In the first installment of *Show Girls*, a female star is selected at random, and only because a casting director is too fatigued to “tell the good women from the bad,” especially since, to him, they all resemble one another. The film forces the spectator to watch—and to become, like the on-screen casting directors, potentially inured to—a seemingly endless series of wordless audition routines in which women simulate stripping. However, the five Nollywood stars who play the aspiring actresses—Amanda Ebeye, Mary Lazarus, Kiera Hewatch, Moyo Lawal, and Cynthia Ihebie—are far from interchangeable, each having come to the film with her own culturally and industrially specific image. The spectator *can* tell these women apart, and rather easily; the misogynist casting directors are rendered foolish for failing to appreciate the performers’ discrepant efforts; and the five aspiring talents continue to occupy the kinds of close-ups that not only invite identification but also showcase the women’s brilliantly different styles of facial expressivity.

Such distinctions are often identified and celebrated in press accounts of Nollywood stardom, which tend to centralize the diversity of performance techniques displayed in Nollywood films, further discrediting the notion that Nollywood fandom “needs” any sort of stabilizing consistency in the face of the industry’s vast annual output. What’s more, it is possible to track the discursive formation of certain Nollywood filmmaking cycles by considering the widely publicized connections and contradictions between stars’ on-screen and offscreen experiences. For instance, as reported in the Nollywood trade press and in a range of West African magazines, the trials and tribulations of actress Stephanie Okereke might suggest a fated recapitulation of the pain that she has expressed in her films, but they are also, more often than not, explicitly positioned as having generated some popular Nollywood subgenres. When NigeriaFilms.com reported on the injuries that Okereke sustained in a major car accident, it also focused critical attention on the creation of a cycle of Nollywood films that appeared to take inspiration from Okereke’s story and from her stardom. In a similar vein, *African Vibes* magazine published a post-accident account of Okereke’s popularity, providing insight into the star’s eagerness to “keep [her fans] guessing” by exploring the fine line between fiction and biography. (Like Uche Jombo and Funke Akindele, Okereke is a writer-director as well as an actress.) No account of the connections between Okereke’s life and work would be complete without a reference to the aptly titled *Show Girls* series. Shot while Okereke was recuperating, *Show Girls* dramatizes the hierarchical relationships among five aspiring performers. In the third installment, however, Salome (Oge Okoye), a woman with her own successful television talk show, suffers from the dis-
figuring effects of an accident. Her face covered in gruesome stars, she asks her friend (Amanda Ebeye) to fill in for her. The friend, however, begs off, claiming that she does not share Salome’s “star quality” and couldn’t possibly “stand in [her] shoes.” Ultimately, however, the film demonstrates that stardom can be achieved through hard and systematic work, proffering a believable star-as-laborer model that operates in express contrast to the star-centered theories of Efficacy, a melodrama that upholds luck and exceptionality as the only possible determinants of success.

Even more complicated are the countless films in which stars imitate not their own offscreen actions but the complex personas of such American stars as Sharon Stone, Beyoncé, and Lady Gaga. Often described—and dismissed—as “mere” remakes or perverse biopics, films like Ubong Bassey Nya’s Lady Gaga (2012), Adim Williams’s Sharon Stone (2003), and Afam Okereke’s Beyoncé & Rihanna (2008), each of which is part of an ongoing film series, suggest a complex combination of homage and deconstruction in which the credentialing of Nollywood stars functions in direct response to the perceived semiotics of American stardom. These films and their intertexts suggest yet another tool of classification that is expressly dependent upon star studies. At the same time, they indicate the salient and indisputably politicized differences between Nollywood stars who mimic White Americans (such as Sharon Stone, Glenn Close, Angelina Jolie, and Lady Gaga) and those who turn to Black stars (such as Beyoncé and Rihanna) as explicit sources of narrative inspiration and as equally explicit objects of imitation. In Nigeria, the subject of “star-on-star” mimicry represents the intersection of Black identity politics, Nollywood stardom, and a practice of appropriation that has heretofore been viewed as crudely commercial and plain lazy—a way of riding the coattails of Western success—but that is, in fact, a major means of further demystifying stardom for Nollywood’s performers and for their audiences. In these films, successful impersonation is possible through hard work; if it is true that, as Beyoncé & Rihanna so openly suggests, “anyone can be a star,” then so, too, may it be true that Western icons can be reproduced in Nigeria. A vast number of recent Nollywood films depict the step-by-step strategies of star-making that permit Nigerians to approximate, celebrate, and complicate the qualities of “imported” icons, offering sustained accounts of the worldliness of stardom.

**What’s in a (Nollywood) Name? The Politics of Transnational, “Star-on-Star” Mimicry**

Virtually all scholarly accounts of media stardom, regardless of the national contexts from which they emerge and upon which they focus, suggest the
significance of discourses of exceptionality, although some concede that it is through hard work—through literal labor—that the “mere personality” becomes a bona fide star. But what happens when a star plays a star? In Nollywood, remakes abound, but as Manthia Diawara has suggested, these films seek to refashion not just old narratives but also European and especially American stars, adding a Nollywood-specific inflection to such stars’ hyper-familiar images. This process is not, however, a matter of “simple” cultural translation, of the importation and subsequent manipulation of Western styles to suit local customs. It involves both a confident, wholesale appropriation—a Nigerian woman of color calling herself Sharon Stone without explaining why, for instance—and a more systematic unpacking of an American performer’s star credentials that, significantly, refuses mention of such an American “original.”

Without the aid of star studies, it might seem dauntingly difficult to account for Nollywood’s frequent use of the names of Hollywood stars in a range of narrative contexts. The seemingly unaccountable deployment of the names Valentino, Beyoncé, Rihanna, and especially Sharon Stone suggest, in fact, an eagerness to appropriate and thereby deconstruct the authority of Western standards of stardom. The popularity of Nigerian “remakes” of American films is relevant in this context, since such remakes tend to condense the chief criteria for Nollywood stardom. At the same time, however, they reflexively question these criteria partly by employing repetitive, almost incantatory utterances, such as the incessant yet narratively irrelevant naming of the American performers who appeared in the films’ ostensible sources, and the deliberate disarticulation of these names from any explicit references to Hollywood. In other words, while a number of Ramsey Nouah vehicles rely, both visually and acoustically, upon the name Valentino—one of the most recognizable names in global cinema history—their narratives never concede that it once belonged to a major Hollywood star (who happened to hail from Italy). Instead, their sole references to American cinema are of a casual, contemporary nature: in Adim Williams’s Valentino (2002), Nouah’s character calls himself a “great, legendary lover,” but he never explicitly identifies his Hollywood namesake. Though the name “Valentino” is also shorthand for a promiscuous male lover, it becomes in this film a floating signifier, devoid of any imaginable referent.

As Jacques Derrida argued in his books Of Grammatology and Writing and Difference, the production of a floating signifier depends upon the systematic introduction of differentiated signs that work to erase or efface memories of “original” (culturally sanctioned yet false/mythical) referents. Such has long been the perceived project of an African cinema whose discursive concepts entail the separation of signifiers of, say, masculinity (such as cowboy accoutrements) from their economic, geographical, and ethnic
“origins”}; indeed, the celebrated cowboy films of the golden age of post-independence Francophone West African cinema express this desire to disarticulate the codes of cowboy life from the allegedly “appropriate” American context. By contrast, star-driven Nollywood remakes tend to appropriate not just the iconography that made a Hollywood star so successful a symbol of masculinity and an object of erotic desire (Gary Cooper’s boots, hat, and associated swagger, for instance) but also the less definable markers of stardom: a popular mononym like “Valentino,” or an alliterative, Anglophone construction such as “Sharon Stone.” Significantly, as this allusion to Stone suggests, Nollywood films further suggest their difference from traditional post-independence African art cinema by responding to “feminine” as well as to “masculine” signifiers of stardom. Although the films of Senegalese actress-director Safi Faye tend to express her sophisticated understanding of the codes and customs of the European avant-garde, and while she has often self-consciously fashioned herself as, say, the Black Brigitte Bardot, her singularity within the category of African art cinema is instructive. In contrast to West Africa’s storied celluloid traditions, Nollywood films offer welcome and frequent insights into the shared semiotics of female stardom.

Nollywood’s mobilization of familiar Hollywood names suggests, whether by accident or by design, a certain flouting of traditional processes of signification. The refusal of Nouah’s films to acknowledge that the name Valentino might signify Hollywood stardom, and the films’ simultaneous, enigmatic application of that name to a range of narrative contexts, suggests a pair of salient points: that the disarticulation of a globally recognizable moniker from its “original” Hollywood context, coupled with the unaccountable attachment of that moniker to a diversity of Nollywood vehicles, represents a deconstructive gesture designed to destabilize any hierarchical relationship between American and African styles of stardom; and that this form of unspoken “star-on-star” mimicry indicates that Nollywood is indeed an archive of worldliness. The hybridity that results from the fusion of Hollywood and Nollywood star symbols can be difficult to further characterize, however, except through recourse to a fairly common Nollywood device: the use of a hyper-referential, English-language pop song during opening- and closing-credit sequences. The names of Hollywood celebrities are sometimes mentioned, in an odd, almost oracular style, in these ostensibly “irrelevant”—but actually thematically pertinent and powerfully explanatory—opening-credit songs. The sorts of tunes that are often termed “filler” in dismissive popular accounts of Nollywood aesthetics, these songs merit analysis in relation to star-centered representational strategies, for they tend to signal an awareness of the continuity between a Nigerian film’s themes and those that the cited star’s American projects have famously explored. This is perhaps nowhere
more pronounced than in the *Sharon Stone* series, which began in 2003 with the Adim Williams film *Sharon Stone in Abuja*, whose title suggests the sort of simple transposition—from Hollywood to Nollywood—that the film’s narrative, in fact, actively resists.

In *Sharon Stone in Abuja*, Genevieve Nnaji plays a manipulative woman whose deceptions and general deviousness are signaled by an opening-credit song (sung in a distinctly female voice) that cautions, “Sharon Stone, Sharon Stone—stay away from her! That girl is dangerous. . . . That girl has no conscience—stay away from her. . . . That girl is poison!” While that last lyric conceivably constitutes a nod to a famous Bell Biv Davoe tune from 1990, the fact that this particular credit-sequence song begins with the almost ritualized citation of the name Sharon Stone suggests the film’s investment in the image that Stone herself has often embodied, at least in her Hollywood thrillers. However, in contrast to what the spectator might expect, *Sharon Stone in Abuja* is neither a biopic nor a traditionally rendered remake of Stone’s *Basic Instinct* (1992). Instead, the film’s use of the name “Sharon Stone” suggests the activation of a violent and expressly “feminine” duplicity, in much the manner in which Nouah’s *Valentino* relies on a mononym that would seem to signify romance itself rather than a Hollywood rendering thereof.

In *Sharon Stone in Abuja*, however, the name of the eponymous Hollywood star, and the violent falsehood that it conceivably signifies on the basis of *Basic Instinct*, is employed in a narrative that focuses, in part, upon the Nigerian government. Nnaji’s Stone lies and cheats largely in the hope of obtaining a government contract—in order, that is, to enter a formal economy—in a manner that marks her as distinctly different from the Stone who, in *Basic Instinct*, lies and cheats solely in order to sadistically manipulate men, to cruelly “keep them guessing.” Nnaji’s Sharon Stone suggests a complicated deconstruction of an American star image and the attendant employment of what Larkin has called Nollywood’s “aesthetics of outrage”—the industry’s routine reliance on narratives that centralize government corruption as well as “the insecurity and vulnerability of everyday life.” To note the politicization of a signifier of Hollywood celebrity such as “Sharon Stone,” as well as to the way in which Nollywood films work to disarticulate it from the singularity of the “original,” embodied, American Sharon, suggests yet another means of questioning conventional conceptions of Nollywood.

When Nnaji plays a woman nicknamed Sharon Stone in *Sharon Stone in Abuja* and its sequels, she is not unlike Oge Okoye playing a pop star named Lady Gaga in a film entitled *Lady Gaga*, which, rather than being a standard biopic, confidently presents Okoye as a woman “born to be”—and even widely believed to be—the star of the title, thereby calling into question the existence of a “real” or “original” American star. In each of these examples,
a woman of color adopts the moniker of a famous White woman in a narrative that denies or redefines that particular White woman’s very existence. It is instructive that Okoye, in an iROKOtv special on the making of *Lady Gaga*, does not comment on the American Lady Gaga’s stardom but instead stresses that her Lady Gaga represents (in familiar Nollywood fashion) the triumph of the rural girl in urban, media-literate Lagos.

In the case of Afam Okereke’s *Beyoncé & Rihanna*, however, the politics of appropriation are even more complicated, since the impulse to deconstruct and subvert a star image operates simultaneously and in constant tension with an opposite process: proud and explicit emulation. It is one thing for a Nigerian to campily appropriate the excessive gestures, noirish poses, and even vocal patterns of a particular White American star; it is quite another for her to imitate a famous woman of color. *Beyoncé & Rihanna* offers a striking sense of the duality of such operations, presenting in fairly clear terms the tensions between implicit appropriation and outright imitation. To begin with, the names “Beyoncé” and “Rihanna” are mere sobriquets, nicknames rather than the actual given names of the two female protagonists. Deployed in realistic ways by women who consistently express their appreciation for American pop music, “Beyoncé” and “Rihanna” stand in stark contrast to, say, “Sharon Stone,” a signifier that has acquired—largely through narrative and nonnarrative repetition—a heightened degree of Nollywood cachet in excess of its White American referent.

Unlike *Sharon Stone in Abuja* and its sequels, *Beyoncé & Rihanna*, which has itself yielded several spin-off films, is not invested in fashioning a floating signifier. Instead, it presents a pair of household names as the explicit sources of inspiration for two young Nigerian women, who occasionally and
casually adopt them, forgoing the sort of permanent appropriation that can be found in the Sharon Stone series. And yet the vestiges of that earlier series can be seen in the very title Beyoncé & Rihanna, which misleadingly suggests a kind of biopic focused on the friendship of two superstars. A cynical (and altogether unproductive) view would assume that such a title was selected out of pure commercialism—for the familiarity and bankability of the names “Beyoncé” and “Rihanna”; indeed, that is how an overwhelming number of self-identified Nigerians respond to the film (and, for that matter, to the Sharon Stone series and to Lady Gaga) in their user comments on NollywoodLove's YouTube page and on iROKOtv.com. Upon closer inspection, however, and from an expressly historicist position, the decision signals a superficial link to a powerful Nollywood tradition—a tradition that Beyoncé & Rihanna transcends through its realistic narrative deployment not merely of music fandom in general but also of American pop songs in particular.

The film provides a plethora of examples of its engagement with what it means to be a Black Nigerian identifying with Black American and Barbadian pop stars. When Rhyme (Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde) practices her dance routines in an effort to achieve what she calls “star quality,” Rihanna’s “Don't Stop the Music” constitutes her accompaniment. The matter of Nollywood’s illicit use of unlicensed songs notwithstanding, the moment is significant for its explicit depiction of the relationship between Nigerian femininity and American pop music. Fittingly and reflexively, Nollywood stardom serves as the crux in which this relationship receives considerable clarification. For instance, Beyoncé & Rihanna is partly about two women who compete for the affections of a man named Jay (an all-too-obvious allusion to Beyoncé’s real-life husband, Jay-Z), but also for roles in Nollywood movies. They take the titular women as their templates, only to discover that they must provide some “originality”—as well as considerable linguistic and phonetic variation—in their acting and dancing auditions and in their song recordings. They are played by stars who have publicly paid obeisance to Beyoncé and Rihanna, often as a means of publicizing the Beyoncé & Rihanna series, but who have crafted their own politicized identities, departing in several significant ways from their more famous counterparts. For instance, while the real Rihanna is a spokeswoman for the coconut water brand Vita Coco, Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde—the “Rihanna” of Beyoncé & Rihanna—maintains a relationship with Amnesty International and has participated in global protests against Shell Oil and the company’s pollution of the Niger Delta, demonstrating a level of political engagement that has thus far been absent from Rihanna’s public persona.

Nollywood’s frequently derided use of the names of Hollywood stars is not, as is typically assumed, necessarily a function of the industry’s alleg-
edly crass, cannibalizing commercialism. It is, in fact, one of the most common mechanisms by which Nollywood stardom is solidified, precisely because it provides either a narrative justification for imitation—as in the Beyoncé & Rihanna series—or a chance for Nigerian performers to powerfully redefine Hollywood images without acknowledging the cross-cultural, and often cross-racial, politics of the process. That is not to say, however, that such films are apolitical—another false assumption that continues to dog Nollywood.

A study of Nollywood's star system, through methods that are responsive to the specificity of Nigerian cultural practices, can aid the broader task of better defining the industry's politics and peoples. The politicization of Nollywood operates in ways directly relevant to stardom, as films that depict government malfeasance provide performers with opportunities to transcend the generic limitations of the Hollywood icons whose names they bear but whose identities they don't directly acknowledge (as in the Sharon Stone series). Alternatively, films that explicitly reference negritude and that position Hollywood's women of color as, simultaneously, sources of inspiration and objects of imitation—films like Beyoncé & Rihanna—remind their audiences of some of the regionally specific requirements of Nollywood stardom, especially linguistic and phonetic adaptability. The world's seventh most populous country is currently engaged, via Nollywood and its stars, in systematically defining its cultural diversity. Rather than attempt an exhaustive analysis of media stardom in Nigeria, this essay has focused on a few of its Nollywood-specific nodes, showing how the industry's politicization is, in many respects, inseparable from that of its most visible personas. It is ironic that a phenomenon arguably so essential to a regional cinema's success is so often ignored. In order to strengthen our understanding of Nollywood, we should first look to its stars.

Notes

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7. For a Nigerian popular account of these ideas, see *FAB Magazine* 2, no. 4 (2012).


9. Star actress Funke Akindele, for instance, is also a successful screenwriter whose willingness to “tweak” her most iconic role (that of Jénífà) has occasioned considerable press coverage throughout anglophone West Africa; as *Y! Magazine* managing editor Adebola Williams puts it, “Funke Akindele is a public face and name who best exemplifies the trend of pushing the envelope and staying at the cutting edge.” Describing Akindele as “Nora Ephron meets Tyler Perry,” Adebola notes that the star “has created several iconic pop-culture characters using indigenous languages. Her movies are continuously at the cutting edge and she has set upon raising standards in a way that is inspiring to a new generation of filmmakers and professionals across sectors.” See Wilfred Okiche, “Funke Kan! Nigeria Kan!,” *Y! Magazine* 7 (2012): 40–45.

10. Beginning in the summer of 2011, I spoke extensively with several managers, employees, and patrons of Silverbird Cinemas (Lagos, Nigeria and Accra, Ghana) and Ozone Cinemas (Lagos), eventually continuing correspondence (especially with managers who could explain various booking procedures and exhibition decisions) via email. As a general rule, Silverbird—a modern, generator-supported, air-conditioned multiplex with six facilities in Nigeria and one in Ghana—books five Hollywood blockbusters for every one Nigerian, Ghanaian, or Bollywood film. The same is true of Ozone, a four-screen facility in mainland Lagos. Justice Grant, manager of the Silverbird in Accra, Ghana, says that one of Silverbird’s “official policies” is to “help promote local movies”—meaning, in this instance, those from Nigeria as well as Ghana. Increasingly, both Silverbird and Ozone are relying on Nollywood stars to promote *all* movies—not simply those that come from anglophone West Africa. Silverbird’s Victoria Island multiplex has hosted red-carpet premiers for Hollywood blockbusters, at which glamorous Nollywood stars have served as stand-ins for Will Smith, Channing Tatum, Jamie Foxx, and Tyler Perry, among many others.


19. Ibid.


29. See Dyer, Stars and Heavenly Bodies; deCordova, Picture Personalities; and Shingler, Star Studies.


34. Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 172.