

# “This House Is Not for Sale”

## Nollywood’s Spatial Politics and Concepts of “Home” in Zina Saro-Wiwa’s Art

Nomusa Makhubu

In Lagos, it is common to come upon houses with the hand-painted sign: “this house is not for sale” (Fig. 1). This arises because con artists frequently sell other people’s homes to unsuspecting buyers. The notion of a home being sold off through a con echoes the discourse surrounding the flight of the country’s oil resources, from which the majority of the citizens do not benefit. The “crisis” of the home is symbolic of the “crisis” of the nation. As a visual metaphor, the home or the house is correlated to deception, illusion, or the ruse through which the experience of place is inseparable from image and imagination. Focusing on the theme of home in Zina Saro-Wiwa’s installations and video artworks as well as in Nollywood video-film generally, I explore the way in which sociocultural performance inscribes moral geographies. Although I do not make a strict comparison between video art and video-film, I do reflect on the definition of one as art and the other as popular culture.

The use of personal homes to shoot Nollywood films—usually the fantasy bourgeois home—is common. This doubly foregrounds “moral performance(s)” (Kalu 2003) where desire reunites with taboo and with social acceptability. In addition, Nollywood video-film, referred to as “home video,” is generally viewed at home (as well as in cafés and barber shops).<sup>1</sup> The double metaphor of the home as a space of video-film production and elite consumption, as well as a place within which gender and class boundaries are set and negotiated, defines home as a multilayered profound space. Although space is more abstract than place, I consider “home” not just as a particular location (place) but as a relational, mutable, and often dislocated space. I propose the concept of “profound spaces” not as a stand-alone concept but as part of a relational approach to interpret Nollywood’s representations of the fantastic in everyday spaces.

### SPATIAL DEPTH IN DOMESTIC SPACES

New York-based artist, curator, and documentary filmmaker Zina Saro-Wiwa illustrated the amplification and depth of space in her exhibition “Sharon Stone in Abuja” (2010), which she cocurated with James Lindon at Location One in New York. By discussing Sara-Wiwa’s video artwork *Phyllis* (2010) that featured in this exhibition, as well as her installations *Parlour* (2010) and *Mourning Class* (2010), I wish to suggest that visual constructions of domestic space in African popular culture are not only settings for melodramatic performances but are a microcosm for the “crisis” in social relations in contemporary Nigeria.

*Phyllis* (Fig. 2), shot in Lagos Island, depicts a young woman who lives alone in Lagos and spends her days watching Nollywood films in her apartment and hawking colorful wigs in the city. She walks the streets in a bright pink wig, with an enamel tray lined with wigs on heads of manikins in her hands (Fig. 3). She is portrayed in her home staring blankly into the camera. Initially, she is unable to open her eyes until she puts on a wig. As soon as she takes the wig off—as if possessed by a supernatural force—her eyes roll back so that only the whites of her eyes are visible (Fig. 4). Without a wig she cannot see, or possibly she perceives other realms. When she puts on a wig, she takes on the personality of the woman who last tried it on. She lies on a bed of wigs, picks one up, and her eyes roll back to seeing again. There is silent-movie-style text declaring, “Phyllis was not a morning person.” She prays, has posters of Jesus in her room and a Bible by her bed. She then walks over to a Nollywood poster on the wall and brushes her hands against it. Phyllis watches Nollywood films that depict clips in which women are dramatically crying. We see her eating *garri* and *egusi*—a characteristically coastal Nigerian dish.

1 Nomusa Makhubu  
*This House is Not for Sale* (2010)  
Photo: courtesy of Nomusa Makhubu



She leaves her apartment to roam the streets, hawking wigs. When a woman approaches her to try on a wig, Phyllis helps her put it on, then brushes it with her fingers, and then she suddenly tightens her grip on the woman's head as if she is sucking life out of her. The woman is left looking insensate and lifeless, like a zombie. After demanding money from the woman, Phyllis grabs the wig and sends the woman off. When Phyllis arrives at her apartment she puts on the wig that the woman in the street tried on. The music in the background is the Igbo gospel tune "I Am Not Alone" followed by Jackie deShannon's 1965 song "What the World Needs Now Is Love" sung by Dionne Warwick. Phyllis begins crying streams of blood (Fig. 5). Phyllis, positioned under a statue of a white Jesus, laughs as she cries. The character of Phyllis, defined by Saro-Wiwa as a "psychic vampire,"<sup>2</sup> is portrayed as a lonely, vampire-like woman whose subjectivity is symbolized by the artificial hair.

In Saro-Wiwa's artwork, we are made conscious of the spaces that confine women. It is not only the seemingly small, cramped, blue-walled domestic space of her apartment, but also the pictorial space of the television screen and posters crowded with celebrity faces. When Phyllis leaves her apartment, a man blocks her, giving her no space to leave the building, and then harasses her before letting her pass. These spaces of confinement are juxtaposed with the illusion of the seemingly liberating public space of the city. However, even the public space of the city has its limitations. As she walks the crowded streets, the gaze confronts her. It is not only men who look at her, but there are also piercing looks of pious women as well as others wearing a hijab.

The juxtaposition of public/private and of the symbol of Islam—the veil—with symbols of Christianity—the Bible, the poster depicting Jesus, and St. Peter's church, where Phyllis sells wigs—are significant as circumscriptions of the fantastic and of moral performance in certain spaces. The presence of the women wearing the hijab, however, is a coincidence. As explained by Saro-Wiwa, they happened to be in that location when the video was shot. The interplay between real and fic-

tional underpins Saro-Wiwa's work. Phyllis's psychological and economic dependence on wigs is contrasted to the veil. Worn by the women in the video in the same way a wig is worn, the veil covers the women's heads and symbolizes religious and personal piety. The wig suggests Saro-Wiwa's critique of artificial hair, which is used extensively in Nollywood video-film to portray stereotypical modern, public, Pentecostal Christian women.

Furthermore, Saro-Wiwa notes that the presence of these wigs and other "plastic goods" that come from elsewhere through international trade "are at once nasty and perniciously attractive: they infiltrate the soul somehow." Hair extensions are sourced from temples in India, where women (and men) piously shave off their hair, which is then cleaned and sold as hair extensions (Malcomson 2013). Saro-Wiwa's observation here invokes specific physical geographical places outside Lagos Island or outside Nigeria. They not only refer back to other places but, more importantly, they can be seen as ways of reading economic relations, class differences, or gender biases within the politics of space. Both the wig and the hijab map out and complicate "moral geographies," the notion that "certain people, things and practices belong in certain spaces, places, and landscapes and not in others" (Cresswell 2005:128). While the wig is historically indexed to bourgeois wig-wearing in seventeenth and eighteenth century England and France, its contemporary uses are a lot more variegated.<sup>3</sup> The bright pink or bright blue polymer wigs, however, seem to symbolize a guileful woman and are also associated with prostitutes. In contradistinction, the veil symbolizes modesty, devotion, and virtue while also circumscribing certain places as Islamic.

The debates regarding the hijab bifurcate into two notions: that the veil empowers women, and the Western feminist perception that the veil symbolizes sexist backwardness and confines or oppresses women. However, Nilüfer Göle emphasizes that the veil is a marker through which Islam is made visible and constitutes a "threat" to European ideals. Signs such as the veil are politicized, vilified, and used to marginalize Muslims



2 Zina Saro-Wiwa  
 Phyllis: *I Am Not Alone* (2010)  
 Archival print  
 Photo: courtesy of Zina Saro-Wiwa

3 Zina Saro-Wiwa  
 Phyllis: *Street Hawker* (2010)  
 Archival print  
 Photo: courtesy of Zina Saro-Wiwa

rial conditions of her world. Notably, Phyllis steals the souls of other women through placing wigs on them and looking straight into their eyes. In some ways, this element corresponds to the Ogoni belief that the soul of a human being has the power to leave its human form and enter into other forms (Saro-Wiwa 1992). This power arguably contributes to an understanding of the body not only as that which experiences space, but also as space. The soul inhabits the body as space, which is there-

fore a temporary “home” for the soul.

Being at home alone, Phyllis is socially alienated. As a single woman, she is marginalized. The margin, writes bell hooks, as a space of radical openness, is “a profound edge.” She remarks:

I had to leave that space I called home to move beyond boundaries, yet I needed also to return there ... Indeed, the very meaning of home changes with the experience of decolonization, of radicalization. At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that one place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference (hooks 1990:148).

in Europe (Göle 2003). In contrast, Saro-Wiwa’s video art uses dialectical critique to interrogate the contradictory value systems that are played out within both public and private spaces, particularly in Lagos. While the veil in Nigeria does not necessarily bear stigma, it does denote the spatial organization of Nigeria where the North is predominantly Islamic and the South is Christian. Nigerian video-films are defined through ethno-religious categories: Christian video-films are made in the south and Islamic video-films are made in the north (mostly in the city of Kano). In the pictorial space are layers of narratives, subtexts, and connotations about ethno-religious tensions (the recent surge of bombings by the Islamic sect Boko Haram, for example).

Saro-Wiwa criticizes the need for wigs in the making of femininity in Nollywood video-film. Without the wig, Phyllis loses her womanhood. This is not the only aspect that forms part of an otherwise fragmented notion of feminine subjectivity. The home is linked to the feminine body as if the one is an extension of the other. Phyllis’s experience in the home is based on *watching* rich women who are also mostly confined in domestic spaces on television, wearing fancy wigs. It is within the domestic space that Phyllis constructs her fantasies. She *looks at* posters of celebrity women; one of these posters bears the words “guilty pleasures.” She gazes at an image of Christ on her walls. The metaphor of seeing in this video has contradictions. Phyllis sees the world through fantasy and becomes “blind” to the mate-





4 Zina Saro-Wiwa  
*Phyllis* (2010)  
 Video still  
 Photo: courtesy of Zina Saro-Wiwa

Homeplace for hooks is a site of resistance. Home in Zina Saro-Wiwa's work is not only about estrangement and dislocation but also about resistance to seeing the home as a limitation for subjectivity. Saro-Wiwa defines Phyllis's state of mind as "loneliness" and as a kind of "mental illness." The video can be read as an interpretation of the mental space or space of the mind. This is not only in the use of things placed on the head (the wig, the veil, and the enamel tray) or the whitening of Phyllis's eyes but also in its portrayal of the infinitude of imagination, of place and ways of seeing. Since Phyllis finds it hard to wake up, what is seen in the video could be things imagined or dreams within dreams and therefore the visual realization of home as an abstract space.

The video portrays the physical place and abstract space that Phyllis occupies. In discussing the making of this video, Saro-Wiwa asserts that it was only by being in such particular space that she could envision the character of Phyllis. She describes this creative process as something that happens through "an emotional tenor and an emotional vibration that allowed everything to come through." The meditation through song enabled Saro-Wiwa to name this character Phyllis and loosened "the idea of narrative." Phyllis "asked" Saro-Wiwa to find and construct various visual elements of the video. Saro-Wiwa asserts that this project "didn't come from me but came from somewhere else." Her description of the making of *Phyllis* as a combination of conscious decisions and inexplicable, unintentional happenings alludes to the channeling of the abstract.

Saro-Wiwa explained that the color blue in Phyllis's apartment is a color that was not chosen consciously but Phyllis "asked [her] to find it" and she realized that her "insistence on this color for the installation" reminded her of her father's television show. Saro-Wiwa's father, Ken Saro-Wiwa,<sup>4</sup> a writer and the leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), was also known for having produced the television series *Basi and Company*. Although Saro-Wiwa does not necessarily connect the particular artwork entitled *Phyllis* to her father's political work against land and cultural dispossession, the space in *Phyllis* is not only a surface but has depth of meaning in which

Phyllis' inquietude reflects a psychogeography of dispossession.

Phyllis watches melodramatic Nollywood video-films where the characters, both male and female, are shown crying spectacularly. Theatrically touching the television screen, Nollywood posters on the walls, and stroking wigs, Phyllis alludes to what Laura Marks refers to as "haptic visualities."<sup>5</sup> In an analysis of the materiality of film in cinematic images and photographs, Marks (2000:162) argues vision is tactile: "the eyes function like object of touch." Haptic visuality is "connected to smooth space or space that enables transformation and codified space" (Marks 2000:xiv). In touching the screen and the posters, the immediacy of other places is experienced as a presence and depth.

Melodramatic Nollywood video-films are sometimes seen as banal—the opposite of profound. For Saro-Wiwa, however, they are simultaneously "highly emotive" and "unemotional." One of the women on the screen sways uncontrollably as if possessed. What emerges is a dialectic of depth and surface. Profundity defines depth of emotion and insight. The triviality and superficiality of melodramatic performance in the domestic spaces of Nollywood is appropriated by Saro-Wiwa to draw attention to surface and depth. It is not only the surfaces of the images on the surfaces of Phyllis's walls (posters and the television screen) from which she draws ideas of herself, but also her continuously changing "surface" appearance as she changes wigs from bright pink, deep blue, tan, etc. Phyllis's depth and polyvalence of character is negotiated not only through her "surface" appearance but also through the souls of women that she steals. Phyllis is a single woman who is not linked to the home as a wife or mother. The conception of femininity as one that finds profundity in the home and conjugal family (a theme that is predominant in Nollywood video-film) is presented in Saro-Wiwa's video as a problematic surface image.

Saro-Wiwa destabilizes the fantasy and ideal of a conjugal family by portraying a woman in the house without the presence of a man. She consumes (and is consumed by) the video-film playing on her television. She perceives ideas of her "self" through the screen as it reflects an image of her. In Nollywood video-film, the house is represented as masculine but the home



5 Zina Saro-Wiwa  
*Phyllis: I Am Not Alone* (2010)  
 Archival print  
 Photo: courtesy of Zina Saro-Wiwa

is depicted as feminine. Gender-biased concepts of the home in video-film necessitate the presence of a man as its proprietor and patron even though he is not always visible within it. For example, the man outside Phyllis's apartment who tries to stop her from leaving is positioned not only as if he is the edifice, but also as though he has rights to the space she occupies. In video-films, houses that do not have a male presence are portrayed as spaces of derangement, in which women who are not tied to traditional conjugal families are depicted as evil, wayward, or mischievous.

The fantasy bourgeois home with extensive reception rooms filled with luxurious furnishings is common in Nollywood video-film. A house with guards and servants is common. In video-films depicting the occult,<sup>6</sup> homes are devoid of women who otherwise inhabit those spaces as mothers or wives. Patrick Iroegbu argues that, within the home, spaces such as the kitchen or the cooking place are a metaphor for the woman's womb: "it

is where things are both fermented and cooked" (2010:24). In occult video-film, the womb of the woman is sacrificed to the occult god and the luxurious houses that the male members own have few or no women. These homes cease to be reproductive spaces. The house, as represented in video-films about the occult, generally has a shrine in a secret part of the house or has a corpse hidden in it and any woman who comes into the house is a concubine and, usually, a victim of sacrifice (see, for example, the film series *Born-Again Billionaires*, *Kingdom of Billionaires*, *Tears of the Billionaires* by Kenneth Okonkwo, a pastor, Nollywood actor, and producer).

The refusal of reproduction for magical creation of wealth and the sacrifice of the conjugal family constitute crises. Christine Koggel argues that the "critical importance of reproduction has prompted governments, colonial and nationalist, to control women and the moral power of domestic space." She argues that there is a cult of domesticity (an "emphasis on good mother and housewife") that is integral to "the cult of modernity at the core of bourgeois ideology" (Koggel 2006:200). In Nollywood video-film, the domestic space is a site of ideological struggle where the concept of the modern home is plagued by incursions of the supernatural. The bourgeois home, with its ostentatious commodities, is a fantastical and eclectic space that continually depends on the international marketplace. With its flows of commodities, the home can hardly be seen as a coherent whole and is profoundly unsettling.

#### THE CONCEPT OF PROFOUND SPACE

The idea of the home in video-film, centered on the fantastic,<sup>7</sup> alludes to the volatility of the home as a constellation of the imagined and the imaginary. These are terms that, according to Arjun Appadurai, "direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes, *the imagination as social practice*" which "is now central to all forms of agency, it is itself a social fact and is the key component of the new global order" (1996:31). Given that studio facilities are barely available for Nollywood video-film, many filmmakers use domestic spaces (borrowed or rented houses) and sometimes hotels for shooting films.<sup>8</sup> As Jonathan Haynes notes, "Nollywood does not have the capital to construct its own spaces" (2007:138). The use of borrowed homes for video-film performances has created a distinctive iconography of Nigerian domestic spaces in which the classic notion of the conjugal family is a site of struggle, reflecting the paradoxes of conflicting ideologies. Consequently, the ideal of a contented patriarchal conjugal family, as a "unit" of national constituency and of a capitalist mechanism (Mohanty 2003), remains a fantasy or an unfulfilled desire.

The Nollywood domestic space is relational, drawing on multiplicity and ambiguities of private and public spheres in Nigeria, and as such it illuminates the intricacies of performativity and power play. The association of the body with the home, the countryside, the city, and the nation-state, as Neil Smith compellingly argues, is "continual production and reproduction of scale" that "expresses the social as much as geographical contest to establish boundaries between different places, locations, and sites of experience" (1992:64). He asserts that Lefebvre's "production of space" is "an inherently political process" and "far from providing an innocent if evocative imagery, the use of spatial

metaphors actually taps directly into questions of social power” (Smith 1992:65). The boundaries of different scales are socially established, contested and negotiated.

The constructed domestic space, as a visual representation, in video-film invokes imaginaries of Nigeria’s rural–urban spatial complex. Although the urban home comes across as the ultimate expression of modern city life whose opposite is rural village life, the Nollywood home is the representation of both; one as the reflection of the other and vice versa. Generally, in video-film, there is a portrayal of those who fantasize about having a better life and leaving the rural village to go to the city, or leaving the Nigerian city to go to European or American cities. Tobias Wendl proposes that “the village forms part of the ‘uncanny,’ of what the city has repressed, and what now returns from time to time into the consciousness of the city-dwellers as the “horror of traditions” (2007:267). In this conceptual separation and problematic hierarchy of place, the African city is recast as village.

Arguably, the city—its large architecture and fast-paced ephemerality that makes things seem magical—could equally symbolize a fantastical place. In response to Wendl’s argument, it can be argued that the horror that surfaces is about loss and dispossession, where the concept of the village symbolizes origin or “home” and the city is a representation of that loss of origin. The city, as a place where no-one belongs and everyone is a migrant, is an allegory of alienation and social fragmentation. The allegory of the fantastic city is that it is not a place that an average individual can own or belong to, in the idealistic sense. It is always already a place of victimization, which is at times remedied by the construction of the village as a territory that has self-defined judicial systems. The city, as a totality, is incomprehensible or unfathomable. It is also a place that represents the theft of land, and the theft of identity, and is characterized by the ruse or the con (Internet scams, ATM cons, etc.). The city is allegorical to the wilderness that Wendl refers to. It is portrayed as a place full of dangers, illusions, and deceptions. The urban–rural complex has a presence in the visualization of Nollywood interiors that alludes to socioeconomic dynamics embedded in ideas of private property in the city or its opposite: sacred or ancestral land in the village.<sup>9</sup> Following this logic, the urban home can therefore be seen as metaphor for profanity. Seen as a repository for commodities and possessions, the urban home directs attention to the marketplace as fantastic space.

The marketplace, defined by Patricia Levy as the “focal point of the village or town” (1993:65), can be seen as a greater domestic space of production as well as consumption, manufacture, and performance of ideology and comprises infinite interspaces. There is a Yorùbá proverb that states *aye loja orun ni’le*: “the world is a market, the otherworld is home” (Drewal 1992:26). This proverb emphasises the coexistence of the material world with the supernatural otherworld, where the structuring of this world is based on the otherworld. Like a Foucauldian heterotopia, the marketplace is “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1986:24). Heterotopias are not abstract and counteract conventional order in an “other place.” The intersection of convention and unconventionality can be seen as a metaphor for the market as a network of crossroads or “the place

where roads cross in an endless pursuit of both profit and other things” (Adesokan 2011:10). Crossroads and the marketplace are defined in Yorùbá cosmology as the place where Eshu, “the trickster god,” “god of the marketplace,” and “master of such networks of desire” resides (Davis 1991).

Adesokan asserts that “the market is the bedrock of livelihood: it is a complex site of resistance, where the collective unconscious is shaped through traditional schemes of globalization” (2011:6). It is a space of exchange, of spectacle, and can be regarded as a profound space. People sell what they produce but the marketplace is also a place where cultural performances such as Alarinjo, from which Nollywood is derived,<sup>10</sup> and other travelling theater troupes would perform. Considering Adesokan’s definition of the market as “both system and place” that bears the “distinction between peripheral/primitive economies and Western economies” (2011:6), the marketplace can be argued to be a fantastic space *par excellence*. In Marxist theory, the materialist notion of fetishism, in which relations between people are defined through the exchange of commodities, may illuminate dyadic interpretations of the money fantasy as magic or wealth. There is the notion of the marketplace as an actual market, a place. However, there is also an abstract concept of the marketplace as space for the mystified and unconstrained exchange and flow of global capitalist trading that is cynically termed “zombie capitalism.” The negotiation of traditional practices in the West African market and international capitalist forces (the presence of mass-produced factory commodities as well as individually or communally produced items) deepens the images of the marketplace in Nollywood video-film.

6 Zina Saro-Wiwa and Mickalene Thomas  
Parlour (2010)  
Installation view  
Photo: courtesy of Zina Saro-Wiwa



Against the idea that land is commodity, sacred land is a particular place and territory that is reserved for burial or used for the performance of festivals. It is profound in its refusal of material production and consumption consisting of interspaces through which the possibility of a supernatural realm can be imagined as a definite presence. Since there is collective use of sacred land, a breach symbolizes the violation of a collective or community of people. Sacred land refuses proprietorship or cannot be commodified.<sup>11</sup> It is a space over which no one person could have power. The representation of sacred land in video-film counteracts the rise of capitalism in postcolonial contexts and questions the exercise of property as power. Power over sacred land is regarded as “supernatural” power. The profundity of sacred land lies in this symbolic and material struggle, where territory represents the basis of people’s livelihood.

My hypothesis of profound spaces therefore refers to the way in which everyday spaces such as the home, burial site, or marketplace have infinitude in their proliferation of other material and metaphysical spaces in the manufacture of desire and the performance of moral values. Rather than being a contained and pure unit, the home persistently produces the possibility of alternative space through the aspiration or desire for other things and other places. The television in the home would constitute

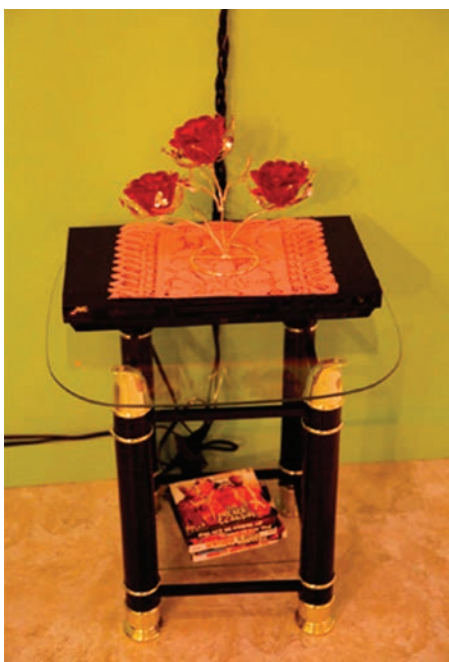
an interspace since it provides multiple connections to spaces at various scales (national and global). The television set, both in the private home and in public spaces, is a way of seeing “the world out there.” As Oluyinka Esan points out, in Nigeria “television has facilitated excursions to distant countries” (2009:323). The television, therefore, is a frame through which the distinction between interior and exterior is destabilized. Often, Nollywood video-films depict living-room scenes in which characters are watching other Nollywood video-films, replicating the act of looking through boundless representation. Another example is the shrine in the basement of a house<sup>12</sup> as shown in many so-called occult Nollywood video-films, that would also constitute an interspace between this world and supernatural worlds. Relations between material and simulated spaces reverberate through interspaces.

As a nonvisual metaphor, profundity is possessed by matters of “love, death, human fulfillment, redemption, weakness of will and self-sacrifice” (Harrell 1992:1). When performed, these abstract values texture space in video-film as something that is “more abstract than place” (Tuan 1977:6). For Yi Fu Tuan, “place is security, space is freedom” (1977:3). As Tuan argues, humans yearn for freedom/space, and that desire characterizes spaces as fantasy. Abstract values, such as love, fulfillment, and redemption, are central to the qualitative interpretation of space. My choice of the word “profound” seeks to emphasize depth so that the interpretation of Nollywood interiors can be a process of reading beyond the surface layer of what is visible and to unpack the abstract properties of space in discussing the contemporary condition. I refer to space in order to complicate the idea of “socially produced space” that “plays the same role as place” (Cresswell 2004:10, Lefebvre 1991). There is the notion that “home is an exemplary kind of place where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness” (Cresswell 2004:24). Nollywood representations of home have a complexity beyond theatrical performance, where the home is not a particular location but a deep visual image or an exhibitionary space.

**7** Glass flowers on a glass-topped coffee table in Zina Saro-Wiwa’s and Mickalene Thomas’s installation *Parlour* (2010)  
Photo: courtesy of Zina Saro-Wiwa

**8** Refreshment stand with gold-rimmed glasses in Zina Saro-Wiwa’s and Mickalene Thomas’s installation *Parlour* (2010)  
Photo: courtesy of Zina Saro-Wiwa

**9** Gold gilded frame in Zina Saro-Wiwa’s and Mickalene Thomas’s installation *Parlour* (2010)  
Photo: courtesy of Zina Saro-Wiwa





11 Mickalene Thomas  
*Two Wives: Nollywood #1* (2010)  
 C-Print  
 Photo: courtesy the artist and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



10 Mickalene Thomas  
*Two Wives: Nollywood #2* (2010)  
 C-Print  
 Photo: courtesy the artist and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Profundity seems an inappropriate and impossible term to use next to Nollywood video-film. It seems to be a better fit for the word “art.” Given that the kind of social value that is granted to art is based on concepts of authenticity, originality, and provenance, contemporary cultural practice questions the manufacture of value within the context of unequal economic development. Complicating this dynamic is the dichotomy between high art forms and popular culture. In European critical theory, this dichotomy is characterized by “a confrontation between the rural and urban working people’s tactics, aimed at the production of an autonomous culture (identity), and the institutions’ and elites’ strategies of dampening their old and odd cultural elements” (de Certeau in Jewsiewicki 1996:343). The differentiation between art and popular culture is based on legitimation, where art is regarded as singularly produced and intellectually engaging, but popular culture is perceived as mass-produced easy pleasure. Nollywood is referred to as popular culture (Barber 1982). This term, however, should not mean that it is depoliticized. For Stuart Hall, “popular culture is ... the ground on which transformations are worked” (1998:443). If one con-

siders other media, such as video art, the principles of differentiation are inconsistent. Video art often adopts an antinarrative approach but, like video-film, repetition is an aesthetic strategy. The differentiation between high and low forms of culture, it would seem, is not based on different elements of representation or even an issue of quality but on who produces and consumes in which geographical locations. The concept of profundity necessitates consciousness of continual power shifts through which taste and value are constructed. As “a people’s art,” Nollywood video-film draws attention to collectively constructed process-based creative public interventions that respond directly to volatile political and economic situations.

#### THE NOLLYWOOD LIVING ROOM—PROFUNDITY OR KITSCH?

Taking the contradictions embedded in terms such as “popular culture” and its kin, “kitsch,”<sup>13</sup> into consideration, I turn to and unpack Zina Saro-Wiwa’s interpretation of Nollywood’s representation of objects in domestic settings in video works such as *Parlour* (2010). Saro-Wiwa dislikes the term “kitsch” but finds Nollywood living rooms “visually dissonant, sometimes even just ugly yet fascinating in [their] inspiration.” She points out that the living room set in Nollywood video-films and particularly her collaborative art installation *Parlour* (2010) has universality. Visitors to the exhibition remarked that the living room reminded them of an uncle’s house in Pakistan or a house in Ukraine, for example. Furthermore, she regards these domestic settings as a form of accessing “modernity or the proximation of it” and constructing “post-industrial identity.”

Saro-Wiwa shows the complexity of kitsch in the kind of urban, modern home that is depicted in Nollywood. Her collaboration with artist Mickalene Thomas for the exhibition “Sharon





12 Television set Zina Saro-Wiwa's and Mickalene Thomas's installation *Parlour* (2010)  
Photo: courtesy of Zina Saro-Wiwa

Stone in Abuja” was an installation of a typical interior of a living room or parlor with green walls in Lagos, fashioned like the parlors that are used as a setting for most Nollywood video-films (Fig. 6). In this installation, there is a “fake” miniature Doric column, “fake” or plastic and glass flowers, “fake” gold-rimmed drinking glasses, and a “fake” gold gilded frame with an image of Christ on the cross, as well as flower-shaped lamp shades (Figs. 7–9). On the walls are large portrait photographs of Nollywood actresses by Mickalene Thomas. The actresses are dressed in batik print fabric outfits and seated on couches that are also covered with batik print fabric (Figs. 10–11).<sup>14</sup>

Carmen McCain (2010) sees the use of batik fabric in Saro-Wiwa and Thomas's installations as a copy of the ways in which Nigerian homes are imagined but not how they really are. She states: “The bizarre notes in the room were the zebra-striped and leopard print throw pillows, reminding the visitor that this was not a home in Nigeria but a gallery in New York, where animal print is often the easiest visual shorthand for Africa.” These objects can easily be perceived as kitsch, but why? Are these objects kitsch because there are many copies of the same objects in working-class and lower-middle-class homes? Are they kitsch because they recycle or copy images of modern living interiors

from American television programs? Donald Cosentino criticizes the “understanding of kitsch as evil imitation” and argues, “In Africa, imitation can also be part of a process of reinvention” (1991:242). He proposes that Afrokitsch “generates fresh and tense images out of old traditions” (1991:254). In their orchestration of familiar objects and reconstruction of familiar spaces, Saro-Wiwa and Thomas's installations incite a rethinking of the Nollywood living room as the culmination of exhibitionary spaces such as the gallery and the stage. Displayed objects are transformed.

Barrot asserts that, as “the main centre for forgery in Africa ... Nigeria uses the art of counterfeit in its video industry, including recycling the names of films: *Pretty Woman*, *Sharon Stone*, *Die Another Day*” (2008:28). This derisive description operates on a cultural value system that venerates the original over the copy in a sociopolitical dynamic that assumes Africans are copying the East and the West. In this sense, the term “kitsch” seems derogatory. The misconception that Africans are copying others is often based on representations of Nollywood domestic spaces that are filled with “kitsch” objects including imported designer leather couches, stuffed animals, green curtains,<sup>15</sup> glass-topped coffee tables with metallic frames, chandeliers, alcohol bars, and large-screen televisions, as well as glass and porcelain sculptures that signify modern wealth. Piracy, however, plagues the Nollywood video-film industry. In the arts, the Western postmodernist discourse of the copy, as demonstrated by Rosalind Krauss (1986), surmises that in the postindustrial, post-Fordist age there is a loss of an original. The economy of the copy in Nollywood is an important element as it subverts the hierarchy/cult of the original. The discourse of the copy and representation of kitsch in Nollywood video-film should shift from a criminalizing discourse (bootlegging, theft of ideas, etc.) to one that recognizes interventionist appropriation. Scholarship in the arts of Africa emphasize that repetition is a significant and inventive aesthetic strategy (Drewal 1992, Vogel 1991). The Nollywood phenomenon subverts notions of private property, authenticity and cult of personality (artists).

Celeste Olalquiaga distinguishes between melancholic kitsch and nostalgic kitsch, arguing that “kitsch is the attempt to repossess the experience of intensity and immediacy through an object ... it is the debris of [the mystical] aura ... a two-way ticket to the realm of myth—the collective of individual land of dreams” (1999:291) In this way, Saro-Wiwa's interpretation of kitsch in the Nollywood living room adds depth. It sets the stage for enacting memory and imagination as well as for thinking critically about home as a transient space and the loss or impossibility of “origin.” Rather than being an aesthetic quality that emerged from the formation of an industrial working class, cultures or objects that appear as kitsch in Nigeria arose in the negotiation of the affirmation of local cultures as well as appropriation of transnational cultures during economic shifts.

For Saro-Wiwa, this installation is not only an interpretation of a typical Nollywood or Nigerian living room or simply an assemblage of familiar objects, but it is a requiem. When I interviewed Saro-Wiwa, she mentioned that the color of the living room set in *Parlour* (2010) had more to do with the set of her father's situation comedy television show, *Basi and Company*. This comedy was broadcast in the 1980s on the National Tele-



**13** Zina Saro-Wiwa  
*The Mourning Class: Nollywood* (2010)  
 Installation view from "The Progress of Love,"  
 Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2013  
 Photo: courtesy the artist, © Pulitzer Arts  
 Foundation

vision Authority (NTA), and because it parodied the get-rich-quick mentality it became very popular. The domestic set in *Basi and Company* was often powder blue or green. The green space in *Parlour* (2010) resonates with the space constructed for *Basi and Company*, setting up a dialogue between Saro-Wiwa's creative practice and her father.

Saro-Wiwa and Thomas's living room or parlor in a gallery (Fig. 12) is echoed by the parlor in the television screen (since video-films are watched on television sets), as copies of copies proliferating *ad infinitum* in a matrix where no object claims origin and which frustrates the process of valuing and categorizing. There is something original about Nollywood (as well as Ghanaian video-film) as a culture "like no other," but it produces and recycles cultural images that circulate in the public sphere, making it both familiar and strange. Nollywood is everywhere. This is its fantastic nature so aptly defined by Okome as "ubiquitous,"<sup>16</sup> as if it were omnipresent. This is also how it can be experienced

as sublime and perhaps profound. It keeps drawing attention to prevailing and overwhelming power systems that are renegotiated in everyday life.

This infinitude of the living room is also demonstrated in Saro-Wiwa's video installation *Mourning Class* (2010). A series of television screens depict women (Nollywood actresses) looking straight into the camera and performing loud crying episodes (Fig. 13, cover). Saro-Wiwa points out that the performance of mourning does not necessarily mean that there is pretense, but that "the piece explores the role of performance in mourning." The close-up of each woman who is crying fills the space in each television screen such that one becomes aware of the way in which television encroaches on personal or inner space that evokes loss (of family). For Saro-Wiwa, this work is linked to the deaths in her family. The spatial dimension of mourning (alone at "home" or publicly on burial sites) is about confronting one's locatedness in the world. It is common to see, in a video-film, a woman throw herself on to the ground, crying and screaming hysterically<sup>17</sup> the same words repeatedly when she hears disappointing news. As also shown in *Phyllis*, spectacular wailing through the loud repetition of words could be seen as comic, but at the same time deeply poignant. Saro-Wiwa points out that she was interested in performed sentiment or the "choreography of grief." Hyperperformance in Nollywood video-film is crucial in understanding the politics of dispossession or of how space is

inhabited and is experienced.

Considering Larkin's observation that video-film "constitutes a living experience" of "fantastic narratives about Nigerian life" (2008:13), its profundity may not necessarily lie in its technical quality or narrative content but in its ability to bring unpolished elements of the material conditions of everyday lives into close proximity (a spatial metaphor). That is, the video-film medium appears as a hyperreality of everyday life and as such overwhelms the senses; in doing that, it can be aligned to the notion of the sublime. Video-film, as shown in Saro-Wiwa's video art, also interrogates the experience of new technology not just as visual but "multi-sensorial" (Drewal 2005). For Saro-Wiwa, this manifests not only in video art that we can see and hear but also in installations that invite the viewer to experience the typical domestic setting of Nollywood that is both strange and familiar, both "awful and engaging." Video-film seems to bring things into proximity such that they are too close for comfort.

Citing French journalist Emmanuel Vincenot, Pierre Barrot (2008:29) notes that Nigerian video-films have a "kitsch feel." Brian Larkin, however, finds that video-film reveals how the "colonial sublime" operates. For Larkin, whose focus is the technology of video-film, the "use of technology to represent an overwhelming sense of grandeur and awe in the service of colonial power" plays an important role in the "representation of technology and technology as representation" (2008:7). Colonial power was expressed through technology that pervaded political and cultural life. The construction of massive bridges, dams, and monuments by colonial administration in colonies is part of the colonial sublime. The sublime is based on profundity that experienced in relation to space. Larkin uses the Kantian and Burkean notions of the sublime as "the individual or collective response to a confrontation with phenomena or events outside of imagination's possibility to comprehend" such that it "performs an outrage on the imagination"; it is "about a representation of limitlessness" (Larkin 2008:35). This sense of limitlessness can also be seen in Saro-Wiwa's description of plastic goods in the Lagosian public sphere. While Burke locates the sublime as a characteristic of objects, Kant posits that the sublime can only exist "in the apperception of objects by a judging subject" (Larkin 2008:35).

Therefore, the sublime is an experience that is not only defined as seeing something "absolutely great," but it also describes "the overwhelming physical powerlessness individuals feel in the face of something overpowering and terrible" (Larkin 2008:36). For James Donald, the qualities of the sublime and kitsch are converse but can coexist. Donald defines kitsch as "the sublime's true antithesis" because it is "collusive with the value-less world of bourgeois modernity in providing a mask of order and value for its real disorder" (1989:240). However, since "terror is a ruling principle of the sublime," the sublime is only differentiated

from the fantastic by the manner in which it identifies "the source of terror" (1989:109). He argues that "popular forms share with the sublime" the transgression "of beauty, grace and reason ... [and] of aesthetic boundaries ... bad taste takes its place alongside the fantastic, the uncanny, and the sublime in a carnival of resistance to the hegemony of the beautiful" (1989: 19). Nollywood contravenes conventions of representation as well as unstable aesthetic categories of rational and beautiful. In that contravention, however, it reunites kitsch and the sublime to reveal the terror of (neo)colonialism and overwhelming gluttony of capitalism, which can easily be disguised as the everyday and mundane (kitschy objects in urban homes). By placing images of these effects into proximity, Nollywood renders them as shocking, and they can be experienced as sublime. The significance of video-film, in its emerging form, should not be undervalued. Even though the images of the home that Nollywood proliferates seem superficial, they are indices of real concerns about spatial politics.

### CONCLUSION

Saro-Wiwa's installation and video art captures the overwhelming reaction to a complex and fantastic postcolonial situation. Through its representation of domestic/local and international spaces, Nollywood becomes a significant medium through which contemporary spatial politics are negotiated. Furthermore, her work depicts the complex reinforcement of moral values through local sociocultural practices by "screening" other worlds on television. This paper instigates debate in the process of reconceptualizing the image of kitsch in the Nollywood living room as a profoundly extraordinary space. Profound spaces, as proposed here, are fantastic multiscalar spaces. Particular scales such as the home, the market, or sacred land facilitate the shaping of a way of life and are constituted by simultaneous imaginaries of spatial experience. The domestic house is represented in Nollywood video-film as a space where the desire of things that are *out there* is constructed. The depiction of these spaces shows how negotiations of so-called moral values in video-film symbolize the complexity of the image in contemporary culture. The rhetoric of a "better life" in the cities is transformed into the nightmare of the city as symbol of cultural decay, alienation, and social fragmentation. Nollywood themes draw out narratives of domination and marginalization, alienation and displacement, where people seek to move from one place to another (from the village to the city, from being local urbanites to being cosmopolitans or from poverty to riches). They are narratives that contend the margin, the border or the boundary to break up conventions of meaning, and to provoke and recreate geographical imaginaries.

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### Notes

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1 This is also changing. In July 2012, when I was in Lagos, there were Nollywood films being screened at the Silverbird Galeria cinema in Victoria Island, Lagos,

where American movies are usually screened. These were also produced as celluloid films rather than video-film and have been referred to as "New Nollywood."

2 All statements made by Zina Saro-Wiwa in this paper are drawn from a Skype interview with the author, July 28, 2014.

3 I am grateful to the external reviewer who pointed out Michel de Certeau's discussion of *la per-*

*ruque* as an interesting way to read the metaphor of the wig. Using the example of *la perruque*, or "the wig," de Certeau argues that "operational models of popular culture ... exist in the heart of the strongholds of the contemporary economy" (1988:25). *La perruque* is work that an employee does for personal fulfillment during work hours or "company time." In this way, the worker challenges the established order through the use of

popular tactics. One can think about Zina Saro-Wiwa's use of the wig as a way of "tricking" established orders. This is what de Certeau calls "styles of social exchange, technical invention and moral resistance" (1988:26).

4 Ken Saro-Wiwa was hanged by the military government of General Sani Abacha in 1995. When the agricultural economy shifted to an oil economy in Nigeria, land was used for oil pipelines. Ken Saro-Wiwa campaigned against Shell Oil Company, who were responsible for oil spills in Ogoniland, and the use of land for oil operations.

5 I would also like to thank the external reviewer for pointing this out.

6 The film *Born Again Billionaires 1&2* is an example. Members of the occult in Nollywood films are generally exclusively male. The word "occult" defines secret supernatural beliefs or practices and is used here without conflating traditional or cosmological beliefs with the discourse of witchcraft. The persistence of supernatural themes in early Nollywood productions led to the coinage of the term "occult movies" as a genre or category of Nollywood.

7 In his seminal work *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973), Tzvetan Todorov emphasises that the fantastic is defined by "hesitation" that is experienced by the character and reader (the latter through the character) while discerning between what is real and what is supernatural. For Todorov, the fantastic is characterized by "the brutal intrusion of mystery into the context of real life" (1973:26).

8 This research was conducted during 2011 and 2012. There are recent productions whose producers have been able to get funding to make films in various studios and other international settings.

9 Tunde Kelani's film *Ti Oluwa Ni Ile* (1995), for example, portrays urban prospectors who seek to build a petrol station and approach a village chief in order to convince him to sell a piece of land that is considered to be ancestral land. Here, the urban appropriation of rural questions private property and the logic of capital.

10 Jonathan Haynes (2007:286) points out that the industry began with artists from the Yorùbá travelling theater, Alarinjo, who produced celluloid films in the 1970s and 1980s that were seen as examples of exotic curiosity rather than artistic expression and focused on inside aspects of Yorùbá tradition. In the 1990s, an Igbo businessman, Kenneth Nnebe, produced films on cassette with Yorùbá Alarinjo performers.

11 In Kelani's *Ti Oluwa Ni Ile* (1995) the prospectors each die mysteriously for the acquisition of sacred land.

12 In *Born Again Billionaires 1&2*, Don Oscar keeps a shrine in the basement of his house in which he performs rituals with a syndicate of rich and powerful men who give human sacrifices to a cult in order to make infinite wealth.

13 Clement Greenberg's (1939) definition of kitsch as the cultural production of "the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe" links the emergence of this quality in objects as inherent in a particular socioeconomic disposition. Although Greenberg's notion of kitsch has been rejected by late-Marxist critics, its coupling of cultural decay with progress necessitates an examination of the particularity of the post-colonial and contemporary African context. Kitsch is regarded as the "offspring" of Romanticism (Kulka 2002:14), to which it owes its mawkish sentimentality.

14 The use of batik fabric is very similar to that in Yinka Shonibare's renowned art work. Shonibare is a British-Nigerian artist who constructs installations of mannequins dressed in batik fabric, based on classic European paintings. Shonibare uses batik fabric to appropriate or quote, rather than copy, canonical Western art. His use of batik fabric, a material that is now known as "African print" but is made through a

process originating in Indonesia, critiques the notion of authenticity (Shonibare et al. 2004). The discourse of copy and original, based on the premise that the power relationship between the colonized and the colonizer results in the notion that the former copies or mimics the latter who symbolises power, is subverted in Shonibare's artwork.

15 Green curtains and green paint on walls have become stereotypical of Lagos homes. The color green refers to the national flag that comprises green and white colors.

16 Interview with Onookome Okome, May 23, 2011, Pretoria.

17 I use the word "hysteria" with caution, and with suspicion of Freudian neuropathological explanations. The term is, however, also reminiscent of the scientific discourse about "mass hysteria" in reference to, for example, the 1962 Tanganyika Laughter epidemic where school children had so-called laughing attacks (Anglade and McConnell 2006:122). Loud crying, like loud laughter, is seen as a form of hysteria that differentiates between classes and between rational and irrational.

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