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# Drawing hearts in the air within new African diaspora spaces: selling Nollywood and consuming nostalgia in London



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## ABSTRACT

Nigerian video films circulate transnationally across various African diaspora communities, including London, England. This article explores conversations concerning the experience of both real and faux nostalgia regarding Blackness and the African diaspora as expressed through Nollywood cinema in London. Within these diaspora communities, Nigerian vendors sell Nollywood DVDs as physical commodities from their homeland, triggering sensations of nostalgia and transporting audiences to experience pleasurable and painful emotions. By consuming these cultural products, Nollywood audiences may yearn for an actual African home or experience longing for a village life they have never truly experienced (Krings and Okome 2013, pp. 5–6). Nollywood DVDs serve as modern cultural artefacts containing a ‘record’, both literally and figuratively, transmitting a ‘communication’ of black nostalgia’ (Edwards 2009, p. 145) to consumers by providing imaginative sensory spatial representations of Nigeria and Africa. This article explores research from the liminal temporal space of 2013 London, where Nigerian consumption patterns shifted from a thriving market of Nollywood video-film consumers renting or purchasing DVDs – in ‘brick and mortar’ shops – to streaming these cultural commodities online. Viewer responses reveal the importance of physical and online movie distribution platforms as pan-African content providers, connecting virtual homeland spaces of nostalgia to the African diaspora. Thus, from the comfort of their homes, audiences conveniently accessed Black African representations of Nigeria. This investigation captures transnational socio-cultural exchanges in survey research, through questionnaires, and online social media research. Black vendors and consumers reveal their experiences with Nollywood as a means to sustain nostalgic homeland bonds, cultural norms, customs, language, religion, and tradition (Krings and Okome, pp. 5–6). The findings elucidate the psychological importance of maintaining homeland connections through buying, selling, and consuming Nollywood experientially. Therefore, a social mechanism of nostalgia allows consumers and vendors to retain and sustain Black African cultural identity abroad.

**KEYWORDS** Pan-African; audience reception; cultural productions; socio-cultural identity; global Africa; psychology

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From the '80s singer Sade to the more recent rappers Wale, Rema, and Burna Boy, the Nigerian diaspora has played a significant role in international Black popular cultural media productions. Nigerian video films (also known as 'Nollywood') illustrate the significance of cultural productions that have transcended African continental borders, inspiring people worldwide. Similarly, Nigerian filmic cultural productions travel through formal and informal distribution channels within African communities, demonstrating a circulatory transnational media flow between London and West Africa. Nollywood video-films create or dispel myths about Nigeria as a homeland by using contemporary cultural elements to simulate Nigerian society and culture. Thus, Nigerian movies potentially serve as an example of 'media-induced nostalgia', which provides a sense of 'psychological health and well-being' for consumers (Wulf *et al.* 2018, p. 77). Further, mediated nostalgia is accessed through what some scholars call *digimodernity*, i.e. 'a dispensation where digital and satellite communication and the global media have reached vertiginous heights and where their sheer ubiquity transcends physical cartographic limitations' (Tsaaior and Ugochukwu 2017, p. 26). Nollywood video-films help viewers remember home, or learn about their culture.

The analysis of the African diaspora divides into four theoretical frameworks of examination according to sociologist Hamilton (2006): 1) geo-social mobility and displacement; 2) African connections (myths, symbols, and realities); 3) agents of resistance; and 4) social identity and struggle through change and continuity. This article and the study it is based on concentrate on geo-social mobility, African connections, and social identity as related to Nollywood consumption and nostalgia. This study is an interview of inhabitants in the space of 2013 Kings Cross, London, where viewers' responses reveal the importance of movie distribution platforms as a pan-African content provider, connecting virtual spaces of nostalgia to the African homeland.

Within this study, interviewed London participants describe how they relate to the videos as a form of 'mediated nostalgia', evoking sentiments of pleasure and sometimes pain (Wulf *et al.* 2018, p. 77). Nollywood movies serve as modern cultural artefacts containing a 'record' that literally and figuratively transmits 'the 'communication' of black nostalgia' (Edwards 2003, p. 145) to viewers by providing audio and visual imaginative spatial representations of Nigeria. Nostalgia bonds African diaspora communities. This study explores Kings Cross, London, a scaled-down mini-version of Peckham Rye, also known as 'Little Lagos', a well-documented cultural transmission hub where African immigrants trade food, beauty products, movies, music, clothing, and other items (Johnson-Nwosu 2023). These cultural transactions foster what Hamilton (2006) would describe as African Diaspora connections: '[t]hose who have a strong connection to—and sense of—Africa as homeland often form networks with others who share in this, building

alliances based on similar experiences and world views and shared circumstances in the African diaspora' (pp. 2–3). The recreated geographical spaces reveal the ongoing connection between West Africans as they gather and maintain their cultural practises, traditions, aesthetics, and personal favourites.<sup>1</sup>

As the largest cosmopolitan geographical metropole in the United Kingdom, London creates a plethora of rich Black cultural productions with nascent Africana communities residing in what Hamilton (2006) calls the 'Global Africa landscape' (p. 9). Black London is a unique cosmopolitan metropole, vibrantly illustrating diverse notions of being Africana in England. There are multiple categories of Black identity in London, including Black English, Black Caribbean, Black African, and previously South Asian, among several others (Aspinall 2011, p. 35). The African diaspora has historically been interwoven into the fabric of English history, as the African diaspora's presence in Britain dates back to Roman times (Zeleza 2005, p. 54). While the social identity of the African diaspora is complex, Zeleza (2005) distinguishes the differences between two categories of the African diaspora: historic diasporas and contemporary diasporas. According to the author, older diasporas are 'Historic Diasporas' meaning diasporas prior to colonisation (Zeleza 2005). In contrast, Zeleza describes 'contemporary diasporas' as newer diasporas created during the late nineteenth century in three distinct waves: '... diasporas of colonisation, decolonisation, and the era of structural adjustment, which emerged from the disruptions and dispositions of colonial conquest, the struggles for independence, and structural adjustment programmes ...' (p. 55). This study also includes African diasporas from the post-independence era, characterised by the migration of numerous Africans seeking to improve their socioeconomic status; however, it primarily concentrates on the structural adjustment eras. Connecting with home through goods, people, or places is crucial to the well-being of immigrants. This article examines how, where, and why Black African diasporas in London distribute and consume Nollywood. The geographical space, the physical and virtual Nigerian cultural productions connect to supporting the social identity of these communities, which often correlates to different forms of nostalgia. Nollywood serves audiences by providing mediated nostalgia in the form of audiences watching films of their favourite genre starring their favourite actors, thereby establishing a connection between the audience and familiar cultural elements – the virtual and physical spaces in which Nollywood is consumed thus become sites of Afro-escapism or Naija-escapism.

## Methods

This study employed convenience and snowball techniques to recruit participants in London, United Kingdom. These methods complement previous

methods to understand the patterns, relationships, and exchanges among the African Diaspora and their networks within shopping centres (LeCompte and Schensul 2010). Snowball techniques and participant observation in London's Kings Cross involved frequenting various stores and restaurants within predominantly African immigrant populations. Contacts established in these locations allowed the researcher to interview other Nollywood consumers recruited to complete surveys with the storeowners' permission. Participant observation and informal, semi-structured interviews with Nollywood vendors assisted the researcher in gaining new customer contacts within different Kings Cross stores. Thirty participants completed the questionnaire within three days in July 2013. The methodological research approach (Bernard 2006, LeCompte and Schensul 2010) revealed valuable insight into how nostalgia is mediated for Black diaspora communities, mostly new African diasporas.

The survey had 27 questions, whereby participants discussed their Nollywood viewing habits. Interviews began with open-ended questions about Nigerian films. The questionnaires explored three primary questions: 1) What are the consumption patterns of Nollywood audiences, particularly in London? 2) How do audiences identify with Nollywood in London? 3) Why are various sectors of society, such as shop owners and cultural communities, engaging with Nollywood? Although these questions were not specifically examining nostalgia, after examining literature on the psychology of nostalgia, it became apparent to the researcher that participant responses indicated how Black Africans retain nostalgia by maintaining, consuming, and distributing homeland connections throughout London in the form of Nollywood cultural productions.

## Participant demographics

According to the 2011 United Kingdom census, Black Africans account for 7percent of the population, with the Caribbean accounting for 4.2percent. Whites in London account for 44.9percent, the lowest in the United Kingdom (Office for National Statistics 2011). All Blacks (African, Caribbean, American, and European) make up 3.4percent of Britain, with an overall population of 56.1 million (Office for National Statistics 2011). The study participants offer a microcosm of the Black London experience, exploring nostalgia with the fastest-growing Black African population: the African diaspora.<sup>2</sup> Most participants were born in West Africa: Nigeria (21); Ghana, Kumasi (1); Cotonou, Ajiase (1); Togo, Lome (1); Cameroon, Iyaonide (1); and Freetown, Sierra Leone (1). Additionally, fewer participants were born in London, United Kingdom (3). The majority of participants were African (26). Among these, 16 identified as Black African, 1 as Black Gambian, and some Nigerian participants specified their ethnicity as Yoruba (3), Delta

State (1), Black African from Biafra Nation (1), and Igbo (1). Additionally, 2 out of 3 participants identified as Black British: Black British/Igbo (1), Freetown, Sierra Leone (1), and unidentified identity (1).<sup>3</sup> This demographic insight on Black identities in London helps contextualise how participants interact with Nollywood in the African diaspora.

According to sociologist Knowles (2013), '[n]ew migrants of the last fifteen years are a young population: 90.9 percent are under forty-five. New migrants have lower employment rates than settled Nigerians: 61.2 percent are employed compared to 72.9 percent for settled migrants' (p. 659). Thus, participants within the study are representative of the Nigerian population within London, as their average age was 37 years, with a range spanning from 18 to 70. Regarding gender, male participants had a slight lead of sixteen, and female participants had thirteen. The majority of participants were religious: Christian (20), Muslim (8), and Ifá (1).

In terms of education, most participants had a bachelor's degree (12), graduate school (9), and some college (5); other educational levels included: finished high school (2), not finished high school but attended college (1). The sample replicates a pattern within London: '[t]here are more new Nigerian migrants (15.3 percent) in education than settled migrants (5.2 percent) and only 37.4 percent of them have higher qualifications compared to settled Nigerians (50.7 percent)' (Knowles 2013, p. 659). Participants held the following occupations: student (9), business (6), security (1), student and ADC advanced security (1), telecommunications (2), teacher (2), support teacher (1), driver (2), retired (2), self-employed (1), manager (1), and registered nurse (1). Thus, the background demographic information can contextualise the upcoming audience responses.

## **Selling nollywood as black nostalgia in London**

Pan-ethnic African communities in London express nostalgia and connect to their homeland through Nigerian video consumption. Nollywood film scholars Krings and Okome (2013) describe the importance of Nollywood films in the African diaspora as a method to retain connections

'with the "homeland" – it is about nostalgia for culture, tradition, and language (no matter how they evolve in the transnational context). It is also about recognising how fundamental the notion of niche markets has become to the phenomenon of global cultural production' (pp. 5–6).

Indeed, the recreation of Africana communities within London and the selling and buying of Nollywood productions illustrate the efforts to retain culture. In this premise, both the marketplace and Africana's distribution and consumption reveal how material culture supports cultural continuity through the daily fashioning of some Africans in London. Africana communities in

London's vibrant market elucidate venders and consumers' needs to instil West African cultural values abroad. These Black spaces are valuable because they 'recreate' West African geographical spaces in London, generating dynamic cultural spaces comparable to top cultural market video centres in Nigeria. Within the African Diaspora, vibrant cultural flows occur where, as Edwards (2003) maintains, 'communication of black nostalgia' flows in the physical and virtual form of Nollywood (p. 145). This section explores the significance of geographical locations as prolific sites of transnational cultural flows. Thus, the longing for cultural traditions is exactly how participants explain their interaction with Nollywood video-films.

Nigerian cinema was previously a part of the diaspora and circulatory flows of cultural commodities sold within markets. As Nollywood scholar Jedlowski (2013, p. 31) explains, 'Diasporic and international markets had been targeted since the early stages of Nollywood's evolution'. The Nollywood market in London underwent significant transformations from the late 1990s to early 2010, primarily due to the prosperous state of the Nigerian domestic market in 1999; however, no robust attempts were made to develop international distribution within the Anglophone regions of the world.<sup>4</sup> The situation became different ten years later when the new wave of Nollywood began<sup>5</sup> (Jedlowski 2013, p. 27). Though there was still strong international distribution, there were no central venders as of 2009. The present study was conducted four years later (in 2013) when sales of Nollywood cultural productions were more prominent than previously. The cultural distributors illustrate that the 'Black hustle' or 'Naija hustle' thrives in London through the circulation of Nollywood video-films.

The physical sites where Nollywood is found resemble cultural memory artefacts shared, sold, consumed, and distributed. Within the market space of Africana delights, where distributors and venders sell Nollywood films to the people, these distribution sites are recreated spaces resembling Nigerian marketplaces. Hamilton (2006) quotes Arjun Appadurai to describe these created spaces as the 'global African landscape', whereby

Global Africa is today part of 'the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers [athletes, entertainers, students, and scholars], and other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world, and appear to affect the politics of and between nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree'. (p. 9)

Nollywood consumers can enter these spaces and find a Nigerian vender, Nigerian merchandise, and a piece of home away from home. However, the vender locations do not exactly resemble Nigerian cultural sites of consumption in some respects, as Okome (2007) refers to two types of 'street audiences': 'video parlour' and 'street corner' (p. 7). In London, the re-creation of the video parlour experience was witnessed by the researcher. Nollywood

videos have produced consumption sites where African influences have transformed the marketspaces.<sup>6</sup> In Nigeria, Okome (2007) explains, '[t]hese stalls have since become part of the visual topography of these cities and towns. In profound ways, these stalls have remapped social spaces in these cities and towns' (p. 7). For example, during the mid '90s, London markets were 'even 'stronger than the Idumota and the Onitsha market outlets' (Video and Celluloid)' (Jedlowski 2013, p. 31). Thus, the transnational African 'remapping' of London's spatial territories creates spaces for nostalgia to flourish as sites of remembrance, rekindling cultural productions to ignite missing components of existence in a foreign land.

The physical circulation of commodities took place within the African communities that utilise Kings Cross in London as a transnational geographical space. This space serves as a hub for the flow of material and socio-cultural commodities to Black vendors and consumers. The intra-ethnic cultural exchange of values and traditions indicates transactions through nostalgia and homeland continuity processing. Nostalgic continuity becomes affirmed whenever shoppers purchase African vegetables, food, meat, fruits, clothes, religious paraphernalia, music, videos, beauty supplies, or other products that bring them a bit closer to their homeland. In the consumption of Nigerian and African products, '[t]he logic of nostalgia dictates that nothing can be recovered, only re-collected, re-imagined. But, nostalgia collaborating with capitalism has this investment, we, as a society of individualists, can regain desired aspects of the past' (Chrostowska 2010, p. 53). Among the transactions, nostalgia via Nollywood is one of many items sold and traded within several shops. The relationship between consumers and commodities indicates the notion of the Black diaspora connecting through social identity and African connections (Hamilton 2006).

Black African immigrants illustrate the connection between London's local geographic location and Nollywood, serving as a catalyst to connect transnationally. Hamilton (2006) supports the participants' descriptive sentiments as an ever-changing form of continuity, '[s]ocial definitions of constructions of identity include 'those feelings and values in respect of a sense of continuity: shared memories, and a sense of common destiny of a given unit of the population which has had common experiences and cultural attributes'' (p. 8). She further explains, '[o]f major interest are the "crosspoints", "active sites", and contradictions within a social system that not only facilitate the emergence and development of a collective "we" but also effectuate major dynamics within and among people of the diaspora' (Hamilton 2006, p. 8). King's Cross exemplifies one of the African sites of connection that circulates cultural ideas, norms, and commodities from the homeland.

The cultural agency of the African diaspora, acting at local, national, regional, and transnational levels, contributes to the '... (re)shaping of [a] transformation of a global African social identity' (Hamilton 2006, p. 9).



Thus, buying and selling Nollywood films indicates a need to retain a distinctive cultural heritage in a foreign land. Among other cultural goods, Nollywood productions represent the desire to preserve historical and cultural distinctiveness within London. According to the 'super diversity' of London's Nollywood, the 'superdiverse ethnic-migrant presence has multi-registration points: in bodies, in clothing, in performances, in forms of commerce, in the form of money, in artifacts and buildings' (Knowles 2013, p. 652). As an observer and consumer of Black cultural spaces, the researcher has witnessed the transaction between Nollywood consumers and distributors, supporting how the geographical locations invoke a sense of community and space where 'home' can be bought and consumed through material products. These reference points trigger homeland connections and nostalgia, creating a global Africa in London (Hamilton 2006, p. 9).

Many Africans consume Nigerian videos for a semblance of home abroad, which may reinforce myths created about their homeland. However, Nollywood videos may help maintain or shatter these myths (Hamilton 2006). As the scholar explains, '[h]omelands are socially constructed spatial representations embedded in economic political, and cultural relations and processes. They may be neither geographical "facts" nor legally defined political or national territories' (Hamilton 2006, p. 19). To this extent, examining Nollywood as an African cultural production with a wide range of geo-social mobility demonstrates circulatory transnational media flows between Europe and West Africa. This popular cultural production flow influences the Africana populations through music, dance, aesthetic styles, and film (Hamilton 2006, p. 23). The spaces of London are multicultural; however, the undergirding cultural space is Euro-British culture. Thus, physically occupying white European spaces that encourage assimilation, whether subtly or overtly, can make Black people desire to search for Black representation and spaces. Indeed, the Eurocentric nature of living as Black Africans in a foreign land encourages immigrants to seek spaces of refuge that will physically and psychologically support them in connection to West Africa.

Nollywood productions, the Internet, and satellite TV movements serve these transnational markets. Therefore, one could argue that these vendors sell Nigerian/African nostalgia to diaspora viewers. Audiences are searching for a means to escape and relate to what is familiar; this notion could be called Afro-escapism or Naija-escapism, which allows audiences to identify and connect with the Black cultural aesthetic, providing viewers with a reprieve from their daily lives.

The confluence of commerce in Africana communities while traversing Kings Cross' geographical location illustrates the interconnectedness of Black African diasporas recreating their homeland in a foreign space. Material culture in Hamilton's (2006) theoretical framework of the African diaspora – African cultures and their vested interests in preserving historical and cultural

distinctiveness – is supported by vendors and consumers (p. 9). Nollywood distribution and consumption, like other products, create an enclave in London where immigrants have recreated African spaces. African immigrants longing to connect to home do so via the physical space of a market to purchase commodities ‘resembling home’, which are later taken home to recreate, incorporate, or integrate a bit of homeland into the comfort of their home or at a relative’s or friend’s abode. The media, particularly Nollywood movie videos, support the ‘Black communication of nostalgia’ as a means of consumption (Edwards 2009, p. 145).

Producers and Nollywood agencies support the Nigerian movie industry in the diaspora. Different studios and supportive agencies were set up formally and informally, such as the Nollywood Acting Studio London, which regards its services on Facebook as ‘academies designed to perfect the Nollywood style, such as Promoting Art and Culture through film’ (December 2021). Therefore, the community development surrounding Nollywood cultural acting agencies, productions, and exhibitions indicates the diverse ways the Black African diaspora connects with home from abroad. Nollywood cultural producers, distributors, and exhibitors create spaces to uniquely connect audiences to Nigeria and Africa.

Nollywood exhibitions appeal to the interests of African audiences. The geographical locations of Nigerian movies screened at different theatres, universities, museums, and art spaces create spaces of Afro-escapism/Naija-escapism and connectivity to homeland identity. Dovey (2015) argues that both film festivals and classrooms are curated spaces selected by the curators to provide an experience for the classroom or public (p. 128). Such experiences created by the organiser are selective and based on political choices. Selecting popular movies and famous actors facilitates the establishment of a sense of connectivity to the homeland. One such example is *Lionheart* (2018), a film by Genevieve, one of the most iconic female actresses now turned director (Kalu 2019). This film premiered at Bonhams African Art in London, creating a space for Nollywood aficionados to thrive and come together to watch a film. As psychologist Krystine Irene Batcho specifies, ‘findings suggest that nostalgia may facilitate or – be facilitated by – the sense of connectedness to others. Nostalgia promotes psychological well-being by countering alienation and strengthening community’ (Batcho 2007, pp. 363–364). These exhibition sites are geographical spaces of Afro-escapism, illustrating the connectivity and nostalgia uniting African Diaspora communities abroad.

### **Exploring nostalgia: afro-Escapism and black African connectivity to homeland identity**

The vast majority of the London audiences in the study revealed how Nollywood is a method to connect with Africa by eliciting nostalgia. Through the

following ways, Nollywood audiences in London explained why they engage with cultural productions: interesting (12), knowledge/education/African culture (8), and entertaining (5). Some participants provided explanations such as: 'it makes me feel lively and keeps me company. I love it [draws a heart in the air]; it tells me more about things that go on in African lives'; '[L]ike the way they present themselves, styles, fashion styles, costumes, that is the only reason why I watch'; and 'Modern and sensible or Traditional'. Participants revealed that entrepreneurs, distributors, and cultural communities engage in nostalgia to connect with cultural norms. Thus, Black Africans are navigating multiple worlds while attempting to hustle and thrive in new territories, propagating cultural plurality by selling and bringing cultural productions from home. These results resemble findings in São Paulo, Brazil where Nollywood video-films supported life abroad in the Lusophone world (Ewing 2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2019).

In London, most participants agreed that Nollywood accurately represents Nigerian culture, with 26 of the 29 participants indicating 'Yes' and one indicating 'Yes and No'. The remaining two indicated 'No' and 'Uncertain', respectively. Similarly, in an open-ended question concerning why participants preferred Nollywood over other movie industries, viewers revealed they overlooked the aesthetic quality of the movies to enjoy the narration and storylines.

The majority of viewers related to Nollywood in terms of cultural affinity or criticism in the following ways: Cultural Affinity (20) [15 viewers explicitly used the term 'culture' or 'culturism' or 'cultural']<sup>7</sup> and 5 viewers indirectly described culture (5) [language (1); 'home grown' – 'It's the best for use cause it grow[s] there, home, i[t]'s ajy [my] faudourite [favourite]' (1); 'It shows more of a traditional outlook on life' (1); 'most times they are real' (1); actors and actress (1)]. The results concur with cross-cultural findings from psychologists Sedikides and Wildschut's (2022) '[n]ostalgia across cultures', wherein they assert that 'nostalgia seems to be triggered in similar ways around the world' (p. 5). Although the study does not include Nigerians, the respondents within this study suggest that cultural affinity with Nollywood consumption triggers Black nostalgia. Living away from one's home country or in a place where one is a demographic minority can lead to feeling like an outsider. Understandably, immigrants and culturally diverse non-majority citizens could use the media to connect with their homelands for comfort.

The viewers' second major themes were storylines (3) and genres (2). Indirectly, participants discussed storylines (3): ['Laughed] it's different from other films that I watch that end nicely. Nollywood doesn't end well, you think the next part of it ends there and that part is the end of it [indicating a lack of appreciation for the cliff hanger endings]'; 'Lesser quality [aesthetic] more entertaining [storylines]'; 'Production is very important, Actions as well. All Nigerian movies should not be about sex [moral critique]'. The participants

reflect a wider critique of Nollywood that viewers, scholars, and the Nigerian government have often expressed. The Nollywood 'mediated nostalgia' here creates 'mixed feelings' of nostalgia towards the cultural productions (Sedikides and Wildschut 2022, p. 2). In addition, the viewer describing the moral critique of Nollywood appears to experience 'negative affect' nostalgia (Sedikides and Wildschut 2022, p. 4 cited Wildschut *et al.* 2006). These responses indicate critiques of Nigerian productions.

Both participants who mentioned genres compared them to American films, with one indirectly comparing them to Latin American soap operas: 'USA when you watch their films you get more ideas and love [suggesting that Nollywood themes are predicable]'; 'Likes American films and soap operas because they seem real unlike Nollywood where you can detect fault, and fakeness within the films'. The last response indicates the different ways that 'real' can be interpreted; some feel the rough aesthetic style of Nollywood indicates that the movies are closer to reality. However, this participant; describes 'real' by referencing traditional Hollywood standards and aesthetic qualities based on a higher financial budget. In the last major theme, participants further elaborate on aesthetics (3): 'The difference is that sometimes [it's] too rough; Nollywood only need[s] some improvement on productions and qualities both in film and audio'; 'Production is very important, actions as well [aesthetics category/genre]'; Lesser quality [aesthetic] more entertaining.

Further, participants describe how national socio-cultural identity is critical for viewers to identify culturally with the films. Indeed, Nollywood consumption demonstrates how immigrants mediate between fitting in with the structures of 'integration policies adopted by the nation-states and referable to two major models, assimilationist and multiculturalism' (Santanera 2013, p. 256). While one may choose to adapt to assimilationist policies, one can still maintain and sustain their cultural heritage. The second most prevalent theme mentions 'fakeness' in film, production, or characters, demonstrating how participants acknowledge a difference between Nigerian and Western productions but continue to support Nollywood because they enwrap audiences in the sense of belonging to Nigeria or Africa in general. Thus,

'nostalgia is one of the mechanisms we employ to (re)construct our identities, above all 'in the context of present fears, discontents, anxieties, or uncertainties ... since nostalgia generates continuity, it helps people to defend and maintain an awareness of their identity and to cultivate an appreciation of a former self in those phases'' (Davis 1977, p. 420 cited Armbruster 2016, p. 23).

Formerly contentious cultural debates that deemed traditional Black socio-political films 'high culture' and Nollywood 'low culture' are frequently discussed in contrast to African social-political films (Okome 2007 and 2010). The cultural relevance of Nollywood is significant, as the first question was

asked to understand whether participants felt Nollywood is important to the African Diaspora, and they responded: yes (28) and no (1). The second question asked whether Nollywood was successful, and participants responded: yes (25), uncertain (3), and no (1). Participants further emphasised their responses by stating: 'Most people subscribe to it, even whites/Europeans watch it'; 'They love it 'cause they have not seen such lifestyle and behaviour of a black man'; 'Some people are not interested in it because they only watch African films, not other people; Yes, it's being watched by Africans and non-Africans and, by that, you can see that it is [successful]'. The responses above demonstrate a pan-African view of how most viewers deem Nollywood successful, as evidenced by the fact that it is not only Africans who watch the movies.

### Buy to connect

As participants revealed, African diaspora communities seek to consume cultural productions, like Nollywood films, to reconnect with their homelands through material products. Seminal Nollywood scholar Jonathan Haynes (2016) underscores this by saying,

'Nollywood provides a way to share news and stories, to stay in touch, to maintain cohesion, to follow the dangerous fates of the emigrant bearers of their society's hopes and desperation, and to understand the historical drama of the second great dispersion of Africans from the continent' (p. 238).

Thus, participants can connect with others of similar backgrounds through a persona and via media devices while watching the drama. Nollywood audiences appreciate consuming movies '...that depict its daily life, as opposed to the American and Indian blockbusters and the Mexican soap operas that NTA showed in abundance' (Chowdhury *et al.* 2008, p. 23). Moreover, consumers gain access to up-to-date information concerning contemporary narratives, news, and social polemics within Nigeria.

Nigerian movies connect the African diaspora to recollections of home, as demonstrated by the study's questions that explore the scope of global movie consumption compared to Nollywood. Consumers normally watch movies from Nigeria (23), the USA (9), England (8), other African countries (4), Europe (4), the Caribbean (3), China (2), India (1), and Latin America (1). Participants were asked whether Nollywood video-films reminded them of life in England, most viewers felt that United Kingdom movies did not remind them of life in their country ('No' [17] versus 'Yes' [11] 'Yes and No' [1]). Participants explained that

life in Africa is totally different from England. [It] is important cause it tells us more what is happening back home, some remind me of England, and some

remind me of back home, just reminds me of home; and apart from the English they talk (July 2013).

The distinction between English national, international, and African movies reveals where consumers feel most comfortable. The linguistic components of the film indicate a pan-African connection through socio-cultural linguistic patterns that are different from daily life in London. Although other video-film industries were mentioned, participants enjoyed connecting with Africa through Nigerian cultural productions. The space of interconnected Black diaspora longing comes from living abroad. Thus, these consumption habits illustrate that participants use Nollywood to connect with their homeland in an estranged environment.

Three participants were born in England; thus, their emotional connection to Nigeria differed from that of those born in Africa. These participants were categorised as having faux African nostalgia,

triggering nostalgia for a lost African past, epitomised in Nollywood's depictions of village life, a socio-cultural reality that these viewers have no actual experience of, but meets their yearnings 'for a home of their own', as Africans, in the contemporary world. (Kings and Okome 2013, p. 6)

However, most participants were born in West Africa and understood the visual, linguistic, and audio imagery as traces of their homeland, evoking genuine nostalgia. African diaspora viewers revealed that '[p]ersonal nostalgia was associated with changes that enhance continuity across time, connectedness to others, affiliation, identity, and belonging, whereas historical nostalgia was associated with less favorable changes in opinions of human nature and sociopolitical factors' (Batcho 2007, pp. 363–364). Therefore, participants' connections to Nollywood vary based on their upbringing and birthplace.

Participants also revealed how they enjoy their leisure by watching specific Nollywood genres. Participants' favourite genres were comedy (26), romance (22), thriller (20), and mystery (10), with other categories far behind (2). The genres indicate how audiences relieve stress through Afro-escapism via video consumption. The fact that audiences ranked comedy first is significant because it emphasises the importance of laughter as an agent of cultural retention. According to film scholar Hanich (2018), laughter

is a particular form of home movie consciousness because the film reminds us of who we are or once were (as Sobchack points out, the more appropriate French term for home movie is film-souvenir). We look 'through' the film as a fiction or document and recognise something from home, sometimes literally so. Even though this sudden recognition is not always accompanied by laughter, it certainly can be. (pp. 201–202)

These elements of nostalgia are present in the material culture, language, customs, familiar scenarios, and circumstances embedded in the films, primarily through humour; however, they are culturally distant and not held

in the same regard in a distant land. Moreover, participant responses to their favourite Nollywood genre movies reveal the importance of comedic relief in a distant land. In a familiar way, comedy is considered the best way to cope in stressful situations, again revealing a way to cope in a culture different from their upbringing.

One of the top forms of Afro-escapism/Naija-escapism is watching romance movies. Many people likely enjoyed the combination of romance and comedy; however, the participants demonstrated how Nollywood movies are vehicles to experience enjoyment or escape boredom. The average age of participants was 37; thus, many were either married and wanted to see movies that reflected the themes or ideal themes in their lives or were single and wanted to watch films that described these concepts. One participant explained, '[i]t reminds you of the old things and how things evolve in Africa, teaches you a lesson' (July 13, 2013). The responses indicate nostalgic joy obtained from watching Nigerian-produced films.

The third and fourth genres of interest were thrillers and mysteries, indicating a desire for 'escape' through Nollywood, which corresponds to how nostalgia contributes to one's identity and well-being. According to Wulf *et al.* (2018, p. 73), three essential functions of nostalgia contribute to well-being:

- 1) The self-oriented function solidifies identity by encouraging self-exploration and enhancing the accessibility of positive self-attributes.<sup>8</sup> ... Altogether, the self-oriented function of nostalgia supports individuals, because they get accessibility to the picture of who they are and to find their place in society.
- 2) The existential function of nostalgia provides a perception of meaning in life.<sup>9</sup> ... In a nutshell, the existential function of nostalgia serves positive evaluations of life and the notion that one's life is meaningful.
- 3) The social function enhances perceived closeness to others (Stephan *et al.* 2014), fosters positive attitudes towards outgroup members (Turner *et al.* 2012), and provides a feeling of being socially supported and connected (Zhou *et al.* 2008) ... Altogether, nostalgia provides people with the experience to feel connected, both to individual fellows and to a collective sharing the same culture.

These genres help to support Black nostalgia in London due to their cultural proximity to a location, characters, actors, and linguistic nuances. Nollywood characters allow audiences to achieve overall well-being, joy, and offer them a break from the daily hustle of living in London through the culture of Afro-escapism or, more specifically, Naija-escapism. This outlet provides audiences with an opportunity to release, reminisce, and connect with homeland cultures via visual Nigerian cultural productions.

Afro-escapism and Naija-escapism occur both individually and collectively by creating support systems of familiarity through Africana media consumption. Audiences find physical spaces to consume Nollywood, albeit at home, in public, at a friend's home, in marketplaces, or in exhibition spaces. Overwhelmingly, audiences predominantly consumed Nollywood films within the comfort of their homes (24), at a friend's or family member's house (6), at the theatre (1), and in other places (3). The impact of watching a film at home is that it is similar to watching an artefact (Hanich 2018, pp. 201–202). Comparably, Nollywood consumers do such actions during their leisure time, indicating what participants enjoy doing during their spare time and illustrating how they cope with nostalgia through consumption. Many scholars support such explanations:

[m]edia-induced nostalgia will affect hedonic (pleasure and fun) media experiences in certain ways: As nostalgia is a complex mixed emotion (Holak and Havlena 1998, Sedikides *et al.* 2015), users will be affected by emotional pleasure and the fun associated with it. (Wulf *et al.* 2018, p. 73)

Nollywood is often the release that consumers use to cope in a stressful world. West African viewers may consume Nollywood 'therapeutically', creating 'nostalgia as a buffer' by living as Black immigrants in a European land – which psychically induces feelings of estrangement in a foreign land, and nostalgia can serve as a buffer against trauma (Sedikides and Wildschut 2022, pp. 8–9). One viewer expressed that the thematic interest in consuming Nollywood films was for 'cultural investment' (July 13, 2013). Thus, these activities are done individually and within group settings amongst friends, family, and others interested in similar cultural artefacts from Nigeria.

### **Actors triggering nostalgia through consumption of nollywood in London**

Living abroad, any reminders of home can trigger nostalgia, including actors from one's country of birth.<sup>10</sup> Just as films provide a cushion of support abroad, the actors and actresses within different genres also support viewers missing their homeland. Nollywood films invoke nostalgia, whereby the audience has familiarity with 'specific locations, objects, persons, or actions on screen that are very familiar to us and in one way or another *are* – or at one point *were* – important to our identity' (Hanich 2018, pp. 201–202). Actors are included in triggering nostalgia through geography, landscape, music, technology, childhood relics, aesthetic garments, and food, as '... we recognize a dialect very typical for the region we come from; we recognize an actor that we used to like and haven't seen in years; we recognize a dance, a sport, or a manner of gesticulating



from our home country' (Hanich 2018, pp. 201–202). As a result, London participants connect with Nollywood characters, plot, actors, or storylines in a way that could be 'media nostalgia' or 'mediated nostalgia' (Wulf *et al.* 2018, p. 71). There are several definitions for both terms. Wulf *et al.* (2018) cites Menke (2017), positing that if the participants watched a movie depicted in their country, it could 'trigger' *media nostalgia* 'by re-experiencing media from one's past... whereas *mediated nostalgia* depicts being nostalgic of media that refer *indirectly to one's past*' (p. 71, emphases added). Nollywood viewers are mostly experiencing mediated nostalgia, whereby the actors and actresses can also evoke an extended virtual mediated family that triggers kinship to one's particular past, cultural heritage, and country.

Viewers' relationship with Nollywood is evidenced by the viewers indicating their favourite actors and actresses at the time. The most popular were Omotola Jolade (14), Ramsey Nouah (11), Genevieve Nnaji (10), Olu-Jacobs (8), Jibola Dabo (7), Mercy Johnson (6), Jim Iyke (6), Peter Edochie (4), Oge Okoye (2), and Oga Bello (2). In some ways, characters within the film become extended families mediated through DVDs or virtual online streaming platforms. As one female viewer explains, '[i]t brings me closer to my country culture it also allo[w]s my children to understand what is happening with my African culture' (July 12, 2013). The participant illustrates the potency of Nollywood to educate, sustain familial ancestral connections, and unite pan-African bonds.

Examining the top four Nollywood actors and actresses reveals the types of extended familiarity created through mediated nostalgia. The most popular actress mentioned in the questionnaires was Omotola Jolade, also known as 'Omo Sexy', who began her career in 1995 with her role in the film *Venom of Justice* by Reginal Ebere. According to CNN Entertainment, she was one of the top 100 most influential people of the year, and, as she remarks, "I think that's what gives me more satisfaction ... The fact that I wasn't just recognized as an artist but as an icon – I'm very grateful for it" (2014). The celebrity is a UN ambassador, activist, and singer who has appeared in over 300 movies and has won several awards as the best actress for several years from different agencies on the continent and within the diaspora (Simwa 2021).<sup>11</sup> Her prowess within the African diaspora and on the continent illustrates the meaningful importance of Nollywood actors' effects on their audiences. The actress is a part of the *Naija* family, and the number of films she has participated in could be one of the reasons respondents remembered her name. Omotola's international reach may also be something the African diaspora can relate to since they are also outside of Africa. As an award winner, she has risen to the top of many consumers' minds, illustrating how they connect with the actress and, overall, the homeland.

Ramsey Nouah was the second-most-mentioned actor, according to the questionnaire research. In the 1990s, his acting career began with a starring role in the soap opera *Fortunes* (Mercy 2010). Nouah is renowned for his romantic roles, earning him the nickname ‘*Lover Boy*’ (Stabroek News 2010). The actor is one of the most sought-after actors in Nollywood (Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009). The Nigerian-Israeli actor has premiered in 189 films in classic Nollywood, New Nollywood, and Nollywood co-productions (IMDb *n.d.*). In 2019, Nouah made his directorial debut with the remake sequel of the first major Nollywood movie, *Living in Bondage: Breaking Free* (Bada 2019, Dayo 2019). Nouah continues to thrive as a romance heart-throb, capturing audiences in Nigeria and abroad. His prominence within the psyche of audiences illustrates a connection to Nigeria and, in general, Africa. Nouah’s second most remembered actor position corresponds with respondents’ second favourite genre being romance. Participants’ recollection of his name as being one of their top favourite Nollywood stars illustrates that, as an actor, he evokes both *media nostalgia* and *mediated nostalgia* similar to how OMO ‘triggers’ (Wulf *et al* 2018, p. 71).

Third on the list of participants is Genevieve Nnaji, one of the most famous Nollywood actresses who has featured in over 500 films (Benjamin 2022). Nnaji began her career as a child actress, starring in the soap opera *Ripples*, produced by Zeb Ejiro (IMDb *n.d.* and Benjamin 2022). In 1998, Nnaji became famous in Nollywood after acting in Ralph Nwadike’s film *Most Wanted*. According to IMDb *n.d.*, ‘[i]n 2009, Genevieve made history by being the first Nigerian actress to be profiled on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986) on an episode about the most popular people around the world’. The episode described Nnaji as the ‘*Julia Roberts of Africa*’ (Benjamin 2022). Similarly, ‘[i]n 2008, Genevieve reaffirmed her supremacy over Ini Edo and Mercy Johnson to become the first-ever ‘*Sexiest Woman*’ in Nollywood, as chosen by fans at the Vanguard Newspapers Award ceremony’ (Benjamin 2022). Her mediated impact on Africana communities continues to connect Nigerian cultural stories with the rest of the world. In one article, Tochi Anueyiagu, co-founder of @nolly.babes<sup>12</sup> explained Nnaji’s relevance and importance in breaking colourism and the power of representation:

[s]eeing women like Genevieve or Stephanie Okereke – two gorgeous, dark-skinned women – it really does something to any dark-skinned girls seeing that. They see the beauty of these women and clock, whether subconsciously or not, that they don’t need to be fair-skinned or mixed race to be beautiful. (Seward 2020, pp. 6–7)

The reflection of Anueyiagu on growing up in the diaspora with Nollywood and the impact actors had on shaping her perspective of the world is important. Living in a predominately Eurocentric White country, it helps to see reflections of oneself via the media. Thus, the familial bonds with these

actors as extensions of themselves illustrate the connections to their homeland via mediated nostalgia.

Olu-Jacobs was the fourth most popular Nollywood celebrity mentioned in the questionnaires. As a veteran actor held in high regard, Olu-Jacobs connected former Nigerian cinema to contemporary Nollywood and is recognised as the 'Godfather of Nollywood' (Njoku 2019). Eighty percent of the time, he has played a king in films (Njoku 2019). For over fifty years he was a dedicated actor, and the '... organizers of Africa Magic Viewer's Choice Awards, AMVCA, in 2013, honoured Olu Jacobs with its first and well deserved "Industry Merit Award". Also, AMAA conferred its Lifetime Achievement Awards on him in 2016' (Njoku 2019). The actor represents past and present culturally mediated memory, being the first to cross international boundaries and participate in acting abroad before it was popular to do so (Njoku 2019). Within the Nigerian film industry, Jacob's prominence and longevity of five decades indicates why London viewers remembered his name. Appearing as one of the top four people of importance within Nollywood illustrates how actors create a socio-cultural connection with audiences. The mere fact that audiences remember these artist's names elucidates a subtly intimate connection with the actors, which serves as an example of being a part of an extended family.

The effect of nostalgia is evocatively triggered by watching Nollywood films, particularly those featuring the above actors. Like many on the African continent and abroad, the study participants' descriptions of their favourite actors reflected the types of extended familiarity those actors created. These names illustrate the connections people felt to their homeland and their culture in the diaspora. The *mediated nostalgic* relationships illustrate the heartbeat at the time, which mirrored the continent and the African diaspora. Black Nollywood audiences in London create pan-African spaces where consumers and vendors participate in both selling and buying mediated nostalgia through commodities. These cultural commodities of consumption allow Black diasporas to foster individual and collective connections to their homeland. Through Nollywood, the Black Naija connections create bonds to the homeland, specifically through actors who represent glimpses of comfort abroad in a White world.

### **Conclusion: nostalgia to the future and the past**

This research is a nostalgic glimpse into when physical Nollywood DVDs travelled from West Africa to the Black African communities for consumption. A recent *Vogue* article, 'How This Particular Kind of Y2K Glam Became a Massive Trend Among Nigeria's Gen Z', by Desmond (2021), describes how younger generations enjoy early Nollywood films, thus appreciating media nostalgia. Desmond, a *Vogue* article contributor, further explains the new trend:

young Nigerians are now retrospectively appreciating these movies, calling it 'the golden era of Nollywood'. This is largely thanks to accounts like Nolly. Babes. It's half nostalgia, half a defiant reclamation of the unflattering tropes. What first started as an ironic trend has turned into a full, earnest appreciation for the style of this era, exemplified by short denim skirts, blunt bobs, massive, bug-like sunglasses, bell-bottom jeans, and too many bracelets (2021, p. 2).

The timely capture of Black nostalgia within newer online Naija spaces takes audiences back to the original days of Nollywood. Social media is a prime way to capture, resist, and reclaim Black images. The cultural Instagram curators of classic Nollywood are providing spaces to articulate what Naija culture means to Nigerians in the diaspora and on the continent through language, fashion, memes, and visual representations (Desmond 2021, p. 2). Within the African diaspora, mediated nostalgic locations such as former video parlours have almost completely shifted to online social media platforms such as iROKO.tv, also known as the 'Nigerian Netflix' (Jedlowski 2019). As social media content producers and archivists such as @nolly.babes provide an online space where audiences can selectively enter virtual curated Nollywood nostalgia, the yesteryear of past nostalgic artefacts has continued to survive and thrive online and newer Nollywood films have made it to top-level streaming services such as Netflix (Leach 2019). Overall, the consumption patterns of Nollywood has shifted over time from the former physical VHS videos and DVDs to online Black Naija geographical spaces.

Nollywood cultural distribution and consumption exemplify alternative spaces for Black Africans to connect with their homeland. These Black spaces – wherein Nollywood is sold, bought, watched, shared, and otherwise consumed as a cultural production – increase knowledge concerning African culture, both positively and negatively. Additionally, audiences desire better-quality movies and appreciate seeing an all-Black/African cast. London participants critiqued the limitations of the productions yet consumed more Nollywood films than any other films from other countries. Black Africans use Nollywood as a cultural production to maintain cultural ties and reconnect with their core cultural identity. Nollywood is also used as a tool within intra-ethnic African diasporas, providing visual images of culture, tradition, education, updates concerning life in the homeland, extended family members who share similar body characteristics, and universal stories. Thus, Black Africans illustrate the significance of media nostalgia as a creative cultural world within London. Finally, the consumption, distribution, and production of Nollywood movies in London reveal how audiences adapt to life in a foreign land and how the second and third generations stay connected to their ethnic heritage.

Nollywood provides spaces of Afro-escapism and Naija-escapism on the African continent and abroad. This study explores spaces of Black nostalgia

in which Nollywood viewers in London, directly and indirectly, engage with Nollywood as a means of cultural affinity that ties, connects, and sustains life in a foreign European land. The Nigerian cultural productions can *trigger* nostalgia in audiences, creating a wide range of emotions that shield them from the onslaught of being an *Other* (Said 1979) in England. It is a space that audiences turn to as a source of Black/Naija entertainment, offering them the opportunity to experience it in the comfort of their home, a friend's house, an exhibition, or outdoor gathering spaces. These informal spaces provide insights on how Nigerian cultural producers create 'film-souvenirs' (Hanich 2018) by engaging audiences in the African diaspora, connecting them to home, even if it is only for a few minutes.

## Notes

1. Nollywood's transnational cultural flows have been previously studied in the traditional Black diaspora. This study focuses on predominantly African immigrant communities to better understand Black diversity and contextualise London's African diaspora. Throughout this paper I refer to 'Black' as Black African Nollywood distributors and consumers.
2. Based on the responses obtained, most participants identified as 'Black,' so 'Black African' will be used as a means of ethnic categorisation.
3. Thirty participants were interviewed, but one participant did not meet the age criteria and thus, had to be eliminated from the research findings, which stem from pre-dissertation exploratory research.
4. This is contrary to the Francophone populations who translated Nollywood films and advertised to French speaking African Diaspora audiences. See Jedlowski (2013, p. 31) in Krings and Okome 2013 for more information.
5. 'New Nollywood' began around 2009–2010 commencing 'a 'New Wave' in Nigerian cinema, characterized by higher budgets, improved production values, and transnational collaborations' (Jedlowski 2013, p. 27).
6. The reception sites 'video parlour' and 'street corner' culture are recreated by African Diasporas in mostly Anglophone and Francophone countries, as well as one Lusophone country: Brazil (Ewing 2016; Ewing 2018a).
7. Participants specifically used the terms: Culture: (5) Culturism (8) cultural difference (2)
8. See: '(Baldwin and Landau 2014; Batcho *et al.* 2008; Vess *et al.* 2012)'.
9. See: '(Routledge *et al.* 2011; Sedikides and Wildschut 2022; van Tilburg *et al.* 2013)'.
10. Two foundational co-productions from London and Nigeria are *Osuofia in London I* and *II* (2003, 2004), which through satire illustrate the dilemmas of Nigerian immigrants in London. The article does not have space to discuss this connection but the films should be mentioned.
11. She received best actress: in 2004 from the City People Awards for Excellence; in 2011 for Best African collaboration at the Ghana Movie Awards; in 2012 Eloy Awards, Screen Nation Awards; in 2017 at the Toronto International Nollywood Film Festival; and, in the same year, she received the Best Actress at Nollywood Travel Film Festival. For more background information see: <https://www.legit.ng/1102269-omotola-jalade-biography.html>

12. @Nollywood babes is ‘an account she and her sister Ebele founded in an attempt to flip that script’ (Seward).

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