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# Hustlers, home-wreckers and homoeroticism: Nollywood's *Beautiful Faces*

## ABSTRACT

*This article examines the ways that Nollywood films are involved in the moral policing of the postcolonial subject both by challenging the state's moral failings and by enacting its ideological violence. I argue that although it is necessary to acknowledge how Nigerian video-films reflect the struggles, anxieties and instability of ordinary Nigerians, it is also crucial to examine the ways that they deflect various concerns about everyday life on to certain bodies. Through a close reading of Kabat Esosa Egbon's film Beautiful Faces (2004), a film about female campus cults, I demonstrate that while the film grapples with issues of violence and corruption on university campuses, it does so by channeling fears about students' educational opportunities into anxiety about women's sexual transgressions. In this way, I suggest that Beautiful Faces is typical of many Nollywood films that simultaneously challenge corrupt and wizened government institutions while also reproducing their normative and violent hetero-patriarchal position.*

## KEYWORDS

Nigerian video-film  
homosexuality  
prostitution  
campus cults  
female sexual  
transgression  
African popular culture

Forms of popular culture in Nigeria – from Onitsha market literature, to Hausa *soyayya* books, to contemporary television and video – have consistently been concerned with the boundaries of gender and sexuality. Varying in form, these popular romantic tales often evoke over-sexualized women, sugar daddies, rigid parents and multiple impediments to heterosexual marriage and

1. For overviews and historical discussions of the Nollywood film industry, see Larkin (2008), McCall (2004), Haynes (2007), Barrot (2005), and Haynes and Okome (2000).
2. On the centrality of the family in Nollywood cinema, see Larkin (2008: 171).

reproduction – sometimes pushing the limits of what is socially accepted and at other times violently reinforcing normative hetero-patriarchal attitudes. Today, the Nigerian video-film industry, known as Nollywood, is one of the most prolific forms of African popular culture and therefore provides us with one of the largest available contemporary archives to examine these complex negotiations.

One of the defining features of the Nollywood film industry is that it came into being without any intervention from the state or from foreign sources of funding. As many of the pioneering Nollywood scholars have noted, the video-film industries that began to flourish in Anglophone West Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s were structured on a very different model than earlier forms of African screen media. Rather than focusing on the rationalist subject, as was the case with colonial cinema (Larkin 2008), or utilizing aesthetic modes that appealed more to western-educated audiences, video films established their own codes and themes that appealed to a large cross-section of African viewers.<sup>1</sup> Using melodramatic and exaggerated tales about Nigeria's upper echelon and dramatizing the excess of their vices, Nollywood films often express disapproval of the urban ruling elite and the nouveaux riches. Corruption, greed, betrayal and scandal are staple themes. Yet, what seems to be most unstable in the world of Nollywood videos is not the government or political society but rather the very structure of the heterosexual family.<sup>2</sup> It is in this way that the films somaticize political and economic crises and rework them as predicaments embedded in everyday social life. This proximity of Nollywood to everyday stories is, no doubt, one of the reasons that Nollywood has such resonance with its audiences. And yet it also means that Nollywood often takes on the role of regulating gendered and sexual citizenship when the social authority of the state is no longer respected.

Accordingly, this article examines the way in which Nollywood films are involved in the moral policing of the postcolonial subject both by dramatizing the state's moral failings and by enacting its ideological violence. Specifically, I discuss Kabat Esosa Egbon's film *Beautiful Faces* (2004), which addresses the issue of cultism at Nigerian universities. The film is notable not only because it was a highly popular film, but also because it exemplifies two overlapping genres of Nollywood film: the campus film and the lesbian film, both of which are concerned with the fate of Nigerian youth and express anxieties about educated women (Haynes 2011a, 2011b; Green-Simms and Azuah 2012). *Beautiful Faces* focuses on the White Angels, an all female cult whose members engage in high-end prostitution, lesbian affairs and the violent intimidation of non-cult members. My argument is that while the film grapples with the growing violence and corruption in Nigeria as well as with the many challenges and difficulties students face, it does so by channeling concern for students' educational opportunities into anxiety about women's sexual transgressions. In this way, I suggest that *Beautiful Faces* is typical of many Nollywood films that simultaneously challenge corrupt and wizened government institutions while also reproducing their normative and violent hetero-patriarchal position.

## THE MIRROR EFFECT

One of the noticeable trends in the rapidly emerging field of Nollywood studies is the examination of the ways that Nollywood films act as a mirror image of Nigerian society, revealing to spectators the word-of-mouth stories, or 'fabu' (Harding 2007), that make up the fabric of Nigerian culture. For instance, Chukwuma Okoye, in an essay titled 'Looking at ourselves in our mirror', argues

that the goal of Nollywood is not to talk back to the West but, rather, to reflect the daily struggles and experiences of modernity in the Nigerian postcolony. In more nuanced versions of this argument, Onookome Okome argues that 'Nollywood and the cultural products it sells constitute one social document, a *tableau vivant* [...] of Nigerian social and cultural history' (2010: 39); Pierre Barrot talks about Nollywood exhibiting the 'wounds' of Nigerian culture; and Jonathan Haynes discusses a general consensus among Nollywood scholars that the films 'are to be read as responses to the anxieties of contemporary West African life' (2010: 107).

The strength of this approach is that it allows for various strategies of interpreting the films as forms of critique that speak to contested ways of knowing and experiencing modernity. But what is often overlooked in these various versions of the 'reflection argument' is that Nollywood films are also complicit in producing certain types of acceptable Nigerian citizens. In other words, Nollywood films do not simply reflect Nigerian concerns, they also create a discourse that regulates and categorizes subjects by disallowing certain types of transgressions. Furthermore, because the films are regulated both by the Nigerian Censors Board and by marketers or powerful producers who often decide what will or will not be funded, Nollywood films cannot unproblematically be seen as the expressive form of everyday people.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while the enormous popularity of the films with African and diasporic audiences makes it essential to find modes of analysis that speak to the films' resonance with their spectators, it is also increasingly important to examine the films as ideological texts that work upon the large audiences that view them. Critics like Brian Larkin (1997), who discusses the influence of Indian films on social expectations in Northern Nigeria, and Matthias Krings (2010), who describes how Nollywood stories impact the style and content of Bongowood (the Tanzanian video-film industry), have already begun to pave the way for discussions of how film in contemporary Africa acts upon its viewers. However, we also need studies that account for the ways that locally produced and consumed films shape cultural expectations.

Furthermore, within Nollywood scholarship there is often a reluctance to examine the textuality of Nollywood films, and it is not common to find the types of close readings that might reveal some of the contradictions, tensions and reproduced stereotypes of the films. One notable exception can be found in the work of Carmela Garritano, who underscores the negative representations of women in video films by examining the ideological effects of filmic structures and by tracing the cinematic systems of signification within which these stereotypes operate. Garritano's work is an important beginning not only for feminist criticism of African video-film, but also for the type of semi-otic analysis that acknowledges that, despite different production values, the signifying systems of Nollywood films are often just as rich and complicated as their global celluloid counterparts. Yet critics like Okoye argue that the elevating of textuality over 'existential reality' elides the agency and resistance of the ordinary people whose stories are dramatized in Nollywood films (2007: 26). My concern is that while Okoye is right in suggesting that the context and material conditions of production do indeed need to inform our understanding of Nollywood, he also underemphasizes the agency of the text itself. In other words, ignoring the way that films constitute themselves as modes of cultural discourse also denies the fact that films are ideological products that interpellate subjects. While Nollywood is unique among global film industries in that it is produced from below – which is to say that the class affiliations of the producers are often those of the mass consumers – this should not exempt the films themselves from rigorous critical analysis. What

3. For discussions of the Nigerian Censors Bureau see Ugor (2007) and Green-Simms and Azuah (2012).

4. Rudolf Gaudio suggests that one of the reasons for the extremism of Nigerian laws against homosexuality in the early twenty-first century is that 'Islamic Northern nationals and the nation's southern and Christian leaders seem locked in a competitive cycle [...] to live down the other's implicit accusations of homosexuality by stepping up its own antigay rhetoric' (2009: 191).

is needed then is a mode of analysis that acknowledges the unprecedented popularity and resonance of the films without dismissing the fact that the films are objects constructed by film-makers who are not outside of ideology.

Furthermore, textual analysis can be a productive way to examine how Western colonialist discourse haunts popular African modes of self-representation, even as Nollywood film-makers forge their own filmic codes and localized narratives. Likewise, it is within the text itself – and not only within its conditions of production – where the political content of Nollywood films may be found. Whether the films are revealing the corruption of thinly veiled government officials, dramatizing political events or examining the ways in which power and authority operate at the level of the banal and everyday, we can turn to their signifying structures in order to read for the meanings and world-views they produce. I am therefore fully in agreement with Jonathan Haynes who argues that the stories that Nollywood has to offer can be both overtly and indirectly political. Yet I would also like to caution that 'political' is not synonymous with progressive. In fact, politics, especially at the level of the everyday, are often conservative and in line with hegemonic and normative perceptions about gender, sexuality and class. Thus, while we should indeed look at the way that Nigerian video films *reflect* the struggles, anxieties and instability of ordinary Nigerians, we must not forget to recognize the ways that they also *deflect* various concerns about everyday life.

*Beautiful Faces* is a film that addresses the violence of campus cults, calls attention to the endemic corruption within the university system and examines the structural limitations of higher education in post-oil boom Nigeria. Yet the film, like many others, enacts its political critique by reproducing and validating a certain logic of homophobic, heterosexist and misogynist violence. *Beautiful Faces* therefore echoes the rise of homophobic rhetoric in the popular Pentecostal churches and resonates with the highly publicized statements by African figures such as Anglican Archbishop Peter Akinola, Olusegun Obasanjo, Robert Mugabe and Daniel Arap Moi, all of whom liken homosexuals to animals and link them to the degeneracy of the West (Gaudio 2009: 188–90; Hoad 2007: 48–67). In fact, not only does the film participate in the targeting of the homosexual body as an object of violence and social contempt, it also predates, and in some ways foreshadows, the increasing criminalization of homosexuality that occurred in Nigeria in 2011. Even though the law did have considerable and vocal opposition from various constituencies within Nigeria, it nevertheless declared same-sex marriage (which was not legal in the first place) an offense that is punishable by up to fourteen years in prison and made it illegal to participate in gay organizations or attend gay dance clubs. In this way, it is clear that the law saw homosexuality as a serious threat to the morality of the nation.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while *Beautiful Faces* does in fact speak to 'pressing concerns, experiences, and struggles' (Barber 1997: 2) that the film producers share with their audiences, it also targets the same subjects that the neocolonial state has continued to castigate and scorn. The film therefore reproduces a male imaginary in which the violent woman – and especially the violent lesbian – is predatory, pathological and the cause of mass destruction.

## FEMALE CULTS AND CAMPUS DRAMAS

*Beautiful Faces* is one of the first Nollywood films to deal with the issue of homosexuality, though since its production there have been at least twenty more. Originally, Egbon, who wrote and directed the film, had not planned on

making a film about lesbians. However, the film's producer, Kas-Vid, wanted to ride the coat-tails of a very successful film released the year before, *Emotional Crack* (dir. Lancelot Imasuen 2003), in which a battered wife, played by Stephanie Okereke, has an affair with her husband's mistress. According to Egbon, Kas-Vid wanted to again cast Okereke in the role of a lesbian in order to attract a wide audience, and the producer's 'commercial instincts' lead him to make Okereke's character into as much of a villain as possible. For aesthetic reasons, Egbon confesses that he would have preferred more subtleties and nuances, and he also admits that *Emotional Crack*, which showed the possibility of love between two women, was a more daring and interesting film (Egbon 2010). However, as the producer, Kas-Vid had the final say on the direction that *Beautiful Faces* would take. The film that resulted from the compromises between director and producer is, like any film, a complex system of signs and codes that cannot be read as the intention of one artist – it reflects the multiple conscious and subconscious moral, economic and social forces at work.

*Beautiful Faces* opens when Vivida (Okereke), a young and stylish university student, enters a classroom where a lecturer is delivering a talk on the sins of hedonism. Upon seeing Vivida in her short jean skirt and revealing tank top, the lecturer refuses to allow her admission into his classroom. Humiliating her in front of her peers, he tells Vivida that he will not tolerate such 'immoral' dress in his classroom. Vivida leaves quietly, but in the next scene she shows up uninvited to his home with several of her mates. They brandish a gun and force him to take his clothes off so that he may see what it is like to have his dressing habits dictated to him. After his clothes are removed the girls mock his penis and point out his large gut. They accuse the lecturer of 'eating [their] money', referring to the common practice of lecturers forcing students to purchase handouts that have often been cribbed from textbooks or the Internet. The girls then proceed to gleefully cane the lecturer.

The film is therefore initially set up as a response to male hypocrisy – the lecturer condemns hedonism and women's immoral dress, while gladly engaging in the immoral practice of basing exams on handouts that students must purchase directly from him. While Vivida's response to being kicked out of the classroom is extreme, this early scene falls into the logic of vigilante violence, which, given the failure of the police to curb crime, often enjoys a substantial amount of support in Nigerian popular culture.<sup>5</sup> An audience familiar with the corruption of the university bureaucracy or the practices of lecturers who exchange handouts and grades for money or sexual favours will certainly understand why the girls feel that they are justified in seeking retribution: they are reacting to an educational system that has clearly failed them.

However, any initial sympathy quickly disappears when the audience learns that Vivida is actually the leader of the White Angels, a leading female cult on campus. Confraternities have been present on university campuses in Nigeria since the 1950s when Wole Soyinka founded the Pyrates at the University of Ibadan as an organization for the intellectual elite. However, the emergence of campus cults as violent organizations, filled primarily by members from wealthy families, began in the 1980s and 1990s during the era of militarization, structural adjustment and post-oil boom corruption. As Charles Gore and David Pratten note, the economic collapse during this period had a devastating effect on Nigerian universities: student fees increased, classroom and dormitory infrastructure began to deteriorate, and authoritarian management and exploitation by underpaid (or even unpaid) lecturers created a general sense of instability on campus. In response to these conditions as

5. Daniel Jordan Smith (2008), for instance, discusses the (initial) popularity of the Bakassi Boys, a vigilante group that emerged in the late 1990s in South Eastern Nigeria. Similarly, Gore and Pratten suggest that both young vigilantes and secret cults are appealing to many Nigerians as models for reorganizing the social distribution of power. By replacing failed 'top-down models of governance' with 'bottom-up responses to disorder' such groups contest the repressive regimes that have failed Nigerian youth (2003: 240).

well as to the growing sense that influential connections were more important than hard work and education, campus cults began to increase their ranks and activities, which included armed robbery, ritual murder, sexual coercion, vandalism and various forms of physical violence towards lecturers and fellow students. Thus, while cults, like popular vigilante groups, may be seen as a direct counter-discourse to the mis-administration of institutions and hierarchical structures of governance, campus cults have presently created a sense of moral panic in Nigerian society as death tolls increase and safety on campuses remains difficult to ensure (Gore and Pratten 2003: 237). It is estimated that in the late 1990s, several hundred students died in cult-related activities, and hundreds more suffered physical injuries (Popoola and Alao 2006: 74). In 2004, the year *Beautiful Faces* was released, 33 students from three Nigerian universities died in the first two weeks of the semester (Popoola and Alao 2006: 74). Moreover, cult activities have led to various school closings and have drastically affected the academic atmosphere on campuses.

To many Nigerians, campus cults represent the failed expectations of post-coloniality as universities, the former symbols of progress and enlightenment, become plagued by the same type of unrest and anti-democratic militarization that came to define the rest of civil society under successive kleptocracies. Misty Bastian writes, 'Stories about university cults speak to a growing disenchantment with the empty promises of late capitalism for Nigeria's youth – as well as the anxieties that adults feel about the activities of educated but jobless, often prospectless, young men' (2001: 72). *Beautiful Faces* is in large part a 'reflection' of these well-found anxieties, and because the film ends with a coordinated police raid in which the cultists are arrested and jailed, it leads to an outcome that many Nigerians would find welcome. In fact, one of the problems with campus cults is that because so many of the members are financially and politically connected, such arrests are much less frequent than they should be.

However, my argument is that by shifting the anxiety surrounding cultism from worries about male violence and militarization to concerns about female sexual transgressions, the film produces a particular discourse about what types of bodies are called upon for the task of representing the moral degeneracy of Nigerian youth. Although female campus cults are on the rise, a report published in 2003 finds that about 93 per cent of cultists are male (Aina et al. 2003: 19). Yet *Beautiful Faces*, like films such as *Before the War* (dir. Rahim Cas Chidiebere 2007), *Dangerous Angels* (dir. Ikechukwu Onyeka 2010), *Girls Cot* (dir. Afam Okereke 2006) and *Rush Hour* (dir. Okereke 2007), presents the problem of campus unrest as essentially one of female violence and hypersexuality, and links the phenomenon of female gangs to other 'destructive' practices, namely prostitution and lesbianism. Male cults in these films are present but largely sidelined. Their role is often to offer protection to female cults. In the case of *Beautiful Faces* and *Rush Hour*, male cultists help to temper out-of-control feuds between warring female factions and to protect the innocent girls on campus from their aggressive counterparts. As Haynes (2011a, 2011b) points out, the campus film genre – a genre unique to Nollywood and not yet shared by other West African industries – is focused, from the beginning, on the central presence of the female body, a body that tends to be particularly volatile in the somewhat closed world of the university campus.

Furthermore, one of the ideological effects of films like *Beautiful Faces* is to reproduce the Victorian myth of womanhood as being split into two: the virgin and the whore, or, in another iteration, the angel and the devil.

Feminist literary critics like Nina Auerbach in *Woman and the Demon* or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman and the Attic* attribute this historic double image of women in Victorian literature to a universal splitting of male consciousness. Anne McClintock, however, suggests that images of female doubling need to be located within the economic and material circumstances of Victorian domesticity (1995: 95). Following McClintock's materialist lead, I suggest that the historic split of women that is reproduced in Nollywood films needs to be read alongside the economic anxieties that are, in fact, very particular circumstances of post-oil boom Nigeria. Thus, in addition to expressing concern for the educational prospects of Nigerian youth, the film also exposes anxiety about a fragile but visible bourgeois class to which many Nigerian spectators aspire but will not likely be able to reach.

### **THE INNOCENT GIRL, THE 'BLOODY' LESBIAN**

In *Beautiful Faces* the clash between the evil and the innocent woman is epitomized in the splitting of Vivida, the prostitute/lesbian/cultist – all illegal practices under Nigerian law – and Natasha, the virtuous daughter of the President of the Senate. Natasha has just arrived on campus with her Versace clothes, handbags and pumps eager to study and learn. But Vivida is not interested in the educational component of university life. When she spots Natasha, she wants her both for the White Angels – who seek members who are 'rich, beautiful and well connected' – as well as for her personal pleasure. Vivida instructs the other White Angels, including her lover Lisa, to find out everything about Natasha. Once she acquires the necessary information, Vivida begins her seductive mission that becomes increasingly aggressive.

The first time that Vivida visits Natasha's dorm room, Vivida claims that she is checking in on the younger student, making sure that she has properly acclimated herself to campus life. But Vivida's lecherous gaze belies her intentions, and as Natasha bends down to get her guest a drink, the camera follows Vivida's eyeline as she slowly takes stock of Natasha's breasts, buttocks and the back of her legs. Thus, while Natasha remains oblivious to Vivida's gaze, the audience is privy to the supposed perversity of the scene. Furthermore, for both heterosexual male and female viewers this shot is most likely uncomfortably familiar. The male viewer, accustomed to identifying with the male gaze, is forced here to yield his position to a woman. In this way, Vivida is clearly usurping male (viewing) privilege. For the female viewer wishing to attain her sense of heterosexual moral superiority, any identification with Vivida must at this point be renounced and switched entirely to Natasha. The film therefore acts upon the viewer by creating an eyeline match shot that allows the audience to establish a sympathetic relationship to Natasha: we see, even before she does, that she is the victim and the one in need of protection.

In her second stage of seduction, Vivida sends Natasha a gift basket with perfume, biscuits and a G-string. As Natasha and her friends examine the contents of the basket, and as the music turns more and more ominous, they slowly become aware that Vivida is positioning herself as one of Natasha's admirers. They are astonished and perplexed, but at this point Natasha still maintains that she does not know what Vivida is up to. Natasha's virginal ignorance seems to be an effect of her innocent and privileged class position, which has not exposed her to the possibility of non-heterosexual desire: here, the film constructs same-sex desire as something alien, even unrecognizable, to the upper class and implies (quite incorrectly, of course) that only the

6. For discussions of the ways in which many African women who sleep with women (WSW) have not typically identified as 'lesbians', see work by Gay (1985), Kendall (1999), Epprecht (2008) and Dankwa (2009). While 'lesbian' is seen to be a Western form of identity antithetical to heterosexuality, same-sex practices between women in many African countries have local words, are often based on age and social status, and do not exclude heterosexual marriage. However, with the globalization of the gay rights movement, more urban African women now self-identify as lesbian, and I would argue that Nollywood films participate in the simultaneous process of constructing and stigmatizing these identities.

lower class will be aware of it. However, on her next visit to Natasha's room, Vivida makes her intentions more clear, first by placing her hand on Natasha's leg. Natasha quickly recoils in confusion, and Vivida then tells Natasha that she is falling in love with her. When Natasha still refuses to understand the advances, Vivida insists that Natasha must stop acting naïve. Finally, Natasha snaps into awareness, quickly jumps up from her bed in a state of fright, and yells that Vivida is mad and crazy. When Vivida tries to seductively calm the panicked Natasha, Natasha is finally able to name and simultaneously banish the act that Vivida proposes. She shrieks at her pursuer: 'Don't you dare call my name, you bloody lesbian. Now you listen, I am not a lesbian and I should have nothing to do with a lesbian like you. So get up and get yourself out of my room this minute'. To which Vivida replies, 'I'm not ready for you yet, but when I'm ready I'll get you', and blows her object of desire a menacing kiss. Here, then, the term 'lesbian', a term that many African women who sleep with women have only recently begun to use to describe themselves, is socially constructed to be synonymous with madness and aggression.<sup>6</sup>

At this point in the film, once lesbianism has been repetitively named, defined and compulsively rejected by Natasha, the seduction takes a more violent and aggressive turn. After Natasha refuses to fill out forms to join the White Angels, the next 'gift' that Vivida sends her is not lingerie but, rather, a miniature wooden coffin. Vivida's friends continually harass Natasha and one night, while Natasha is in her room, she is accosted by two members of the Blood Brothers, a male cult that provides the White Angels with protection in turn for sexual favours. The Blood Brothers accuse Natasha of being a lesbian who has severely beaten one of her lovers, and they demand she hand over money to pay the girl's hospital bills. Thus, lesbianism in *Beautiful Faces* becomes not an issue of love and desire but ultimately a marker of physical violence, death and the excesses of elite, sexually autonomous women. The G-string that becomes a coffin comes to signify the interchangeability of female (homo)sexuality and destruction.

In this way, *Beautiful Faces* echoes many other gay-themed films that have been made in the 2000s. The common thread in these films is that each erases the homosexual character, and almost all end with the death, arrest or spiritual 'salvation' of the criminalized and degenerate homosexual character (Green-Simms and Azuah 2012: 37). Of course, it can be argued that the presence of these characters on Nigerian screens, their insertion into everyday life, domestic spaces and institutions of learning, suggests that Nigerians – at least on some level – are willing to admit that homosexuality does exist in their country, as homosexuality cannot be both unAfrican and, at the same time, a major problem within Africa. Furthermore, one may extend this line of reasoning to suggest that there is something affirming about seeing Nollywood superstars play homosexual characters and engage in same-sex intimacy on-screen. However, in my own research on gay spectatorship, I have discovered that lesbian-identified viewers see very little of their own lives reflected in Nollywood storylines and, in general, find the gay-themed films too discouraging to watch (Green-Simms and Azuah 2012: 44–46). This does not mean that seeing beautiful stars play lesbians is entirely void of pleasure, but the films serve as such blatant reminders of religious, state and cultural homophobia, that they seem to be unpleasant reminders of social inequalities. As one lesbian audience member told me, 'These films are not about us; they are not made for us'. Therefore, gay audiences – both men and women – turn to shows like *The L Word* – a Showtime series about the lives of stylish lesbians

in Los Angeles – or the popular gay male sitcom *Will & Grace*, both of which provide a portrait of ‘out’ gay life that is violently foreclosed in Nollywood films. Thus, while heterosexual audiences eagerly consume gay-themed movies, gay audiences, in general, expressed little desire to see Nollywood films made either by or for people that see their lifestyle as a sin or pathology.

### **SEXUAL OUTLAWS: OF LESBIANS AND PROSTITUTES**

Though films like *Beautiful Faces* are very much about contemporary concerns like campus cults, the failure of universities and the increasing visibility of homosexuality, they also repeat colonial discourses about gender and sexuality in very particular ways that speak to the type of modernity and cosmopolitanism they attempt to construct. In her study of the sexual economy of the Bahamas, M. Jacqui Alexander argues that there is a pronounced historical continuity between the imperial hetero-patriarchy and the production and surveillance of ‘nonprocreative noncitizens’ by the postcolonial state apparatus. Because of its relevance to the Nigerian postcolonial predicament and the type of discursive constitution I am identifying in *Beautiful Faces*, it is worth quoting Alexander at length:

Women’s sexual agency and erotic autonomy have always been troublesome for the state. They pose a challenge to the ideology of an originary nuclear heterosexual family that perpetuates the fiction that the family is the cornerstone of society. Erotic autonomy signals danger to the heterosexual family and to the nation [...]. In this matrix, then, particular figures have come to embody this eroticism, functioning historically as the major symbols of threat. At this moment in the neocolonial state’s diffusion of sexualized definitions of morality, sexual and erotic autonomy have been most frequently cathected on the body of the prostitute and the lesbian. Formerly conflated in the imaginary of the (white) imperial heteropatriarch, the categories of ‘lesbian’ and ‘prostitute’ are now positioned together within black heteropatriarchy as outlaw, operating outside the boundaries of law and, therefore, poised to be disciplined and punished within it.

(2005: 22–23)

The conflation of lesbian and prostitute that Alexander refers to has also been identified in the work of legal scholar Ruthann Robson, who points out that in the nineteenth century both homosexuality and prostitution were concomitantly labeled as medical/legal categories rather than simply acts or behaviours in which people engaged. Robson also discusses the ways in which lesbianism has historically been prosecuted under prostitution-related crimes (1992: 32), and lesbian activist Joan Nestle describes several instances in twentieth-century American legal history in which lesbians and prostitutes were simultaneously targeted in anti-vice campaigns.

Yet it is important to remember that throughout Euro-American history, the types of women who were seen as socially deviant were also presumed to exist outside of white, civilized, bourgeois society. Robson, for instance, discusses a nineteenth-century British court case in which the judges believed that tribadism was not physically possible between white, Scottish women who did not have enlarged clitorises, a characteristic they assumed to be present primarily in African women. Jurists in the case also seemed to doubt that Christian women

7. However, Rudolf Gaudio (2009) has commented on the ways that the 'problem of prostitution' was linked in the colonial period to 'yan daudu', feminine men of Northern Nigeria who sleep with men.

from upper class and educated families could participate in such an 'unnatural' act (Robson 1992: 31). Similarly, Sander Gilman, in his study of nineteenth-century iconography, notes how anthropologists, sexologists and criminologists compared the physiology of the prostitute to the primitive and atavistic African Hottentot – a figure who was also, in Theodor Billroth's *Handbook of Gynecological Diseases*, compared anatomically to the lesbian. Furthermore, Pauline Tranowsky's study of Russian prostitutes associates the facial features of prostitutes with the 'mannish' characteristics of lesbians (Gilman 1985: 98).

While it is beyond the scope of this article to assess whether there is any historical evidence of the conflation between lesbianism and prostitution within colonial Nigeria itself, it is sufficient here to note that such a conjunction was indeed part of the European imperial imagination and that Europeans were certainly concerned with regulating the sexuality of their colonial subjects.<sup>7</sup> What is important then, to return to Alexander's argument, is the contiguous trajectory between colonial and postcolonial modes of discourse around figures of outlawed sexuality. In both historical moments it is the same types of bodies that are called upon to signify crimes against society. Yet it is also crucial to point out the *differences* between the colonial and postcolonial discourses, namely in regards to race and class. In the Victorian-imperial imaginary – which has carried over into classical Hollywood cinema as well – the violent lesbian and prostitute are always the others of a white, middle-class fantasy (Hart 1994: 4). However, in Nollywood film, the figure of the prostitute-lesbian has undergone a symbolic inversion. The outlawed bodies of the lesbian and the prostitute are no longer associated with racially inferior, working-class bodies of the white imperialist imaginary, but instead with foreignness, capitalist greed and bourgeois excess. This, I argue, is not a move to blame whiteness or imperialism for the problems of the Nigerian postcolony, nor is it a move to elevate the aesthetics of blackness, African authenticity or even the traditional over the modern – such historical and racial discourses are, in fact, noticeably absent from most Nollywood films that almost always take the modernity and cosmopolitanism of their characters for granted. Rather, it appears that Nollywood 'others' certain bodies in order to caution viewers about the presumed danger of a modernity that, for better or for worse, defines everyday life for most Nigerians.

In his examination of anti-homosexuality espoused by certain strands of African nationalism as well as by African religious leaders, Neville Hoad argues that current discourses of African homophobia may be read as a 'reaction formation in the psychoanalytic sense' (2007: 56). Hoad suggests that attacks on homosexuality are a response to imperial attributions of primitiveness and degeneracy: those attacking homosexuality as excessively Western or un-African gain a moral upper-hand by claiming both a pure (i.e. non-homosexual) traditional past and, paradoxically, a modern value system in-line with the Victorian hetero-patriarchal family. In other words, Hoad is suggesting that the modernity claimed by those insisting upon the unAfricanness of homosexuality is a retrograde or nostalgic modernity, one that looks back towards and reclaims a modernity from which Africans had – in less modern times – been historically excluded. Following Hoad, I am arguing that the type of modern, heteronormative, hard-working citizen that is championed in Nollywood films is one that is haunted by a Victorian, Christian value system that is constantly entangled with a capitalist and cosmopolitan world-view.

In *Beautiful Faces*, since both Vivida and Natasha are in positions of power and have access to wealth and high-ranking connections, the conflict between

them can be read as a battle for the image and survival of the Nigerian bourgeois class itself. Here, then, we can discern an ambivalent and often contradictory politics of class. On the one hand, the film clearly condemns campus cults – which have often been described as the ‘youth wing’ of the ruling class (Popoola and Alao 2006: 78) – and are undoubtedly linked in the Nigerian imagination to an immoral and corrupt upper crust.<sup>8</sup> Yet, on the other hand, the major preoccupation of the film seems to be with protecting the respectability of Natasha who is the paragon of innocent upper-class beauty, youth and femininity. Thus, while the film critiques and exposes the misbehaviour of ruling class youth, it also re-imagines and upholds a type of pure, albeit precariously positioned, bourgeois respectability.

### THE PLEASURE OF CONDEMNING

The success of Nollywood, like other forms of African popular culture, often hinges on the above-mentioned entanglement of values, temporalities and desires by allowing audiences to take pleasure in a series of glamorized moral transgressions that are then condemned and disallowed (Green-Simms 2012). In this way, Nollywood operates in the same way that earlier Onitsha market pamphlets did. These pamphlets also seek to both simultaneously educate and entertain their audiences and, like many other types of popular writing, often focus their concern and anxiety on the unmarried urban, the woman, or the ‘good-time’ girl who chases money and men and, as Stephanie Newell argues, is ‘the hoarder and private accumulator par excellence’ (2002: 6). Furthermore, it is in the Onitsha market literature that one can find perhaps the earliest popular representations of the conjoining of same-sex desire and prostitution. In the 1960 pamphlet *Mabel the Sweet Honey that Poured Away*, Mabel, a fatherless and spoiled only child in Onitsha, learns about the pleasures of sex (both hetero and homo) from her room-mate Margie. After Mabel witnesses Margie having sexual intercourse with a man behind the restaurant where they both work, Mabel becomes excited and agitated and, later that night, Margie seizes the opportunity to pounce on Mabel and grind into her. This happens several times throughout the story, and in each instance, Mabel both pushes Margie away and takes immense pleasure in the act. However, in this case, the sexual activity is not translated into an identity for either girl. Rather, it seems that it is simply one symptom of the excessive sexuality of urban, working girls in a decolonizing Nigeria. Eventually, as Mabel begins to sleep with more and more men, and as those men lavish Mabel with gifts, she transitions from ‘good-time girl’ to prostitute. When the story ends, Mabel has moved out of her room with Margie and has taken up residence at the Palace Hotel where she eventually bleeds to death alone from a self-induced abortion. However, while the story ends with the destruction of the female body who refuses to participate in marriage and heteronormative family life, it is also hard to forget that the pamphlet provides the reader with almost 70 pages of lurid and titillating descriptions about Mabel and Margie’s sexual encounters. Thus, the overall morality message is clearly complicated by the narrative excesses and the pleasure that the reader might take in reading about such women.

Likewise, in *Beautiful Faces*, a film clearly predicated on the pleasure of moral outrage, little distinction is made between the White Angels’ sexual desires for other women and their practice of prostitution. Both are positioned within the logic of the film as not only harmful to the heterosexual family but also self-aggrandizing and irrational. As noted above, women who seek to

8. Daniel Jordan Smith (2008) notes that there is a strong tendency in the Nigerian popular imagination to attribute armed robbery and cultism to the acts of wealthy spoiled children. Although Smith suggests that these popular perceptions are not backed by empirical evidence (and many indeed are not), one recent study of campus cults (Ainsworth et al. 2003: 19) does suggest that 86 per cent of self-identified cultists and ex-cultists claim that their parents are wealthy.

join the White Angels must already be rich and well connected. Thus, prostitution is not positioned as a means of getting by or making do in tough economic circumstances, nor is it framed as a form of exploiting women's bodies, though, as Paul Ugor notes, there are certainly many films in which this is the case (forthcoming). Rather, in *Beautiful Faces* prostitution is there to alarm the audience and reveal the transgressions committed by the daughters of upper-class families.

As Brian Larkin suggests, one of the ways in which Nollywood films grapple with the various instabilities of urban life and unequal distribution of wealth is through an aesthetics of outrage, 'where the narrative is organized around a series of extravagant shocks designed to outrage the viewer' (2008: 172). While it is of course impossible to gauge each viewer's reaction to a film or to expect a homogenous audience, Larkin's point is that the films are ordered on various cinematic and narrative codes intended to elicit certain moral reactions. I have already suggested above how the shock of Vivida's lesbian advances is registered in Natasha's bodily fright, which causes her to suddenly jump up and jerk her body away from Vivida. This reaction, I argue, is constructed as the proper response to such an overture, and I would suggest that pleasure to be found in viewing the heated exchange between the two women can be seen both in the 'naughtiness' of the transgression and in the righteousness of experiencing disgust. In other words, the 'aesthetics of outrage' that Larkin describes are essential to producing the pleasure of the film.

In the second part of *Beautiful Faces*, after Vivida's cult activities have become clear, Natasha discovers that Vivida and her friends are also involved in an organized prostitution ring. Again, the camera registers Natasha's response as appropriate and normative. When the prostitution is dramatically revealed, Natasha is on a double date with her room-mate and their respective boyfriends at the restaurant of an expensive hotel. As the group of four dines and jests, several of the White Angels walk into the lobby draped on the arms of older, wealthy men. The scene therefore juxtaposes two types of heterosexual coupling – one centred on dating, romance and love, the other, clearly inferior, based exclusively on the exchange of money. When the two groups notice one another, the camera begins to cut rapidly back and forth between close-ups of Natasha and her friends, who look alternatively bewildered and disgusted, and the Angels who shoot back looks of delight and intimidation. The scene is notable both for its use of extreme close-ups and the quick pace of the shots and reaction shots, which break from the regular pace of the action and are punctuated by intense drum beats not used anywhere else in the film. The overall effect of these 40 seconds, then, is to increase the intensity and dramatic action of the film in order to create a sense of moral panic that is supposed to be shared between Natasha and the audience.

In the next scene Natasha's outrage is channeled into anger that Vicky, one of the Angels she saw at the hotel, has borrowed her pink chiffon blouse. The implication here is that Vicky will somehow contaminate her shirt: the revelation that Vicky is a prostitute, and not simply a cultist who associates with lesbians, makes it unacceptable for the two to share garments. The two girls enter into a shouting match in which Natasha accuses Vicky of 'hopping from bed to bed' and tells her that she should use her money from whoring to purchase her own tops. Vicky responds with more violent threats, and after she leaves, Natasha's room-mate expresses trepidation for the repercussions of Natasha's outburst. At this point, the audience's sympathies are clearly sutured to Natasha and the spectator should feel aligned with her outrage. The

room-mate – who lent out the shirt in the first place – is therefore constructed as a weak character, unable to respond with the proper level of indignation to the overlapping moral transgressions of cultism, lesbianism and prostitution that are plaguing Nigerian campuses.

Because my argument is that *Beautiful Faces* in fact typifies the moral panic and condemnation present in many contemporary Nigerian films, it is also instructive to briefly examine the confluence between lesbianism and prostitution on university campuses in two other recent Nollywood films – *Rush Hour* and *Girls Cot* – both directed by Afam Okereke. In the film *Rush Hour*, female cultists who compete for prostitution gigs with other cults are misrecognized as lesbians. Here, members of a cult called the Bats are trying to recruit Fiona, a beautiful, wealthy girl and a professed virgin. Oblivious to the presence of campus cults, and having seen members of the Bats engage in acts of prostitution, Fiona presumes that the girls who approach her are interested in her as a sexual object. Unlike Natasha who cannot recognize lesbianism, Fiona immediately – and, as it turns out, incorrectly – assumes that their aggressive attitude and blatant promiscuity must be related to same-sex desire. Thus, whereas Natasha at first fails to name what she sees, Fiona misnames it. However, in both films the narrative structure is designed to reveal to both the audience and the innocent upper-class girls the full range of the cultists' perversity and depravity.

In *Girls Cot*, acts of prostitution by a group of university students (who are not in a cult) are treated relatively more sympathetically. Although the leader of the group is the daughter of the Vice President, the rest of the girls seem, at first, to be using prostitution and scamming as a way to pay their school bills, buy nice clothes and check the behaviour of out-of-line men. They use blackmail to ensnare corrupt politicians and capitalize on their illicit affairs with the police inspector to put a hectoring male cultist in his place. But as the girls take their scamming to excessive levels and begin to target innocent men, their actions become more deserving of moral condemnation. One of the ways the shift from a justifiable use of sexuality to a depraved sexuality is marked is through the transferring of the 'crime' of prostitution to that of lesbianism. In the film two of the university girls, Bella and Alicia, are involved in a love affair. But when Alicia confesses that she wants to marry Bella and that sex with men is only good for making money, Bella refuses Alicia, calls her mad, and asserts her desire for a heterosexual, nuclear family. To get revenge, Alicia sleeps with Bella's fiancé and tells him about both the prostitution and the affair she has been having with Bella. The fiancé reacts harshly: he understands the prostitution – the money, after all, is intended to fund his and Bella's move to the United States – but the lesbianism is intolerable. He calls Bella a 'dirty, rotten pig' and leaves her, dashing her hopes for an economically viable heterosexual marriage abroad.

In each of these films, then, women's erotic autonomy, as Alexander suggests, is a danger and threat to the establishment of the heterosexual family upon which cultural citizenship is based. In *Beautiful Faces* this is dramatized not only in Vivida's pursuit of Natasha but also in the film's major subplot in which Vicky is having an affair with Mike, a wealthy married man. Here, as in the case of *Mabel the Sweet Honey That Poured Away* (as well as earlier narratives like Cyprian Ekwenzi's *Jagua Nana*), the line between prostitute and 'good-time girl' is blurred. Mike is not one of Vicky's clients, but she is benefiting financially from the relationship and her relationship with Mike is represented as one that needs to be stamped out. Mike's wife Doris

begins to suspect something when her husband refuses to have sex with her. When Doris confirms his infidelity and confronts him, she is severely beaten for meddling in his business. A friend convinces Doris that the only way to save her marriage is through witchcraft. Doris then hires a member of the Daughters of Jezebel, the White Angels' rival cult, to procure one of Vicky's shoes for witchcraft purposes, an act which sets off a major war between the two cults. The witchcraft proves effective and as Vicky is walking back from class one day, she suddenly becomes paralyzed and has to have her legs amputated. With Vicky out of the picture, Doris is able to save her marriage. The consensus amongst Natasha and her friends, who have been constructed as the victims of the same type of female hyper-sexuality, is that Vicky got what she deserved for sleeping with a married man – the amputation was a fair price to pay for threatening the stability of the nuclear family. Furthermore, it is notable that Mike, the unfaithful and abusive husband, does not need to be punished or eliminated like the women in the film, but, instead, coerced, through his wife's witchcraft, back into his marriage. In the subplot of the film, then, women are both the problem and the solution. However, in the main narrative Natasha needs to be saved by a strong, romantic male.

### THE ROMANTIC HERO

As I suggested above, one of the ways that *Beautiful Faces* deflects the problem of cultism is by presenting a phenomenon that is, at least in part, defined by hyper-masculinization and militarization – especially since male cults are particularly feared on campus because of their violent behaviour towards women (Bastian 2001) – and reconfiguring it as one that can be solved through the containment of women's sexual deviance. One of the ways that the film enacts this slight-of-hand is by making Nick, the Capone of the Blood Brothers, the romantic hero who saves Natasha from Vivida and the White Angels. Nick, like Vivida, is immediately attracted to Natasha's good looks and class status, and he also begins to court her aggressively. Nick comes to visit Natasha's dorm, but when she finds out that he is a cultist, she dismisses him. Although she is clearly astonished by the revelation of his activities, her reaction this time is not one of hysteria. Nick continues to pursue Natasha around campus and when she tells him she wants nothing to do with him, he responds by passionately kissing her on the lips. After the uninvited kiss, Natasha admits to her friends that she is falling for him. Thus, while Vivida's aggressive behaviour (which, it should be noted, hardly crosses over into the physical) becomes the source of moral panic, Nick's aggression actually heightens his sexual attractiveness.

Part II of *Beautiful Faces* opens when Natasha, distraught over the continual tormenting by the White Angels, decides to seek Nick's help and protection. The scene in which she approaches him is notable because of the way that it is intercut with one that reinforces Vivida's abject behaviour and places it in direct opposition to Nick's noble stature. After Natasha enters Nick's home and asks to speak to him alone, the camera cuts to a familiar scene: Vivida entering the room of a new female student, praising the girl's beauty and promising material gifts (Figure 1). Vivida presents herself as a logical alternative to the men on campus who 'try to taste as many pies as possible' and who could impregnate her or pass along disease. Although the girl seems confused and unconvinced that 'this will not hurt' (Figure 2), she eventually relaxes, as she is told, and yields to Vivida's advances. As Vivida positions



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

her body on top of the girl and begins to inch her hands up her skirt, the camera slowly pans to the poster hanging above the bed (Figures 3–5). The poster contains an image of a scantily clad, light-skinned woman cradling a mortar and pestle between her legs. The extra-diegetic marker here serves to associate Vivida with an aberrant and hypersexual form of femininity. The poster takes a symbol of traditional African womanhood – the mortar and pestle – and re-imagines it as a sexual object in the hands of an eroticized foreigner. In the poster, the pestle is positioned as a masturbatory object, but when the camera pans to the image in order to avoid filming the sex scene between Vivida and the girl, the pestle figures as an indicator of ‘unnatural’ phallic penetration. Thus, Vivida here is presented not only as a lesbian who usurps the male position, but also as an ambivalent Other who is perverting and corrupting African womanhood.<sup>9</sup>

In the next shot, which cuts back to Nick and Natasha, Nick is also placed in front of a large poster (Figure 6). This time the image is of a bare-chested, long-haired and light-skinned man who might easily grace the covers of a Harlequin novel.<sup>10</sup> Natasha asks Nick to protect her from the White Angels, and, as he stands in front of his romantic double, Nick tells her that he has always wanted to be her guardian angel. A look of relief rushes over Natasha’s face and as they romantically embrace, the film’s theme song begins to play: ‘Be my guardian angel [...] I need a man, a strong man to give me love and protection when I give him my devotion. Would you be my guardian angel?’

9. According to Egbon (2010), the poster was chosen hastily by an assistant who was sent to the market to purchase something to decorate the bare walls of an apartment the crew had borrowed for the shoot. When the assistant returned with several options, Egbon chose the mortar and pestle image for both its size and its ‘cinematic quality’. Though the poster, which Egbon says ‘worked perfectly for the scene, was selected without much forethought, it still indicates the multiple associations the film was trying to evoke. The somewhat accidental nature of placement therefore reinforces my point that popular cinema



Figures 3–5.

often unconsciously reproduces the violence of exclusion.

10. This poster was also selected by Egbon's assistant and chosen by the director to visually complement the first.

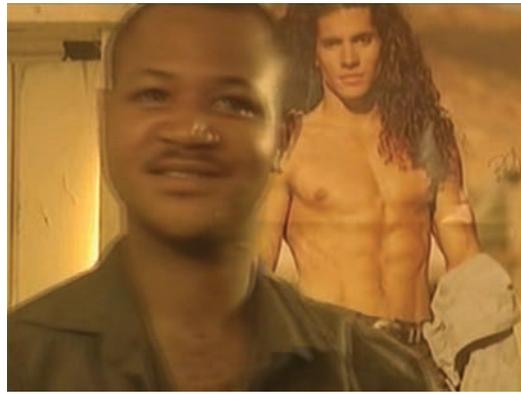


Figure 6.

Would you take care of me, give me security?'. Nick's character therefore re-appropriates the trope of the angel that has been misused by Vivida and the White Angels. Against Vivida's feminine depravity – or the angel that becomes a demon – Nick presents a strong-but-gentle masculinity, which, it should be noted, is also linked via the poster to foreignness. Thus, it is important to point out that *Beautiful Faces* does not oppose Vivida and Nick in terms of foreignness versus authenticity. Rather, the film seems to be weighing in on the question as to which globally recognizable symbols and identities are suitable for incorporation into a Nigerian bourgeois sensibility and which ones are dangerous and polluting.

A good deal of the film's denouement revolves around resolving questions about Nick's moral character and incorporating him into the upper class so that he may be an appropriate husband for Natasha. The first way that this is accomplished is actually by establishing Nick as someone who hails from a lower-class background and is therefore not part of the corrupt elite. Nick reveals that the only reason that he joined a cult in the first place was because he was a poor orphan and had no other family. The cult members, he claims, gave him a sense of belonging that he had never before known. Thus, Nick is not motivated by greed or violence, nor is he part of the 'youth wing' of the crooked national leadership. His motivations, then, are positioned as more pure, and his decision to stick by the Blood Brothers when the police raid campus is constructed as an act of loyalty rather than adherence to cultist values. When Nick is arrested along with all the campus cultists and Natasha goes on a hunger strike to convince her father to secure his release from prison, the audience is made to believe that Nick has renounced cultism and is deserving of rescue. The melodramatic mode of the story mobilizes the audience, as Linda Williams suggests, 'to feel for the virtue of some and against the villainy of others' (2001: 13). Thus, despite his role in cult activities, all narrative codes point viewers to wish, along with Natasha, for Nick's release.

But Natasha's father, having realized that Nigerian universities are no place for his daughter, has decided to send her to London to complete her studies. In the final scene of the film, Natasha sits sullen-faced at her own farewell party. In the middle of the party, the M.C. asks Natasha to approach the dance floor to have a final dance with her Romeo. Believing that Nick is still in prison, Natasha is astonished to see him walk onto the dance floor. Nick, who is now sporting a fancy suit and shirt, explains to Natasha that her

father secured his release from prison and offered him a well-paying job that will keep him away from cults. When Natasha asks about their future, Nick explains that she will go to London as her father arranged, but first they will have a court marriage. Nick will join his wife later when he travels to London for his Master's degree. Here, Nick speaks in place of Natasha's father, becoming a veritable substitute for his authoritative, decisive male voice. In this way, he becomes a suitable upper-class husband and gentleman who, like Natasha's father, participates in restoring order to the dishevelled world the film has presented. As Hoard suggests, the bourgeois nuclear family – or at least a nostalgic and anachronistic version of it – is seen as the pinnacle of modernity, and erasing rather than accepting homosexuality becomes key to achieving this desired family (2007: 57).

By the end of the film, Nick has acquired all the signs he needs to leave his former class position behind: a job, fine clothing, an upper-class wife, influential connections and a Western education. Here, then, we see a 'proper' cosmopolitanism (not one degraded by homo- or hyper-sexuality) being championed – it is a version of the American dream that requires hard work, sacrifice, moral fortitude and that, in fictional representations, always pays off. Cultism, as it turns out, fails to secure these things and instead almost costs Nick his admission into bourgeois life. Thus, the film ends with Vivida and the White Angels in jail, Vicky paralyzed, Mike and Doris back together, and Natasha and Nick on the verge of marriage and safely out of reach from any other cultists who may attempt to harm them. Both the rule of law and the Law of the Father are simultaneously re-established.

## CONCLUSION

My objective in this article is not to create a simple link between Nollywood and homophobic or heterosexist culture, nor is it to suggest that there can only be one reading of *Beautiful Faces*, a film that clearly speaks to many different issues. In fact, online reviews of the film reveal that some viewers may see *Beautiful Faces* as a film that shamelessly elevates the importance of gay and feminist issues.<sup>11</sup> Such commentators clearly do not read the film as homophobic or misogynist and instead feel that the film pushes an agenda that is too out of line with social values. Likewise, Internet bulletin postings on other lesbian-themed Nollywood films suggest that viewers are often offended at the lesbian scenes and would prefer that Nollywood film-makers act *more* conservatively by not 'promoting' the behaviour. I therefore do not deny that audience reactions to films are varied and conflicted, or even that the depiction of erotically autonomous women may be liberating for some viewers, though, as stated above, my own research suggests that this is not the case for lesbian-identified women. But I am claiming that the film articulates normative gendered, sexualized and classed social formations by violently excluding and making scapegoats of specific subjects. Thus, while Nollywood films often critique the failures of state institutions, they are also equally preoccupied with 'saving' the institutions of marriage, heteronormativity and the family that the state, as a bourgeois neocolonial entity, strives to uphold.

Moreover, as I have argued, film-making itself must be seen as an act of interpretation and never simply a neutral reflection of social conditions. Nollywood film-makers use melodramatic conventions, music, costume, editing, crosscutting and dialogue to convey their understanding of the narrative events. They create characters that elicit audience sympathy and those who

11. For instance, one commentator on the YouTube trailer of *Beautiful Faces* claims to 'hate Nollywood movies with [homosexual] characters' because she believes that Nollywood should focus on issues like AIDS or government corruption rather than 'gay rights issues'. Another person takes Stephanie Okereke to task for agreeing to play a lesbian. The commentator believes that Okereke is 'out [for] revenge against her father or men in general' because she tends to take on 'annoying' and 'boring' feminist roles. These comments can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qff3RIPDB8> accessed 29 July 2009.

will most likely be the object of scorn or outrage. Indeed, much of Nollywood's success can be attributed to the film-makers' abilities to embed their message or moral within an overall signifying structure that is legible and appealing to the targeted mass audience. Therefore, the decision to work within an entrepreneurial mode of production that is 'simply interested in making money' (Okoye 2007: 20) does not mean that either films or film-makers operate outside of ideology. In today's Nigeria, Nollywood has in fact become a major site in which social constructions are mobilized, viewed and judged both by Nigerian and transnational audiences, and the profound popularity of Nollywood attests to the fact that many of its viewers' urgent concerns and daily contestations with institutions of power are indeed struggled over on the terrain of cultural production. Thus, it is because of and not despite the fact that Nollywood has become such a pervasive mode of popular media that careful attention must be paid to the ways that the films simultaneously contest official power and reproduce hegemonic discourse by employing neocolonial tropes of degeneracy and moral outrage that regulate and police cultural citizenship.

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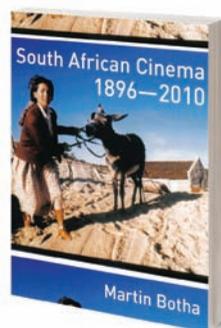
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MARTIN BOTHA is a writer who has published numerous articles on the South African media, as well as several books, including *Marginal Lives and Painful Pasts: South African Cinema After Apartheid* and *Images of South Africa: The Rise of the Alternative Film*.

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