Transcript: In conversation with Karimah Ashadu

This conversation was recorded on 2nd September 2022. Speakers: Lara Choksey, Lecturer in Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures // Karimah Ashadu is a British-born Nigerian artist

Lara Choksey: Hello everyone, welcome back to the SPRC podcast. My name's Lara Choksey and today I'm delighted to welcome the artist, Karimah Ashadu, to speak to us about some of her recent films. Karimah is a British-born Nigerian artist whose work looks at labour, patriarchy and notions of independence in Nigeria and West Africa. Her most recent film, *Plateau*, documents a community of tin miners in modern Nigeria and it was screened at the Tate Modern earlier this year. She's won numerous awards and prizes which you can find out more about on her website, including the ars viva prize for visual arts, awarded to outstanding young artists living in Germany. In 2020 she established her own film production company, Golddust by Ashadu, which has a focus on producing artists films on black culture and African themes, and in 2021 she was an Abigail R. Cohen Fellow at Columbia Institute for Ideas and Imagination in Paris.

Karimah's films often focus on the camaraderie and community among black labourers, in and across different locations, sometimes thousands of miles away from each other. She doesn't romanticise her subjects or restrict them to stories of their exploitation. The subjects in her films aren't just surviving. They move in complicated and risky ways between processes of production and consumption. These informal economies connecting disparate places on the map rely on technological and socio-political systems embedded in colonial and imperial history. You can find excerpts from two of her films, *Brown Goods* and *Plateau*, on the webpage and these are the films we'll be discussing today, among other things.

Karimah, thanks so much for being here today. I'd like to start with a question about biography. When did you start making films?

Karimah Ahsadu: Thank you so much, Lara, for having me here, I'm really pleased that we're getting the chance to speak together. I've always been interested in films ever since I was a little girl. I just remember always being glued to the TV, I had a huge VHS collection. It was never something that I thought I would do as a career, but I guess somewhere subconsciously I must have just absorbed all of that. And when I started doing my BA at Reading - I am a trained painter, so I was a painter - but I was started tailing off and doing these performances for the camera. I never really thought anything of it because at the time you had to choose, you were either/or, you couldn't do both. So, I chose to stick with painting, but it was still niggling at me.

Anyway, fast forward. I started doing my MA at Chelsea College of Art and I was actually doing spatial design, but then film pulled me in again and I started attaching devices to my body, mechanisms to my body that I would build and also attach cameras to my body and started performing in space. Then it really gained momentum from there.

Lara: I wanted to ask you a question about movement in your films, and your sculptures also unsettle the relations between environment, industrial processes, mechanical devices, inanimate objects and human subjects. I was thinking about that camera placed into the wheel that goes into the mud and out again in your short film, *Lagos Sand Merchants*, and the repetition of that moment and that motion produces, for me at least, a feeling of fatigue as the wheel was turning, but it's also impossible to look away. I was completely riveted by this motion and I was watching to see where the wheel would get to on its way back down from the sky to the ground. Where was it going? What was its purpose? And in *Plateau*, as well, the landscape isn't just a background, the plateau isn't somewhere still and idyllic and picturesque, it's this ground that's being dug into that's full of water and its hills and crevices have been produced by mining. There's this feeling of being in dynamic landscapes that are constantly shifting around their subjects.

I suppose the question there is, is there a connection for you between the movements of bodies and objects, transformations in the landscape, and the process of filmmaking?

Karimah: That's a great question. I want to start by, when you introduced my work you said 'documents' - I always shy away from this word in relation to my work because I feel like what I'm doing isn't documenting. There are moments of observation, for sure, but I feel like it's much more than documenting and I'll go much deeper into it. The way that I consider the camera is with a great deal of respect and what I mean is that I consider it to have its own kind of almost personality, and when I'm making a work, I think ooh, how would the camera like to capture this? How would the camera like to reflect what's going on? How would I like to embody it? So, it starts from this kind of question, and in a work like Lagos Sand Merchants, these workers are diving down without any respiratory equipment, with just baskets and digging the sand and if you watch the film, you will understand. And I wanted the camera to really kind of relay some of this energy, so then I thought I'll make a device that kind of mirrors or in some ways shows this idea of going down and coming back up again, for air almost, and with this aggressive lurching and almost gasping, and that's where this kind of pummelling to the floor came in.

And in *Plateau*, I wanted the camera to have an almost corporal feeling to it and you definitely get a sense of that. So, yes, the landscape absolutely inspires the way that the camera moves, the way that the camera captures; that's a huge part of the work, for sure.

Lara: I love you using the word 'lurching', it's such a generative word. I'm really interested in how this visceral quality of your films – I can't think of another word – visceral quality, allows space for the viewer to be fascinated and enthralled and gripped almost physically by practices that aren't usually visible, or at least not in mainstream cinema. I'm thinking about the beheading of dead cows in a meat market; and what you just described, the submersion of workers bodies into polluted water. But I can also see why a viewer might want to connect this fascination to political consciousness raising, which I suppose is much more affiliated with a word like 'document'. So, consciousness raising about conditions in the Global South or meat production or ecological crisis or, indeed, informal waste economies; but it seems to me that you're really careful not to impose judgements on your subjects about whether their experiences are determined by exploitation, by colonial history, by racism.

At the same time, your subjects often want to talk about them. In *Brown Goods* something that really stuck out to me was a man saying that 'white people value their slippers more than they value the black man' - such a powerful line. I remember the trailer for *Plateau*, for the screening at the Tate, also emphasised the mine's colonial history, that area's colonial history - 'we just remine the mines that the whites left behind'. But in a sense your films surround these ways of narrating colonialism and racism without letting them determine the way that you tell your story.

So, I wondered how this comes up for you in encountering responses to your work, and do you feel that it's possible to make films about global systems of industrial production without also at the same time making films that address racism and colonialism however indirectly? Is this a response that always comes up for you?

Karimah: Another great question. Making the films that I make, with the subject matter, with where I make them in Nigeria in West Africa, comes with a great deal of responsibility – black bodies labouring on screen. So, I definitely feel- I wouldn't say a weight - I definitely feel that and it's something that I lead with, that responsibility. Now, the way that I make my films, yes, there's a consideration for, for instance, architectural qualities, maybe spatial rhythm, light and so on, the way that things are edited or whatever. But underpinning all of that are some of these themes that you've mentioned, some of these issues that you've mentioned and yes, they might not be shoved down the viewers' throats or glaring, I suppose, or leading with that from the get-go, but there is an undertone of that and there is a quality to that. I feel like it's really important in order to engage the audience to create, again, space for them to not even know that they're being drawn in, and by the time that they're drawn in, it's too late. They suddenly realise 'oh, okay, this is what this work is about. I thought it was just about-…', whatever they might have thought. So, I feel like I kind of just create this kind of almost a safe beginning, or a safe space. Maybe not in a work like *King of Boys (Abattoir of Makoko)*, but in a work like *Plateau*, for instance, where it starts off and it's quite lyrical and it's enticing and it draws you in and then when you're settled, you suddenly realise oh, okay, there are these very uncomfortable topics that this film is engaging with. I think it's a personal preference of mine, it's just the way that I like to engage viewers. And you mentioned not imposing judgements, I feel like that's really important and something that we could all do much more of.

And it's not that I don't have opinions about things, but I kind of feel like I don't have like a really strong political agenda that I'm educating people about. So, I don't know if that's really answered your question, but yeah, it's a very big question and I could talk for a very long time about it but I understand that we're limited by time. And it also irks people that I have this approach to making films. I can think about the Flaherty Seminar that I did in 2018 in the US, and people were outraged by the way that I speak about my work, by the subjects that I show, by the themes of the work and so on, especially in a place like America where race, race politics, race judgement, it's so fraught with it. And here I was coming in saying, yes, there are people engaging in manual labour but this is just the way that things are, and they couldn't fathom me. And I was saying I want to lead with rhythm and I want to lead with other things rather than just race first, can we start with that? So, it was very difficult for people to get their heads around.

Lara: We can maybe come back to this question, but I wondered if another way of - you used the word rhythm - another angle to look at it from would be, you mentioned the beginning of *Plateau* and in re-watching it I was so struck by – you talk about pulling your viewer in – how it starts with this description of the process of tin mining itself, digging to excavate and then tin and columbite mixed with soil and then that's washed, and the water washes away the soil and it leaves the product behind. The product is prepped and sieved, weighed for buyers and then it sweeps up to talk about the land, the voiceover sweeps up to talk about the land, and this is the voice of a worker being overlaid with these visuals, with these images.

I suppose the contention, or the issue, is this in danger of, not romanticising, but generating aesthetic pleasure out of this scene and what are the stakes of that? And I think what you do so deftly is to move the question into a different register, which is potentially actually about the creation of value in the first place, which is something again that your subjects seem to want to talk about.

Karimah: But you know that's really funny that you mentioned romanticism because that was the word that was on my mind. Listen, I'm a filmmaker. I do tend to romanticise things sometimes. That comes hand in hand with the work that I do. However, I'm not ignorant to what's really at play here and what's really at stake here and the extreme hard work that a lot of the people that I show in my films are undertaking - the labour, the physicality of that, and what that must do day in and day out, not only to your body, your physical being, but your mental being.

So, I understand all of that but that's not to say that there isn't a beauty in that too. There really is. There's beauty in discomfort. There is. It makes people uncomfortable but I feel like what's really important is having an awareness for everything, being really super aware and when you're aware and when you're responsible and when you understand what's really going on, on lots of different levels, then you can appreciate everything for what it is.

Lara: It's interesting that you talk about awareness because another thing that jumped out to me re-watching *Brown Goods* and *Plateau* is that your male subjects, and often the subjects are male in your films, in these films particularly there are these moments when they're looking directly at the camera. They stop what they're doing and they're looking directly at the camera and there's a sense in these moments that the viewer might be trespassing on something and seeing something that they shouldn't be seeing, and they're such powerful moments of disrupting that process, that there are these acts of labour, and it embeds this sense of voyeurism, I think, into the film. What are we doing here? Why are we watching?

And this made me wonder about this question of privacy and vulnerability, especially given that masculinity and masculine pride are themes that run across particularly these two films. So, I was wondering have any of these subjects refused to share things or questioned why you're filming them doing particular kinds of work?

Karimah: Yeah, absolutely they have. They have refused to speak about certain things and I completely understand that. For instance, in *Brown Goods* it happened quite a bit. He doesn't want to put himself at risk or others at risk and also when people give consent for me to make films and I explain I'm an artist and I'm making a work and whatever, they give the consent but they're not really sure where the work is going to end up. Neither am I entirely either at that particular moment. So, I have to be careful with what they are happy to communicate or not, and I have to also be very accepting of that and not push them. I mentioned this responsibility and this goes hand in hand with that, questioning why I'm doing whatever I'm doing.

Emeka, the protagonist in *Brown Goods*, I did ask him. I said to him, why are you trusting me with this information and he said 'I understand the value of what you're doing, you're kind of like a journalist, aren't you? And I want my story to be out there.' So, people agree to be featured in my work because it's about value, they want to be seen and heard. And I think everyone in whatever way that is wants that, wants to feel seen or heard.

Lara: That makes a lot of sense. And it's easy to underestimate how powerful the act of telling one's own story is. So, *Brown Goods* is this 12-minute film about Nigerian immigrants working at a waste goods disposal unit in Hamburg in Germany, where you are. And they're identifying and selling on discarded domestic items to buyers in Lagos, and one of the things that your protagonist in that film says is, 'every minute I'm connected to Lagos. We know exactly what the price is for X or Y or Z in Lagos at any given time'. So, there's this sense of being connected and that moment where he looks back to the camera, I think, encapsulates everything that you've just said, that this is a huge risk that he's taking because this is an informal economy, because he has to be there, he has to be hustling all the time to make sure that he's making the profit that he wants to make that day or that week. But at the same time, that's the risk that he takes in order to, I think - or at least I got the sense in that film - to get to that question of value and the value of the life that he's living.

I wanted to go back to some of the conversation that we were having earlier about the production of postcolonial value in the arts, and artists of colour are often, I think, under pressure to reproduce particular kinds of stories about racialised experiences and to be explicit about their political agendas, as you said. And in my world, in literary studies, part of the job is to keep positioning a writer of colour's aesthetic and formal inventions as integral to the social and political resonance of their work. So, it's not just about the history, it's not just about the politics, it's also about how these are being represented.

So, I was wondering, I suppose you used the phrase practices of independence, and this seems to me many things across the work. It's not only about the practices of your subjects but, in a sense, it sounds like it's also a memo to itself as a filmmaker.

Karimah: Absolutely, and as a human being. I very much consider this labour as a practice towards independence, and it's not again that I'm romanticising that. Again, it's what I said, it's what I touched on about having an awareness of things. In a country like Nigeria, and everything that has happened throughout history and where the country is now, it's very much developing and so on, labour is something that gives autonomy to people. So, in a situation like with the film *Plateau*, where people have gone to university and they can't get jobs and they go back to tin mining because they know they can earn money that way. So, it's not ideal but it's something that the generations before them have passed on those skills so that they're able, when times are really tough, to earn money.

So, it definitely is a personal thing. With every film that I make, of course there are reflections of me in that; what it means for me as a black woman in a country like Germany, moving through different worlds and so on, what that looks like for me and the way that I make my work and the way that I am validated and the way that I bring value and gain value - it's all interwoven in all of that. And being an artist and a filmmaker, there is a huge amount of personal independence and freedom that comes with that, but then there is also a great deal of uncertainty as well.

Lara: You mentioned passing on skills, and in *Plateau*, the miners in that film continue to use the infrastructure left by the British after the expiration of the International Tin Agreement in the mid-1980s, and this made it really difficult for these practices to continue and it took a group of labourers out of work. So, I wondered actually how you came to that story in the first place and how do you go about finding the subjects of your films?

Karimah: My work is also very much rooted in industry, particularly industry in Nigeria, or rather, the lack of industry in Nigeria. I often think and ruminate on what an amazing country it would have been should things have been different for us, Not that we're not incredible as we are already but there are very specific problems related to Nigeria as a result of what's gone down in history. But when I look back on the abundance that we have as a country - whether that's coal, whether that's tin, raw minerals, whatever it is, oil - you just sit there and it doesn't really make any sense. But then when you put things into perspective and you look at also the position that colonialism had and what it did to a lot of our resources, yes on the

one hand, we did allow it but then, on the other hand, a lot of it was taken by force; and tin mining is an aspect of that. We had an abundance of tin and the British came in and built an industry out of it, and if we had been able to make our industries work for us, what a powerful country and positioning we'd have today.

So, I do a lot of research. I encounter my subjects in lots of different ways. It depends what it is. In a work like Brown Goods, I literally was on the train travelling in from somewhere coming back into Hamburg and I noticed this location and I was like, what's that? Marked it down on a map and then just went there over the next couple of weeks and just started talking to people, meeting people and just being a kind of fly on the wall until I met Emeka and then took it from there. So, a lot of it sometimes is by observation and just being super curious. Other times I'll touch on something that has piqued my interest, like tin mining and I'll start reading and researching, reading research papers and books and all sorts of things, and then I'll organise a research visit to go and meet people there on the ground and so on. It's easier than it sounds. The insecurity in Nigeria is so real, travelling around by road is so, so difficult; and it's getting increasingly frustrating for me because I have so many ideas and things that I want to explore and I feel like I can't and one has to be smart and you can't put themselves in danger and so on.

So, I'm in this place right now where I have ideas that I want to explore, and make more works that go hand in hand with *Plateau*, but then I'm also thinking, perhaps it's also time for me to still retain the essence of what I'm saying with works like *Plateau*, and maybe I can approach it differently. So, I'm still kind of figuring that out right now. I think my practice is definitely shifting, and I like that also. I really like not stagnating. I really like not being known for only one thing and it's also about keeping that curiosity there and challenging. I always need to feel challenged, that is the point of my practice and once I get too comfortable, I get bored. So, I just want to keep on shifting things, and people also not getting too comfortable with what I do as well, keeping also people on their toes.

Lara: Yes, especially given the subject matter.

Karimah: Yes, exactly.

Lara: That's the last thing, I imagine, you want. So, your new project isn't set in Nigeria, it's set in Senegal, in Dakar. Could you tell us a little bit about that and what your experience has been working there in comparison to Nigeria?

Karimah: I have a couple of projects in the works. I'll speak about *Saltmine*, because it's a film that has been on my mind since 2015 and it's taken that long to get the ball rolling and right now I'm finishing the script, with the support of Filmförderung Hamburg, really amazingly working with a script consultant to get that script finished. It's a very different way of working than how I normally work, which is again great. It's a story that's set in - I don't want to say too much about it - but it's a story that's set in Dakar, it's set in a saltmine, Lac Rose, and it explores themes of independence and value. There is a protagonist who is a labourer, whose brother is in Hamburg, and his brother goes missing and he's caught between, does he go to Hamburg illegally to find his brother or does he stay in Dakar to be part of changing times at his work and so on. There's a union at his work and something goes down and he's kind of caught in the middle of it and then there's also a personal aspect as well with his family.

In many ways, the story is a reflection of me. And I started this story before I had my son and I left it for a while, and I've come back to it now, so I'm really curious, a lot of shifts have happened in my life since I started writing it and I'm really curious to see how that's going to be absorbed by the story and what direction that will take. So, the goal is to finish the script as soon as possible, get some more funding with my production company, Golddust by Ashadu, and to get the film made. I'm very excited at the prospect of doing that because it's the first time that I've written something, the first scripted thing, but I imagine when I do make it that it will be somewhere between fiction and reality. It will be somewhere kind of in between and this kind of awkward and very interesting, intriguing place between the two worlds.

Lara: What's it been like writing a script?

Karimah: It's been a lot different than I imagined. I thought I could do it with my eyes closed and I got a rude awakening. I'm working with a script consultant, who's been amazing, Zsuzsanna Kiraly, who has brought a lot of wisdom. It's just been a very different way of building a story and I also have to think very

differently as well. So, it's keeping me on my toes. And although I didn't want to admit it, I thought I could come in and do something radical, which I can, but there is a structure to things, things exist the way that they exist for a reason and scriptwriting and filmmaking is one of these things that does have a certain structure to it. And so I've had to respect those structures, put my own spin on it nevertheless, but respect them for sure.

Lara: So, finally, my last question is a somewhat speculative one. If you were going to make a film on similar subjects - labour, patriarchy and practices of independence - but one set in Britain, who or what would your subjects be?

Karimah: I've been thinking about this and I have to admit I have absolutely no idea. It's a tricky one for me because being based in Germany has afforded me the freedom to be able to deal with very difficult things like Brown Goods has done; but in the UK I feel like I've not been able to do that in such a way, and I'm not exactly sure why. Maybe it's too close to home? I don't know. I feel like in order to answer that question, I would have to be in the right situation, I would have to be based in the UK for a while exploring and meeting people. I feel like it would possibly be based in London. I'm not exactly sure really. It's a very difficult question to answer.

Lara: Well, there's something about proximity, isn't there, to your subjects and to the stories that you might want to tell.

Karimah: I watched a film called *Farming* not too long ago, I've forgotten who the director was. Have you heard of it?

Lara: No.

Karimah: It's a film about - well, I once made a work called *It doesn't need more* and I made this work back in 2014 and it was a series of interviews in the UK in London where I met women who were British Nigerian and based in the UK, and they were talking about their experiences being black, growing up in the UK between Nigeria and so on. And I met so many different women and one in particular stood out. Her name was Yemi and she had been farmed; and farming is something that took place in, I guess, the fifties, the sixties, where Nigerian parents would bring their children to the UK and leave them, kind of a fostering, and pay a family to look after them so that they would get a good education and have the experience of a British life. But what that would mean is they would completely disconnect from their children.

So, this woman that I met, Yemi, her parents had done that and then when she was of an age, they came back to get her but, of course, she didn't feel Nigerian anymore. She was entirely and truly through and through British, to the extent where she regarded the people who had brought her up who were not her parents, she regarded them as her biological parents, and she called them mum and dad and she had completely disconnected from her actual biological parents. And she now had this kind of disregard for Nigeria and had never been and couldn't go and so on. So, it was a complete psychological mess up for her and I was so intrigued by that. There was something about that that struck me and maybe there's something that I might do in the future, but this idea of feeling like the UK holds a certain set of values and advantages that are better than Nigeria, therefore you give your child up and put them in the care of other people, is so, so sad and at the same time, also very intriguing. You should watch this film, *Farming*, that I mentioned.

Lara: Thanks for the recommendation. It also reminds me of *Brown Goods* again and your protagonist in that film and another line that really jumped out is when he says, 'we're not supposed to be here', and the reason he's there is because of the war in Libya and his displacement caused by war.

Karimah: He actually means much deeper than that. He means we're not supposed to be in Europe, we're supposed to be back in Nigeria. If things had turned out the way that they had supposed to turn out, the way that we imagine, if Nigeria was able to - all the things I spoke about earlier - we are supposed to be in our country and we want to be in our country. And I do in many ways, although being British and being afforded the advantages of that, the way that I can move through different worlds, I completely and utterly have a great respect and appreciation for that. But also, on the other hand, I do feel like I'm very much Nigerian and I belong there. So, yeah, I guess there is this feeling of Emeka feeling displaced and a feeling like begrudged by it, like I'm only here because I'm wanting to make money but if I could make money in

my own country, I would.

Lara: Thank you so much Karimah, that's been such a fantastic conversation and I'm wishing you all the best of luck with Saltmine. Very much looking forward to seeing what happens with that script.

Karimah: Thank you so much for your time and for having me as a guest on your podcast.