
CINÉMA AFRICAIN –
ARCHIVING, RESISTANCE
AND FREEDOM
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MAMI WATA by C.J. Obasi | cinematography by Lílis Soares © Fiery Film, 2023

CINÉMA AFRICAIN - ARCHIVING, RESISTANCE AND FREEDOM

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2024, the first CINÉMA AFRICAIN! film festival took place in Linz, Austria. To extend the impact of the festival and keep its conversations alive, we have created *Cinéma Africain: Archiving, Resistance and Freedom* an anthology that is dedicated to highlighting the richness and diversity of African and diasporic storytelling in film.

This anthology emerged from the curatorial and collaborative practice surrounding the CINÉMA AFRICAIN! film festival. What we present here is a constellation of voices, reflections, and cinematic gestures that came out of specific encounters, shared questions, and the urgency to create space for film cultures often pushed to the margins.

Cinéma Africain: Archiving, Resistance and Freedom intends to foster a conversation transcending conventional boundaries. Our goal is to create an accessible collection that reaches beyond academic circles, challenges euro-centric viewpoints, and celebrates the diverse traditions of African stories in the big screen. The contributions take various formats - essays, interviews, critical reflections, academic analyses, and personal narratives.

Cinéma Africain: Archiving, Resistance and Freedom does not aim to define what "African cinema" is or should be. On the contrary: it embraces the complexity, contradictions, and multiplicity of film practices that are rooted in or connected to the African continent and its many diasporas. These practices are not limited by geography. They travel through language, body, rhythm, landscape, archive, resistance, and imagination.

Most of the texts in this anthology are written by women - filmmakers, curators, researchers, artists, and writers – who speak from situated perspectives: South Africa, Burkina Faso, Brazil, the UK, Nigeria, Senegal, and beyond. Some are part of the diaspora, others are based on the continent; some move back and forth. What connects them is not a single identity, but a shared commitment to storytelling as a political, poetic, and embodied act.

Rather than offering a static framework, this anthology reflects a living process. It values fragment over closure, insight over instruction. Many of the texts grew out of conversations, screenings, panel discussions and everyday exchanges during the festival. Others were written in solitude, drawing from personal archives and political memories. Together, they form a space of resonance – where ideas can unfold, contradict, respond, and multiply.

The films referenced and discussed here do not follow a single aesthetic or ideological line. They are united by their resistance to dominant narratives and challenge what is shown, who is seen, how we listen, and whose perspective is centered.

ARCHIVING

In an interview titled **'Archiving as a Radical Act'** London based moving image artist and researcher, Onyeka Igwe reflects on valuable time spent in June Givanni's Pan-African Cinema Archive and how this impacted her own creative practice and trajectory. The piece reveals how June Givanni's unlikely *'counter archive'*, as Onyeka describes it, spearheaded a film movement spanning the African diaspora.

In **'Together We Create Our Futures: Creative Collaboration Between BEYOND NOLLYWOOD and the Surreal16 Collective'** curator Nadia Denton details her realization and development of the new wave Nigerian cinema platform BEYOND NOLLYWOOD alongside the meteoric rise of the Surreal16 Collective. The collective made up of Nigerian filmmakers Mike Omonua, Abba T Makama and CJ 'Fiery' Obasi operates on the periphery of Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry, much as BEYOND NOLLYWOOD acted as a site for exploration in Europe. Nadia interrogates the outcomes of collaboration between BEYOND NOLLYWOOD and the Surreal16 filmmakers showing how they collectively carved out a sustainable niche for the existence of their creative output.

RESISTANCE

Brazilian Cinematographer Lílis Soares offers provocation in **'A estética é política - Aesthetics is Political'**. Referencing the black feminist theorist bell hooks, she reflects on the *'complexities of the creative process of the Afrodiasporic woman as a cinematographer'* and posits that *'the Black woman, in her aesthetic creative process, will bring with her a rejection of invisibility itself and the visibility of her entire universe and history.'* The piece allows readers to understand how the mere visual vantage point of the black female film creative can be revolutionary.

'The T-shirt: Unchosen Histories in Cinematic Texts' penned by creative producer and festival programmer Lesedi Oluko Moche questions the *'separatist notion of „Africa" and „Europe"*, demonstrating how a new generation of African diaspora female filmmakers are crafting African narratives from afar. She demonstrates how this growing body of work by filmmakers navigating multiple geographic spaces, and colonial histories *'demonstrate that true liberation is found not in the impossible return to a pure, unblemished past. But in the courageous frame-by-frame embrace of our complex intertwined present and future.'*

Director Simisolaoluwa Akande contemplates the erasure of queer Africans through the cultural lens of the Yoruba in an essay titled **'Disordered/Speculative Memory'**. Citing the process of making their documentary film, 'The Archive: Queer Nigerians' they excavate the 'queerness already present' in the Yoruba Pantheon. Simisolaoluwa boldly argues that queer Africans *'may attempt to reclaim memory as a post/anti-colonial strategy against queer erasure, suppression, and death'.*

FREEDOM

Estrella Sendra and Laura Feal's interview, **'In Conversation with Aïcha Chloé Boro: Crafting Freedom Through Intimate Cinema'** lays bare the realities of the Franco-Burkinabe writer and director's film and gender politics. The conversation piece includes tender, raw moments of truth where Aïcha critiques her work and structures inherent within the film industry. At one point she states unequivocally *'I am a woman who feels more depressed than she dreams. Because cinema is my home, but it can also be my wound'.*

In his biographical narrative **'Le Cinéma et Moi – Cinema and me'**, Senegalese film giant Moussa Sene Absa chronicles how cinema saved his life, and why for him film is not merely a *'form of entertainment'* but a *'true source of redemption, a refuge'* where he found *'answers to questions'* he did not know how to ask. Referencing key personal and cinematic moments from his childhood to the present day, the essay gives insight into both the romance and reality of being a present-day African filmmaker.

Conclusion

Cinema Africain: Archiving, Resistance and Freedom is not a conclusion, but a beginning. It is an invitation to read across contexts, to watch attentively, and to rethink cinema as a space of movement, friction, and transformation – across continents, disciplines, and communities. We hope that you will join us to continue this journey.

Nadia Denton (London) and Sandra Krampelhuber (Linz)
August 2025

LE CINÉMA ET MOI - CINEMA AND ME

Moussa Sene Absa

I often say that cinema saved my life. Whilst this statement is commonly made, it is just as often misunderstood. For me, cinema is not merely a form of entertainment; it is a true source of redemption, a refuge where I found answers to questions I didn't even know how to ask.

In this essay, I will share how cinema has been a vehicle of personal transformation. Born into a modest family, in Kayoor[1], Senegal, I grew up in an environment where aspirations were often stifled by daily realities. My father died when I was only three days old! My mother, though full of love, struggled to make ends meet, and dreams felt like an unattainable luxury.

Yet from a very young age, I was fascinated by the stories told on the big screen. Every film I saw was an escape, a way to transcend my everyday life. These narratives allowed me to explore different worlds, lives I never imagined living. Cinema became a reflective mirror for me.

I grew up in a family of *griots*[2]. In our household, every evening, one voice from a room would respond to another in the kitchen. It was like an open-air opera where the drum and the *xalam*[3] of Bacc Njaay beat in rhythm. Music has always fascinated me.

I was four years old when I was entrusted to Serigne Cheikh Mbacké[4], who initiated me into Quranic teachings.

A *talibé*[5] was born.

I wandered through the alleys of Keur Baay Gaindé[6], an old neighbourhood now demolished and replaced by a modern housing development. The wandering of my childhood allowed me to observe the world.

Childhood, dreams, and storytelling: these were the foundations of my passion for ci-

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[1] Kayoor was a powerful precolonial Wolof kingdom in north-western Senegal, known for its resistance to colonization and rich cultural traditions.

[2] A griot is a West African oral historian, storyteller, and musician who preserves and transmits cultural memory through generations.

[3] Traditional West African lute with 1–5 strings, primarily used by griots.

[4] Serigne Cheikh Mbacké (1925–2010) was a prominent spiritual leader of the Mouride brotherhood in Senegal and grandson of its founder, Cheikh Amadou Bamba.

[5] A young Quranic student, often a child, studying under a marabout (spiritual teacher) in a daara (Islamic school).

[6] Neighbourhood on the outskirts of Dakar, Senegal.

nema. My path has been a quest, a journey filled with obstacles and discoveries, always guided by hope and the desire to share meaningful narratives. As an African filmmaker, I feel deeply the importance of our voices and our imagination, especially in an era where challenges are enormous and resources so limited.

I remember the first sparks of interest in cinema, those moments of awe of the stories that seemed to transcend the big screen and touch people's hearts. Through films, I discovered worlds, emotions, and histories that resonated with my own experiences. These narratives spoke to me and inspired me, but they also revealed a bitter truth: African cinema was often marginalized, reduced to meagre budgets and unfounded stereotypes.

My childhood taught me the value of small things: a smile, a helping hand, the hopeful gaze of a mother bearing the weight of the world on her shoulders. Every day, as I raise my eyes, I think of those faces, those stories unfolding around me. These stories are my "counter" - a way of measuring not only the passing of time, but also the struggles and triumphs of our people.

And then I would do the *Pitchoss* - a shadow theatre made from a cardboard box, with white fabric around and a candle inside.

And thus, cinema was born in me;
I was ten years old. A studious student,
Always first or second in class.
Never out of the top five - or else I would face the wrath of Mother Absa.

Pitchoss was my favourite distraction, as it earned me a few coins from the neighbourhood kids. I honoured it in my film *Ça twiste à Popenguine* in 1992: A tender film about my adolescence, the yé-yé years[7], and music.

I grew up in a polygamous family. My "father," a cousin of my biological father, was a violent man. Yet how gracious he could be in his soaring *khassaides*[8]. I saw no fewer than twenty wives pass through that compound in Tableau Ferraille[9].

My aunts were beautiful, with voices I still search for to this day: An endless longing for the sound of my childhood.

As my mother had no daughters, I was "her daughter": I went to the market, cooked, washed clothes in the classic three basins; I did the dishes …

And I read a lot.

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[7] A youth-driven pop culture era of the 1960s, which emerged from France and became known for its catchy music, bold fashion, and modern style.

[8] Devotional poems by Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, central to Mouride Sufi practice in Senegal, often recited in Arabic to express spiritual devotion.

[9] Neighbourhood in Dakar, Senegal.

That feminine universe marked my existence. I was accepted as "my mother's daughter". Thus, I was granted access to the intimate world of women.

My film *Tableau Ferraille* from 1997 marked the beginning of my quest into the feminine world.

Later, I began dreaming of making films - above all, films about women. Everyone asks me why I make films; The answers are in my films.

Madame Brouette is an ode to love.
XALÉ is a painful song of a teenage girl.

Every woman carries a story.

And that is the essence of my cinema; this feminine universe is always full of drama and poetry, beauty and kindness. I make films in honour of these women who bear life.

This was the first basis of my writing: I wanted to make films to tell the stories of these women - carriers of hope, of dreams, courage, and virtue.

That is where I began to question myself as a man. I wandered, I dreamed, I travelled the world - just as my films travelled the world - and yet sometimes I tell myself I haven't done enough, because I was never given the opportunity to do more.

African cinema is a cinema under control. It is a cinema that is a victim of capitalism. It is a dependent cinema, especially in Francophone Africa. We have always revolved around a hostile or complacent system: Either you follow France's agenda - you support France, you are Franco-African by heart or nationality and you are promoted; you are visible.

If you don't accept the diktat, you are punished. This is a form of arrogant paternalism that sees Africans as if they do not exist; as if anything could be imposed on them because they have no say, and as if their imagination needs to be controlled.

It is not only a question of control, but also a question of ownership of African cinema. Hence, this raises the issue of heritage, which is why many filmmakers have sought refuge in the salons of Paris, London, or New York.

And then there are those who stayed, or who returned home, as I did. I had to be a witness to testify. I had to see what people live through daily to be able to immerse myself even deeper into that humanity and those values that shape my imagination. That is where I found myself, as an artist who seeks to infuse values into a community.

African cinema is deeply political. Filmmakers must understand the importance of provoking ideas through their craft. Africa's imagination can regenerate the world and nourish a rebellious youth.

The world is young.
Africa is very young.
Africa is overflowing with potential.
Africa has everything.
We have all that others desire, yet we remain the poorest.

So, the filmmaker must ask: how can this society be rich in resources and remain poor at the same time? How does this African society, rich yet poor, grow poorer everyday while the West "develops"? In what ways can the filmmaker look at this Africa and pose questions that allow Africans to reclaim their dignity, cultures and economic power?

That is where my cinema speaks: I do not try to please. I am convinced I have something better to offer - the missing leg the world needs. That leg is fundamentally Africa's consciousness - its concept of Ubuntu[10], its ethos of selflessness, truth, sharing, and justice. We must offer this serenity to the world.

But the African filmmaker faces a wall of Western arrogance!

Djibril Diop Mambéty went years without making films. He returned slowly but powerfully with major works. He was exhausted, like so many others, on this warrior's journey where honours are bartered. I had the great privilege of being the first assistant to this master of African cinema. By his side, I learned what no university can teach: the art of directing, the poetry of storytelling, and the freedom of the artist.

He died in 1998, taking with him so many beautiful projects that would have further energized African cinema. His elder brother in arms, Ousmane Sembène, had to abandon his grand historical epic on Almamy Samory Touré[11] for lack of funding.

African filmmakers must content themselves with a maximum of one or two million dollars to make a film.

They tell us: "Two million is a lot, because Africa lacks everything."

And so, cinema has no priority. I say - and I repeat - that this is false. Utterly false. We must construct our imaginary output according to our relationship with the world. Where do we come from? Where are we going? What kind of world do we want to live in?

This is where the filmmaker becomes essential. I do not see why Spike Lee can make a 40million dollar film, and I can't make a 15million dollar film, just because I am African.

People live on bread, but on roses too.

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[10] Ubuntu is the philosophy from Southern Africa meaning „I am because we are," emphasizing community and interconnectedness.

[11] Samory Touré (c. 1828–1900) was a Malinke and Soninke Muslim leader who founded a West African empire and resisted French colonization until 1898.

Constructing our imagination is a necessity. I want to create a re-enchantment. The purpose of the filmmaker is precisely to be ahead of the world's vision, like an albatross, but at the same time to share the life of the people.

The African filmmaker has a very important part to play:
Cinema is more than just soft Power - it is Deep Power. The one who does not understand this does not understand the meaning of history. History is accelerating. It is cyclical. Almost a whirlwind.

Whether we want it or not, artificial intelligence (AI) is here to propel us forward. We must embrace these tools and build our imagination using what we have and what the world offers us. I would be curious to see the first fully AI-generated African film, to get ahead of things and enable artists to multiply and create more content.

We are living in a pivotal era. The African filmmaker is crucial in shaping our postmodern collective imagination. Markets have developed around many narratives, but African cinema, due to a lack of support and resources, often remains marginalized. Given this context, it is necessary to strengthen our capacity to create authentic works. Building this imaginary is vital, because it is about claiming our place in the world and asserting our cultural identity. That would, however, require a reliable distribution network, with many cinemas. Right now, this is far from the case. As a teenager, I counted no less than thirty cinemas in Dakar and its suburbs. Today, there are fewer than five!

AI can facilitate the creative process, offering innovative solutions to the challenges we face. It could allow us to produce films on smaller budgets while maintaining high visual and narrative quality. Imagining and creating a film entirely generated by artificial intelligence is a fascinating prospect. It could not only modernize our approach to cinema, but also provide new ground for creative expression. By multiplying the means of expression, AI opens new horizons for filmmakers, allowing more artists to make their voices heard.

The African filmmaker must, therefore, not only be an artist, but also a visionary. Someone who positions themselves like a navigator, able to see beyond immediate challenges and anticipate global trends. It is their duty to be ahead of the times, to commit to building a powerful imaginary that reflects the richness and diversity of the continent.

Every day, through contact with the people's realities, filmmakers are called upon to become narrators of their time. By integrating people's stories into their work, they are preserving history and celebrating cultural identity. Whether it's portraying the struggles of a mother with hope in her eyes, or shedding light on historical figures like Samory Touré, every story has the potential to transform and uplift.

Ultimately, African cinema must be seen not only as an artistic endeavour, but also as a catalyst for socio-cultural change.

Herein lies the role of the African filmmaker: to be the narrator of their time, the storyteller of human experience and unavoidable truths. To be committed to making our realities shine, to ensure that every story - no matter how modest - finds its place in the grand narrative of humanity. That is how the African filmmaker - a carrier of an ambitious vision rooted in his or her environment - can truly contribute to shaping the future of cinema and their people.

I am often asked about funding, about the lack of budgets. Why is it so difficult for an African filmmaker to make a film with the same support as their Western counterparts? Yes, funding challenges exist, but they should not hinder our creativity. By embracing new technologies and renewing our commitment to our stories and truths, we can build a cinema that inspires, moves, and educates, despite the lack of big budgets. Financial obstacles should not prevent us from dreaming. Quite the opposite, they can motivate us to dive into our stories, to fight to have our voices heard. It is a matter of cultural survival. Of simply surviving.

This is why I film so much – as if making up for the lost time of so many illustrious elders: Sembène, Djibril, Johnson Traoré, Samba Félix Ndiaye, Tidiane AW, Momar Thiam, Safi Faye ...

In my dreams, one voice always resonated louder than the rest: the voice of women.
People often asked me why I wanted to make films about women. For me, the answer was clear and rooted in my personal reality.

My father died shortly after I was born, leaving me in my mother's arms. She was the one who raised me, alone, with strength and determination. I grew up with the faith and resilience of a woman who fought to give her children the best. Raised by my mother, I was immersed in stories of courage and sacrifice. It is this feminine strength that I seek to highlight in my work. Women's stories are often overlooked or pushed to the margins. Yet they are at the heart of our society. By making films that give them voice and visibility, I aim to honour the struggles and triumphs of all these women who, like my mother, have shaped our world.

The African filmmaker, in my view, is predisposed to be the storyteller of these narratives. Our vocation goes beyond mere entertainment; it is to tell truths, to elevate our stories into the light. In a film, every character, every voice matters, and every story deserves to be heard.

Every film we strive to make is an opportunity to challenge persistent stereotypes.
The quality of our art should not be dependent on the size of a budget. In fact, our creativity can shine through works that capture the richness of our unique experience.

It is imperative to develop networks of support, funding research, and collaboration between African filmmakers and investors. We must come together to create an environment in which African cinema is supported just as much as productions elsewhere

in the world. This requires not only individual effort, but a collective commitment to turn our vision into reality.

The African filmmaker must therefore lead the way as a pioneer, an ambassador of our culture, and an innovator in the way we tell our stories. "To help inhabit a world," I would say. By making our voices heard, we can claim our right to creativity and artistic expression, no matter the financial limitations imposed upon us.

Popenguine, May 19, 2025

Translated from French by Sandra Krampelhuber and Nadia Denton

XALÉ
Moussa Sene Absa
Senegal 2022, 101 min

A ESTÉTICA É POLÍTICA - AESTHETICS IS POLITICAL

Lílis Soares

The personal is political is one of the most famous feminist slogans of the 1970s. It is an assertion that women's individual problems are the result of their oppressed political class. It is also this slogan that leads bell hooks to propose that we question our own existence and journey by relating them to history, and taking Sojourner Truth's speech at the *Ohio Women's Rights Convention* in 1850 as a milestone in Afro-feminist thought:

"That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?"

Black feminism talks about the invisibility of Black women in the struggle for rights within the feminist movement. It questions white feminism and affirms the uniqueness of the lives, history, and socio-political reality of Black women. Even today, the demands are very similar to those avant-garde movements, and the reflection of Black women in society and their participation in leadership roles has become even more urgent.

In cinema, thinking about gender issues also means thinking about race issues: studies around the world show that Black women are the group with the fewest opportunities in front of and behind the camera - behind not only white men, but also white women and Black men. The latest study on gender and racial diversity in film releases in Brazil, published by the National Film Agency ANCINE in 2016, brought to light some unsurprising facts: among all the feature films released that year, not a single one was directed by a Black woman. When asked about cinematography, the person in charge of ANCINE's Gender, Race and Diversity Commission at the time, said she had no record of it.

Therefore, it is crucial to study the growing participation of Black women in cinematography. Although they remain few in number, it is important to examine whether the increased participation of this group will lead to a shift in the paradigms of image construction in cinema.

"I want my look to change reality" - this quote by bell hooks in *Black Looks - Race and Representation* (1992), could guide this study. Yet it would be naive to think that the Black and female gaze could change reality without going through a process of

reflection on the hegemonic view of the world or about oneself. Beyond that, the multiple perception of reality is constantly changing. This change, as I believe, requires the occupation and development of a unique aesthetic. It involves social and political tensions and, inevitably, a re-examination of one's own existence – such as emotional memories, childhood, and important events in a person's development.

When it comes to the Black female spectator, bell hooks creates a basis of thought and reflection for the beginning of an analysis of Black women's role as image creators in cinema. Her concept of "the oppositional gaze" (hooks, 1992, p. 115) is the starting point of my reflection on the complexities of Afro-diasporic women's creative process as cinematographers.

Considering cinematography as part of the creation of a film's aesthetic unity - colour, movement, perspective, and framing - and recognising that it contains embedded codes, signs and possibilities for re-signifying reality, the oppositional gaze acts not as an opposition to reality. It acts as an understanding that Black women in their aesthetic creative process will bring with them the rejection of their own invisibility and the visibility of their entire universe and history. Through aesthetics, a message is built that may endure for generations and, who knows, be understood in the future as subversive or revolutionary. *The personal is aesthetics.*

It is important to occupy spaces, to be and recognise oneself in them. The need for more space in the creation of images makes me reflect on the need to think about the images I create as a director of photography. Where am I in them? How do I place myself in them? Who am I in the current socio-political context?

From a very young age, the feeling of discomfort was present. It took me a long time to understand and recognise certain aspects of the origin of my distress. I didn't like what I saw in the mirror and, unlike Narcissus, the mirror represented something I wanted to deny. I was ashamed of what I saw. I remember the feeling of embarrassment well. At the time, I had no idea what it meant. Racism has very deep roots in the imagination of generations like mine.

Stuart Hall in 'Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation' and Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* make us reflect on the power of these representations created by a hegemonic gaze:

"The movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self." (Fanon 1986, p. 109)

"This ‚look', from - so to speak - the place of the Other, fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility and aggression, but in the ambivalence of its desire." (Hall 1989, p. 78)

I remember TV shows, magazines for teenage girls, music videos; for some reason, I wasn't there. That content wasn't made for me. Black women were either side characters, sexualised, or underexposed - the darker the skin, the less visible. Often, it was all of these things at once.

My feelings changed as I distanced myself from those references. I tried to nourish myself as much as possible with new experiences and dared to look at other references of beauty. Studying film, and more specifically cinematography, made me reflect on the potential of being in this creative space. It also made me consider how many obstacles I would still have to face before I could finally have a job that would impact people's imaginations - whether black or white, male or female. I wish I had known earlier how good it feels to be and see myself as a whole.

"Since I knew as a child that the dominating power adults exercised over me and over my gaze was never so absolute that I did not dare to look, to sneak a peep, to stare dangerously, I knew that the slaves had looked. That all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality'." (hooks 1992, p. 115-116)

The need for a critical gaze of Black women in the aesthetic construction of images - even in contexts of structural and financial precariousness in a film or audio-visual project - thus carries important political and social significance in the construction of the collective imagination. It can enable Black girls to see beauty and complexity in their own image. In this way, Black women, with their unique characteristics, can contribute to building a more pluralistic and appreciative collective imagination of Black bodies.

To understand the construction of image more deeply, we must return to studies on communication theory. Roman Jakobson, in 'Linguistic and Poetics' (1960), presents a basic scheme of communication: the sender, the receiver, the message, the context or referent, the code, and the contact. Here, we consider the construction of images applied to cinematography with the introduction of new receivers, new codes, new messages and new contexts.

Semiotics raises very relevant questions about the study of image construction and its perception. In addition, Boris Groys' 'Comrades of Time' (2009) offers a valuable reflection on timelessness and the dilation of time in the creative process. The present time in which I propose to create images is based on a historical, political and social context in which the present is a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming a space of continuous rewriting of both the past and the future - of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual control or grasp. Ancestrality, so often cited by Conceição Evaristo and so many other Black women writers from Brazil and beyond, such as Ana Maria Gonçalves, Djamila Ribeiro, Beatriz Nascimento, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Grada Kilomba, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison, establishes a notion of another creative time and perspective on the world, based on an aesthetic that is rarely seen.

Diversity is believed to be the possibility of a plurality of individual perspectives. The personal becomes powerful and also imposes itself as aesthetics. I speak here of Black women, but we can also draw a correlation with other so-called minority groups. The *New Gaze* is inflected by number, gender, and race.

We still have no idea of the pacts that have been made to bring about this revolution, which seems so near. And even in this generation, we are still subject to witnessing many of us dealing with non-negotiable aspects in order to belong or defend an outdated code. However, there are those who believe in change and rupture, in the creation of something new.

As a cinematographer, I hold in my hands an incredible opportunity to revisit my roots and deeply explore Black and Afro-diasporic aesthetic codes. We can use this position to change realities, to create other perspectives and narratives. This is not new. Many have done this before - in religion, music, and fashion. Aesthetics are a means for survival, for eternity. They are legacy. And I, in my role, have the possibility of no longer being just a spectator. Instead, I can be the creator of my own narrative.

The incredible writer Conceição Evaristo said in her poem 'Calma e Silêncio':

When I bite the word,
please
don't rush me,
I want to chew,
tear between my teeth,
the skin, the bones, the marrow
of the verb,
so, I can get
to the heart of things.

When my gaze
is lost in nothingness,
please
don't wake me,
I want to retain,
within the iris,
the smallest shadow,
the tiniest movement.[1]

[7] Freely translated from Portuguese

For me, images are like words for Conceição. There is such an intense relationship in the creative process, sometimes even painful, but I insist on believing in the poetry of images and their power to change. Because yes, it exists and infatuates any attentive and curious eye. In calmness and in silence, I hope to bring reflections to the *image-messages* that I create, and that these, within so many films, might become part of a meaningful conversation about aesthetics, politics, and time.

Translated from Portuguese
by Maria Deopátria Altreiter-Silva and Sandra Krampelhuber

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Lílis Soares on set of MAMI WATA © Drive Adebayo

IN CONVERSATION WITH AÏCHA CHLOÉ BORO: CRAFTING FREEDOM THROUGH INTIMATE CINEMA

Estrella Sendra and Laura Feal

Aïcha Chloé Boro (Burkina Faso, 1978) views cinema as an intimate and necessary language. Yet, it is not her only means of expression. Trained in literature and journalism, she has held various roles, all while nurturing a deep need to address issues that resonate with her lived experience, and to leave a legacy for future generations.

As a novelist, she has authored two works inspired by her own life: *Paroles orpheline/ Orphan's Words* (2006) and *Notre Djihad intérieur/ Our interior djihad* (2018), in which she explores the contradictions and questions faced by an African expatriate in France returning to her native village. Like her protagonist, Boro has lived in France since 2010.

A self-taught advocate of what she calls "a cinema of the heart and the truth", Boro has primarily worked in the documentary genre. Her films include *Sur les traces de Salimata/ In the footsteps of Salimata* (2012), *Farafin Ko, une cour entre deux mondes/ Farafin Ko, a heart in-between two worlds* (2014), *France-Au Revoir, le nouveau commerce triangulaire/ Good Bye, France, the new triangular trade* (2017), *Le Loup d'or de Balolé/ The Golden Wolf of Balolé* (2019), and *Al Djanat (paradis originel)/ Al Djanat, the Original Paradise* (2022). In these works, she positions herself as an engaged observer of pressing social issues in her country, ranging from natural resource exploitation and neo-colonial ties with France to gender inequalities.

With *The Golden Wolf of Balolé*, she made "herstory" as the first woman to win an award in the documentary category at one of the longest running and most prestigious African film festivals in the continent, the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou, also known as FESPACO.

Though she prefers to be a witness rather than a protagonist, Boro does not hesitate to insert herself into her narratives, grounding the story in the lived experiences of her filmed subjects and sometimes her own. In her latest film, *Les Invertueuses/ The Invirtuous Women* (2025) – self-produced like most of her previous works –Boro ventures into fiction. The film tells a love story between a grandmother and her granddaughter. *Les Invertueuses* is a bold ode to freedom that has stirred strong reactions among Burkinabe audiences during FESPACO.

Shortly after the festival, we invite her to an interview about her career, which she generously accepts. In our conversation, we explore her motivations, her vision, and her dreams in cinema.

You are a prolific storyteller, a journalist, writer and filmmaker. How did your love for cinema start?

I've always had an intimate relationship with cinema, ever since I was very young. I talk about it in the film *Al Djanat*. I grew up in my uncle's home. I have enormous affection to him – may he rest in peace. He was a kind of local religious figure, an emblematic figure. Our home was a bit of a reference point, both for Islam and because he had a television, which was rare in Dédougou at the time. He had a lot of children, and together with the neighbourhood kids, we'd do whatever we could to come and watch TV. My uncle was on the sofa. He held on to the remote control and when there were scenes of violence, he wasn't at all shocked. However, as soon as there were scenes of kissing or love, he would turn towards us to check if any of us were still watching the screen. It felt like he was looking for which child carried the devil inside him. In those moments, you had to disappear while staying still. He would find a child watching a scene he considered as obscene and turn off the TV, always saying: 'Anyway, for white people, there will be no judgement. White people will go straight to hell'. It was a huge sentence. As a child, I had the impression that there was some kind of power in the act of holding and pressing the remote control.

We never saw the beginning or end of the film. I remember when we'd get out of there and some children would say: 'What is it with white people making indecent films?' While in my case, when I was little, I used to look up at the stars in the sky, and I'd say to myself: 'One day, when I grow up, I will make films.'

So, I was six, seven or eight years old when I had this desire. It's linked to the body. Today I make films to tell stories. At the time, I think it was for two reasons: first, I wanted to get back the power of that remote control that my uncle had had for so long; and second, I wanted to decide when a film starts and ends.

I didn't start out directly in cinema because, in most countries, cinema is reserved for a kind of elite. I had to work first, earn some money, attend a few masterclasses here and there, and self-produce almost all my films. Apart from *Al Djanat*, my documentaries are self-produced, and my first fiction film, *Les Invertueuses*, is entirely self-produced. There is a very intimate relationship between cinema and me. I can't live without cinema, and I hope that cinema doesn't want to live without me.

That's very interesting to hear, especially after having seen a film like *Al Djanat*. Did you go to the cinema together when you were little? Was that the norm in Ouagadougou?

Not us, not at all. I ended up seeing films in the cinema quite late. I think the first film I saw on the big screen was by Dani Kouyaté. Because I was in a Muslim family, we didn't go out in the evening. We sometimes went out when the adults were asleep, but that was to see the boys, to go to clubs, and rarely to the cinema. Cinema wasn't very functional at the time.

AL DJANAT
Aïcha Chloé Boro
France, Burkina Faso, Benin, Germany 2023, 84 min

Your work has an autobiographic dimension, at least in films like *Al Djanat*, but also, in *Les Invertueuses*, to some extent. What are the themes you are interested in, and the ways of approaching them?

So, what kind of cinema am I trying to make? That's a difficult question. I think I'm trying to make cinema from the heart. I try to make cinema from the gut, and that is not at all cerebral. That means the subjects often choose me, more than I choose them. Both *The Golden Wolf of Balolé* and *Al Djanat*, like *Les Invertueuses*, are stories that emerge in such a compelling way that not making the film feels impossible. I have no choice but to make it. It is a cinema of necessity. I am undeniably driven by the need to shed light on those who exist outside the social sphere. What interests me most are the ordinary people of society – people like me – the invisible, the forgotten. Because if I can offer them a moment of existence in the light cast by a camera, all of a sudden, I exist as well, a little bit...

If you've been to Ouaga, to FESPACO you will have been to the headquarters. The mine that I show in *The Golden Wolf of Balolé* is around four kilometres away from the FESPACO headquarters. In other words, it's not far at all. And yet, it was a totally unknown place. The school where I went was also just three kilometres away from that hole, and I didn't know it existed. Except that it's not just a hole. It's a town in the heart of another town.

Balolé is a town in the heart of the city of Ouagadougou, but under it. It's a huge and very deep hole where a whole community lives. The wolves are suffocated in the hole, because it's actually a mine to extract granite, the one used to build the beautiful districts. It has a church and a mosque. And people are buried there. Some people live there, and just a few kilometres away, there are people who don't know about them.

In fact, how I discovered this hole is that, for me, like most of the inhabitants of the capital or even the district, when you walk by, you see pebbles, and old people sitting down and selling them. And, like most people, I thought the pebbles had come from elsewhere, and that it was just a market. I had no idea that they had been extracted a few metres further down. So, I went to film it for *France, au-revoir, le nouveau commerce triangulaire*. And there was a young man who told me: 'if you give me some spare change, you'll be able to go behind and film the hole'. I asked: 'what hole?' And then he looked at me like I am an idiot and said: 'Where do you think the stones come from?' So, I gave him a note equivalent to €2, and there it was. Once you get there, you can't see the bottom, because it's hidden by all the rocks, suddenly, there it was, like an apparition.

There's something mystical about this place. There's the noise, because there are over 2,000 people crushing stones, with hammers, that make lots of little clangs together, the smokers, the grey dust from the granite that rises, and the red dust from the earth mixing with the fumaroles… That is why this film was highly acclaimed for its postcard images. Yet, I am not a camerawoman. I never trained to do that, and I filmed it with a completely amateur camera.

When you see a place like this, you inevitably tell yourself: it's not possible to miss this place. Whether as a journalist, or a writer, or a filmmaker, you know it's an opportunity. It's a place you are called to. You must tell the story. It was a call from that place. And I experienced it as a privilege to have been chosen by that place so that people could know that it existed. From that very moment, I became a witness of *The Golden Wolf*. There's this great character of Adama in the film who asked me, as I started filming: 'What's the point of you coming here to film?' And suddenly, I realised that when my first impression tells me that I have been chosen by the place, I can only, in a humble way, step aside, and let the place and its people speak for themselves. I have to follow the intuition. When I was shooting, I had the feeling that I was just a go-between, a passer-by, to be honest. All I did was have the humility to let the place tell its own story. I think that's the kind of cinema I make and want to make, letting people and places speak for themselves, tell their own story. That's why I was talking about a cinema from the heart, but I could also talk about a cinema of truth, the truth of people, the truth of moments.

You have many ways of telling a story. As a journalist, you understand how to approach a subject with a sense of objectivity–even if, as we know, complete objectivity is never truly possible. You also make films, translating stories into powerful audiovisual language. But how do you decide how to tell them? How do you let the story guide you toward its form, and at what point do you step back and decide: 'this one needs to be a film, or a novel, or a documentary'?

That's a very good question and a very difficult one. My artistic choices tend to be artisanal choices, a cinema of intuition, rather than reflection. When I made *The Golden Wolf*, there was this character, Adama who is a wonderful actor. At festivals sometimes I have been asked: 'But aren't you embellishing the translation a little? Because every-

thing Adama says is so beautiful.' Whereas when I was doing the translations, I was frustrated at not being able to convey all the poetry and all the essence of what he was saying, because there aren't always equivalent words. I found that what he said was stronger, deeper, more beautiful, more poetic than what I was translating. And I said to myself, I want to make a film that showcases this spoken West African language, which is beautiful, poetic, and profound. I didn't know what kind of film would convey that. I also really wondered what kind of cinema I wanted to make.

I knew that my uncle's death couldn't go unnoticed. I had to tell the story of my uncle's disappearance, but I didn't know in what form. Since I didn't go to film school, I have the right to have knowledge gaps. I just listen to my intuition. I knew that I had to go back to my family, with a camera, to sit there, to be myself, and to wait for things to happen. But very quickly, I realised that all this poetry, through songs, where my aunt thinks about saying nothing and letting men decide everything, says a lot. I realised I had the opportunity to remedy the frustration that I had on *The Golden Wolf*, by highlighting these words of my aunts.

Al Djanat was ultimately a documentary, but it's also a kind of musical. There's no other music, but my aunt's song punctuates the story and contributes to the narration. Once again, it's a cinema of truth, where at the beginning I follow my intuition, and then I follow the tools that are needed. Not having gone through a film school is thus a weakness, but it's also a strength. It means I am much more open, and much more receptive to everything that happens.

I identify a subject, or rather a subject finds me, and I understand that I cannot ignore it. I start by doing some empirical observation. Then, I search for the language, the grammar of the film. I never have the grammar of the film before shooting starts. Not once. Because for me the grammar is in the story itself. You have to learn from the story you are telling.

There are several layers and strong moments in your films. For instance, in *Al Djanat*, that scene where a woman is in labour, live... Or at the end, when we hear: 'Cut!' And the rest is told through voice over. When, in the creative process do you make such stylistic decisions, as you listen to the subject's specific grammar?

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I think that all of that is possible because I make a very artisanal cinema. In fact, as I respond to you, I realise many things… If I'm honest, in *Al Djanat*, the moment where he says: 'Cut the camera', either I didn't hear when he said it, or I forgot about it, but I didn't know we had that in the footage. My editor, who is great, and I were looking for a way to end the court scene, and suddenly we heard this voice saying: 'Cut!' We looked at each other and said: 'But, he said 'cut!' It was then that we understood that he was offering us that wonderful moment. That we would be able to leave the court with that voice. That is why it is really an artisanal cinema from beginning to end.

Al Djanat is the only film where I have a voice-over because, I had always criticised voice-overs before the film. Back then, I thought, wrongly – now I know – that doing a voiceover was a way of responding to some form of failure in direct cinema. Both my editor and my producer – who I also salute, a wonderful man, who really supported me for several years – spent almost a month trying to convince me, saying: 'We need to know your position on this story. You can't tell us in a file that there's your umbilical cord and that you're going to keep the same distance as in your other films.' It took me a long time to assume that the voiceover was needed by the story. That it would make the link between all things. It became a must, but I did not know in advance that this was the case.

We wanted to ask you about the fiction film, *Les Invertueuses*. Why did you choose in your last film to do fiction? You said at the beginning that it came from an actual situation, and that you saw the potential of telling the story, and work on a subject that is a bit taboo in society.

Les Invertueuses is my first fiction film, and it was entirely self-produced. The story came from a real moment I witnessed between my daughter and her grandmother during a trip to Burkina Faso. My daughter, who also plays the girl in the film, noticed something tender and unusual between her grandmother and an older man. That moment sparked the idea: what if a young girl helped her grandmother reclaim a love she was once denied?

The film explores themes of self-determination of women. And it's embodied by a 65-year-old grandmother who lived a life of imposed choices–forced marriage, silenced dreams. Her granddaughter decides to take risks to help her reconnect with the man she truly loved, who remained faithful for decades. I found it beautiful because when in 2017 I was on holiday with my children, I sent my daughter to the market. And when she came back, she said: I saw a grandmother there talking to this old man. It was weird. But why? And we said we would dress her up and take her to the market the following day. Fiction allowed me to explore these emotional and taboo subjects–love in old age, gender identity, and personal freedom–with nuances. These themes challenged societal norms. For me, fiction was the only way to tell this story with the depth and tenderness it deserved.

Do you think that being a woman filmmaker has an impact on how the film is perceived? How do you feel or position yourself about that?

Well, cinema is still very much a man's world, whether we like it or not. That's just a fact. Carving out a space for yourself in this industry is anything but easy, especially for women. Now, do audiences respond the same way to a subject depending on whether it's presented by a woman or a man? That's a tough question. Honestly, I don't think I can give a definitive yes or no – because I am a woman, and I've never experienced the other side of that equation. But I do know one thing: during filming, I witnessed things. I pointed them out to some people on set. Had I been a man, things wouldn't have happened the same way. Even if others didn't acknowledge it, I saw it clearly. The truth is, there are still many things that are more easily accepted when you are a man.

I believe that in the production process, gender can play a significant role. For example, with *Al Djanat*, I'm convinced that if I had been a man, I would not have been able to make the film in the same way. Being a woman was actually a strength. In my family, returning with a camera as a woman was seen very differently than if I had been a man. Because it was me, a woman, 'a little girl of the family home', the camera wasn't seen as dangerous or as a threat. Had I been a son, the combination of being male and holding a camera would have created suspicion, even resistance. So yes, it's clear to me that being a woman or a man influences the kind of cinema we are able to make – and probably also how that cinema is received. It's complicated. It's difficult to answer with certainty.

We love the way you talk about your cinema as a cinema of struggle and of the heart. Your sensitivity as a woman and as a mother is very present, as a strength. Would you say your cinema is also a cinema of resistance? Are you doing an exercise of memory on your history, as a person, and as a woman, of building the memory for the future?

What truly interests me is telling stories – capturing moments and preserving them for the future. I know it might sound pretentious, and I apologise for that, but the idea that in 20 or 30 years, someone –maybe you, or my children, or even someone I've never met – might be searching for meaning, asking questions about our connection to the earth, to our origins, to a form of spirituality... that they might even find the beginning of an answer, in *Al Djanat* or in any of my films – that thought makes me happy.

I love the idea that somewhere, someone might watch *Al Djanat* and feel a spark of recognition, a sense of connection in their own quest for meaning – about who we are, our relationship to the earth, to where we come from. Because one does not need to be Mandinka, or Black, to recognise yourself in that journey. I have the impression that this quest for meaning is something deeply present in our modern societies, and my work tries to speak to that.

I think of it as a cinema of memory, a cinema of imprint. A cinema that wants to leave a trace. Because I, myself, am nothing. But if my films can leave behind even a small imprint – so that someone, 50 or 100 years from now, might watch them and say: 'That's how it was. And that connects me to something...' - then that would mean everything to me.

Another thing that resonates deeply is the idea of building bridges. For me, it's really

about that. When I show *The Golden Wolf of Balolé*, there's a moment where a mother tells her husband not to give their children coins, because she knows they'll spend it on candy. She says: 'Candy is junk. It's not very good for their health.' And I think to myself: what's the difference between this mother and a Parisian, Andalusian, or American mother saying the exact same thing? Maybe in different words, in a different language, but with the same care.

In the end, who are we? We are simply the other – living another story, in another colour, another culture, in another gender. But still, just the other. And cinema is such a powerful way to reveal this. It's a way to build bridges, to help people realise that if they had been born in a different place, under different circumstances, they could have been that person. With differences, of course, but still, fundamentally, the same.

That's what building bridges means to me. It's an honour to be able to serve as that bridge. This is the kind of cinema I want to make. The kind I want to defend. Because it gives me purpose. It gives me meaning.

Are you also interested in rooting the stories in the socio-political and economic context of what is going on in Sahel at the moment? You have been based in France for a while, so, is this also a way of positioning the gaze you have for your country?

Well, I think it's a conscious effort – not to lose my country, and not to lose myself. That doesn't mean I close myself off. I'm not a 'parallel'. In Europe, 'parallels' are Africans who live there while trying to remain in parallel – living a specific life, often to make money, but always trying to stay 100% who they were back home. That's not me.

I'm deeply interested in new cultures, in learning, in everything that can enrich and affirm my humanity. But at the same time, I need to stay anchored. Even if I had never left Burkina, I would still need to return to my roots, to my origins – not just to stay grounded, but to find myself, to search for myself. I'm someone who is constantly searching for herself.

And I manage to find pieces of myself through art – especially now, through cinema. The kind of cinema I make is a way of telling myself. Because cinema, at its core, is about storytelling. This need to present oneself – it's not narcissistic, I assure you. It comes from a place of humility. I belong to a society that hasn't always been well or sufficiently represented. As the saying goes, history remembers the victors. And Africa hasn't always been told well or told enough by its own people. At the same time, I come from a culture where storytelling is deeply rooted. The presence of our *griotte* aunts, for example, shows how much we value the act of telling. It's something endogenous to us – culturally, and even spiritually. It's a kind of catharsis. We see it in *Al Djanat* – it's an extension of that tradition, a blend of all those influences. In our culture, storytelling has always been a way of transmitting memory. And today, in 2025, cinema has become one of the ways we pass on that memory.

Conflict is a recurrent theme in your films. We see it on television, hear it on the radio, and witness it in the streets – through the presence of tanks and the military. Do you see a connection between the internal conflicts experienced by your characters and the external, political or social conflicts surrounding them? Can we talk about cinema in Ouagadougou and Burkina as a cinema of conflict?

Ah, yes. Cinema has undeniably become a cinema of conflict since the outbreak of terrorism in the country. That's certain. I think the trauma we're experiencing from this conflict is, in some ways, comparable to the trauma Europe experienced during the World Wars. The conflict seeps into everything – into our narratives, into the stories we tell, and even into how we tell them.

When I first began writing *Les Invertueuses*, I had no intention of addressing terrorism or the current crisis. But today, it's almost impossible to tell a contemporary story without it surfacing, because it's everywhere. We may try to hide it, especially when we're welcoming guests, but it's there. It's part of our daily reality. And so, inevitably, it becomes part of our cinema.

Even beyond Burkina, in other Sahel countries, there is a generation of young women directors – like Aïcha Macky, Amina Weira, Amina Abdoulaye Mamani– for whom the question of conflict is very present.

Conflict is something that strikes women in a very visceral way. It hits you in the gut. I don't know how men experience it, but in places, countries, and territories at war, the situation of women is always one of the first things to be affected. Wherever there is conflict, the fate of women is thrown into uncertainty. It comes restricted, endangered.

Because with war comes rape, comes violence – so many things. As soon as a territory falls into conflict, the female body, the destiny of women, becomes vulnerable. It becomes a bargaining chip, a target of domination, a stake in negotiations. Conflict zones automatically redefine the place of women in society. And this era we're living through does exactly that. It redefines women's roles, their safety, their freedom. Is this also true for men? I am not sure. But for women, it's undeniable.

We started the interview introducing our shared love for cinema, those c*oups de foudre* which we see also in your films. There is also a dream represented in your latest film, the statement that elderly women have the right to dream. Which is your dream with regards to cinema and your own films career?

Today, I am a woman who feels more weighed down by sorrow than lifted by dreams. Right now, I am a woman who feels more depressed than she dreams. Because cinema is my home, but it can also be my wound. What defines us, what we hold most dear, is often what has the greatest potential to hurt us.

That's why, at the beginning of this interview, I said: 'I don't know how to live without

cinema, and I hope that cinema can't live without me'. I have a dream – and I'm proud to say it, even though it has already cost me a lot to do so. But I still find it huge: after more than 50 years of FESPACO – Africa's largest and oldest film festival – it was only recently that a woman [herself] received the top award in the documentary category. For fiction, it still hasn't happened.

When we go to the *Place des cinéastes* [the Filmmakers Square, in Ouagadougou], we just see statues of men...

Thank you for saying it, because that's what I said at the last FESPACO, and I was told I was a hysterical woman.

Place des Cinéastes, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, taken by the authors during FESPACO 2025

It is just a piece of evidence.

The absence of women as reference points in fiction is not just an oversight – it's a structural issue. What's the dream? I don't know exactly. Maybe it's access – for women – to education, training and culture. Maybe that's the dream. When, after 50 years, no woman has received the highest recognition in fiction, something is wrong. There's an error in the equation. It signals a deeper problem. And I'm not saying it's intentional or a conspiracy orchestrated by men. That's not the point. In fact, we cannot win the feminist struggle without men. We need them. Many men already stand with women, not against them. Our father [Souleymane] Cissé – may he rest in peace – has always supported the cause of women. So, I'm not drawing a line between men and women. I'm just saying that we need to be able to name the problem. We need to acknowledge that something is off – and we need to look into it.

I dream of being the woman who finally lifts that standard. Who can say: 'Finally, a woman has done it.' That's my dream. I have been harshly criticised for saying it. But I still say it. I claim it. I want it to be written. Not just for me, but for all the girls who deserve to dream. Who deserve to believe that it's possible for them too.

Because whether we admit it or not, when we walk into a filmmakers' space and see only male faces on the walls – whether we intend to or not – we are sending a message. We are telling the little boy: 'You can do this'. And we're telling the little girl: 'You can't'. We are still perpetuating that message.

But what if we could send a different message? That it's about building herself and self-realisation? How do we tell little girls that the dream is possible? I've been insulted for saying it. Maybe I'll be insulted again. But I don't mind. Because I'm not just speaking for myself. I'm speaking for all the little girls in Africa. The dream can take many forms: access to education, access to culture, to opportunity. But it starts with recognising that something needs to change.

We hope to see that, that it's you who lifts the stallion for a fiction film... We'll be there. Thank you so much for your time, and for sharing.

Filmography of Aïcha Chloé Boro

Sur les traces de Salimata. Burkina Faso, 2012, documentary, 52 min.
Farafin Ko, une cour entre deux mondes. Burkina Faso, 2014, documentary, 92 min.
France Au-Revoir, le nouveau commerce triangulaire. 2016, France, Burkina Faso, Togo, documentary, 72 min.
Le Loup d'or de Balolé. Burkina Faso, 2019, documentary, 65 min.
Al Djanat (paradis originel). Burkina Faso, 2022, documentary, 82 min.
Les Invertueuses. Burkina Faso, 2025, fiction, 96 min.

Interview:

Aïcha Boro, with Estrella Sendra and Laura Feal, on 13 May 2025, via Google Meet, in French. This interview has been translated from French into English by the authors.

LES INVERTUEUSES
Aïcha Chloé Boro
Burkina Faso, France 2025, 96 min

ARCHIVING AS A RADICAL ACT: INTERVIEW WITH ONYEKA IGWE

Nadia Denton

In this piece UK curator Nadia Denton interviews moving image artist and researcher Onyeka Igwe about her book *June Givanni: The Making of a Pan-African Cinema Archive*.

Archiving, Resistance and Freedom are the themes for this publication. What does memory and resistance mean to you in the context of your own artistic practice?

In my own work, they're completely tied to ideas I have about the present and how to politically engage with the world that we live in. I look to history. I engage with my own memories, but also other people's memories of politics and resistance. So, there's a film series that I did a few years ago - I was thinking about the Aba Women's Riot[1], thinking about anti-colonial resistance and I was interested in understanding what people's memories of this moment were, and I'm always trying to do this to inspire my thoughts in the present. So, they're really interlinked, I think, for my practice.

In terms of my own, personal cultural memories that have influenced me in working in film, my dad used to entertain [me and my siblings] by letting us watch any films we wanted in the cinema and borrow loads of DVDs from Blockbusters. Me, my brother and sister just became very experimental in our choices. We watched everything and anything. I remember being exposed to lots of different types of independent cinema and in that moment, it really broadened my horizons and my interest in film. I wouldn't say I was thinking about a career in film, but it really established a deep kind of appreciation of film as full of possibility in my imagination. I think this experience opened a certain perspective of seeing film.

Your book *June Givanni: The Making of a Pan-African Cinema Archive* was launched this year (May 2025). June Givanni is a luminary in the world of African Diaspora film and in particular curating and archiving. What were some of the highlights from your experience of the archive and time spent with June?

The highlight was getting the opportunity to talk to so many different people. June is the conduit of the archive, but from her springs a whole network and community of filmmakers. So, I got to speak to filmmakers and people who were associated with each of the four festivals that June had curated - *Third Eye: London Third World Cinema Fes-*

[1] An anti-colonial protest which took place in the south-eastern provinces of Nigeria in 1929.

tival, The Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), Images Caraïbes, and *Celebration of Black Cinema*.

It really expanded and developed my knowledge and understanding of those films of that period and also how I would like to orient my own work. There were obviously a lot of those individuals and even their works that I would have had no prospect of coming across because of how the history of this kind of work has been documented or not documented.

As someone who grew up in the UK, I had the feeling of being so close yet far and that this information has been under my nose the whole time. I think in writing the book, I can piece together the puzzle of a political and cultural history in London. I don't think I would have gotten there or maybe it would have taken me longer to get there if I didn't have access to the archive.

So, that was the highlight, hearing these contributors' stories, understanding from a diversity of perspectives and formulating an understanding of Pan-African film that was broader than the notion I came to the book with.

The book is part of the Radical Black Women Series[2] which includes publications about Claudia Jones and Amy Ashwood Garvey. What did you observe as radical in terms of June's own creative practice?

I think the way that the archive has come to be is not traditional. It's not the way that archives usually exist in terms of the norms of a library or an institutional archive. It is like a counter archive in many ways, and uses what people describe as feminist archiving practices, which are about marginalized knowledge. I really think the archive becomes whole or becomes meaningful through personal stories and networks. My experience has been enriched from talking to June and her telling me a story, going off on a tangent, pulling something from a shelf, showing me a film. Or someone coming into the archive, that I've vaguely heard about and who I ended up having a conversation with, this for me is a counter archive. It's an experiential archive rather than something that's about records, catalogues and material. I think that's its strength. I do think that June's approach, the whole idea of creating this kind of internationalist solidarity that connects film, communities and a kind of movement using this idea of liberation through politics is radical.

Your documentation of June's reflections about the early days of FESPACO[3] under President Thomas Sankara's government are particularly rich. What do you think that the younger generation of African filmmakers can take away from the legacy of FESPACO?

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[2] The focus of the Radical Black Women series is to spotlight the specific contributions of black women to social justice movements in Britain

[3] FESPACO, the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou, is a biannual film festival held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. It's the largest regular cultural event on the African continent, showcasing African films and promoting the expansion and development of African cinema.

I had the opportunity to go for the first time this year [2025]. It was quite interesting after hearing so much about it and also people's reflections on it and how it's changed, how it's not quite the same, how it has not got the same energy. What I think will be beneficial for young people to take away is what it means for film culture to be infused with political ideas. That's also my experience of FESPACO itself.

It's a state film festival, that is trying to communicate ideas through the festival, through its rituals, how things proceed, and what films get invited. It's kind of promoting an idea of Pan-Africanism through film culture. That kind of relationship is not something that I experience here in the UK or broadly in the West.

FESPACO was about African filmmakers saying, we have African film, and it looks like this, it behaves like this, it adheres to these kinds of traditions. And I think that produced a real rich film history. So, what does it mean to try and work under that kind of banner instead of individualism?

How has the research and writing of the book affected your own creative trajectory and indeed radical leanings?

I think that it has definitely made me rethink my attitude, and thinking around Pan-Africanism. I had quite a dismissive idea about it, how it developed and didn't even realize that the influence of these kind of Pan- African ideas seeped into my work and what I was interested in looking at. I've always been invested in collectivism, but it's just reinforced the importance of that and how I would like my work to do that.

I want my films to have a relationship to the political. I think I've danced around it and not quite known precisely how to name it and how to engage with it, but it feels so much more urgent now and I feel, I guess braver, to be more explicit about that after writing the book.

Has the time spent in the archive with June affected your own perceptions about developing an archive? How do you now see the importance of archive in the context of your filmmaking and wider artistic practice?

You know what? I'm a terrible archivist of my own things! I'm not someone who really thinks about legacies. I've never really thought so much about how to preserve the research that goes into things. Looking to see what other people have done helps you in the present and it helps you become brave and you see that you're not alone. So, I feel like I should probably start engaging with archiving a bit more. It's a little more in the front of my mind now. I guess it just takes a bit of time and investment because you know, once I'm finished the project I'm often just spent. It is a big ask, I think, to be in the mindset of creation and then also have to think about the archiving process.

You have an exhibition coming up at the Tate Britain in September 2025 …

The exhibition focuses on the history of Nigeria's first university which was the University of Ibadan where my mum went in the 1970s and is a kind of site of several different projections. It was a colonial university, it was seen as this exemplar of Tropical Modernism. It was a university where luminaries of Nigerian literature, like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo studied. It had this kind of political history around it, certain expelled Marxist academics taught there. So, I'm interested in it because it kind of forms my own first memories of education and what the potential of education could be. So I'm exploring multiplicity and imagination through the history of this particular space. There's video, analogue film technology and a sculptural element as well. I'm trying to be more ambitious with this show, experimenting with different kinds of media.

Onyeka Igwe *is a London born and based moving image artist and researcher. Her work is aimed at the question: how do we live together? Not to provide a rigid answer as such, but to pull apart the nuances of mutuality and co-existence in our deeply individualized world. Onyeka's practice figures sensorial, spatial and counter-hegemonic ways of knowing as central to that task. She is interested in the prosaic and everyday aspects of black livingness. For her, the body, archives and narratives both oral and textual act as a mode of enquiry that makes possible the exposition of overlooked histories. The work comprises untying strands and threads, anchored by a rhythmic editing style, as well as close attention to the dissonance, reflection and amplification that occurs between image and sound.*

Onyeka Igwe (middle) speaks at launch of *June Givanni: The Making of a Pan-African Cinema Archive*. © Patrick Lewis

THE T-SHIRT: UNCHOSEN HISTORIES IN CINEMATIC TEXTS

Lesedi Oluko Moche

In 2018, I was tasked as Head Curator with selecting a diverse array of films from a dozen European Union member states for the annual European Film Festival in South Africa. The festival, designed to showcase the best of each country's cinema from the current and preceding year, mandated that the director be a citizen of the nation represented by their film. My tenure as Head Curator was particularly distinct, coinciding with Brexit, which marked the United Kingdom's final year as a member of the European Union.

A pivotal moment arrived when a notable South African visual artist, with a semi-aggressive questioning tone, asked me, „Why do we need European cinema in Africa?" This question crystallized the very purpose I intended to imbue into my role: to foreground the undeniable truth that there is no separatist notion of „Africa" and „Europe." For better or worse, our histories are inextricably linked, woven together by centuries of interaction. No matter how ardently some may wish to return to a purist, untainted notion of identity, ours has long been a merged existence, playing out across diverse regions and profoundly shaping our contemporary realities.

This conviction is evident in the tangible structures that govern African lives. Our historical relationship to Europe, rooted in violence, exploitation, and numerous inconveniences, continues to shape our contemporary governance, legal systems, and, in many cases, even our national identities. This legacy is visible in the foundational documents of many African nations; most still have their official constitutions and primary legislation drafted and enforced in the language of their former colonial power. Irrespective of the countries that officially acknowledge indigenous languages, the default for legal and administrative frameworks often remains a former colonial lingua franca. This linguistic imprint is but one thread in the vast, complex tapestry of our shared past, demonstrating that the ‚us' and ‚them' are far more entwined than often acknowledged.

Given this reality, my vision for the festival became clear. I would utilize this significant platform to deliberately complicate the cinematic representation of Europe and, by extension, challenge simplistic notions of European identity itself. Not a unique pursuit, but one that needed revisiting. Life, in a serendipitous alignment with my curatorial intent, presented a compelling opportunity that year. There was an impressive number of award-winning and critically acclaimed films made by European directors with parental roots outside of Europe. Filmmakers whose heritage stretched across former colonial boundaries into the very continents from which Europe had extracted so much.

Whilst I was prepared for potential backlash from some members of the EU delegation regarding my selections, I was taken aback by the adamant resistance from one or two country heads who unequivocally stated their unwillingness to have their nations represented by the films I had chosen. A curator, like any cultural practitioner, must navigate the delicate balance of conviction and compromise; you win some, you lose some. That year, I certainly lost some battles.

The opening night film was a significant triumph, a powerful statement that resonated with my core philosophy. I programmed Rungano Nyoni's BAFTA award-winning film, *I Am Not a Witch*, as the festival opener. In my address, I highlighted the significance of opening with an African-made film by a Welsh woman director of Zambian descent. It was a deliberate reflection of how we are all bound by histories that are not of our choosing, a mirror to the forced convergences that define our world.

While this piece is not a review of the film, I reflect on a potent symbol within it: a t-shirt worn by Shula, the young lead. A torn, beige t-shirt, discoloured by dust and seemingly weary from a lengthy journey from factory to store then transported as charity before landing on the body of this little girl. The faded blue writing on the t-shirt reads, „#Bootycall." This seemingly innocuous garment, imbued with layers of unspoken history, becomes a concentrated visual representation of the enduring residue of European engagement with peoples beyond its borders. It speaks to the global supply chains born from colonial exploits, the casual distribution of goods, and the implicit power dynamics embedded in aid or discard. The film itself follows this young girl who has been accused of being a witch and is sent to a witch camp. Like the t-shirt, a silent testament to the continuous exchange and onslaught of this profoundly negotiated identity we now call an 'African' one: an identity forged in the crucible of historical encounters, perpetually in dialogue with imposed labels and reclaimed truths. Are you a witch? Are you a commodity? Is this your life? Is this a circus?

For the most part, contemporary African cinema is no longer solely concerned with the overt political freedom that preoccupied its ancestral cinematic counterparts. While understanding historical context remains vital, the current wave of African cinema is more interested in a syncretic cinematic framework of contemporary identity. This new frontier is a vibrant act of resistance against dominant narratives that still espouse some purist view of regional indigeneity or a simplified „Africanness."

African film, much like the diverse Africans and diasporans who tell its stories, is multitudinous. It has become a scene-by-scene reclamation of the countless ways in which we live, dream, believe, and continue to be shaped - internally and externally - by a global system that often still wants to pack us into convenient raggedy containers of categorization.

In a world still preoccupied with macro-narratives of singular symbols, reductive descriptions, and catchy slogan identities, when it comes to „African" cinema, a growing number of African and diasporic women filmmakers are breathing nuance and offering a more textured, human-scale perspective.

Filmmakers with roots in the diversity of African experience like Wanuri Kahiu (Kenya), Mayye Zayed (Egypt), Milisuthando Bongela (South Africa), Kemi Adetiba (Nigeria), Ramata-Toulye Sy (Senegal), Angela Wanjiku Wamai (Kenya), Kaouther ben Hania (Tunisia), Santilla Chingaipe (Zambia), Karabo Lediga (South Africa), Akosua Adoma Owusu (Ghana), Claude Haffner (DRCongo), and scores more are leading this charge.

From teenage Arab girls participating in a weightlifting competition, to young love under the weight of cultural expectation, to taking a sabbatical from black girl magic and returning to your childhood home, these women directors are crafting films from the frontlines of sharp tenderness, defiant truth, and at times an acerbic brand of humor.

Looking back at that pointed question, „Why do we need European cinema in Africa?", the answer is neither simple nor singular. It doesn't lie in a separatist ‚need,' but instead in acknowledging the profound and challenging intimacy of our shared histories. The cinema being crafted today by African and diasporic women filmmakers stands as a testament to this truth.

Through their lenses, their films become a powerful site of reclamation, meticulously unpacking the layers of a negotiated identity and the dust left in our collective wake. They demonstrate that true liberation is found not in the impossible return to a pure, unblemished past. It is found in the courageous frame-by-frame embrace of our complex intertwined present and future, where identity is a ceaseless, vibrant becoming.

DISORDERED/SPECULATIVE MEMORY

Simisolaoluwa Akande

The erasure of queer Nigerian ancestry allows the phrase 'queerness is un-African' to persist unchallenged. This erasure splits the national self, casting queerness as 'other' - a foreign imposition, that cannot be integrated into the national 'I'. Both the tool and consequences of this forgetting is violence: the criminalisation of homosexual intercourse between men with a penalty of 14 years, the stoning of gay men under Sharia law, and the kidnapping and ransoming of queer bodies.

How then might we, the impossible queer Africans, claim existence and claim a right to home.

I suggest that we may attempt to 'remember'.

I. Trauma and Memory

Memory is a key site of the colonial project, which determines not only *what* can be remembered in contemporary life, but *how*. The colonial project does not merely ask that we forget; it desecrates sacred artefacts of our past and rewrites our past as a traumatic memory that must necessarily be repressed. According to trauma-informed psychology, repressing traumatic memory creates unconscious conflict. Events are not recalled in coherent time and space but return as psychosomatic symptoms: fragments, flashbacks, dissociative reactions.

I am well acquainted with this kind of *remembering*. After almost a year of convulsing in lecture halls, collapsing in cafés, and slurring "please" and "thank you" in the back of ambulances, a Neurologist finally gave it a name: *Dissociative Seizures*. He told me I was remembering memories so distressing they triggered seizures. "It's rooted in PTSD[1]," he said, "Common for people who have experienced war or sexual assault." What business do I have with such a condition? I hold no memory of war or sexual assault, no image, no known story about myself that could justify such a violent reaction.

How does one tell impossible stories, those that surpass the boundaries of the speakable and knowable? Stories about myself that *I* was not present for? In my case my body would act it out. Each tremor leaked vile secrets of what she has survived. She tells me she has been compromised, invaded, turned inside out. That a world of mine did end, and only she was there to bear witness.

For traumatised people and groups, the gap between somatic memory and cerebral

[1] Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition triggered by experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, and uncontrollable thoughts about the event.

memory creates an ontological schism: where subjectivity and temporality no longer cohere. My subject position, "I", was forced to expand, to contain "we," because my body has lived a life beyond me. She holds stories, secrets, and even joys that I cannot cognitively trace. I am no longer a singular self but a plural one, fractured across dimensions of time and experience. Over time, I have learnt to transform what seemed like a disability into a generative space, where remembering is not a process of reifying a stable and coherent self-narrative but a confrontation with the multiple dimensions of self that are continually being negotiated.

By proposing 'remembering' as a post/anti-colonial strategy against queer erasure, suppression, and death in Nigeria, I invite us to take seriously our disordered memories as traumatised peoples. To regard our psychosomatic symptoms, our flashbacks, and dissociated reactions as openings into othered histories that was not allowed - whether due to colonial violence or cultural silence - to be fully actualised.

This kind of memory work requires the imaginative labour of Saidiya Hartman's speculative fabulation, which uses storytelling and speculation to awaken alternate histories–not to recover what was lost, but to make space for what might yet be.

It is this pedagogy of remembering that I attempt to practice through my film *The Archive: Queer Nigerian*s. This essay explores how I put these ideas into practice as an experimental filmmaker who centres memory, witnessing, and speculative imagination as tools of both personal and cultural resistance.

II. On Witnessing and Relationality

As a participant in the Oral Tradition, Nigeria has always spoken herself into existence through folklore, proverbs, poetry, riddles, and drum language.

To narrate history through spoken word is to let it pass through a body. It implicates the speaker. It demands presence, witness, and relational continuity. In this mode, history is not an external, objective record; it is lived, embodied, and co-created.

Out of darkness, a voice calls out: "Alo o" awaiting the audience's response. This *call and response*[2] is a hallmark of Yoruba storytelling tradition. It creates reciprocity between teller and listener (or in this case, film and audience), implicating both as co-conspirators. In *The Archive: Queer Nigerians*, this technique becomes a cinematic device that transforms spectators into witnesses.

Where spectators remain safe behind the fourth wall, witnesses are summoned to cross

[2] Call and response, is a musical and communicative structure, rooted in various African cultures, including the traditional Yoruba context. It involves a dialogic exchange where a "call" - often a vocal or instrumental phrase - is answered by a corresponding "response" from another individual or group. In Yoruba traditions, this form is integral to rituals, music, and oral storytelling, emphasizing communal participation, rhythm, and shared meaning.

it. To bear witness is to enter into a contract of presence, to be close enough to feel the weight of another's words and to be marked by them. In this space, the boundaries between subject and object, viewer and viewed dissolve. Subjectivities blur and overflow, spilling into each other. The "I/self" expands into "us/we." Memory, becomes relational, intersubjective, and collective.

Mainstream discourse often demands "more representation". However, parading Black bodies on screen or excavating trauma for spectacle does not fulfil the deeper desire to be witnessed. *Witnesses over audiences*; this is what we long for. To witness is to have a stake in the story, and ultimately to care.

But what of *being* witnessed?

To be witnessed is not merely to be seen or even believed. What is at stake here is being itself - *consciousness*. Western philosophy tells us, "I think, therefore I am." (Descartes), the African philosophy of Ubuntu, offers a different proposition: "I am because you are." In this worldview, consciousness is not self-contained but emerges through relation. Being is defined through proximity to the other. Thus, I may only name what has happened to me - I may only fully be - through being seen, heard, and held by another.

In *The Archive: Queer Nigerians*, I invited over 30 participants into an autoethnographic process. For over three months, they created personal audio diaries. I offered no prompts, just a request: record the sounds that make up your life. The rhythm of your commute. The silence of your bedroom. Laughter shared with loved ones. This opened up a meditative space.

Gradually, they offered more: singing half-remembered songs and whispering secrets. Unfolding personal stories about their longing for home and about the shame they carry. They addressed me by name, *Simi*, using it as a surrogate for the mother/father/sister/brother they wished they could speak so transparently to. Somewhere between the anonymity of voice and the intimacy of my listening, they found the courage to say things they had never said aloud.

I was taken aback by the position they placed me in, afraid of the weight of what they were entrusting me with. This experience radically transformed my understanding of my role as a filmmaker. It is not to only *tell* stories but to learn to *listen*.

Months later, I bumped into one of the participants: the shy pastor's son. I barely recognized him as he boldly took the streets of London, visibly and unapologetically queer. He told me, "The project changed everything for me." His audio didn't even make it into the final cut. But it wasn't being 'represented' that made him feel seen, it was being listened to. It was being *witnessed*.

People, when given the tools, space, and safety to express themselves are incredibly skilled at telling. My job as director was to guide, to make the occasional 'mmm' and 'yeah', not to decide what is true or false, but to remind them: I am here. I am listening.

III. Speculation As Resistance

The Yoruba word *Ìtàn* translates not simply to "history," but to something far more expansive: *narrativity*, encompassing mythology, folklore, cosmology, and ancestral memory as serious epistemologies. These are not mere stories, but knowledge systems, birthed through the divinatory practices of Ifá[3]. Thus, for the Yoruba people history is contingent on creative processes. This epistemological openness resonates with Saidiya Hartman's theory of speculative fabulation, which seeks to "mime the figurative dimensions of history," using imaginative narrative to conjure lives that archive-based history refuses.

By naming the film 'The Archive' I deliberately invoke the aura of empiricism and authority that such a document carries, to expose, exploit and subvert the cultural stature of 'the archive' itself. I aim to disturb its position at the top of the hierarchy of discourse, to denature its facade as a neutral repository, and to reveal it as a site of power, omission, and imaginative potential.

The film opens with a queer retelling of the Yoruba creation 'myth'. In contemporary Nigeria, where Christianity and Islam dominate the religious landscape, the Yoruba creation myth - telling of how Obatala, Orunmila, and Olorun[4] created the human realm - is both a contested and co-opted history. In the traditional Ifá literary corpus, Olorun (the supreme being) possessed no gender. Yet 19th century Christian missionaries translated the Bible into Yoruba with Olorun as "God" and Eshu[5] as "the devil." In doing so, they forcibly reframed Yoruba deities through a Christian lens, demonising the divine. Our gods, quite literally, were turned into devils.

By conjuring our deities, I attempt an act of speculative argumentation. I ask: *What if* the absence of gender pronouns in the Yoruba language suggests an alternate metaphysical order? *What if* our gods - tricksters, shape-shifters, liminal forces - signal a lineage of ontological fluidity? These questions are not an imposition of queerness *onto* the Yoruba pantheon, but excavations of queerness already present. Here, queerness is not just gender or sexual variance but a deeper ontological instability - a queerness of form, of logic, of being: sensuous, non-cohesive, over-spilling.

The questions posed by the folklore sequences exploit what Hartman calls "the capacities of the subjunctive," pulling us into a conditional temporality–a time of what *could have been*. To dwell in this speculative space, we must hold a dual attention: to the positive objects of history (that which is named and known), and to the absences and silences (that which has

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[3] Ifá is a system of divination and philosophical thought central to the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria and neighboring regions. It is based on a vast body of oral literature and is practiced by trained diviners. The system is rooted in the worship of Orunmila, the divine entity of wisdom.

[4] In Yoruba belief, Olórun (or Olodumare) is the Supreme Being and creator, beyond direct human contact. Orishas are divine spirits representing natural forces, ancestors, or morals, acting as intermediaries to Olórun. Orunmila is the Orisha of wisdom and divination, revealing destiny through Ifá. Obatala represents purity, creativity, and justice, and is said to have shaped human bodies.

[5] Eshu is a key Orisha in Yoruba religion, known as the messenger and trickster who mediates between the spiritual and human worlds. He is the guardian of crossroads and communication, responsible for conveying sacrifices and messages to other Orisha and ensuring the balance of fate and destiny.

been suppressed). In this light, the film does not aim to recover a fixed past, but to awaken an archive of possibility, making space for histories felt, intuited, or imagined into being.

As the film unfolds, it resists the closure of linear time. The Orishas[6] do not appear as relics, but as hauntings, emerging from a liminal space into the present: into the streets of Peckham - known as London's "little Lagos", in the aisles of corner shops, and slipping between housing estates. They refuse erasure by inhabiting and troubling the now. I do not aim to *illustrate* them, but to *activate* them as living provocations.

This speculative mode also shapes how the film holds its participants. For many queer Nigerians, the present is unbearable: shaped by political violence, displacement, or exile. In such a context, the subjunctive - *what if, could be, might have been* - becomes a site of safety and possibility.

Each participant is filmed in a similarly liminal space. We recognise bedrooms, but they are awash in otherworldly tones. Bodies are made unfamiliar through shadow, turned faces, or silhouettes that resist grasp. In this slippery visual/temporal space, participants are able to speak what might otherwise be unspeakable: they talk to their mothers about their girlfriends and describe moments of gender euphoria. In the 'real' world, many are estranged, but within this conditional temporality, they speak themselves into existence.

Through the intimate practices of listening, storytelling, and speculation, *The Archive: Queer Nigerians* emerges not merely as a film but as a methodology. One that reclaims the right to speak, to be heard, and to exist beyond the constraints of colonial amnesia and nationalist violence. This is not a return, but a re-membering: a weaving together of fractured selves, silenced voices, and timelines ruptured by trauma. It is at once personal and collective resistance.

My seizures, the participants' whispers, the Orishas' return, all converge in a refusal to forget. In place of the archive's cold authority, we offer an embodied chorus: a living, breathing counter-memory.

By reclaiming memory as both embodied rupture and speculative repair, this essay has challenged the frameworks that render queer African life illegible.

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[6] In Yoruba religion orishas are deified spirits, intermediaries, manifested as forces of nature that can be consulted with to assist on a range of needs. They are a bridge between humanity and the creator, Oludumare.

THE ARCHIVE: QUEER NIGERIANS | Simisolaoluwa Akande, United Kingdom 2024, 22 min

TOGETHER WE CREATE OUR FUTURES: CREATIVE COLLABORATION BETWEEN BEYOND NOLLYWOOD AND THE SURREAL16 COLLECTIVE

Nadia Denton

This piece explores the concept of BEYOND NOLLYWOOD a term I coined to refer to a new film form emerging from Nigeria; and an unprecedented creative collaboration with the most significant Nigerian film collective to date, the Surreal16 Collective (Mike Omonua, Abba T Makama and CJ 'Fiery' Obasi).

Nollywood and the Emergence of BEYOND NOLLYWOOD

The term "Nollywood," coined by Norimitsu Onishi in 2002 'refers primarily to the English-language films emanating from the production and distribution system based in Lagos (Haynes, 2016, p.8)'. Nollywood, 'from its humble formal beginnings in the 1990s … has achieved a global reputation through its unique transportability' (Tar Tsaaior, 2018, p.146). As an African film genre and video culture it is regarded as 'a compellingly sagacious example of how transnational cultural influences work together to create a distinctly Nigerian cinema' (Arthur, 2014, p. 112). In recent years, 'Nollywood has grown and changed at a phenomenal rate' (Haynes, 2016, p.11) with films being made for record breaking budgets, appearing on the international film festival circuit and streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime.

Though Nollywood does not tend to accurately describe other Nigerian audio-visual forms such as art house or documentary films the 'brand is now so powerful it is sometimes used to refer to all Nigerian filmmaking' (Haynes, 2016, p.9). This absence of an adequate description of alternative Nigerian genres created an opening for my curatorial acknowledgement of a new class of content which I termed BEYOND NOLLYWOOD.

In 2014, I wrote *The Nigerian Filmmaker's Guide to Success: BEYOND NOLLYWOOD* a compendium about the Nigerian industry which featured interviews with industry professionals both in the Nigerian and international film space. Curious about Nollywood narratives which 'most deeply embedded the tensions of contemporary Nigerian life' (Haynes, 2016 p.9.), I decided to explore the potentialities of the industry to cross over and be referred to much in the way other parallel cultural cinemas such as films from

Iran or even Mexico are discussed in the context of world cinema. In the book, I queried my interviewees about subjects ranging from the state of the industry to what they thought it would take for Nollywood cross over success, hence the subtitle BEYOND NOLLYWOOD.

I observed that whilst the filmmakers making BEYOND NOLLYWOOD content had 'grown up in a world saturated with video films' (Haynes, 2016, p.9) they had been simultaneously influenced by other forms such as the French New Wave, Korean cinema and international pop culture. They occupied multiple identities and were unequivocal in their desire to advance Nollywood storytelling. I noticed that these creatives recognised the possibilities of engaging audiences trans-nationally and were dogged in presenting film form in such a way to make the intended cross-cultural engagement possible and posited that 'the Nigerian film industry is on the verge of a renaissance. A new class of content creator has emerged, challenging previously established preconceptions about the industry popularly known as Nollywood.' (Denton, 2014 pg.1)

Two years after the release of *The Nigerian Filmmaker's Guide to Success* the Nigerian film industry saw the emergence of the Surreal16 Collective, a trio of filmmakers composed of filmmakers Michael (Mike) Omonua, Abba T Makama and CJ 'Fiery' Obasi on whom, in considering alternative methods of creative collaboration, this piece will be focused. The filmmakers were interviewed for this chapter in December 2023 and January 2024.

Within the framework of creative collaboration, I argue that the filmmaker's 'integrative collaboration' (John-Steiner, 2006) dovetailed with my own curatorial creative brokering, was driven by a 'desire to transform existing knowledge and paradigms into new visions' (John-Steiner, 2006, p.65). I consider how the outsider status of the Surreal16 filmmakers artistic cluster along with my distance from the Nigerian film industry as a UK-based curator has harnessed new forms of collaboration and international visibility. I also explore how through BEYOND NOLLYWOOD I have acted as a creative intermediary and provided a site of incubation allowing the filmmakers space to showcase alternative creative films forms which received a muted industry response and, in some cases, were shunned by the Nigerian film industry.

BEYOND NOLLYWOOD as an Ideology

Since the publication of *The Nigerian Filmmaker's Guide to Success* over a decade ago, I have developed BEYOND NOLLYWOOD in three distinct ways: as an ideology, a curatorial programme and a collective of filmmakers.

As an ideology BEYOND NOLLYWOOD refers to my interpretation of alternative film content coming out of Nigeria which marks an aesthetic shift from Nollywood. This includes art house, documentary, animation, experimental films and music videos. This content I noted was typically relegated to the sidelines of the more commercial Nollywood and did not tend to enjoy the same level of theatrical distribution, industry impetus or press coverage within the Nigerian film space and indeed was often regar-

ded with suspicion. 'Nollywood propagates the same colonial rhetoric and negativity towards the arts and [is] responsible for poor reception, appreciation and patronage of visual arts in contemporary Nigeria (Akpang, 2020, p.597).' In other words, I championed the niche and less understood artistic forms.

As a curated programme BEYOND NOLLYWOOD has been a vehicle to showcase content at film festivals and cinemas. Over the years, the exhibition platform has received visibility at the BFI Southbank 'Black Star' (2016), International Film Festival of Rotterdam (2017), Film Africa (2020, 2022), Film Festival Dresden (2023), Uppsala Short Film Festival (2023) and Afrykamera Film Festival (2023). It engaged in its first theatrical release partnership with UK Picturehouse cinemas in 2023.

As a loose collective, BEYOND NOLLYWOOD acts as a cluster of Nigerian and diaspora filmmakers offering 'a common interpretative context based on artistic visions, values and memories, which exist in the form of artefacts, routines, and experiences (Karlsson, 2011, p. 14) and brought them together at festivals and associated events such as the British Council funded 'I Just Dey Observe' programme (2016) both in the UK and Nigeria.

It is across these strands that BEYOND NOLLYWOOD and the Surreal16 collective, who operate within its orbit, have gone on to make a cultural impact in the years since their unlikely beginnings.

The Surreal16 Collective

The Surreal16 collective is composed of filmmakers Michael (Mike) Omonua, Abba T Makama and CJ 'Fiery' Obasi. They all share Nigerian heritage and have spent most of their lives living in Nigeria.

Mike is based in Lagos. His film credits include the shorts *Sun Eje* (2014) *Born* (2016) *Brood* (2017), *Loop Count* (2018) and feature film *The Man Who Cut Tattoos* (2019). His last short, *Rehearsal* (2021) premiered in competition at the 71st Berlinale and won the Grand Prize at Kurzfilm Winterthur.

Abba also lives in Lagos. His filmography includes *Green White Green*, which had its 2016 world premiere at Toronto International Film Festival and *The Lost Okoroshi* which was subsequently released on Netflix in 2020.

CJ is based in the Benin Republic. His debut feature *OJUJU* premiered at Africa International Film Festival (AFRIFF) 2014, where it won Best Nigerian Film. His second feature film *O - Town* screened at the Gothenburg Film Festival in 2016. CJ's 2018 short film *Hello, Rain* was based on *Hello, Moto* by science fiction and fantasy writer Nnedi Okorafor. His third feature film *Mami Wata* had its premiere in 2023 at the Sundance Film Festival.

The collective, having previously heard about each other's work, informally came together in 2016 at the Nigeria based African International Film Festival (AFRIFF), hence the

reference to '16' in the Surreal16 title. They stayed in touch through a WhatsApp group which Mike explained enabled them to have 'more of an intellectual discussion about cinema and where Nigerian cinema could and should be'.

In 2017, at the very festival where the filmmakers had met the year before, AFRIFF, they formally launched the Surreal16 Collective and a 16-point manifesto. Abba reflected that the manifesto 'was written very tongue and cheek'. The document, simultaneously poked fun at Nollywood, while establishing them as filmmakers who were art driven in their creative ambitions; and heavily influenced by the historical new wave film movements from western Europe and eastern Asia.

As Vera John-Steiner stated in her seminal text Creative Collaboration, 'the juxtaposition and joint exploration of ideas are crucial for constructing a new paradigm in art' (John-Steiner, 2006, p.65)'. And further that 'The act of constructing a new mode of thought in art thrives on collaboration' (John-Steiner, 2006, p.68). The ability of the filmmakers to identify a mutual admiration of international artistic forms not only acted as 'glue' for the formation of the collective, but has been a recurrent theme reflected in their discourse about their work.

The Surreal16 manifesto banned the making of 'wedding films', 'slap stick films' and 'romantic comedies,' (Surreal16 Collective Manifesto, 2017) controversial at the time because this was content which was enjoying the height of success within in the Nigerian film industry. The manifesto instructed that, the collective would use 'surrealism' and avoid 'censorship,' inadvertently alluding to commercial limitations that the industry was seen to impose on filmmakers such as disapproval of experimental, non-linear filmmaking approaches or what could be described as 'the culture of art attack in Nigeria for which Nollywood [is] culpable, problematically discourages artistic expressionism and creativity' (Akpang, 2020). The creation of the manifesto and its aims, served to bind the filmmakers together whilst simultaneously guarding them against an industry which dictated rigid commercial viability as a benchmark of success.

Reflecting on how the manifesto was formed Mike told me, 'we looked at different film industries that had had new waves and thought that we could do something similar here [Nigeria]. We thought that we needed to do something that was very deliberate and had a bunch of roles that was anti-establishment for Nollywood but spoke to a more international vocabulary but not overly elitist. Something that the average person could understand. A change in vocabulary from the traditional Nollywood melodramas'.

Mike recalled that Surreal16 also published a white paper as 'a guide book' (Omonua, 2023) for their working process. The paper reflected the collective's desire to 'push a new kind of Nigerian film … encourage genre films such as fantasy, science fiction, horror, crime'. The white paper further stated, 'the Surreal16 will go against the grain. Push boundaries and play with the language of film' (Surreal16 Collective White Paper, 2017).

It is the establishment of this manifesto and the accompanying white paper that set the

Surreal16 collective out from other filmmakers operating in the Nigerian film space at the time it was launched and even now. As John-Steiner indicated 'shared opposition to a belief system that collaborators consider dangerous or faulty frequently strengthens an already important bond' (John-Steiner, 2006, p.37). Together, they could band themselves against what they regarded as the creative restrictions of the industry. It is also notable that the establishment of their creative intentionality is one of the key ingredients that made their collective collaboration so successful and ensured their longevity as a group.

Collaboration Amongst the Surreal16 Collective

Talking with the filmmakers, it was apparent that collaboration across the collective was not just a professional endeavour but something which had marked them personally. CJ was candid in saying that he saw the Surreal16 collaboration as 'like a mission in [his] life to make sure that we have [put] Nigeria on the cinema map and to be taken seriously'. Hinting that there was a survival aspect to working in this way and that without the collective their vision for alternative filmmaking in Nigeria might not exist. It is notable that CJ also benefited from collaboration with his wife and Producer Oge Obasi. Oge, whilst not formally a part of the collective itself has been acknowledged as a part of the wider Surreal16 Collective movement.

Mike was more pragmatic in his description of collaborative creativity suggesting that it was 'when people come together in order to build something, sharing ideas and brainstorming ideasto get to the best one.' Abba added that it meant 'collaboration amongst creatives who have common interests, share common value, intersecting aesthetics and have a common respect.' Their comments both allude to the opportunity that collaboration appears to have provided to create something bigger than could be produced by their individual efforts.

The Surreal16 manifesto reflects the collective's perceived position as outsiders in the Nigerian film industry space based on their artistic persuasions. It is clear that in this context, collaboration amongst the filmmakers has offered a point of unification; and in parallel an opportunity to explore alternative artistic mediums in the safe space that they have created for themselves. The group seemed to be bonded by their mutual admiration for one another's work and artistic practice and indeed the successes that have followed from taking a collective approach.

My observation of the Surreal16 collective was that they operated two styles of collaboration. That of complementary collaboration which as John-Steiner described is 'characterized by a division of labour based on complementary expertise, disciplinary knowledge, roles, and temperament. Participants negotiate their goals and strive for a common vision bond' (John-Steiner, 2006, p.198). This has not only been clearly laid out in their manifesto, white paper and joint film productions but even more recently, the creation of the S16 Film Festival. The event was a culmination of their learnings from exhibiting internationally and desire to create an extension of their alternative space of operation. Abba stated, 'we just got off the Locarno Film Festival, there was this

high and we had won the critics prize and we were like we need to keep the momentum going and that is when we decided to do a film festival'. The management of the festival appears to play to the strengths of the collective members much in the way that their filmmaking operates. Speaking on the practical workings of the S16 Film Festival, Abba mentioned, 'I am the festival director because I am mostly on ground. Mike and CJ are the inhouse curators. They sit down and decide what films are going to end up being on the programme'. Taking inspiration from the various film festivals they have screened at, including presentations as part of BEYOND NOLLYWOOD, the collective created their own event and as a result have gone on to enable opportunities for the next generation of new wave filmmakers based in Nigeria. S16 Film Festival celebrated its third edition in December 2023.

Since their inception, the Surreal16 collective have produced two anthology projects – *Visions* (2017), a 3-part anthology short film exploring dreams and visions, as well as *Juju Stories* (2021), a 3-part anthology feature film exploring urban and mythical tales in contemporary Lagos. *Juju Stories* had its world premiere in competition at the Locarno Film Festival, and went on to win the Swiss Independent Critics Boccalino D'Oro Award for Best Film. Surreal16's successes internationally have made the appearance of the collective more viable in the Nigerian film industry and garnered respect where it was lacking locally. It has also strengthened the connection that has kept the members committed to the objectives as set out when they started.

The creation of films has been a key driver for the collective from the outset and it is questionable if the film creatives would have endured without the success of their anthology films. It would be easy for individual members to branch off and pursue solo projects but the track record of their successes as a combined group seemed to be a compelling hold. The filmmakers set the goal of collaborative film productions from the very beginning and the success of their collaboration is reflected in the advancement of the films that resulted. Mike stated, 'In our white paper we set out a to do list. To make a short film, to make a feature film.'

It is in this context that I would argue that the collective's mode of operating can also be described as written by John-Steiner of 'integrative collaboration' where 'partnerships require a prolonged period of committed activity. They thrive on dialogue, risk taking, and a shared vision. In some cases, the participants construct a common set of beliefs, or ideology, which sustains them in periods of opposition or insecurity. Integrative partnerships are motivated by the desire to transform existing knowledge, thought styles, or artistic approaches into new visions' (John-Steiner, 2006, p.203).

On his personal motivation for participating in the collective Abba explained, 'my entire life I have always wanted to surround myself with people who seemed smarter than me. It just inherently makes me more competitive and want to challenge myself. I have always felt that when it comes to technique that Mike and CJ have more knowledge in technical craft'. His comments imply that being part of the collective helped him overcome perceived creative shortcomings. With his colleagues Mike and CJ there was

an awareness of having a creative edge over rank-and-file Nollywood filmmakers who were not opportune to operate with such creative independence. Abba remarked, 'there are probably thousands of people who want to make films like the S16 members but because what we are doing is so niche there is only a handful of us making an impact or getting paid. What we are doing is still in its infancy. The industry needs to be a bit more diverse. There needs to be more parallel industries'.

BEYOND NOLLYWOOD and the Surreal16 Collective

Since BEYOND NOLLYWOOD's inception, I have screened aesthetically nuanced films from Nigeria and the wider west African region, working to demonstrate to audiences and film industry colleagues alike that it was this artistic content from Africa that would go onto to excite audiences worldwide in a way that the more commercially inclined and drama-based Nollywood productions had been unable to. All Surreal16 collective filmmakers have been featured as part of BEYOND NOLLYWOOD programmes over the ten years that it has existed.

In 2016, I hosted the European Premiere of Abba's *Green White Green* in a BEYOND NOLLYWOOD strand included as part of BFI Black Star. In 2017, Mike's short films *Born* and *Brood* were shown as part of a special International Film Festival of Rotterdam BEYOND NOLLYWOOD showcase and in 2018 *Brood* was shown at the British Film Institute (BFI) as part of a British Council Nigerian shorts programme I crafted titled, I *Just Dey Observe* the same year. CJ's *Hello Rain* was featured as part of the *When Sand Enter Garri* shorts programme, curated for the 2023 edition of Film Festival Dresden and *Mami Wata* as part of a BEYOND NOLLYWOOD showcase at Afrykamera, an African film festival based in Warsaw also in the same year.

My collaboration with the Surreal16 Collective came together through a recognition of shared values. What we shared in common was our existence as film creatives outside of mainstream commercial models in our respective geographical regions. 'The interaction of artists in non-local networks can be interpreted as a conscious attempt to overcome identified weaknesses and shortcomings in their own cluster and to achieve certain creative goals (Karlsson, 2011, p. 18). My position as an outsider to the Nollywood space both geographically and by way of nationality mirrored the collective's own alienation from the industry as filmmakers making artistically unappreciated content in a commercially driven space. The promotion and exhibition of the various Surreal16 members film work through BEYOND NOLLYWOOD has come to be a bonding agent much in the way that they have collectively combined efforts as a form of 'protectionism' against forces within the Nigerian film industry.

Our analysis of and conversations about the films showing as part of these BEYOND NOLLYWOOD events over the intervening years have helped me to identify some of the more obscure artistic techniques of their work and draw out cultural distinctions I perhaps would have otherwise missed without context. These informal interactions with the collective have supported my ongoing awareness of the cultures that make up Nigeria, as a non-Nigerian and enriched my own learning and development even

if subtly. This is something that I believe I have been able to convey in my curation through an authenticity that resonates with individuals of Nigerian heritage but also ignites the curiosity of those outside of the culture.

In addition to exhibiting and promoting the onscreen work of Abba, Mike and CJ, I have collaborated with them all individually by sharing critiques of film work coming out of the Nigerian film space in the intervening years: receiving feedback on their experience of operating within the Nigerian film space; and sharing industry specific books, programmes and film ephemera. Of the learning exchange, Abba commented, 'your book and getting access to your knowledge gave me pointers in terms of festival strategy and now we have almost become professors in that regard. You were one of the first people to say 'you have made a film but you need to know exactly where you want to put it'. BEYOND NOLLYWOOD broke down to me the film festival stratosphere' .

In other words, similar to the WhatsApp group-based cluster the Surreal16 collective have developed for themselves, I simultaneously have been in discourse with them via email, WhatsApp and face-to-face, charting the course of notable Nigerian film releases and speculating on the scope of the impact of Nigerian film content both on the continent and abroad and in between providing critiques of their work. This mutual information exchange has reflected itself in the intellectual framing of specific BEYOND NOLLYWOOD programmes such as 'I Just Dey Observe' where my rationale for showcasing a given title may have been based on conversations held with the filmmakers and for the members of the collective, giving them encouragement with their endeavors. Mike told me during our interview that, 'BEYOND NOLLYWOOD was a huge encouragement to a filmmaker such as myself trying to get the work out there. And the industry is such that getting into festivals can help your career to progress to the next stage'.

As John-Steiner indicated, 'in collaborative endeavours we learn from each other. By teaching what we know, we engage in mutual appropriation. By joining with others we accept their gift of confidence, and through interdependence, we achieve competence and connection.' (John-Steiner, 2006, p.204). My collaboration with Surreal16 from the perspective of curation has resulted in additional layers of insight which has meant I could discourse about the films in my programme with a certain amount of integrity and cultural context for the audience.

Commenting on my role as BEYOND NOLLYWOOD curator Abba opined, 'everybody is an amateur filmmaker today without knowing' (Makama, 2023). Abba's comment touches on an important element of my offering to the collective as through BEYOND NOLLYWOOD, which is the filtering of distinct, higher quality Nigerian film content in alignment with international cinematic standards. My role as a combined curator and creative broker via BEYOND NOLLYWOOD – 'creative brokers …establish interaction among talented individuals to enhance the effectiveness of good ideas' (Eglīte, 2023, p.106) has served to reinforce the validity of Surreal16's creative output both for international audiences and industry figures back in Nigeria.

Mike also saw the value of this broker ship between myself as curator and he, as a member of the collective, admitted that 'the role of the curator is critical for artistically minded films especially in Nigeria where that scene does not really exist and over time if you do well and have a festival run that can often lead to people taking you more seriously'. BEYOND NOLLYWOOD has served as a platform that would not only welcome the work of the various collective members but through my personal connection with the filmmakers as a curator, act as a source of encouragement.

In Mike's view, 'BEYOND NOLLYWOOD is the platform for people who aren't doing traditional Nollywood films, to showcase their work to audiences, especially international audiences and to get into festivals … the first time I went to a major international festival was through BEYOND NOLLYWOOD. It was overwhelming at the time but it was a brilliant experience because you realise people are taking you seriously' (Omonua, 2023). He indicated the extent to which collaboration with BEYOND NOLLYWOOD in the earlier stage of his career enabled him to access engagement with an international film festival in a way that otherwise may not have been possible.

On the importance of BEYOND NOLLYWOOD as a concept and curatorial platform CJ added, 'people should know that there is a cinema culture from Nigeria beyond Nollywood. It says that there are other kinds of cinema outside of Nollywood. It recognizes Nollywood as an entity that exists but is saying that there is something else'. As BEYOND NOLLYWOOD marks its tenth year it could certainly be argued that the platform has successfully canonized filmmakers such as those that form the Surreal16 Collective, African filmmakers who otherwise would have had less international visibility if not for its existence.

BEYOND NOLLYWOOD Collaboration and Cultural Acceptance

BEYOND NOLLYWOOD has created a safe space for filmmakers operating in an environment where their creative work has been ridiculed, maligned and mis-understood due to the 'culture of art attack' (Akpang, 2020, p.601) that is Nigerian film industry distain towards the more figuratively obscure and a lack of awareness of film forms by local audiences. CJ in particular spoke strongly about his experiences of being shunned at the hands of the industry: and how the Surreal16 collective conversely provided a space of normalization for his work. He explained that 'all the doors were closed. I remember the blowback from industry big wigs saying things like 'who do you think you are?'

BEYOND NOLLYWOOD has come to be a space of liberation and acceptance for Nigerian filmmakers who feel constricted by local structures. CJ said, 'we have been a part of BEYOND NOLLYWOOD from the beginning. I remember one of the things that made us align so much is that we were saying the same thing. When we said that we were not Nollywood the [Nigerian film industry] doors slammed closed on us. When we aligned with BEYOND NOLLYWOOD it was a way for us to even have that conversation outside of the Nigerian space because we could not say that in Nigeria. We love and respect what Nollywood has achieved but we think that people should be allowed to do something else'.

Abba commented, 'BEYOND NOLLYWOOD is like a prelude to S16. You saw beyond what was happening on the mainstream with various people who were doing interesting stuff with the medium which did not necessarily have to be film it was music videos, documentary etc. BEYOND NOLLYWOOD is one of those first platforms that decided to take a critical look at the medium beyond what everyone knows, beyond the mainstream perspective … your platform put a spotlight on my work when none of this existed'.

The Surreal16 Collective's engagement with me and subsequent word of mouth about BEYOND NOLLYWOOD programmes have enhanced my reputation amongst the wider film community in Nigeria. I frequently receive emails from aspiring filmmakers who have heard about my work from members of the collective. Each time one of their films have been featured as part of BEYOND NOLLYWOOD it has generated praise for their efforts and interest from third parties on social media, feeding into perceptions of their creative successes on the international film scene.

Collaboration between BEYOND NOLLYWOOD and Surreal16 has also boosted a sustainability of efforts. In a film eco system where they and I have received limited financial patronage from film industry structures the creative and moral support enjoyed has created a wholesome level of emotional encouragement that has come to mean more than monetary incentives.

Collaboration and Cultural Impact

Advocacy about the Nigerian film industry has been a key element of BEYOND NOLLYWOOD programming. All past BEYOND NOLLYWOOD showcases have been accompanied by an extended introduction that I led prior to the film screening and where possible post screening Q&As with filmmaking talent if present. As part of these presentations, I explained the concept of BEYOND NOLLYWOOD and informed the audience why it was a notable, emerging film form. As a curator, the notion of cultural exchange sits at the heart of the events I produce and, in doing this fostering cultural bridges between west Africa and audiences outside of this geographical reference point who may have no familiarity or awareness of this culture.

As such the measuring of the impact BEYOND NOLLYWOOD curation has had on audiences whether through formal or informal audience surveys, post screening feedback sessions with the participating filmmakers has served as an unspoken vein in my work. It has been to educate the public about this new film form while also eliciting their feedback about the content they have seen. Without this, BEYOND NOLLYWOOD would have limited value and be reduced to existing as a catchphrase.

On the subject of the cultural impact CJ shared the opinion that, 'film has different levels of impact. It has a commercial and cultural impact. The cultural impact of Nollywood is what I don't necessarily see. I do not see it because if you make a movie and put it on a streamer, I don't know what the metrics are, I do not know what the significance is of x number of people seeing a film in terms of cultural impact. I know that it might mean a lot of people have watched it but it's unclear what this means on the

global stage in terms of cultural impact. Where are our stories in terms of claiming the cinematic space? For me that is what is missing. Nollywood is not doing that'.

Collaboration between BEYOND NOLLYWOOD and the Surreal16 collective has created a gateway for artistically influenced work which has been enjoyed by audiences beyond Nigeria's shores: hence cultural impact. CJ certainly achieved this with *Mami Wata*, a black and white fantasy film which won the Sundance 2023 Special Jury Award for Cinematography, as well as the FESPACO Best Image, Best Décor and the African Critics Prize. In addition to winning the Best Cinematography, Best Make-Up, and Best Nigerian Film Awards at the Africa Movie Academy Awards (AMAA), the film was also put forward as Nigeria's entry to the 96th Academy Awards. *Mami Wata* is undoubtedly a Nigerian success story and break out film which has created a lasting impression and will be studied in years to come.

Of CJ's feat, fellow Surreal16 collective Mike commented, '*Mami Wata* is a huge success just because it is new for Nigeria. There are not many films that are doing the festival circuit and getting distribution like it is doing. It shows the other filmmakers what could be done. That if you're not working in the mainstream, you can get international distribution'. It is unlikely that CJ would have gone so far with *Mami Wata* had it not been for his previous track record of successes with the Surreal16 Collective and showcase as part of international exhibition platforms such as BEYOND NOLLYWOOD.

Conclusion

At the beginning of my journey as curator of BEYOND NOLLYWOOD I wrote that Nigerian filmmakers who 'challenged themselves and gave audiences what they did not think was possible' and found 'the beauty and essence of [their] work making that which is local, international would be richly rewarded in birthing stories of the future that inspire and unleash a new creative force'. It was this kind of work that I believed would make a cross-over impact.

Both BEYOND NOLLYWOOD and the Surreal16 collective have enjoyed unprecedented levels of success and created new avenues for exploration and creativity within the Nigerian film space and internationally 'reinvent[ing]traditions, sometimes creating something out of nothing' (Evuleocha, 2018). Acting as a creative cluster, the filmmakers have benefited from my own curatorial, creative brokering which has elevated the content above the status that it was relegated to within the artistically restrictive wider Nollywood industry. Through our combined collaboration we have 'projected Nigeria's self-image across the African continent and beyond' (Haynes, 2016, p.9.)

On the future of BEYOND NOLLYWOOD Mike reflected that it would enable Nigerian filmmakers to 'create a new mainstream' and that there would be 'a new type of cinema that comes through and develops side by side with Nollywood'. In the words of Vera John-Steiner 'through interdependence, we achieve competence and connection'. This study of collaboration between BEYOND NOLLYWOOD and the Surreal16 collective truly shows that 'together we create our futures' (John-Steiner, 2006, p204).

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Nadia Denton is based in London and has worked in the film industry for two decades as a curator, public speaker and impact producer. She specialises in Nigerian Cinema and coined the term BEYOND NOLLYWOOD. In 2014 she wrote *The Nigerian Filmmaker's Guide to Success: BEYOND NOLLYWOOD.* She has worked with organisations, which include the BFI London Film Festival, EFM at Berlinale, Doc Society, London Film School, Sundance Film Festival, British Council and Comic Relief. She co-produced *Shooting it Like a Woman*, a BBC World Service radio documentary about Nigerian women in the film industry. Nadia is an official African Heritage Guide across the V&A, Tate Modern and British Museum. She has a degree in Modern History from St. Hilda's College, Oxford. She is also an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Exeter. Her father is the late Black British filmmaker Menelik Shabazz.

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Dr. Estrella Sendra is a Lecturer in Culture, Media, and Creative Industries Education (Festivals and Events) at King's College London. Her main research interests are film and creative industries in Senegal, with a particular focus on festivals. She was the co-principal investigator of 'Decolonizing Film Festival Research in a Post-Pandemic World', funded by the Government of Canada's New Frontiers in Research Fund (NFRFR-2021-00161, 2022-24). She is an advisory board member of the ERC-funded research project 'African Screen Worlds: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies' (grant agreement No. 819236, 2019-24), led by Prof Lindiwe Dovey. In 2024, she was awarded the King's Research Impact Awards (International Collaboration) for her collaborations with festivals and film programmes curating African cinemas.

Moussa Sene Absa was born in 1958 in Tableau Ferraille, a suburb of Dakar. As a true multidisciplinary artist, he began his cinematic career with the award-winning screenplay *Les Enfants de Dieu*. He then made the short film *Le Prix du Mensonge*, which earned him the Tanit d'Argent at the Carthage Film Festival in 1988. After working in theatre as both an actor and director of plays such as *La légende de Ruba*, he fully transitioned to film. His prolific work includes short films like *Jaaraama, Set Setal*, and *Entre vos mains*, documentaries including *Jëf-Jël* and *Blues pour une diva*, and internationally acclaimed feature films such as *Ça Twiste à Popenguine* released in 1992 and *Tableau Ferraille* from 1997, which won Best Cinematography at FESPACO in 1997. In 2002, Sene Absa directed *Madame Brouette*, a poetic tribute to female resilience that blends music, griot tradition, and social critique. His most recent feature film, *XALÉ*, released in 2022, offers a contemporary exploration of youth and identity in Senegal. Beyond cinema, Sene Absa is an accomplished painter whose visual art has been exhibited internationally. His work across all media reflects a vibrant and socially engaged artistic vision deeply rooted in African traditions and contemporary realities.

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Lílis Soares is a Brazilian cinematographer whose work has earned her international recognition, including the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award for Cinematography at the Sundance Film Festival 2023 and Best Cinematography awards at FESPACO, Dublin, Guadalajara, AMAA, and Fantaspoa. In 2023, *The Guardian and The Film Stage* named her among the best cinematographers of the year. She studied at the Institut International de l'Image et du Son in France and at UFRJ in Brazil. Her career spans digital media, television, and cinema, with projects in Brazil, France, Russia, Switzerland, Angola, Benin, and the Republic of Congo. As Director of Photography, she has worked on *Mami Wata* (C.J. Obasi), *A melhor mãe do mundo* (Anna Muylaert), *Narciso* (Jeferson De), *Salve Rosa* (Susanna Lira), *Medley* (Ana Luisa Azevedo), *Um dia com Jerusa and Ó*, *paí, ó 2* (Viviane Ferreira) and *Nosso lar 2* (Wagner de Assis). For streamings, she was lead cinematographer on *Amar é para os fortes* (Amazon), *Passinho* (Disney) and *Sessão de Terapia* (Globoplay).

CINÉMA AFRICAIN - ARCHIVING, RESISTANCE AND FREEDOM

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