

In this Issue:

CRE Hosts Film Screening and Discussion on *Nollywood Babylon*

CRE Graduate Assistants Host 7th Annual Graduate Forum on Race and Ethnicity

CRE Hosts Film Screening and Discussion on Nollywood Babylon

On March 11, 2014, the Center for Race and Ethnicity held a film screening and discussion on the 2008 documentary, *Nollywood Babylon*. Undergraduates, graduates, and several media scholars gathered to discuss how the Nigerian film industry has changed the landscape of media, both globally and within the United States. Kaia Shivers, a doctoral candidate in the School of Communication and Information (Rutgers-New Brunswick), led the discussion after the film.



CRE Graduate Assistant Kaia Shivers (2013-14) led the discussion following the film.

Filmed by Canadian documentarians, Ben Addelman and Simar Millal, the feature documentary details the rise of Nollywood, the third largest film industry in the world. Currently operating out of Nigeria, Nollywood is an emergent form of African pop culture. While Hollywood and Bollywood, the top two movie production systems in the world, have existed for over a century, Nollywood is barely 30 years old.

Nollywood Babylon centers its exploration of this film industry around an examination of the film production processes of director Lancelot Imasuen, a self-trained film director of six years. In producing his films, Imasuen navigates limited funding, a strict time schedule, improvisational scripting, locations that require permits and actors who often are late and sometimes fail to show up at all. Nonetheless, he is a successful and prolific filmmaker: the documentary captures him directing his one-hundred fifty-seventh full-length movie.

In Hollywood, directing more than one hundred films would be nearly impossible, but Nollywood movies are made using drastically different production processes, which allow for Imasuen's voluminous filmography. Whereas filmmakers in Hollywood produce celluloid films that require expensive equipment and take a great deal of time to process and edit,



Nollywood director Lancelot Imasuen





Filming on location in Nigeria

Nollywood filmmakers craft movies within a short time frame using inexpensive equipment and guerilla-style techniques. On average, Nollywood films are made in one month— and that timeframe includes pre-and-post production time along with the film score. Filmmakers there employ affordable and highly mobile digital video equipment to shoot and edit their movies. This approach helps them survive in West Africa’s unstable, post-colonial economic climate and is well-suited when filming takes place outside of a production studio, which often is the case in Nollywood productions. Whereas Hollywood films are often shot largely in studios, Nollywood films are typically shot on-location in sites such as homes, rural settings and city streets.

Unlike Bollywood movies, which showcase glamorous costumes of movie actors to beautiful production sets and locales, Nollywood shows the daily, urban experience in Africa, which can be unforgiving. Many Nollywood films are shot in gritty urban sections of Nigeria. Films set in Lagos, for example, show a congested, polluted city, with harsh living conditions. They may include footage of some of the city’s more upscale residential neighborhoods. But such

scenes are usually juxtaposed against footage from poorer, less developed areas. A few Nollywood films focusing on tradition take place in village settings and in rural areas, but most of its movies are set in the city.



A typical scene in Lagos, Nigeria

Despite showcasing Nigeria’s urban poverty, the films feature stories of personal triumph which depict characters navigating successfully various economic and personal challenges.

Nigerian poet Odia Ofeimun and scholar Okome argue that Nigerians are caught between tradition, colonial pasts and modernity, a reality complicated by the inequitable structural adjustment programs offered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the rise of fanatical religiosity seen in practices of Christianity and Islam. *Nollywood Babylon* documents the impact of this complex reality on the Nigerian film industry. The documentary shows how prosperity preachers use Nollywood to promote their systems of beliefs, while providing social services to populations in a country where the government does not. The

film briefly shadows Nigerian evangelist, Helen Ukpabio, also a top producer of Nollywood movies, to illustrate this point. Ukpabio operates in the poorest areas of Nigeria. In worship services, Ukpabio encourages churchgoers to purchase Nollywood movies and other religious items, such as oils and books, from her ministry. Poet Odia Ofeimun explains that Nigerian churches have a dual role. They spread religious messages, and they provide necessities such as food to members who have plummeted into poverty after the IMF’s structural adjustment programs, which have resulted in the closing of manufacturing jobs and the devaluing of the Naira (Nigerian currency). Ironically, some of the mega-churches are now located in places where manufacturing warehouses once sat.



Helen Ukpabio, successful Nollywood producer and popular evangelist, with more than 50,000 members in her church, Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries.

Nollywood producers face economic challenges as well. All the participants in this emerging Lagos-based film industry face the challenge of maneuvering through a media market still attempting to establish itself as a formal institution. While Nollywood producers are figuring out how to sustain a promising new industry while still dealing with issues such as film piracy, Nollywood filmmakers, directors and actors are still

working on professionalizing their careers. No one in Nollywood can be complacent, as its productions have yet to be accepted as an “authentic” film industry among other African filmmakers, such as those who work in the older and more established African Francophone cinema. Inaugurated in the 1960s and 70s after African independence from colonial rule, cinema in Francophone Africa began a legacy of leading African filmmaking. Today, the African Francophone led organization, the Federation of Pan-African Filmmakers and its bi-annual event, Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ougadougou sits as the bedrock of African film festivals.



Nollywood is often excluded from the Pan African Film Festival, which represents the establishment within the African film world.

The event highlights African Francophone films, while often blocking Nollywood movie submissions. The few that are accepted are relegated to the category of TV because movies are shot in digital format as opposed to the 35mm also known as celluloid films. Because Nollywood uses digital format, its productions has yet to be fully accepted as cinema. However, as director Lancelot Imasuem explained, Nollywood is an industry that tells the African story from the lens of an African.

The discussion that followed the movie screening highlighted how Nollywood



Purchasing a movie from the Lagos Market

is consumed in Nigeria and the United States. Attendees admitted that they did not know much about the industry, but were fascinated by what they had just learned about it. The film provided a quick view into a production system that exists outside of Hollywood. One student remarked that the film gave a good overview of both Nigerian media and Nigerian history. CRE graduate assistant, Kaia Shivers enumerated the various genres of Nollywood such as comedy, drama, juju films (traditional movies), hallelujah films (Christian-themed movies) and gangster films. She also explained that Nigeria remained closely tied to Britain even after it gained independence in the early 1960s. Within the context of this continued relationship, the British helped the new nation build the first national television studio system on the African continent – although that system would deteriorate with the devaluation of the naira starting in the 1970’s.

Event guest, Chika Okoye, a doctoral student in the Global Affairs program at Rutgers-Newark, added depth and insight

to the lively discussion. Speaking from firsthand experience, she made some interesting observations about how Nollywood is consumed in Nigeria and circulates among Nigerian immigrants in the United States. Igbo people located in the eastern part of Nigeria, Okoye noted, produce a bulk of the movies in Nollywood. Their tremendously popular productions, she suggested, have largely replaced the work of traveling theater groups of the Yoruba--who once dominated the performance art scene in the country. “Every year in my mother’s hometown the Yoruba troupes would perform the year’s events in the form of a play. That doesn’t happen anymore” said Okoye. The industry is equally influential outside Africa, she added, where it keeps many Africans in touch with their homeland, and exposes immigrant Nigerian children who have never been to Africa to their native land’s various languages and cultures.

Shivers also emphasized Nollywood’s diasporic impact. Filmed in numerous locations through Nigeria, this straight-to-video production industry has generated new jobs in Nigeria and revenue across the globe. Increasingly popular among peoples of African descent in Europe, North America and the Caribbean, Nollywood films are especially popular in African countries, where they often outsell Hollywood productions.

CRE Graduate Assistants Host 7th Annual Graduate Forum on Race and Ethnicity

The Center for Race and Ethnicity (CRE) hosted its 7th annual graduate forum on race and ethnicity on February 21, 2014. The forum received wide participation and interest from graduate student speakers at different stages of their education from across the three Rutgers campuses and in varying departments and programs, including American studies, anthropology, education, English, childhood studies, history, media studies, political science, psychology, the School of Policy and Planning, and women’s and gender studies. Despite the fact that the speakers hailed from diverse disciplines, their research on race and ethnicity raised exciting points of convergences that were reflected in the four panel titles: Youth, New Identities, and Learning; Citizenship, Immigration and Diversity; Representations Across Time, Space, and Media; and Gender Politics, U.S. Empire, and Feminism, which were respectively moderated by the GAs of the CRE, Anandini Dar, Donovan Ramon. Kaia Shivers, and Mekala Audain.



Ramon (not pictured: Kaia Shivers)

CRE Graduate Assistants for 2013-14 (l-r): Mekala Audain, Anandini Dar, Donovan

The panels were lively and all of the speakers felt that the forum provided a productive and comfortable space to present work. Two speakers noted that they had never previously presented work at a conference. One first-time presenter expressed that this forum was an ideal starting point for future presentations in academia. Veteran presenters were also enthusiastic. One participant told CRE graduate assistants that she had never been to such a collegial and professional event in her graduate school career. She felt very welcomed and enthusiastic about the rigorous scholarship shared on the day. Like many in attendance, she enjoyed the breath of work presented and the support given by the group.

The graduate forum also hosted a lunch panel titled “Navigating In and Out of the Academy.” The discussion offered advice to graduate students about their future prospects after graduate school. The panelists included Anita Bakshi, Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Cultural Analysis, Rutgers – New Brunswick; Wendy Wright, Assistant Professor – Criminal Justice at Bridgewater State University; and Fatimah Williams Castro, Founder and CEO of Beyond the Tenure Track, which aids graduates in pursuing careers beyond academia. The latter two presenters were former graduate assistants at the CRE and

expressed enthusiasm to have the opportunity to return and mentor graduate students at their alma mater.



“Navigating In and Out of the Academy” Panel (l-r): Anita Bakshi, Wendy Wright, Fatimah Williams-Castro

Fatimah Williams Castro, who received her PhD in anthropology from Rutgers-NB, shared how she had to think of herself as a “whole person” in order to decide her future career trajectory after graduate school. Navigating the life decisions that she faced in an uncertain job market was a challenge she faced because doctoral programs usually train students for an academic career. Williams Castro encouraged forum participants who may be unsure about their future career trajectories to ask themselves “what does work look like to you?” She suggested to students to think about a variety of kinds of jobs that they might enjoy in order to generate career options. Freelance work, she noted, can offer students opportunities to network outside of the academy and to acquire additional skills or hone existing ones. Her discussion provided a good introduction to the personal trajectory that Anita Bakshi shared with the audience. While conducting her Ph.D. research, Bakshi made contacts in her field site of Cyprus, where she examined the experiences of people who lived in the divided city of Nicosia. After completing her Ph.D., she used these networks to host an exhibition that was

funded by the United Nations and a non-government organization she helped establish in Cyprus. Her work outside the academy enables her to explore all dimensions of her research, give back to her research participant community, as well as take on an exciting project before she finally was able to secure and start her post-doctorate at Rutgers. Wendy Wright also shared how she navigated employment possibilities both within and outside the academy in her final year of her PhD program. She explored government sector job positions as well as academic posts, but realized she wanted to be in academia when she learned what the day-to-day life at a government job looked like. She was able to successfully secure a tenure-track position, although at an institution where faculty have a heavy teaching load, which inspired her to also discuss the different types of teaching requirements at various universities. Her account of her experience gave audiences the opportunity to think about different job workloads and day-to-day obligations that they might encounter in academic jobs. The audience responded to the panelists' presentations with a variety of questions about funding, fellowships, and adjunct teaching, which occupied the remainder of the lunch session. The session mood was collegial and supportive environment and gave graduate students an open forum in which to discuss their professional concerns.

After the presentations, many of the participants and organizers attended

a reception at the CRE. This gathering allowed the participants and organizers to informally build collegial networks. By the end of the day participants had enjoyed both an intellectual and culinary feast. Catered by Pooja, an Indian cuisine restaurant on Easton Avenue in Somerset the lunch we offered was widely hailed one of the best meals participants had ever enjoyed at Rutgers. We give thanks to both our caterers and our scholarly participants. Your outstanding contributions made our event very successful.



Graduate students gather informally during breaks at the 7th Annual Graduate Forum on Race and Ethnicity, held in February.



The Center for Race and Ethnicity

Mailing Address:

Rutgers, The State University of
New Jersey
191 College Avenue, 1st Floor
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

Telephone: 848/932-2181

Fax: 732/932-2198

Email:

raccethnicity@sas.rutgers.edu

Website:

raccethnicity.rutgers.edu

Director: Mia Bay (History)
Assoc. Director, Ann Fabian
(History)

Senior Program Coordinator: Mia
Kissil

Graduate Assistants/Editors:

Mekala Audain (History);
Anandini Dar (Childhood
Studies); Donavan Ramon
(English); Kaia Shivers
(Journalism and Media Studies)