

Culture is Our Future:
The Constitutive Role of African Australian Film¹

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“It doesn’t matter what tone of fuckin’ black you are, you are black.”
(Deborah Mailman, Black Chicks Talking, 2001)³

Abstract

‘Culture is our Future’⁴ is one example of an emerging body of film and video by and about African Australians, and in which ethics and aesthetics sometimes compete. Australian media representations of African Australians have been persistently negative, and many look to the ability of film and video to represent a counter-narrative in the co-construction of cultural and subcultural identities. Drawing on Appadurai’s⁵ cultural imaginary and mediascapes, this article will contextualise these films in a consideration of larger ‘filmic diasporas’ which represent the diversity and richness of African communities emerging in multiple diasporic locations (particularly Australia), and competing within multiple aesthetics. Simultaneously, this critique interrogates how these examples of gender and race⁶ may also be used as ‘mechanisms of exclusion’⁷, and how African Australians remain ‘constitutively visible’⁸ despite mainstream media attempts to render them invisible.

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² *Author’s Note: The author gratefully acknowledges the contribution of the anonymous ARAS reviewers who have, through the journal’s review process, contributed to the clarity and depth of the argument presented here.*

³ Deborah Mailman, *Black Chicks Talking*. Director, Leah Purcell, Bungabura Productions Pty. Ltd. 2001.

⁴ Lamine Sonko, *Culture is Life/ Culture is our Future*. VCAM/Centre for Cultural Partnerships, Melbourne University, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWws1FiohNQ> (accessed December 9 2011).

⁵ Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996/2005.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of “sex”*, (New York: Routledge), 1993.

⁷ Jacky Lumby, “Performativity and identity: mechanisms of exclusion.” *Journal of Educational Policy*, 24:3 (2009): 353-369.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, “The Gift of Death”, cited in Akira Mizuta Lippit, ed., *Atomic light (shadow optics)*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, 90.

Introduction: How different?

What is African Australian film? The topic is contestable, and definitions vary. It includes but is not limited to films about Africans in Australia, films made by African Australians, films in collaboration with African Australians, films about Africans elsewhere in the diaspora or in Africa, but made by non-African Australians, and countless other permutations. Appadurai⁹ reminds us that the media and the imaginary are both constitutive elements in identity-building, and as such, filmic representations of African Australians are contentious and diverse in much the same ways in which the very notion of an African Australian identity is also problematic, emotional and contentious. Nevertheless, various bodies (learning institutions and festivals) are assisting the growth of African Australian film and video work – despite persistently contentious definitions of the genre. Film serves a symbolic - but very real - function in identity-building for diasporic and transnational travellers. For the purposes of this article, African Australian is defined as encompassing both films made *by* and *about* Africans from diverse nations and identities, residing or working within Australia.

The past five years have seen increasing opportunities for both African-driven and collaborative film and video projects in Australia (and elsewhere), many of which represent intergenerational, intercultural and integration struggles. There are significant and multiple challenges associated with attempting to define an identifiable ‘African Australian’ film genre: who makes the films, who owns the films (copyright versus director/collaborators), who names the films as African Australian, and what kind of representation is ‘allowable’ from communities that are assiduously trying to not only construct but also to represent themselves to a sometimes-hostile mainstream Australian social landscape. Identity-building is a long-term project. Filmmakers and artists from African Australian backgrounds understand the ever-evolving complexities of attempting to define themselves as one thing; however, in an almost all-white filmic field, a more diverse body of Australian film is clearly on the rise.

Cultural theorists assert the constitutive and fluid nature of social reality,¹⁰ and films made by or with Africans in Australia (or other

⁹ Arjun Appadurai.

¹⁰ Richard Delgado, “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative,” in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds. *Critical race theory: the cutting edge*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 60-70. See also: Stuart

emerging communities) can be considered both transnational *and* diasporic,¹¹ important aspects of their fluid identities. For those recently emerging from refugee backgrounds, it is clear how this once-useful label has quickly turned into a ghettoizing stereotype in the Australian popular imagination as violent, slow to integrate, and ungrateful. For those like Sudanese Australians (who have continued to bear the brunt of negative media onslaughts since 2007¹²), the idea that independent filmmaking offers powerful social potential in its identity-building currency is no surprise. A handful of young, talented African Australians have been active in recent years in theatre, hip hop and film, but often complain of the development ‘glass ceiling’ that plagues these emerging artists.

In the international context, Delgado continues to recognize the power of storytelling, drawing links between Butler’s¹³ repetition of acts and identity construction, and the ways in which “narrative habits, patterns of seeing, shape what we see and that to which we aspire.”¹⁴ Yet debates continue about just what constitutes a ‘black film’ in Australia and elsewhere. The long-reaching cultural impact of seminal African American films such as *The Wiz*¹⁵, which were not directed by African-American directors or financed by Black production companies or individuals – and yet whose cultural influence both within and outside of African American communities - continues to be felt. Yet the cult-favourite ‘blaxploitation’¹⁶ films of the 1970s, and early ‘race films’ like those funded, produced, directed, and written by Oscar Micheaux, were viciously criticized early in the century from within African American communities as upholding racist stereotypes. Genres blur too with ethnographic, ethnocinematic¹⁷ and ‘anthropological’ documentary films

Hall, “Who Needs Identity?” in Du Gay, Paul, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman, eds., *Identity: A Reader*. (London: Sage Publications, 2000).

¹¹ Ien Ang *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 25.

¹² Melissa Phillips, “Convenient labels, inaccurate representations: Turning Southern Sudanese refugees into African Australians,” *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 32:2 (December 2011): 57-79.

¹³ Judith Butler.

¹⁴ Butler cited in Delgado, 62.

¹⁵ Sidney Lumet. *The Wiz*. USA: Universal Pictures, 1978.

¹⁶ Ed Guerrero. “The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation”, in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, eds. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, Art Simon, Volume 3: (New York, 2012): 435-469.

¹⁷ Ethnocinema is defined, contextualized and extended in Anne Harris, *Ethnocinema: Intercultural arts education*, The Netherlands: Springer, 2012 – Noting that the seven ethnocinematic films in this series include: 1. *Still Waiting* (Nyadol Nyuon); 2. *Neir Chi Puj (Educated Girls)* (Lina Deng); 3. *In Transit/ion* (Angelina Kuol); 4. *Slowly*

which problematise notions of what can be considered African diasporic films. One example, *Lost Boys of Sudan*,¹⁸ highlights the ongoing problems inherent in outsider-created documentaries by presenting the lives of two young Sudanese males; these filmmakers (and others involved in similar projects) have acknowledged the absence of females in their films often due to budget limitations, poor access to translators, and the lack of English language fluency amongst the few available female interviewees. One direct result of such obstacles is far-reaching: the plight of the so-called ‘Lost Girls of Sudan’ continues to remain far more obscure to audiences and potential advocates due to their diminished representation in such films¹⁹.

Culture is our Future (also titled *Culture is our Life*)²⁰ is a short web-based film by Senegalese-Australian artist Lamine Sonko, which highlights the ways in which drumming and dance have served as an intercultural tool for him and others engaged in the process of crossing cultural borders and making that crossing visible and understandable to others. Through Sonko’s readiness to “share [his] knowledge with people,” he evokes Derrida’s notion of the relational visible/invisible, where the invisible is equally constitutive of culture in so far as that which is at times “... artificially kept from sight ... becomes invisible but remains within the order of visibility; it remains constitutively visible”²¹. Not only through his acknowledged art forms of dance and drumming, however, but through the film artefact in which we can see him, hear his voice, and virtually experience his work, is Sonko adding to the visibility of African artists in Australia.

As Hage has noted and Collins has productively linked to Australian cinema, cultural integration is a slow and “gradual process,” in which “it takes time to learn a new culture and take up a place within it.”²² African

by *Slowly* (Grace Mabor); 5. *Chick Chat at the River Nile* (multiple contributors); 6. *Singing into Language* (Achol Baroch); and 7. *EthnocineME* (multiple contributors).

¹⁸ Michele Mylan and John Shenk *The Lost Boys of Sudan*. USA: Actual Films, 2003.

¹⁹ Anne Harris, “Performativity, Identity and the ‘Found Girls’ of Africa: Sudanese Women Talk Education”, In C. Baker (ed.), *Expressions of the Body: Representations in African Text and Image*. (UK: Peter Lang, 2009), 337-361; Anne Harris. “I Ain’t No Girl: Representation and Reconstruction of the ‘Found Girls’ of Sudan” in *Race/Ethnicity*, 4:1. (Autumn 2010): 41-63.

²⁰ Lamine Sonko.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, cited in Akira Mizuta Lippit, 31.

²² Gassan Hage, cited in Felicity Collins, “Wogboy Comedies and the Australian national type,” in Catherine Simpson, Renata Murawska and Anthony Lambert, eds., *Diasporas of Australian Cinema* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2009), 77. See also: Gassan

Australians are not the first to experience the long slow burn of acculturation, but perhaps their experiences are multiple layered with racial and postcolonial complications. Starting with post-colonial alienation within home countries (for example Sudan, Burundi and Somalia), these young intercultural artists continue to personify and actively explore within their artistic work and daily lives the difficulties and complexities of race-, ethnic- and sometimes faith-based conflicts both in Africa and in the diaspora. Such conflicts include both interior and exterior landscapes, and the ways in which acculturation is an intersubjective negotiation that never ends and often bypasses language.

For this reason, some have questioned the veracity of an African Australian identity at all,²³ while others link it to questions of alterity and difference.²⁴ If film then has the potential to evoke corporeality, it simultaneously suffers from its inability to represent a knowable identity. The very changeability and unknowability of the African Australian subject of the films which will be discussed in this article add to the difficulty of naming or collecting a filmic ‘African Australian subject,’ the implication being a singularity that is clearly unattainable (and surely undesirable). Therefore, young African artists seeking to find support for filmmaking in Australia continue to find themselves enmeshed in this double-bind: funding requirements demand an identifiable genre, while identity-creation and artistic expression require the transcendence of known categories. In this bind these young artists are certainly not alone, yet their fight for artistic freedom has additional challenges that are arguably both limiting and liberating.

In the American context, mainstream films like *Colour Purple*²⁵, Blaxploitation films like *Superfly*²⁶, Black chick flicks like *Waiting to Exhale*²⁷, and independent films like *The Watermelon Woman*²⁸ have all represented important steps forward in a history of so-called African

Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Annandale, NSW: Pluto, 1998), 82.

²³ Melissa Phillips 2011.

²⁴ bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” in Manthia Diawara, (ed), *Black American Cinema* (Routledge: New York, 1993), 288 – 302; See also Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*, translated by Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluhacek, (London: Continuum, 2002).

²⁵ Steven Spielberg. *The Colour Purple*. USA: Amblin Entertainment, 1985.

²⁶ Gordon Parks, Jr. *Superfly*. USA: Sig Shore Productions, 1972.

²⁷ Forest Whitaker. *Waiting to Exhale*. 20th Century Fox Productions, USA. 1995.

²⁸ Cheryl Dunye. *The Watermelon Woman*. Dancing Girl Productions, USA. 1996.

American film, but often get left behind.²⁹ In Australia, this history that some trace back to exoticised, Indigenous-themed, white-produced films like *Jedda*³⁰ and *Walkabout*³¹ is now rapidly expanding to include films by Ethiopian Australians, Sudanese Australians, and an increasingly diverse film industry which supports ‘ethnic’ films like the crossover films *Wogboy*³² and *Samson and Delilah*³³ (though these are still in short supply).

The article argues that the small selection of films that can be considered African Australian are beginning to constitute a growing category of film products that both assist and parallel the development of a diverse and nuanced constitutive subjectivity which can be understood as ‘African Australian.’ Furthermore, this article argues that the development of this strategically essentialist category can be temporarily useful (even as it is an imperfect construct) in the process of integration and resettlement for an emerging and diverse population of Australians from African backgrounds. Furthermore, this article explores the possibility that such films may be usefully compared and contrasted to both Indigenous (Black) Australian film products, and African international films. Lastly, it is argued here that the emerging practice of ethnocinema challenges representational authority, and confronts the difficulties of ‘mis’-representation. Any emerging African Australian film discourse must address intersubjectivity, and will reflect a changing critical race and whiteness studies epistemology in which a “critique of how white hegemony is perpetuated”³⁴ is required and interconnected. This article argues that such interconnections may assist – rather than hinder – the project of identity-construction through film production and representation.

Black film in Australia: an overview

“...the guy looked at him and said, ‘You are black!’ I think he meant to think it, not say it out loud...” (Connie Levett, 2008)³⁵

²⁹ Terri Francis, “Cinema on The Lower Frequencies: Black Independent Filmmaking” *Black Camera*, 22:1 (Spring/Summer 2007): 19-21.

³⁰ Charles Chauvel. *Jedda*. Charles Chauvel Productions, Australia, 1955.

³¹ Nicholas Roeg. *Walkabout*. Max L. Raab-Si Litvinoff Films, 1971.

³² Aleksi Vellis. *Wogboy*. AFFC, Australia, 2000.

³³ Warwick Thornton. *Samson and Delilah*. Madmen Entertainment, Australia, 2009.

³⁴ Damien W. Riggs, “On accountability: Towards a white middle-class queer ‘post identity politics,’” *Ethnicities*, 10:3 (2010): 344-357.

³⁵ Connie Levett, “Finding a boss who sees more than your skin,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 2008, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/looking-past-the-skin/2008/02/03/1201973740498.html> (accessed 15 March 2012).

As Collins makes clear, Australian cinema has long been “concerned with the nation’s coming of age,”³⁶ and this includes its reckoning with non-white Australia, as far back as the silent films of the 1920s. From the internationally acclaimed debut of Australian staple Indigenous actor David Gulpilil in *Walkabout* to the shift in film representations of diverse Indigenous identities post-Mabo in 1992,³⁷ Australia is only recently waking up to its Black cinema. In many ways, Gulpilil’s professional career can be paralleled to the rise of a so-called Aboriginal cinema.

Over the past fifteen years, however, Indigenous films have become better funded and generally speaking, more widely distributed – although the genre is still dominated by Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaborations. For *Rabbit Proof Fence*³⁸ both non-Indigenous director Philip Noyce and writer Christine Olsen teamed up, and in the older but ground-breaking *Radiance*³⁹, Indigenous director Rachel Perkins collaborated with non-Indigenous writer Louis Nowra. This trend continued in 2010, where Perkins collaborated with non-Indigenous writer Regg Cribb on the film adaptation of *Bran Nue Dae*⁴⁰, the all-Aboriginal stage musical by Jimmy Chi. Debates over the creation, ownership and promotion of Indigenous and other non-white media production are well documented, both internationally and within the Australian context,⁴¹ and Perkins has been instrumental in defining a body of ‘Aboriginal film’ with various creative processes over the past two decades.

Both African- and Indigenous-Australian definitions mostly adhere to products which “either portray Indigenous people, issues and stories or films made by Indigenous Australians.”⁴² This article contextualises these films within wider ‘filmic diasporas,’ yet problematises how such identity performance⁴³ may also be used as tools of exclusion.⁴⁴

³⁶ Felicity Collins, ‘Recognition, Identity and Trauma in *Black Chicks Talking*’ in Collins, Felicity and Therese Davis (eds), *Australian Cinema after Mabo*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 17-19.

³⁷ Felicity Collins, 2004..

³⁸ Phillip Noyce, *Rabbit Proof Fence*. Australia: Rumbalara Films, 2002.

³⁹ Rachel Perkins. *Radiance*. AndInc Productions, 1998,

⁴⁰ Rachel Perkins. *Bran Nue Dae*. Roadshow Films, 2010.

⁴¹ See especially Marcia Langton, “Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television.” (NSW: Australian Film Commission, 1993).

⁴² Australian Government, “Culture: Indigenous Film,” *N.d.* <http://www.culture.gov.au/articles/indigenous/film/> (Accessed 15 November 2011).

⁴³ Judith Butler.

⁴⁴ Jacky Lumby.

Over the past decade, a diverse and multicultural new wave of black Australian cinema is emerging, driven by both recently arrived as well as more established African Australian artists.⁴⁵ That categorical definitions are hotly contested, and highlight more general questions about representation, identity construction and nationhood, can be seen as productive for the industry. The number of short multimedia projects is steadily increasing; however, are these representations of diverse African Australian communities and individuals enough to counteract the effects of widespread media vilification of Africans in the mainstream press?⁴⁶ The ability of both documentary and dramatic film products to counteract or dialogically respond to a hegemonic narrative about black Australians has only recently begun to emerge in scholarly and creative contexts. Contemporary intercultural film scholars⁴⁷ have considered such questions of representation, in addition to considerations of class, sexuality and gender. By problematising notions of identity construction with considering the question “how is gender lived in the modality of race?”⁴⁸, patterns begin to emerge about the progression of African Australian film.

That these intersectionalities continue to trouble neat definitions of what it means to be national, ethnic or gender minorities highlights the need for both self- and collaboratively-created ‘minority’ films within the Australian context, particularly for those communities and individuals most under fire (like the Sudanese), and for those who still struggle against material inequalities. Asante’s⁴⁹ call to address race-based economic inequities is crucial in Australia where there are still few organisations where long-term nurturing of black media artists - including Rachel Perkins, Iven Sen, and Warwick Thornton - is possible.

Films and videos produced both by Africans and non-Africans in Australia are contributing to the construction of a diverse and evolving

⁴⁵ This list serves as a literature review of films made in Australia between 2005-2010 by (or collaboratively with) African Australians, but is in no way exhaustive.

⁴⁶ Caitlin Nunn, “Spaces to Speak: Challenging Representations of Sudanese-Australians,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 1469-9540, 31:2 (2010), 183-198.

⁴⁷ Includes - Laura U Marks, *The Skin of the film: intercultural cinema, embodiment, and the senses*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000; Hamid Naficy, *An accented cinema: exilic and diasporic filmmaking*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Sheila Petty, *Contact Zones: Memory, Origin and Discourses in Black Diasporic Cinema*, (Detroit Michigan: Wayne State University, 2008).

⁴⁸ Judith Butler, 117.

⁴⁹ Molefi Kete Asante, *100 Greatest African Americans: A Biographical Encyclopedia*. Amherst, (NY: Prometheus Books, 2002).

cultural identity which is flexible, dynamic, and which offers a counter-narrative to the one presented by most mainstream media. Those like Flory⁵⁰ and Opoku-Mensah⁵¹ highlight viewers' biases as part of the cinematic conversation between maker and viewer, and the ways in which the "relations between these dimensions of cinematic viewing are symbiotic"⁵². American father-son filmmakers Mario and Melvin van Peebles show the changing face and socially constitutive nature of film representation and its relation to social capital and material conditions. As such, these filmmakers and theorists help to construct new national and subcultural identities. This article highlights the value of intercultural filmmaking collaborations, then, to position both self- and collaboratively-made African Australian film as a positive antidote to stereotypical misrepresentations, while simultaneously serving a constitutive role as diverse African Australian communities continue to define and represent emerging hybrid identities.

Some recent government, university and community funded programs have sought to nurture young filmmakers and multimedia producers from diverse backgrounds, including African. While productive, these ongoing programs and short-term projects highlight some of the polarizing aspects of films marketed as 'African Australian.' The Horn of Africa Arts Partnership has produced films which have gained wide circulation; for some, the profiling of the producers take precedence over that of the filmmakers themselves. Yet this program is responsible for gaining important profile for many of its emerging artists in their early stages of their careers. Wide circulation is equally important for these short films, showing diverse African Australian perspectives.

The program has provided professional development and networking for the young filmmakers involved. Importantly, several of these young African filmmakers have now set up the film production company SudMedia⁵³, administered through a local community arts organization.

⁵⁰ Dan Flory, "Black on White: Film Noir and the Epistemology of Race in Recent African American Cinema," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 31.1 (Spring 2000): 82-116. See also: Flory, Dan. *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2008)..

⁵¹ Aida Opoku-Mensah., 'Marching On: African Media Studies.' *Feminist Media Studies*. 1:1 (2001): 25-34

⁵² Dan Flory, 2000; Dan Flory, 2008

⁵³ To find out more about SudMedia, go to <http://sudmedia.tumblr.com/> or via the homepage of Footscray Community Arts Centre at <http://footscrayarts.com/about-us/artists-in-residence/sudmedia/>

Continuing artistic outputs point to positive professional development of these young African artists.

Multicultural Arts Victoria (MAV) is another prominent community arts organisation involved in the nurturing of young African Australian filmmakers through community development programs, short-term project funding, and through their *Emerge* festival of arts (since 2006). These programs have employed professional (non African) filmmakers to both mentor and to create films about African Australian experiences. The recent *Step by Step* is a film by non-African filmmaker Thomas Baricevic⁵⁴ (see Figure 1), and while the film might be characterised as *not* African Australian due to the ethnicity of the maker, one can argue that its sheer ‘watchability’ in profiling African voices and stories might deem it solidly ‘African Australian’ due to content. Universities, too, walk a difficult line between collaborative and non-collaborative film-based research projects, which often (due to the institutional power behind them) gain wider distribution than those more directly ‘African made’ films from community artists just starting out. Acceptance or rejection of both community-based and professional film products of African Australians depend largely on the positionality of the viewer, but consistently Africans and other filmmakers-of-colour continue to demand more rigorous criteria for claims of ‘collaborative’ or African.

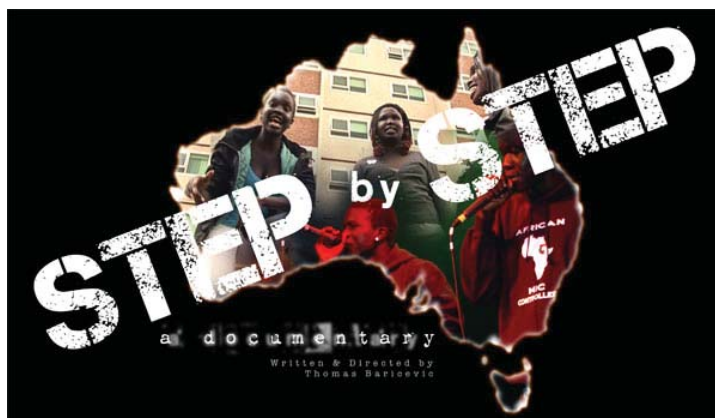


Figure 1: Promotional image, *Step by Step*⁵⁵

Tensions arise between ethical and aesthetic concerns when confronting film festivals and more formal distribution channels for films billed as ‘African Australian’. Women filmmakers, too, are even more scantily

⁵⁴ Thomas Baricevic (dir.). *Step by Step*. Melbourne: Jackson Black Films, 2009. <http://australiacouncil.placestories.com/story?id=7400316> (accessed 17 Dec. 2011).

⁵⁵ Thomas Baricevic.

represented in community- and university-based film festival initiatives. And yet, this very brief overview of some of the work that is being done by exciting new talents including Ezeldin Deng, Mangesto Chol, Abraham Adet⁵⁶, Nyadol Nyuon, and Daniel Zwedu⁵⁷ indicates the vibrancy of a growing multicultural and black Australian film industry, despite roadblocks.

Appadurai's mediascapes suggest that "electronic mediation and mass migration is explicitly transnational – even postnational"⁵⁸ and that necessarily from multiple subjectivities new identities will evolve. One such transnational project is the ethnocinematic project *Cross-Marked: Sudanese Australian Young Women Talk Education*⁵⁹, a series of seven co-created films (six about their Sudanese Australian subjects, and one about the researcher-as-subject) which were jointly conceived and marketed. From the beginning, the researcher and co-participants chose to prioritise process over product, in that the young women who participated experimented with the cameras, with editing, and skills development was part of the agreement (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Still image of Angelina Kuol from *In Transit/ion*.⁶⁰

Diverse goals of a range of filmmakers, all add to a growing body and range of work by and about African Australians. The YouTube based

⁵⁶ Abraham Adet, *Job Seeker*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H07PEvAsHuk> (accessed 7 November 2011).

⁵⁷ Daniel Zwedu. *Amharic on Air for Ethiopians*. 2010. Privately available from the director.

⁵⁸ Arjun Appadurai, 9.

⁵⁹ Published as Anne Harris, 2012.

⁶⁰ Anne Harris, 2012.

music video “Meet Me On Facebook”⁶¹ by SudMedia artist Bangs has had a remarkable 651,792 hits on YouTube to date, but seems to offer mainly an African American-style rap music video. Yet the short film *Never Ever* (by fellow SudMedia artist Ezeldin Deng)⁶², which is more narratively substantive and addresses serious settlement issues within the African Australian community, has had only 44 hits. Other collaborative projects, including the Paola Bilbrough/New Hope co-production *No One Eats Alone*⁶³, raise the question of what non-African filmmakers can do if their African subjects do not wish to be involved in the filmmaking process. Clearly there is room for building a black and intercultural Australian film scene, in which both African and non-African, black and non-black filmmakers are helping to increase the body of work which documents African Australian lives. This need to develop ethnically and artistically diverse ways of working together can be accomplished by nurturing artistic “affinity across category boundaries,”⁶⁴ with a focus on shared agendas of dismantling hegemonic notions of Australian - and indeed all nationalist - identities.

‘Black film’ as counter-memory

*“I know my audience, and they’re not people that the studios know anything about.”*⁶⁵

Since the turn of the 20th century, debates have raged both within and outside of the African American community/ies about what is ‘good’ representation. James Baldwin encountered this during the Harlem Renaissance for daring to write novels about gay, angry or otherwise less-than-noble black folks. It endures today centering (for the moment) around entertainment/drag phenomenon Tyler Perry and his Madea character (see Figure 3) versus Hollywood, in the American context, but elsewhere internationally too⁶⁶. On one side of the argument are those

⁶¹ Bangs. *Meet Me on Facebook*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lchaAtrwkE4> (accessed 7 November 2011).

⁶² Ezeldin Deng and Mangesto Chol. *Never Ever*. Multicultural Arts Victoria: Melbourne, 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGvH9i_XKPQ (accessed 7 December 2011).

⁶³ Paola Bilbrough, *No One Eats Alone*. Melbourne: New Hope Foundation, 2010.

⁶⁴ Karen Jennings, “Sites of Difference. Cinematic representation of Aboriginality and Gender,” in *The Moving Image*. (ed.) James Sabine. (Sydney: Australian Film Institute Research and Information Centre 1993) 77.

⁶⁵ Tyler Perry, n.d. IMDB film biography website accessed at <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1347153/bio> and image from Google Images.

⁶⁶ Peter I. Ukpokodu, “African Heritage from the Lenses of African-American Theatre

who believe ‘minority’ (be it gay, black, women or marginalized others) films should be made by minority community members; on the other hand there are those who relentlessly criticize those crossover artists and writers who succeed in getting their representations and stories out there. But these arguments are old and - some would argue - inevitable, as is increasingly evident in Australia’s black film scene.



Figure 3: public domain poster image from *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*⁶⁷

In the British context, Gilroy⁶⁸ has written about the permeable nature of racial identity, and this extends to ethnicity and culture. Where intersections of class (and I’ll add gender, as per Butler) impact on the ways in which Gilroy’s notions of race are played out, it is important to point out that geography and other factors play their own roles: for those of us in what Europeans and Americans consider the ‘southern states’, transnational identities take on additional layers. Temporal and spatial factors have and will continue to impact on how immigrant Australians re-identify once our transnational journeys have (apparently) been completed. The very need for defining and adhering to static diasporic identities comes up particularly insufficient when examining evolving

and Film,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory & Criticis.*, 16:2 (Spring 2002): 69-93.

⁶⁷ Tyler Perry (dir.), *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*. <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1347153/bio> (accessed 20 November 2011).

⁶⁸ Paul Gilroy. “Race, Class and Agency” in *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, (London: Hutchinson, 1987/1991) 15-42.

representations and self-representations in film with an African Australian context.

Asante, Diawara⁶⁹ and others continue to fight for greater visibility for African background, diasporic or transnational scholars. Black intellectuals and culture-makers, including pioneer Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951) (the first black American filmmaker, writer and producer from 1919, with silent film *The Homesteader*⁷⁰) broke barriers but is still poorly recognised in film histories. What is clear, as stated by film scholars and Micheaux himself, was that he would not have achieved funding for his projects were he to tell the stories he wanted to tell, as he wanted to tell them. His career exemplifies the difficulty of obtaining mainstream funding while trying to tell 'black' stories, a difficulty that continues to plague black filmmakers today. Hollywood has a poor memory when it comes to black film, but what of the Australian film industry?

Pioneering black Australian filmmakers Syron and McGuinness⁷¹ are often forgotten in snapshot histories of Australian film. Contemporary filmmakers Tracey Moffatt, Rachel Perkins, Bindi Cole and Warwick Thornton seem to have sprung fresh from an all-white filmmaking field. It is in this context of hyper-in/visibility that African Australian filmmakers are struggling to be seen. As Diawara points out, many filmmakers and scholars still hold that "Africans and African Americans have nothing in common"⁷² and continue to make work that promotes

⁶⁹ Manthia Diawara. 'Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance', in *Black American Cinema*, (ed.) Manthia Diawara, (New York: Routledge, 1993) 211–220.

⁷⁰ While Micheaux made over 40 feature films between 1919-1948, and was a prolific novelist, he is still rarely celebrated as a foundational Hollywood talent outside of African-American scholars and cultural critics. Asante notes the loss of Micheaux's so-called 'race' films that are mostly gone from the archive, an irreplaceable portion of the American film canon, yet films that by today's standards would seem unbearably racist. His 1930 *A Daughter of the Congo* is one such film which depicts dark Africans as savages and 'high yellows' as civilized, was roundly criticised by Black community presses, yet remained considered too Black to be mainstream.

⁷¹ See the excellent memoir of Indigenous theatre and film for a first-person and baseline literature review of these disciplines to 1993: Brian Syron with Briann Kearney, *Kicking Down the Doors: A History of Australian Indigenous Filmmakers from 1968-1993*, (Donobri International Communications Pty Ltd, 1996/2008). His lit review contains but is not limited to references to the following: Bruce McGuinness, 1969, *Black Fire*. (60 mins); Nicholas Roeg, 1971, *Walkabout*, (feature); Charles Chauvel, 1955, *Jedda* (feature, colour).

⁷² Audrey T. McCluskey. "Troubling the Waters: A Conversation with Manthia

these perceived divisions. At the same time, many African filmmakers have been criticised heavily within their communities for negative or ‘mis’representation.

This article argues, as does Everett in *Returning the Gaze*, for placing such works “within a wider history of influential African American socio-cultural trends and movements”⁷³, linking cinema to the formation of a national political consciousness which demonstrates the centrality of race. Artists and scholars theorising emergent African Australian film too must establish links and draw critically from a wider history of black and non-mainstream film. Decision-makers⁷⁴ remain largely non-black, marketing to mainly white audiences and limiting funding opportunities. Control of production is crucial in contributing to a diverse and constitutive black film discourse (and body of work) internationally.

Race a-genders

Within racial and ethnic marginalization, gender sidelining narrows the field even further. Since the pivotal “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”⁷⁵, many have argued that film language continues to be constructed and controlled by a male-dominated system of spectatorship and semiotics. Film language has been framed historically as both controlled by men and designed for the benefit of male pleasure,⁷⁶ inextricably linked with looking, voyeurism, and the objectification of the female image. And while recent past discourses have reminded us of the links between how “blacks are portrayed on the screen” and “how black audiences see themselves”⁷⁷, these notions have fresh relevance when echoed by young African Australian filmmakers like Ezeldin Deng and

Diawara”. *Black Camera*, 21:1 (Spring/Summer 2006): 1-2.

⁷³ Kara Keeling’s clear-headed review of ‘Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949’ by Anna Everett (2001, Durham, NC: Duke Univ) sheds further light on this. In *Callaloo*, 26:3 (Summer 2003): 923-926.

⁷⁴ Nancee L. Lyons, “From Race Movies to Blaxploitation to Homeboy Cinema.” (evolution of African American films by African American filmmakers). *American Visions*, 7:1 (February-March 1992): 42-43.

⁷⁵ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975) 14–26.

⁷⁶ Michele Schreiber, “Spectatorship and Academic Film Studies,” <http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Romantic-Comedy-Yugoslavia/Spectatorship-and-Audiences-SPECTATORSHIP-AND-ACADEMIC-FILM-STUDIES.html> (accessed 4 December 2011).

⁷⁷ Jacqueline Bobo, “The Subject is Money”: Reconsidering the Black Film Audience as a Theoretical Paradigm,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25:2 (Summer, 1991): 421.

Abraham Adet working outside the mainstream in Australia today. Sudanese Australian young women making films also understand the crushing power of the media, and the need to harness that power for more accurate self-representation:

How come, when they show Africa, they show the poor places, they don't actually show the exciting places of Africa? ...when they go there they actually look for the worst parts, they go and look for the poor people and all this tragedy...I don't know why they would think that way.⁷⁸

As the American (and also to some extent British) film industry demonstrates, collaboration is crucial. Moving toward black ownership of filmic knowledge-production must continue, but throughout the growth of non-white media industries, insider/outsider collaborations can be mutually beneficial. Filmic collaborations (when they are truly collaborative) break down prejudices, hold each other accountable, and provide an important complexity of perspectives which problematise both subjectivities. Progress remains the job of both black and non-black filmmakers to push funders and community-producers; yet this paper argues it also requires male/female alliances to benefit all.

Critiquing Diawara in his own volume, hooks challenges what she sees as his gendered focusing of "...his critical discussion on Black masculinity"⁷⁹ and sidelining of the issues of black female spectatorship. In response, hooks calls for an oppositional gaze which she sees as inextricable from a female self-representation in which she

...noted the connection made between the realm of representation in mass media and the capacity of black women to construct ourselves as subjects in daily life. The extent to which black women feel devalued, objectified, dehumanized in this society determines the scope and texture of their looking relations⁸⁰.

These looking relations are the already-evident gap in a possible emerging African Australia filmic landscape. The films that do exist and which have been cited in this article that address women's stories or perspectives are largely collaborative or made by non-Africans, whilst the

⁷⁸ Grace Mabor. 'Slowly by Slowly' in *Cross-Marked: Sudanese Australian Young Women Talk Education* (phd dissertation of Anne Harris, published as Harris 2012).

⁷⁹ bell hooks, 299

⁸⁰ bell hooks, 299

much more numerous films about male African Australian issues that are available and rapidly proliferating are more often self-created. Applying hooks' oppositional gaze to the multi-efforts of those engaged in ethnocinematic projects (discussed in the previous section), and of those who continue to work toward establishing and theorising counter-hegemonic perspectives and representation in Australian film, there is a clear and present need for a gendered expansion of the genre – in both production and analysis - though beyond the scope of this article. This article argues the need for further film development and also scholarly analysis in this area.

Conclusion: film production as identity construction

“What does it say about racial purity that the best blondes have all been brunettes (Harlow, Monroe, Bardot)? I think it says that we are not as White as we think.”⁸¹

This article has argued that intersubjectivity in film representation and production may assist (rather than hinder) the project of identity-construction for contemporary African Australians. Appadurai tells us that transnational individuals and groups, especially as they become represented through film and other media, are imagined communities that reciprocally construct and deconstruct new and reconstituted notions of identity and nationhood, especially in so-called diasporas. The nominal mediascape that comes at times to represent imagined notions of home or of nationhood-in-exile sometimes bears little resemblance to life in countries of origin. Relationships between ‘new’ and ‘established’ citizens are transformed through creative works like filmic collaborations, but attention to Asante’s material conditions point the way toward professional development of young African Australian artists and technicians, not just one-off workshops. The human multiplicities⁸² apparent in the films discussed here (which is just a small sample) expose the ‘fictive unity’⁸³ of a singular African Australian identity, and assert the value of co-constructing these hybrid-identity narratives⁸⁴ (Hall, 2000; Delgado 2000) with and against outside others, both in countries of resettlement and back home.

⁸¹ Burchell, cited in bell hooks, 292

⁸² Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Brian Massumi. (2nd edition). *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. (London: Continuum, 1987/2004) 40.

⁸³ Souter, cited in Stuart Hall, 29

⁸⁴ Stuart Hall; Richard Delgado.

Importantly, Multicultural Arts Victoria's Emerge Festival, Victorian College of the Arts and Music's Community Cultural Partnerships, the Sydney African film festival (in 2008) and other initiatives are promoting, disseminating and in some cases helping to create a growing body of African Australian film work that conforms to varying definitions of the genre. Some challenge the very notion of identity that this film genre suggests. As the second decade of the new century unfolds, the relationship between these emerging identities and this emerging cinema genre will no doubt continue to evolve and to intersect. Most recently, the Australian Human Rights Commission's 2010 report 'African Australians' articulates what filmmakers, mentors and arts educators have long known, that recognizing "creative arts as a method of participation and inclusion" is effective and directly linked to social capital and attention to material conditions; that "through film, music, and other creative initiatives, art can provide a safe environment for participants to interact and explore complex social and cultural issues."⁸⁵

What hooks has described as the "absent presence"⁸⁶ of black womanhood in American film can be applied to contemporary Australian representation (or invisibility) of Africans. In a fledgling field representation in Australia, this article has sought to identify some trends and tensions, compare the coalescing genre in the national context with the more established (but still emerging) Indigenous film genre, and extend that comparison to the American industry over the past century. hooks invoked Hall in her call for a critical spectatorship that has agency, that is active, that

invites us to see film 'not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover who we are.'...whereby we see our history as counter-memory, and use it as a way to know the present and invent the future.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Australian Human Rights Commission. "African Australians: human rights and social inclusion issues project; a compendium detailing the outcomes of the community and stakeholder consultations and interviews and public submissions," 2010, Section 10.1 (h), http://www.humanrights.gov.au/africanaus/compendium/emerging_issues/ (accessed 14 December 2010)

⁸⁶ bell hooks, 292.

⁸⁷ bell hooks, 302.

This article has articulated some ways in which the very semiotics of African Australian film are adding to the diversity within the field, for films which are wholly, partly and not at all made by Africans in Australia. Yet these are not tensions for Africans in Australia alone. If we look to Africa itself, we see successful (and growing) models of Hollywood alternatives. Nigeria (and other countries, including South Africa) host international film festivals and boast a booming local and international film market for films that are ‘authentically’ African (see Figure 4), and are consumed in huge numbers both within Africa and worldwide, as documented by both local and diasporic filmmakers like Zambian Franco Sacchi. Some complain about the often-poor production values, while others see this as part of the distinctive, alternative nature of their films to a ‘slick’ but heartless Hollywood style. Nigeria’s Nollywood film market, and Bombay’s Bollywood suggest a new possibility in Melbourne which might become the next international film sensation: welcome to Mollywood!



Figure 4: A growing Nigerian film market, documented by Zambian filmmaker and photographer Franco Sacchi.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Franco Sacchi, (photographer/filmmaker) “Nollywood and African Filmmaking”, *World Policy Blog*. <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2010/09/27/nollywood-and-african-filmmaking>.

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