

# Representations of the African Diaspora in Three Films

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## Introduction

In a culture, film is one of many modes of expression that is based on representations. As James et al note, “For many people, media representations may be their first and often only source of information about, or reference for, people outside of their social and cultural circles,” (354). This thesis examines how the African diaspora has been depicted in films by directors representing distinctly different loci of the diaspora, in the United States, Brazil and Nigeria. The scope of this thesis specifically examines the representation of that diaspora in John Singleton’s *Higher Learning* (1995), Walter Salles’ *City of God* (2002), and *The Journey* (2010) by Chineze Anyaene, a Nigerian director of “Nollywood.” Although each of these films differ in terms of genre and come from different cultural and directorial traditions/styles, they share a common thread which is the systematic racism that members of the African diaspora often experience.

Singleton and Salles were presumably under more pressure to make a profitable film than Anyaene, since the cost of production is higher in developed and emerging nations than in Nigeria. Nevertheless, each represents some aspect of the diaspora through storyline, characters, and semiotic messages. The underlying treatment of racism in each film ultimately affected its commercial success. Cultures on the margins of mainstream society such as that of African Americans in the United States, for example, have often found ways to get subversive messages into artistic products such as film. Filmmakers can use a popular genre to send a serious message to niche audiences, who are eager for self-representation in film and contribute to its commercial success. Whichever film has the most blatant treatment of racism will have the greatest commercial success. Audiences want to see films that address such issues and box-office sales reflect this.

The central focus of this thesis rests on issues of globalization, globalized communities, representation and the audience's reception of filmic text and media products in general. The phenomenon of diaspora in an increasingly globalized world is becoming the norm rather than the exception. This creates a situation of developed, emerging, and underdeveloped national interaction. Where people reside can either be thought of as a homeland (or imagined homeland) or a host country. For the sake of this discussion, developed nations will mean wealthy nations like the United States, also known as the global north. Emerging nations will refer to developing countries like Brazil, also known as the semi-periphery. Under-developed nations like Nigeria are the world's poorer nations, lacking economic prosperity, also known as the global south.<sup>1</sup> When analyzing film, it is important to see it as the cultural product of a developed, emerging, or underdeveloped nation because resources greatly affect filmic products.

Film is an influential medium that can shape the construction of personal and national identity. Entertaining, fictional genres can also carry serious ideological messages. Narratives often reinforce social norms and for naive viewers offer up "reality" to be emulated. Viewers can identify with portrayals of issues like racism. As James et al note, "[F]ilms offer frameworks through which one can access the political and cultural realities of the world in which racialized minority and immigrant youth live," (354). Of paramount importance is the way films portray the realities of the African diaspora. Conflict between the demands of the film industry for economic profit and the creative forces involved in the making of individual films creates a springboard for inquiry into the complexities of diasporic representation and self-representation on screen; in this way, they work in identity construction by showing certain groups in a certain way. Characters often define themselves in relation to an imagined homeland in Africa. Some align themselves with white mainstream culture in North and South America; however, each confronts racism

because of African roots. Afro-Brazilian and African American characters experience a displaced sense of African identity filtered through centuries of forced migration and enslavement. These groups may no longer imagine an African homeland, but instead American societies in which people of color are treated equally. African descendent characters in emerging and developed nations are still linked to the global south, whether they think of it as home or not. In film, the displacement these groups experience in the white-dominated world comes to the foreground, questioning the inherent racism in these societies, even when the subject of racism is not explicitly verbalized. A semiotic analysis of the films reveals symbols that stand in for overtly racist attitudes and behaviors and allows the films to be interpreted in multiple ways: they are simultaneously about racism and about something else that appears to be nothing more than innocuous entertainment. In this way, the films become subversive texts, allowing directors a degree of creative expression that does not present an obstacle to the funding and commercial success of their films.

Resources for productions will ultimately influence the filmic text in a number of ways. Well-funded and distributed films often gain resources through commercial means and therefore have a greater obligation to create a commercially successful product than an independently funded film or director. This fact manifests itself in a number of ways, some of the most obvious being perhaps product placements in film or synergistic endorsements for products in the film. Because advertisers or some other media entity have paid for a project, their product, message, and influence over a media text is greater. Directors often come in conflict with producers for this reason; artistic visions are not always realized when production calls for certain restraints on what can be presented and still satisfy funders. This supports the resource dependency theory, which asserts that wherever the money for a film or media product is coming from, will also

determine what message is presented. Advertisers and producers will not create a film that does not serve their agenda. The task will be to see how this plays out in the three aforementioned films in regard to the African diaspora. How does the political economy of each nation affect what messages audiences are receiving? This research will conclude with a cross cultural comparison of each film in relation to one another and each nation's film industry. This comparison will be based on the depiction of systematic racism, as it relates to diaspora. The measure of success of each film will be based on box office gross, as well as direct reference in the films to diasporic issues such as systematic racism.

### **National Comparisons**

Without the added strain of directing and producing content for a western audience, the Brazilian or Nigerian directors are free to create a filmic product that will resonate with national audiences. This means their representations of diaspora as it applies to that particular nation will be more nuanced. For example, in Brazil colonization of African descended peoples was experienced in substantially different ways than was by African descended peoples in the United States. In Brazilian societies, there was more original African cultural retention than in the United States. Where one culture was not able to assimilate into the mainstream, the other developed with many African cultural elements intact; both as a result form subcultures within each nation.

Each nation's diaspora and how it is shown in film will be different. A method for analyzing each film in respect to its nation will be to contextualize the film within the society's history. British colonial practices in Nigeria were vastly different from the way the Portuguese enslaved Africans in Brazil or how slavery played out in the United States for African

Americans, who found themselves enslaved in a free nation. Each unique situation will add certain directorial nuances that will not go overlooked upon analysis. The goal is to account for these subtleties, especially as they relate to symbolic meaning, which is bound to change from Nigeria to the United States and Brazil. According to Shobat and Stam, “Cross-national comparisons are equally imbued with affect, fears, vanities, desires, and projections. They can idealize the “home” country or denigrate it, just as they can idealize the “away” country or denigrate it, or they can seek broad relationalities, which deconstruct nation-state thinking by discerning commonalities, thereby bypassing the border police,” (477).

A cross-cultural comparison can be biased in the way it approaches issues of subjectivity. This research is situated in a western context, although it has been informed by field-work in Brazil about their media system. Nigeria, from this point of view is the most obscure nation under analysis, but information about this nation and its film will come from African diaspora scholars.

### **Diasporic Cinema**

World cinemas must not be compared using one rigid model and must account for the niche of diasporic cinema. The question then becomes, can *Higher Learning*, *City of God* and *The Journey* be considered diasporic cinema? It can be argued that they are, but not as a means to reach a particular conclusion about the nature of the African diaspora or the people who comprise it. The relation to diaspora is much subtler than that.

People of African descent around the world may not deliberately identify as part of a diasporic community. Particular nuances may go unnoticed by a community that is used to seeing certain messages on a regular basis. In this way, one may not be aware that they are

viewing a diasporic media product and, furthermore, outsiders to a culture may have a keener eye for noting certain cultural aspects that have been normalized through common use.

Audiences relate to the diaspora on a daily basis as they are going about their lives.

The relevance of diaspora in people's lives is ever increasing and it is most certainly making its way into films. In discussing how diasporic media becomes a part of everyday life, Rajinder Dudrah states, "The diasporic imaginary becomes part of the everyday of diasporic subjects as the sounds and images of mediascapes are integrated into the routines and rituals of daily life, as well as the struggles for settlement and belonging" (35). Images of the diaspora are conveyed in the movies people watch, although it is not explicitly identified as such. The constant struggle for settlement and belonging has to do with a negotiation of self. Persons from the diaspora find themselves blending and appropriating elements from host and home country. This negotiation is inevitably reflected in cinema by simply showing the experiences of everyday, ordinary people. Directors and audiences alike may be members of the African diaspora; because of this, topics important to this community are increasingly being addressed in cinema. This allows for commercial and critical success. The films in this study, because they relate to the diaspora, each have some overlapping themes that are unique to African diasporic cinema.

### **The Political Economy of Movie Making:**

The existence of a well-defined market for films that deals with the African experience is due in part to directors like John Singleton. The commercial success of his films opened the door for directors from emerging and under-developed nations to also make films for this market. It would seem as a recent trend that cinema from the emerging and underdeveloped

nations must gain recognition in the festival circuit (such as The Cannes Film Festival) before being taken as a serious contender for global success and the distribution deals from investors that follow. Another trend has been coproduction between producers in poorer nations and the United States or Europe as a launch pad for commercial success. In fact, two of the films for this analysis (*City of God* and *The Journey*) are a result of coproduction between a major Hollywood company and a local production company. Such unions transnationalize the filmic product. Successful diasporic films perform a double task of appealing to domestic and international audiences. Neither audience must be alienated by the message that the film communicates.

Partnering studios from different world economies seems like a natural choice when trying to reach a diversified audience. Since the 1990's this has been a common practice where agencies had previously been state run. It is also becoming the norm in the emerging Nigerian market. The effects of said partnering are two-fold. On one hand, this process provides much needed funding for producers in the emerging and underdeveloped market; where otherwise there would have been none. However, some argue that this also has an effect on the films that directors are able to produce. This leads to obvious issues of resource dependency and the need to make returns for investors by producing a film that will make money rather than a cultural statement. Luisela Alvaray investigates this very issue, stating that it was during the 1980's and 1990's in Latin America when the majority of coproduction started. Coincidentally, it is at this time that the United States media system began to conglomerate at an unprecedented level under Ronald Reagan when, "the struggle over representation appear[ed] less urgent than in previous decades,' (71).

In media and communication studies, it is well known that media companies consolidate under vertical integration, meaning that when companies in one area of production diversify their

business to become producers or distributors. They take more control over all aspects of media products. Representation of peoples and alternate viewpoints goes down as monopolization of the industry goes up because fewer people have the power to shape the messages that are communicated through media products. In this way representation of minorities, including people in the diaspora and the globalized communities they represent and belong to, disappear from media products.

This process of dwindling representation has been ongoing and communities in the emerging and underdeveloped world are letting their grievances be known. Even subcultures like that of African Americans in a developed nation voice this same complaint, and some directors like John Singleton have made it their aim to present alternative and diversified representations that will be discussed here later. They are putting themselves back into media products by demanding that their stories be told and their issues be addressed. Sales, market trends, and production also reflect this. People around the world want diverse, diasporic cinema and they're willing to pay for it. For this reason, "home-entertainment releases... appeal to buyers not only in Nigeria and other African countries but also around the globe. They have a cult following in diaspora communities throughout Europe, North America, and Latin America," (Chamley, 22). Because of the commercial demand for critical films that appeal to the diasporic audience, messages such as those that address systematic racism can become marketable.

Not only are straight-to-DVD releases from emerging and under-developed nation's cinema in hot demand, but more 'serious' sophisticated award-worthy films are coming out of countries that have never produced them before. Chamley goes on to say that in Nigeria, "The preference for local films is an affirmation that Nigerians want to see their own films. Any successful national cinema would have to base their success on local acceptance and the local

market,” (22). As the demand for home grown local cinema increases, directors are apt to meet this demand. Being that a foreign international audience is also watching, directors have taken steps to make movies that are Nigerian in nature, and of higher quality. Larger budgets allow for innovations such as exclusively using a 35 mm camera to make movies. The higher resolution looks cleaner and dissuades piracy, which remains an issue.

The wave of the future for cinema seems to point to producing diasporic cinemas with a global and a local consciousness to reflect audiences. Far-flung globalized communities have created their own niche in the demand for a particular cinema that producers and directors cannot afford to ignore. Therefore, the concern of directors has to be focused as much on commercial success as it is on social commentary in order to please audiences and funders/investors, which is no small task. Succeeding at both may be redefining what it means to have a ‘commercial film’. The question then becomes how have the films for this study ranked at doing said task? Scholar Debra Shaw believes some films can in fact do both, and she cites the case of Argentine film *Nine Queens*, which gained domestic and foreign success. Shaw’s premise is that audience decoding of a film can fall along national or international lines. The domestic audience can interpret meaning one way because they can contextualize it in the film. International audiences can appreciate it as a well-made film for entertainment or aesthetic qualities.

Commercial success that does not obscure a cultural message depolarizes the commercial versus critical argument and concedes that one film can have both. This reasoning will be extended to all three films in this analysis. The commercial success of *Higher Learning* opened the door to future directors with diasporic messages. Within this study an evolution of global themes can also be seen. Each film under investigation was a commercial success in its own right and, to an extent, aware of the systematic racism facing those in the diaspora.

***Higher Learning:***

Director John Singleton's provocative *Higher Learning* explores racial and sexual tensions on a mostly white college campus. Alternative forms of blackness are presented through main characters Malik and Fudge. Malik, a track star on an athletic scholarship forms an unlikely friendship with the Afrocentric Fudge, who opens his eyes to the benign racism that exists on their campus. This racism eventually manifests itself in a bloody, hate-fueled shoot out initiated by a white supremacist. The character Kristen who tries to initiate peace among the racial cliques on campus is dealing with her own battles of sexual orientation. All the character's paths collide in unfortunate but telling ways.

Such a racially motivated story line would not immediately seem to be popular among general moviegoers. However, *Higher Learning* was able to gross more than 30 million in its first three weeks of being released (Collier, 121). Singleton's aim was at an African American audience, hungry to see portrayals of themselves that were non-stereotypical. With this aim in mind, coupled with the film's box-office success, it is safe to assume that Singleton has a loyal fan-base among the African American community and that a significant portion of the profits from the film came from this group. This once again supports the idea that a niche for diasporic directors and films was blossoming as early as the 1990's (in the United States at least) and Singleton and others were able to successfully appeal to this market.

Singleton tells a story through stark visual, narrative, and social contrast. At every angle there is a juxtaposition of elements in characters and their environments. Such stark pairing causes the audience to consider difference. From all the noted differences, inequalities become emboldened and apparent. The veil of racism against blacks and other minority groups becomes

very apparent under Singleton's lens. The manifestations of systematic racism are most pronounced in this of the three films. Blacks are shown in a different aesthetic than white characters. Where the blacks reside there is bass heavy rap music, political talk, slightly darker lighting and perhaps, most importantly, police presence. Whites reside in a much different world, although they are all on the same campus.

In one segment of the film, Singleton switches from the party scene of the whites versus the blacks. The whites are shown in a ruckus, licentious, party blasting rock music and behaving in wild destructive manners. In one instance, a group of presumably drunken white males overturn a small car, simply for fun's sake. This is immediately juxtaposed with the partying scene of the blacks, who smoothly and melodically dance to rap and R and B music. Men play cards and talk politics instead of overturning cars. And yet, it is the party of the blacks that gets broken up by racially motivated white policemen. The irony is that the innocent are persecuted because of blackness, while the guilty whites escape suspicion and persecution. Remy, during the climax of the film, is overlooked by police for his whiteness and able to commit a crime while they chase Malik instead. This evokes in the audience an uncomfortable but familiar sensation of injustice faced by minorities.

Singleton extends the juxtapositions to make a comment on sexism also. The spaces of women are shown in a more gentle quiet light than that of men, especially in relation to the character Kristen who battles with her sexual orientation. It is interesting to note that Singleton chose to explore issues of homosexuality through the white female character rather than one of the many black or male characters in the film. One can infer that this was the easiest way to acknowledge this issue; American audiences are more comfortable with female homosexuality than male; especially since the director is male, the issue of the male gaze becomes apparent. The

male gaze is awareness that the perspective from which one is viewing something is that of the heterosexual male. When it is applied to female sexuality in the film it paints a stark contrast between the more feminine and therefore heterosexual women and the more masculine homosexual women. Kristen dons signifiers of each sexual orientation throughout the film as she grapples with her attractions.

The visual juxtapositions are parallel with the narrative arc. Images of racism and sexism become more compelling as the story develops to a violent climax. Although Singleton deals greatly with racism in the film, just as Salles does in *City of God*, the characters of African descent make no direct connection back to Africa, but suffer the blows of racism because of their African-ness. It is never pronounced but implicit in both texts. The grievances of slavery are however much more pronounced, in *Higher Learning*, particularly in the Afrocentric character Fudge, who likens other black characters in the film to slaves when they comply with demands of mainstream society. At one point he says, “One beat down will never compare to 439 years of captivity,” after there is a fight between a group of blacks and a white supremacy gang. This line of dialogue is closely followed by one of the white supremacist saying to his gang, “Which of you would have the balls to shoot a nigger?” The magnitude of what Fudge is saying would no doubt resonate with the African American audience. This diasporic community has understood for years that, although far removed from Africa, their African-ness continues to cause them to be a target for racism and, they are often reminded of it daily. This racism is alive and well among many communities in America and the film draws attention to this by casting a white supremacist clique in the film.

The character Fudge is quite interesting in his portrayal. Although he seems highly intelligent for the things he says and his critical consciousness, he is also a “super-senior” and

unable to graduate from the university, presumably for his laziness. Singleton shows him in this light for a number of reasons. In an interview from *Ebony* magazine Singleton says, “I want to dignify African Americans through films. We need to show them with some dignity. Humanize them, not just with positive images. We need to show a balance of good and bad,” (Collier, 122). This is also what diasporic audiences are calling for: realistic treatment of who they are in film. The African American characters in the film are highly nuanced, processing both positive and negative attributes. Characters from other racial groups are also presented in diverse ways; for example, Fudge’s white roommate Remy becomes a white supremacist, partly because he is unable to fit in with any other group on campus. His underlying racist attitudes are nourished by neo-Nazis. This type of whiteness is a huge contrast to the peace-loving attitude that Kristen adopts. For all the diversified racial representation, the audience is most acutely aware of the treatment of the African Americans.

A similarity between *The Journey* and *Higher Learning* is that they both try to account for the diversity of the African diaspora. In *The Journey* this diversity is quite obvious as African and African American characters interact. It is represented in the Professor Phipps’ character. His outward appearance is that of a black person, but it is his curious unplaced, but possibly British colonial African accent that separates him from the African American characters. Singleton’s choice to cast such a character could be for a number of reasons. Phipps’ nationally ambiguous status makes him an outsider to the largely African American experience that is presented in the film. As an outsider, he is able to make a comment on the racist American system, suggesting that the issues happening in the United States in relation to racism are so blatant that an outsider would notice. The fact that this voice is coming from a professor, a person of authority in the context of the film, signifies that the critique of inequality must come

from those in power. Phipps, Malik and Fudge represent subtle differences in blackness. However it is in stark contrast to white characters that messages about racism are presented.

The stark contrast makes the racial issues addressed in the film all that much more pronounced. Whereas the characters in this film acknowledge their current day grievance as in relation to captivity from centuries ago, it goes unmentioned, but understood in *City of God*. This epitomizes what diasporic audiences were craving: plain, upfront, talk about the conditions of systematic racism, and how the atrocities of the past are still felt and greatly influence the present. Given the commercial demands of Hollywood filmmakers one might not expect such criticism to come from the American director. However, because of Singleton's own status as an African American, there is perhaps a heightened sensitivity to issues facing diasporic communities as Singleton also belongs to this group. *Higher Learning* is a Hollywood film in that is made by an American director, but it is by no means typical. It focuses on diasporic sensibilities because of the director's commitment to highlighting African diasporic subjects. Characters that represent an unequal system are also in Walter Salles' *City of God*.

### ***City of God:***

In addition to beautiful cinematography, director Walter Salles paints a violent, high crime, high action picture of the Brazilian slum in Rio de Janeiro's *City of God*, through the eyes of photographer Wilson Rodrigues, who barely navigates and survives existence in such a dangerous place. An elevated gangster movie of sorts it is a step beyond the Hollywood conception of this genre in that its gritty, truth-telling lens has a muckraking effect, through inclusion of the journalistic element of Rocket's camera. In this way, it feels testimonial or even like a documentary. This realistic feeling is especially marked at the end of the film because of

the actual news footage Salles uses. The grainy videos are played alongside the credits at the end; this addition makes the audience believe Salles' adaptation of characters and their stories. There is a take away feeling that what has been shown is real. There are also many stylistic markers that set this film apart from the Hollywood expectation. Amid all the stylistic beauty there is also a strong statement about *favela* life, that you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. It is at this crossroad that many people of African descent in the emerging world of Brazil find themselves.

This story is as much about documenting a violent period in the City of God as it is about rising out of ghetto life. This narrative is one that many African descent people in urban cities could relate to. Salles tells this story in such a way that is not typically found in a film of this kind. He achieves this in a number of ways.

The unsteady camera shots lend to the hurried hectic feeling which parallels the narrative action of the characters. In typical Hollywood film continuity editing, a smooth transition from one scene to the next is used for a clean, seamless finished product on screen. The jumps in narrative and scene are a deliberate style choice for Salles. The wobbling camera takes us through the City of God as an insider. This adds to the disturbing feeling when violence is shown. This feeling is heightened particularly when children are shown committing acts of violence for sport. Violence as a part of the film is common to the Hollywood gangster genre, but Salles elevates its use as a function of sentimentality, in that the carnage becomes a vehicle for reaction and response.

In one scene, slum Lord 'Lil Zé' commands one of his child minions to shoot another in the foot as punishment for terrorizing on his turf. To heighten the discomfort of an already

disturbing scene of child on child violence initiated by an adult, Salles cuts all diegetic sound, so that it is silent, thus the image 'speaks' louder. When the gun shot sounds it is all that much louder for the silence that preceded it. The heart wrenching look on the face of the child who has just been wounded is emboldened by an extreme close up of the child's face. Salles uses such shots sparingly to capture the emotional impact of scenes. This strategic use of technique that is interwoven into the story adds to the layered richness of scenes. Appealing to emotion in this way makes the audience feel for the mostly black youths who because of an unequal system live such violent lives.

Wholly framing *City of God* as a gangster movie is not taking into account the multiple vantage points from which audiences are watching the film. As suggested earlier, there is an international as well as domestic reading of the violence in the film. In a simplified view, the heavy use of violence in the film in American terms would classify this as a gangster film. But this classification does not fully encompass what is happening in the film. Salles is no doubt rendering his own brilliant appropriation of the genre. His Latin American perspective politicizes the violence to make a statement that is beyond entertainment. Debra Shaw elaborates on this point stating that, "the class-race intersection in *Cidade de Deus* marks its distance from Hollywood's gangster genre: The 'violent lord of life and death' is 'a gapped-toothed youngster, [undernourished] and illiterate, often barefoot and in shorts, invariably dark-skinned in [color]'... 'the point on which all injustices of Brazilian society converge,'" (57). Salles' critical political statement elevates the film past a retelling of history to Brazilian audience and makes the film more than entertainment for international and western audiences. It fringes on the realm of social commentary for what it depicts of Brazilian society and the way it is able to make this statement. The fact that it's mainly Afro-Brazilian characters that experience the inequality

provokes critical inquiry under the guise of an entertaining gangster shoot-em-up movie. Perhaps this lends to the film's critical and commercial success domestically and abroad.

For all the realism Salles is able to insert by way of including actual news footage of the events depicted at the end of the film, it is interesting to note that the film was in part funded by The Brazilian Ministry of Culture. To consider this film as a cultural export is interesting because of the violence. True, it is a very Brazilian story that documents early *favela* life but it also speaks to the experience of so many in the diaspora. The characters in the film never explicitly refer back to Africa, but the implicit understanding is that their experience as poor people is somehow connected to their blackness. In one scene when a group of hoodlums has just committed a crime and the police are in pursuit of them, one officer proposes that he and his partner steal the loot they lifted from a robbery. When one officer objects, the other says, "Since when is stealing from niggers and thieves a crime?" This dialogue is paired with a medium shot of one of the crooks that slowly zooms in on his black face. This short scene is meant to register with audiences on a number of levels.

The dialogue itself captures the sentiment that runs through the entire film. The blacks are by default guilty because of their blackness. Crimes they may commit are not understood as conditions and results of the systematic racism against them, but as qualities of their very blackness. This also captures the corruption of the Brazilian police, who have a long history that would resonate with national audiences, especially in respect to how police handle crime in *favelas*. As for the technical aspects of this scene, Salles closes in on a medium shot to humanize the hoodlum. The audience is able to read his expression and is made to empathize with the criminal. Although they are guilty, of a crime such a shot that registers the emotion of the accused helps contextualize why the crime was committed. This notion is reinforced in the scene

that follows when the same hoodlums whose emotions the audience is able to read declares that he is done with crime and will submit the rest of his life to God. The social and cultural intersections of inequality in *City of God* become a central theme in *The Journey*.

***The Journey:***

This poignant film, stars Genevieve Nnaji, a megastar who has been coined the Julia Roberts of Nigeria. Nnaji, a seasoned veteran of Nollywood movies, performs among other Nigeria stars in the tale of two sisters growing up in the countryside. One sister in her pursuit of the American dream moves to the United States. Things go horribly wrong when she is accused of murdering three American men including her husband. Her sister must then travel to the United States to defend and support the innocence of her sister. Such a narrative represents the ever advancing sophistication of the Nollywood industry and reflects the stories that a diasporic audience is interested in hearing about. To explain the context of this immensely successful film which grossed “over sixty million naria (\$380,000) at the box office in a record-breaking seventeen- week theatrical run in 2010” (Chamley, 21), one must understand the context of Nollywood.

The term Nollywood was first coined in 1992, when Nigeria was in a financial crisis. Directors began making very low tech inexpensive videos on VHS that would be copied and distributed. The first video of this kind was a film called *Living in Bondage* which sold more than half a million copies, rather impressive for such a grass roots distribution method. Since then the industry has developed exponentially to become the second most prolific film industry in the world after India’s Bollywood, a similar filmic phenomenon. From its humble beginnings Nollywood now employs half a million to one million people annually and produces one

thousand to two thousand films a year, adding a surplus of \$250-500 million into the Nigerian economy (Chamley).

The techniques and overall sophistication in *The Journey* have come a long way from the humble beginnings of *Living in Bondage*. The film is rich with symbolic meaning and social commentary. The strongest commentary comes from what the film has to say of racism/racial relations and cross cultural comparisons between the more conservative Nigerian culture and western culture. In the film the racial lines are drawn early on. Blacks seem to be linked to Latinos in their plight. Asians are grouped with whites in their indifference and flat out rudeness to the people of African descent. Parallels are drawn between the Latino experience and the Nigerian, as each group has a mutual fear of immigration concerns such as deportation. In the film this becomes a point that is used against a Hispanic maid when she is defending Anya, the Nigerian woman accused of murdering Americans. There is also a tension established between Asian and African characters. The owners of the hotel where Chioma stays (Anya's sister) are Asian, and very rude to Chioma. At one point the hotel owners' son assaults Chioma in hopes of robbing her. Anyaene also depicts the relationship between African immigrants and African Americans in a positive way.

The directorial choice to depict race relations in this way lends itself to realism. The African American lawyer Jaylen represents the similarity of experience of people in the diaspora. Their relationship is significant because each of them represents a part of the African diaspora. For Jaylen, the issue is forced migration is a legacy of slavery and for Chimoa it is the contemporary voluntary migration of people from undeveloped regions into developed western culture. Both groups experience diaspora in different ways. Jaylen, although he represents the disenfranchised group of African Americans, is a success in his profession as a lawyer. This

signifies that people of African descent can assimilate and become productive members of the dominant host society. This message would appeal to Africans and African Americans alike. Chimoa's experience is largely based on her nationality rather than ethnicity. In the scene where Jaylen and Chioma meet, he initially regards her with suspicion and mentions her "fake accent". Anyaene is acknowledging the difference in the two groups, but also unifying them with the common thread of diasporic experience, which in this film is reflected in a traditional love story.

The roles of Chioma and Jaylen in the film are also important to mention. Although there are a number of people working to get her sister out of jail, Chioma is largely responsible for her sister's acquittal. She even risks her own freedom by compromising evidence for her sister's sake. Contrasting with the other women in the film, Chioma is quite brave. To show the contrast between the bravery of the Nigerian women and women of other races, the Hispanic maid that testifies on Anya's behalf reveals that Anya was raped; but when questioned by the prosecution she breaks down and cries. This can be read as a cowardly response. The white female lawyer initially in charge of the case is so afraid to lose in court that she coaxes Anya to lie. The Asian woman in the film is also shown in an unfavorable light because she lies to Chioma about the price of her room and over charges her. It is also a very deliberate choice of Anyaene to show the African American lawyer Jaylen as the only one brave enough to take a very difficult case. Diasporic communities are eager to see representations of African descendent people that are brave, courageous and get fair treatment from the American judicial system.

Anyaene also visually strongly contrasts freedom and imprisonment. In the film's opening sequence Chioma is shown going through the airport in her native Nigerian garb. She is routinely stopped and searched; this juxtaposes with images of her sister being booked into jail. Switching between experiences speaks to the overall treatment of immigrants in America which

leads to scrutiny or incarceration for many. This is in sharp contrast to the images that represent freedom. These spaces are outdoors and open and often set in Nigeria. When Chioma contemplates her childhood, the girls are usually shown outside playing and running. This is repeated at the end when Anya earns her freedom, and the two sisters run and play on the beach. This scene connects back to the carefree way they were as children. Anyaene works to visually represent this on screen by contrasting open versus enclosed spaces.

There are also a number of symbols that Anyaene uses to convey meaning. A symbolic object that takes on meaning in the film by its repeated use is Anya's mother's beads. They help advance the plot, connect the characters back to Africa, and would resonate deeply with Nigerian diasporic audiences. In an early scene in the film when Anya is writing Chioma from prison, she mentions that the magic of the beads did not work. This reference to magic beads would be easily understood by a domestic Nigerian audience, but a western audience might fail to understand the significance of this. In traditional Yoruba religions beads are worn for protection against adverse spirits and for good fortune, and generally carry heavy spiritual significance. Anyaene constructs a number of scenes around the beads. They are what initially separates the sisters, as Anya mentions that she gave them to Chioma when she was jealous, to insinuate that they carried the spirit of misfortune that might have led to her own mishap in America. In the instance where the strand of beads breaks, Chioma also finds herself in trouble.

Contemplation of the beads often precedes a flashback scene to Nigeria where they speak Yoruba, solidifying the connection of the beads to a domestic Nigerian audience. These frequently used flashback scenes also help establish a contrast between the foreign and domestic cultures in the film. There are many lines of dialogue which begin, "This is not Nigeria; in America..." This is repeatedly used to mark the difference in the two national cultures,

particularly in the way the societies deal with rape, which becomes a central conflict in the film. Anyaene handles the issue in an interesting way; she is essentially airing Nigeria's dirty laundry by exposing how the society deals with rape. In one scene, Chioma explains to her lawyer that although it would help Anya's case to admit that she was raped, in Nigeria it is a source of great shame for the women, who are forevermore regarded as damaged goods by society. Therefore, Anya would omit this detail. Nigerian women could empathize with the character and appreciate Anyaene's treatment of the issue. The film's ability to empathize with what might be perceived as a "damaged" woman to Nigerians in the film is what made it successful in Nigeria. Unfortunately, more and more women are occupying this space with the alarming number of rapes occurring in their society.

The film's message about the American dream still being something obtainable is also what makes the film popular with a diasporic audience, who are still apt to accept this message. There is also the filmic fantasy in the sentencing of Anya, who is given relatively light sentencing for the crime she is accused of. In actuality, the chances of an African immigrant being given light sentencing for any crime are slim to none. Yet Anyaene depicts this in the film. Anyaene is presenting an alternate reality for cases with a racial element in which blacks (or in the case of the film African immigrants) are evaluated fairly by the justice system: "Racial inequality is routinely played out in judicial sentencing usually in favor of whites against blacks..." (Park, 494). Anyaene's film presents justice where there would likely be unequal sentencing. This would resonate with African American audiences, who are eager to see equality for people of African descent; this builds her western fan base as much as her Nigerian one. Criminalized people of African descent and the systematic racism they experience are a consistent thread in each of the three films.

## Conclusion

Directors Anyaene and Singleton are creating a cinema that affirms and celebrates its own people. The same is true of Salles but on a more nationalist level. Singleton appeals to the subculture of African Americans, but is able to make a uniquely all American product, as racism unfortunately is just as American a tradition as any other. Film works as a lens into a particular culture. These films reflect the systematic racism in each culture they represent and their connection to the African diaspora.

The initial hypothesis on which nation's cinema would be the most commercial was somewhat disproved in that the American film was able to make a bold statement about African diasporic issues. It is also the American film that was the most commercially successful. This proves that diasporic audiences are looking for bold messages about the issues their community faces. Each can be seen as being on a continuum of representation. From one film to the next, there is an evolution in the way the diaspora is presented. The focus had been relatively narrow on African Americans from the earliest film in this study. Representations evolved to account for counterparts in Latin America and for the contemporary diaspora out of Africa today.

Singleton depicts reality as it is, and Anyaene presents how it should be, for African immigrants who are fairly tried in the American judicial system. Both depictions satisfy a need for diasporic audiences to see their realities represented and their future hopes expressed. But for many in the diaspora, their lives incorporate both the continuing negative realities and positivity. Diversified representations of what is happening with the diaspora community and films with a globalized community in mind will continue to dominate the film industry. The commercial

success of each of these films from this research proves that audiences want diasporic representations that are more sophisticated and nuanced.

This research generates further inquiries on the future of African diaspora cinema that questions whether or not socially conscious directors with an artful cultural lens have ‘sold-out’ if their films are a commercial success? Or can a film simultaneously satisfy national preference while gaining international profit returns? The answers to these questions are likely to change as much as the face of the African diaspora will.

**Note:**

1. These classifications are discussed at length in: Lechner, Frank J, and John Boli. *The Globalization Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008. Print.

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