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# My Nigeria: Navigating Narratives of Disappointment and Hope

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MY NIGERIA:  
NAVIGATING NARRATIVES OF DISAPPOINTMENT AND HOPE

by

Jemima Suwa

B.A., Wesleyan College, 2013

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Science

Department of Mass Communication and Media Arts  
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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for the Degree of

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in the field of Professional Media and Media Management

Approved by:

Sarah Lewison, MFA, Chair

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

JEMIMA SUWA, for the Master of Science degree in PROFESSIONAL MEDIA AND MEDIA MANAGEMENT, presented on JULY 5, 2018, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: MY NIGERIA: NAVIGATING NARRATIVES OF DISAPPOINTMENT AND HOPE

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Sarah Lewison, MFA

This paper supplements a documentary film on life in Nigeria. The film features interviews from Nigerian women and men sharing their thoughts on the realities of daily life in the country. The filmmaker uses body movements and dance to navigate the complex feelings arising from the frustrating as well as hopeful stories provided by interviewees. This is the filmmaker's attempt to reconnect with her home after being away for some time, while also sharing alternative perspectives of her home with the audience.

## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my family, friends, all Nigerians, and everyone who continues to challenge the single story everyday.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to God. I am grateful to Sarah Lewison, Lori Merrill-Fink, Darryl Clark, Akosua Adoma, Hassan Pitts, Abimbola Iyun, Sam Ameghiemen, Mr. and Mrs. Orisi, Elizabeth Eyo, Emmanuel Ihim, Mr. and Mrs. Suwa, Mr. and Mrs. Orevba, Emmanuel Orevba, Sharon Orevba, Lily Orevba, Bukky (Omowale), Grace Ochidi, Anna Bako, Jemima Gwamna, Shem Ayegba, and Cathy Lilley.

The individuals who helped me choreograph the dance, play the drums, execute the dance routines, film the dance, and record audio are students who volunteered their time and energy to this project. They are the true MVPs. They are: Alondra Woodard, Felicia Olawuni, Mayowa Olaoye, Jordyn Kess, Pelumi Shaleye, Tomide Ajifowowe, Ben Giles, Caleb Bunn, and Lucas Schroeder.

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## HEADING ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Bill Nichols defines documentaries as films that “speak about situations and events involving real people (social actors) who present themselves to us as themselves in stories that convey a plausible proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situations, and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a way of seeing the historical world directly rather than into a fictional allegory.” (Nichols, 2010, p. 14) This project started out as a documentary film that would focus on simple everyday activities of Nigerians. My motivation was a desire to challenge negative stereotypes about Nigeria and Africa in Western media. By portraying everyday activities, I would be moving the focus away from a large-scale representation of themes of violence and poverty, and depicting instead the complexities of people’s everyday realities. Doing this, for me, serves a purpose of reminding audiences that all Africans and all Nigerians cannot be lumped into broad categories; and a project like this would help acquaint people with examples of some of the layers that make up the unique experiences of different individuals and families.

Nigeria is a West African country bordering the Gulf of Guinea. It is one of fifty-four countries on the continent. Nigeria has a population of over 190 million people, making it the most populous country in Africa. The country has over 250 ethnic groups and over 500 indigenous languages (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d). Before Nigeria became one *united* country in 1914, she was two separate protectorates- Northern and Southern Protectorates, under British control. Before this amalgamation, Great Britain had been involved in trade, including slave trade, in parts of Nigeria. In 1851, some years after the prohibition of slave trade by Britain, Britain took position at the helm of affairs in Nigeria and signed treaties with indigenous



rulers in order to enforce the slave trade ban and secure her influence in the area. The city of Lagos, which used to be a major slave port, was the first location in Nigeria to be officially annexed as a Crown Colony. By 1885, after the Berlin Conference, Britain had extended her control to other parts of the region, forming the Oil Rivers Protectorate, later renamed the Niger Coast Protectorate. At the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, European nations came together to divide African territory amongst themselves, in order to resolve overlapping colonial activities on the African continent during the period of the *Scramble for Africa*. It was at the Berlin Conference that European powers granted permission and agreement for Britain to oversee the Niger River area (Nigeria) (Metz, 1992; Ajayi, Kirk-Greene, Udo & Falola, n.d.).

European empires dominated large portions of the world starting in the sixteenth century. In fact, by 1921, Europeans had colonized 84 percent of the surface of the earth (Imhonopi, Urim, & Iruonagbe, 2013). It was in the nineteenth century that European explorers and missionaries started to map out Africa and exploit her raw materials to fuel industrial revolution. This period of colonial occupation and exploitation is referred to as the Scramble for Africa. In 1884-5, thirteen European countries and the United States met to spell out rules for the colonization of the continent, in order to prevent conflict between the colonialists as they claimed land on the continent and harnessed her resources (St. John's College University of Cambridge, n.d.). History supports that, before colonialists arrived, Africa was "an assemblage of well-organised city-states with unique civilizations" (Imhonopi, Urim, & Iruonagbe, 2013). Examples to support these pre-colonial civilizations include historical evidence that in Nigeria, terra-cotta ceramics of the Nok people flourished in the region between fourth century B.C. and second century A.D. There is also evidence of metalworking in the fourth century B.C. and ironworking in the second century B.C. (Lovejoy, 1992).

By the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C. there was a string of dynastic states stretching across sub-Saharan Africa, supporting the claim that Africans were constructing unique political and economic structures before colonial intervention. Some of the modern ethnic groups today are a representation of the separate states that African societies used to be, based on ethnic lines, before European imperialists created modern African states. (Imhonopi, Urim, & Iruonagbe, 2013; Lovejoy, 1992). Africa encompasses a variety of cultures, languages, and systems of belief. It is the second largest continent, has more than one-eighth of the total population of the earth, and has an estimated 900-1500 different languages. The continent has the most physically varied populations in the world, and the greatest human genetic variation. (Dickson et al., 2018). This diversity was evident even before colonialists sectioned the continent in line with their interests. Telling the story of such a diverse continent is not an easy feat. Edward Said argued that all historical knowledge and facts about human society, as opposed to the natural world, rest on judgment and interpretation (Said, 1981). Therefore, storytelling in itself can come with a variety of complications because of subjectivities. And while subjectivity is not inherently harmful, it is important to be mindful of this when we tell or listen to stories.

Spanish essayist, Louis Sala-Molins, argues that contemporary images of Africa can be said to have reached “a formative peak during and after the Enlightenment period in Europe, where great thinkers such as Hobbes, Montesquieu, Condorcet, Hagel, Hume and later Victor Hugo, to mention a few, did not hesitate to formulate racist theories about Africans as primitive peoples”; people with no human dignity, who had no knowledge of their history or ownership of their land, and therefore, needed enlightened masters to tell them who they were, and bring freedom and civilization (as cited in Mengara, 2001, p. 6). In Hollywood films such as *The African Queen* (1951), *The Naked Prey* (1966), *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1981), and *Congo* (1995), we see sub-

Saharan Africa continuing to be portrayed, over decades, in the light of safari-like adventures and/or white heroes among savage people and beasts, especially on the white screen. And the limited representations of Africa by black U.S. producers has largely focused on grandeur and fantastical monarchies, as evident in *Coming to America* (1988) and the documentary series, *When Black Men Ruled the World* (1991). These sorts of portrayals ignore the complexities and dimensions that a story needs to be complete (Rahier, 2001). Media scholars have argued that the continent is largely misrepresented in Western cinema.

In their study of United States television networks' coverage of Africa over a thirty-year period, Kalyango and Onyebadi (2012) found that between 1980-2010, ABC, NBC and CBS hardly reported any news on Africa, and when they did, it was news on crises and conflicts or news surrounding U.S. interests in an African country. The stories on crises and conflicts included reports on civil wars and health pandemics, and U.S. interest stories included reports on economic relations and U.S. military involvement in an African country. (Kalyango & Onyebadi, 2012). This is an example of Television lecturer Sakota-Kokot's argument, that mainstream Western narratives do not allow for an 'ordinary' life in Africa; they simply rely on 'extraordinary' images of decay, violence, corruption, poverty, and naiveté (Sakota-Kokot, 2014). She writes that these images are portrayed in the extreme, and that they displace colonial guilt. In films such as *The African Queen* (1951), *Tears of the Sun* (2003) and *Sahara* (2005), Africa is merely used as a setting to advance the narrative of the Western characters. And in *The Constant Gardener* (2005) and *Blood Diamond* (2006), a major portion of modern Africa's realities are ignored, and there is a justification for the intervention of Western characters, usually white males, to come in and save the day (Dokotum, 2014; Hagen, 2013; Mafe, 2010; Sakota-Kokot, 2014). These portrayals shape and support perspectives and notions of Africa as a

continent in a desperate situation.

Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) said, “[t]he single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” If stories about Africa and Africans lack the layers and dimensions that make them complex and complete, they will encourage assumptions and stereotypes that audiences may be quick to make reference to in their everyday life. Stereotypes are exaggerated beliefs linked with a category. They present a quick channel of reference in the communication of specific issues, but tend to enable the persistence of negative prejudices (Balaji & Worawongs, 2010; Inigo, 2007; Qingwen, 2008). I am aware that there is some truth to the stories and images of poverty, violence, corruption, and disease, but these are not the *only* stories and images. Like other countries, African countries have beauty and goodness, as well as suffering and struggles. I desire to explore and share stories of the goodness and beauty in Africa. I want to do this by starting with my country, Nigeria. My definitions of beauty and goodness are especially subjective and personal in this project, as I aim to identify the beauty and goodness in simple activities and interactions that may commonly be dismissed without a second thought. I deploy the terms beauty and goodness to encompass images, stories, and activities that are not enmeshed or overshadowed by narratives of poverty, violence, corruption, disease, and despair. Images of hope and optimism in the simple, ordinary, and every day. Images portraying simple things like interactions between friends and family, love for soccer, and even household chores. I also find beauty and goodness in the ways Nigerians show a determination to upend the status quo, and in their choice to hold on to the hope of a better future. It takes strength and courage to maintain this intent, considering the economic hardships

and terrorism going on. I am glad that I get to portray in the film, the beautiful strength and courage of Nigerians who are fighting for change.

The idea of beauty in the simple things has been praised in Aesthetics for a long time. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, German aesthetician, Johann Joachim Winckelmann discussed his appreciation for artistic masterpieces that arise out of simple means. According to him, it is easier for people to create any number of things when they have a plethora of resources at their disposal. It is, however, rather difficult and worth paying attention to, when a person is able to create significant work with simple resources (Karvonen, 2000). Beauty is generally associated with goodness and positivity. Ancient Greeks believed people who are beautiful are good; and research studies in modern times confirm that people still tend to attribute positive qualities to attractive people and things, and negative qualities to unattractive people and things (Langlois et al., 2000). In Philosophy, the consideration of ‘everyday aesthetics’ dates back to the latter half of the twentieth century. “In the history of Western aesthetics, the subject matters that received attention ranged from natural objects and phenomena, built structures, utilitarian objects, and human actions, to what is today regarded as the fine arts. However, beginning with the nineteenth century, the discourse has become increasingly focused on the fine arts.” By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the field of aesthetics began to open up beyond the fine arts, as interest in nature and the environment increased (Saito, 2015). There are debates surrounding what constitutes the scope of everyday aesthetics, but the main idea is blurring the distinction between art and life, and “locating ‘the aesthetic’ in the character of an experience rather than in a specific kind of object or situation” (Saito, 2015). It also involves bringing an artistic approach into science, education, business, and sports. Everyday aesthetics incorporates gustatory aesthetics, domestic aesthetics, body aesthetics, functional beauty, and

aesthetics of design, etc. (Saito, 2015). My initial aim with this project was to capture the pleasantness in simple, ordinary, everyday parts of life in Nigeria, including sweeping with a short palm raffia broom, washing clothes by hand, playing soccer in makeshift soccer fields, entertaining unexpected guests during the holidays, open fire cooking, open air market shopping, random friendly interactions on the street, buying and selling, etc. Although the project has taken a bit of a different turn, which I will discuss further in this paper, the message is still very much the same. Nigerians tend to find ways to hold on to hope and to celebrate the things that make us who we are. Nigerians tend to maintain a sense of pride over our hospitality, respect for elders, humor, and fashion, among other things. These come up in the interviews, in spite of the heavy nature of some of the topics we discuss.

There is a need for the stories of Africa as told by Africans to gain prominence. I intend to join in the effort by young Africans across the world who are producing a variety of media content to challenge popular assumptions. A study of stories published in *African Voice*, a newspaper run by Africans in London, found that the African diasporic press is able to counter dominant negative stereotypes by covering the continent's political, economic, and geographic diversity widely. The writers resist simplistic tropes and one-sided or one-dimensional angles; they instead present positive, negative, and mixed viewpoints, provide appropriate historical and cultural contexts to go with the stories, and give additional information on diagnoses and solutions from sociocultural standpoints (Ogunyemi, 2017). There is a "Rising Africa" narrative that is emerging, and Africans across the continent are adding their voices to the evolving image or representation of the continent, by participating in transnational media production in visible ways. For example, an ethnographic study in Ghana between 2012 and 2014 found young Ghanaians actively using social media to challenge afro-pessimist narratives and attempting to

rebrand the image of their country and continent. For example, university students uploaded images on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram juxtaposing stereotypical, pessimistic images of Africa under the heading ‘They Say’, with more colorful images of creativity and entrepreneurship under the heading ‘We Say’. They were self-representing their country and continent in a more optimistic and enthusiastic light. In addition, bloggers repeatedly highlighted statistics and infographics on GDP growth, internet bandwidth speeds, start-ups, and tech entrepreneurs (Flamenbaum, 2017). Africans have collaborated with the Solidarity organization of students and academics in Norway (SAIH) to create campaigns that challenge stereotypes with humor. For example, in 2012, SAIH created a parody of Band Aid’s “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” music video, with their “Radi-Aid: Africa for Norway” video. Band Aid’s video in 1984 featured British and Irish artistes singing to raise money for anti-famine efforts in Ethiopia. The Radi-Aid spoof featured African pop stars calling on all Africans to donate radiator heaters to help Norwegians who were going through a severe winter. “In our video, African pop stars offer their sympathy to the poor, freezing people of Norway facing yet another hard winter. Without preaching, the video comments on the simplicity and the patronizing notion of ‘saving’ anyone.” (Viki, 2017; SAIH Norway, 2012). It is efforts like these, by young Africans across the world, that fuel my desire to challenge negative stereotypes about African countries and people. I intend to, with this project, add to the conversation by producing a variety of media content to challenge popular assumptions about Africa, and specifically Nigeria.

## HEADING TWO

### THE “MY NIGERIA” PROJECT

#### Introductory Reflections

The subject matter of this project is very close to my heart. I have been interested in exploring the representation of Africa and Africans in mainstream Western media for a few years now, so when the time came to decide what my final project would address, I knew I would go this route. I started out with a vision to challenge and disorganize popular negative assumptions of life on the African continent, and specifically life in Nigeria. I was born and raised in Nigeria, but I have grown into my adult self in the United States. I have come to acknowledge my deeply held convictions and interests here. Many experiences in the last few years have helped shape me into the person I am today, and I am extremely grateful for them, but sometimes I feel a sense of detachment from my home country because this process of growing and defining myself has happened away from there. In some ways, this project is an attempt to reconnect and redefine my relationship with Nigeria.

I decided to tackle stereotypes that portray Nigeria and Africa in a negative and hopeless light, by doing something as simple as highlighting the beauty in everyday activities, such as household chores, interactions between friends and family, and love for soccer, etc. I traveled to Nigeria to record interviews and footage of everyday life. Little did I know that in my effort to challenge other people’s thought processes about my *home*, I would undergo an internal challenging and disorganizing of my own. The understanding and perception of life in Nigeria that I was carrying around with me, and my ideas for the progress and outcome of this project, underwent a shifting and shaping beyond my control. James Clifford, in his discussion of diasporic communities, makes reference to a longing for home that prompts members of the



diaspora to sometimes invent memories of the home they have been separated from by time and distance; a home that is emotionally resonant (Klein, 2004). My memories and perception of Nigeria are not the same as the perception of a person who currently lives and interacts there on a daily basis. Going back was a sort of reawakening and reacquainting for me, with the realities of everyday life there.

When I arrived, a number of disappointing issues confronted me, and it did not help that my interviewees provided stories that intensified the disappointment I was already feeling. I was overcome with feelings of dissonance because I wanted to present Nigeria in an optimistic way at all cost, but I just could not shake the disappointment I felt because of issues such as misogyny, corruption, and inter-religious and inter-tribal conflict. Here I was, in the middle of my effort to debunk negative stereotypes about Africa, but I was experiencing those very stereotypes firsthand. I can only describe what I went through, and am still going through in some ways, as turmoil. This turmoil was tearing me apart inside and slowly paralyzing me. I began to second-guess my message, conviction, and capability. I was losing motivation to continue pursuing the story. It took everything to regain my zeal. I had to remind myself to stay open and allow things to play out, trusting that the journey would be worth it.

### **The Interviews**

The film features interviews from Nigerian women and men in their twenties and fifties, sharing their thoughts on the realities of daily life in the country. I interviewed 17 people: 10 women, 7 men; 8 above fifty years of age, and 9 in their twenties. These individuals are my friends and family. I have known most of them since my childhood. The adults have been friends with my parents even before I was born. The younger interviewees are a mix of childhood friends, and friends from middle school and high school. I knew it would be easier to convince

these people to participate in the project and coordinate interviews accordingly. I was also interested in listening to my family and friends describe life in Nigeria in their own words. These are people I have known practically all my life, but I have not necessarily had a chance to view their life experiences through their own eyes. This experience made me feel closer to them. The choice to interview people age fifty and above, and people in their twenties was intentional. I felt it would be interesting to hear the thoughts of people my parents' age and people my age. There were not as many differences between both generations as I thought there would be. Both groups vented about the sad state of things in the country, but generally communicated hopeful predictions for the future. The general perspective was that things would get better with the next generation because younger Nigerians are generally fed up with the status quo and seeking out ways to bring about political and socio-economic change.

The interviews were conducted between December 26, 2017 to January 4, 2018 in Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria. Most of the interviews were group interviews (2 or more people at a time). Here are the names of my interviewees:

- Mr. Amieghemen (male, mid 80s)
- Mr. & Mrs. Orisi (early 50s)
- Mr. & Mrs. Suwa (mid 50s)
- Mrs. Eyo (mid 60s)
- Emmanuel Ihim (male, late 20s)
- Mr. & Mrs. Orevba (mid 60s & mid 50s)
- Emmanuel, Sharon, and Lily Orevba (1 male, 2 females; mid to late 20s)
- Anna Bako, Grace Ochidi, Jemima Gwamna, and Bukola Omowale (females, mid to late 20s)

- Shem Ayegba (male, late 20s)

Below are the interview questions. There were a few modifications here and there, for different people:

- Describe what everyday life in Nigeria is like (favorite and least favorite things)
- What is one thing that makes you proud to be Nigerian?
- How is life for a woman in Nigeria similar to or different from life for a Nigerian man?
- What are some things your grandparents/parents did that you still do today, or have deliberately refused to continue in your life/family?
- Would you rather use a washing machine or wash your clothes by hand/ use a vacuum cleaner (or tall broom), or short palm broom/ cook with yam flour (or yam pounder), or pound yam with a mortar and pestle?
- In what ways has your life been changed because of technology?
- Do you think corruption will ever be a thing of the past in Nigeria?
- What are your hopes for Nigeria's future? What should change/ stay the same?

### **The Film Structure**

The film runs for 21 minutes and begins with a voiceover explanation of my intention to share a story from Nigeria that is not about poverty, violence, disease, or corruption. Then I go on to add that doing this is proving more difficult than I had expected, because it is difficult to ignore the ills that continue to disappoint me and other Nigerians. The first few sound bites I use from the interviews focus on the selfish ambition of certain leaders which leads to poor administration and management of resources, and therefore economic hardship for the people. The film then moves to a discussion of the significance of dance for humans in general, and Africans in specific. I explain that dance is of great importance to me as it helps me let go of tension and

make sense of emotions. Allowing myself to embrace the complex feelings that have arisen from working on this project, and moving my body as I experience and navigate the emotions has been helpful. These mixed feelings are from a state of desiring to share optimistic stories about Nigeria, while simultaneously being unable to shake off feelings of disappointment about the country.

The film goes back to the interviews. Interviewees share about how life has gotten tougher than it was during their childhood. They address recession, unemployment, ubiquity of bribery and corruption, division and discrimination, and gender bias. Some people offer suggestions to make things better. For example, one person says more people need to get involved in political process, and another says that everyone needs to join the fight against corruption instead of just leaving the task to a few people. In between these sound bites are dances and body movements expressing the spoken thoughts or providing pauses for the audience to briefly ponder on what has been said. I will describe the dances in greater detail later in the paper.

The interviews continue with people lamenting on the interethnic and inter-religious violence and killings that have become commonplace in the nation. They say they miss the peace and unity that existed in prior years, and hope it returns soon. They refer directly to violent acts by Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen. Boko Haram is an ISIS-linked sect founded in 2002 to challenge corruption and inequality in Nigeria, but in 2009 adopted a strategy of extreme violence under new leadership. The group opposes western education, is committed to jihad, and is responsible for around 30,000 killings over the past decade (Smith, 2018). The Fulani herdsmen or Fulani militia are of a semi-nomadic, pastoralist group in central regions of Nigeria, who have struggled over grazing land with indigenous tribes and local farmers for many years. Some people believe that these clashes are a result of environmental degradation which has led

to loss of land and migration of the Fulani people, while others argue that the conflict is a form of religious persecution because most of the people and property affected by the violence are Christians. (Ochab, 2018). There are a variety of reasonings surrounding this issue. People tend to get very passionate and heated when they discuss it. I tried to steer clear from including deeply political or religious opinions that could potentially bring up conflict or confusion and take the film in an entirely different direction. I would consider exploring those opinions eventually, in a different project. The bottom line is Nigerians may not agree on the causes or solutions for the violence and terrorism plaguing the nation, but most people agree that it needs to end soon.

The film concludes with interviewees envisioning a better future and sharing narratives of hope. They say things are already changing, as evidenced in the general mindset and actions of younger generations. Young Nigerians seem to focus less on religious or tribal division, and more on uniting to bring change. They add that Nigerians are generally resilient people, and that we have a way of pulling together to support each other through tough times. The film therefore ends on a hopeful note. Although conditions are far from ideal in the nation, Nigerians are hopeful for a better future. I tend to be optimistic about a lot of things, so dealing with the disappointment and frustration has been especially hard for me. I felt like I spent the months of working on this project in a sea of frustration. It seemed overwhelming and unending. I tried to grab on to traces of hope, but the more I fought, the more I sunk. This entire journey has been unnerving for me, but I have learned so much about myself, my country, my family and friends, navigating complex feelings, and filmmaking. I have discovered new ways through which dance can help people cope with the realities of life, I have learned to dig deep to explore root causes of problems, and I have learned to follow the path that a story wants to take me, instead of always trying to make it fit into a specific script.

## Film Style

This film is a reflection of the ways that the journey has stretched, pushed, comforted, and opened up my mind. In trying to shape my message and decide the best ways to convey it, the process has shaped me instead. I have used Bill Nichols' reflexive and performative modes of documentary to tell this story. The reflexive mode of documentary draws the viewers' attention to the filmmaking process, and the struggles and issues that arise from trying to represent the world. The performative mode seeks to evoke emotional responsiveness, rather than emphasize arguments and evidence. Through voice-over narration and on-screen text, I share about my decision-making process: the footage and interviews I have chosen to include or exclude; I ask questions that communicate my struggle to viewers. I also use body movement and dance to help relay or buttress my message. I will discuss more about my use of dance in the next section.

According to Bill Nichols, the reflexive mode is "the most self-conscious and self-questioning mode of representation" (p. 196) because it increases viewers' "awareness of the constructedness of the film's representation of reality" (p. 32). I have not hidden the turmoil I have gone through in the process of structuring this film. For example, in the film I ask the rhetorical question, "how do you share an optimistic story about a place, when the things that continue to disappoint you about it are difficult to ignore?" I was torn as I considered what portions to include or leave out. I did not want to disappoint the friends and family who volunteered to be interviewed, by using their words inappropriately. I also did not want to let my friends in the African Students' Council down, by sharing stories that support negative assumptions about Africa, instead of hopeful narratives as we have discussed many times. Reminding myself of the power I have, as a filmmaker, to shape my audience's views was a constant part of this process. Nichols describes the performative mode of documentary as "underscor[ing] the complexity of our knowledge of

the world by emphasizing its subjective and affective dimensions” (p. 202). The performative mode emphasizes the affect that accompanies a filmmaker’s involvement with and interpretation of a subject. My attachment to the subject is evident in the decisions I have made in shaping and transmitting my message. For example, I cannot seem to stay away from interjecting messages of hope in the middle of clusters of interviewees’ complaints. The personal connection and significance of this project for me, pushes me to make decisions that are highly emotional. It is my hope that viewers will be able to connect with the film on an emotional level. My use of dance, to an extent, functions to evoke emotional responses from viewers.

### **Dance**

Dancing is “as old as man and his desire to express himself, to communicate his joys and sorrows, to celebrate and to mourn with the most immediate instrument: his body” (Sorell, 1967, p. 9) Dance is an important part of my life and culture. I dance when I am happy, sad, stressed, confused, or upset. It helps me let go of stress, tension, and negativity. In my country, people dance at weddings, funerals, festivals, baby naming ceremonies, church services, Independence Day celebrations, etc. There is always one reason or another to dance. We express our joys, sorrows, and hopes through dance. “In the African society, dance is used to mark every event of life. There are dances to mark birth and transition from one age group to another, to celebrate the planting season and harvest, to mark the end of the year and beginning of another, to mark status in society, dances of occupational groups and dances to mark and document important historical events.” (Ugolo, C.E., 1994)

As a person who is very expressive with my body, I turn to dance to help me let go of tension and make sense of emotions. Moving my body, be it just my shoulders or fingers or feet, is therapeutic and freeing for me. In this situation where verbalizing my feelings and experience

appropriately is proving difficult, moving my body helps my process of navigating the disappointing as well as hopeful stories of home. Through dance, I am embodying the inner struggle that has risen from these seemingly contradicting feelings of disappointment and hope. I reached out to friends and fellow students to help interpret and express these feelings through dance. I was looking for a bit of structure, so I asked a friend who is good at choreographing dances to help choreograph feelings of frustration and disappointment, as well as hope and optimism. We met a couple of times to discuss my vision and intentions, view the interviews together, and brainstorm. I let her know it was important to incorporate African style movements and music in the movements and dances. After our initial meetings, I invited friends and other schoolmates to join. The dance team was made up of four women and three men- four Nigerians, one Nigerian-American, and two Americans. They kindly volunteered their time and energy to help brainstorm, and to rehearse the choreographed dances. To the Nigerian dancers, working with me on this project was meaningful in a personal way, and for the others, they said they came on board because they wanted to help make my vision a reality. I am grateful for their support and commitment.

Initially, I divided the film into four sections. The first section included interviews addressing corruption, the second section had interviews addressing gender (in)equality, the third section addressed hardship and violence, and the final section focused on hope. I worked with my choreographer to develop movements to accompany these sections. The movements were to be used between and within the interview sections. I broke up the dance sections as follows: a dance to introduce the second (“gender”) and fourth (“hope”) interview sections, dance breaks in the middle of the third (“hardship and violence”) and fourth (“hope”) interview sections, and dance routines to end the second (“gender”) and fourth (“hope”) interview sections. The movements



interpret themes of gender inequality, hope, violence, and culture. My dancers had several rehearsals before we recorded the actual version to be used in the film. I stayed behind the camera for the filming.

There were two parts to the dance for the gender (in)equality section. One part had two men and two women dancing together. At first the male dancers try to pull the female dancers back, but the women shake their shoulders and wriggle out of the men's hold. Eventually all four dancers are able to actually dance together, instead of struggling. The second part of the dance is just the two women dancing on their own. Their movements are wide, open, confident, and strong. They reach upwards, sideways, bend low and get back up. These movements signify strength, independence, and courage. This dance is a good reflection of how I view gender relations in Nigeria. The traditional view of males as superior or more important than females is very evident in daily life, but I continue to see more and more women these days speaking up, taking on leadership positions, and encouraging young girls to refuse to limit themselves.

There is a sweeping dance that my choreographer introduced. When I think of household chores, sweeping is one of the first two that comes up for me. When I was growing up, it was more common to use short palm raffia brooms to sweep. The brooms were so short that we had to bend really low to sweep. Household chores was one of the topics I originally wanted to use in my discussion of beauty in simple, everyday activities. My interviewees talked a bit about sweeping. They said it is generally regarded as a chore for female children. They also talked about the mixed reception of tall brooms and vacuum cleaners in Nigerian homes; some people prefer traditional methods while others are accepting of modern methods. I thought it would be interesting to incorporate the sweeping dance. The female dancer just moves left and right, to the beat of the drums, hitting the short palm raffia broom on the ground.

For the hardship and violence section, we took from the Afro-Brazilian fight dance: Capoeira. Capoeira is a type of martial arts that combines combat and dance. It is believed to have originated with former slaves brought across the Atlantic Ocean from Africa. It has been referred to as the art of liberation, because it was practiced on plantations as a form of breaking physical and mental bonds of slavery. Some historians say the dance-like appearance of the art served the purpose of disguising the enslaved peoples' self-defense and combat training. Today, capoeira has spread across the world and is practiced in parks, studios, universities, and professional institutions. (Capoeira Brasil Los Angeles, n.d.; Goncalves-Borrega, 2017; Princeton Capoeira, n.d.). I had a two-fold use for the fight dance. I wanted to use it to buttress my interviewees discussion of the unfortunate prevalence of inter-ethnic and inter-religious violence in the nation. The second use was to support the discussion of resilience and determination, qualities that Nigerians tend to believe we have in abundance. I like that capoeira is a mixture of combat and dance; it fits well with the style and purpose of the film.

For the hope dance, I had a female dancer move her body slowly and gently from side to side. Her arms go right, left, and then up and back down. The left-right movements are to mimic the calm waves of the sea. When I think of peace and hope, I picture a calm body of water, with gentle waves. The hope dance is reflective of this. As for the up-down movement, it signifies reaching for something we cannot yet see, and pulling it down. It also signifies calling out to a higher power or supernatural force for help. Nigerians are generally very religious people. Most people are either Christian or Muslim. Majority of my interviewees, in their discussion of their hopes for the future of the nation, mentioned prayer and trust in God as key factors for a better future. The up-down arm movements of the hope dance signify this.

I realized during editing and after several talks with my Project Advisor, that the film would

serve its purpose better without the four strict sections: corruption, gender (in)equality, hardship and violence, and hope. This was after my dancers and I had celebrated filming and completing the dance portion of the project. Fortunately, the movements still worked with the final arrangement of the film. We did not have to re-choreograph or re-shoot them. There is a good mix of choreographed and freestyle dances to go with the interviews. The film does work better now that the interviews seem more connected and thoughts flow better from one person to another, rather than forced into rigid categories. I ended up going in front of the camera to interpret and bodily express some of the thoughts, feelings, and themes from the interviews. In fact, the very first dance movement I use in the film is from one of my first solo sessions.

For my personal interpretive movements, I wrote the following and moved my body in accordance with how it made me feel: I love you, but you're hurting me and making me cry; still I'm hoping and holding on because I believe tomorrow is going to be a brighter/better day. I crossed my hands over my chest to signify love, then put my hands over my face and go down to the floor to signify hurt and tears. For the hoping and holding on part, I stretch my right hand up to the right then close my palm and pull down. I do the same with my left hand to signify holding on to hope. And finally, for the part about believing tomorrow will be better, I jump and stretch out my arms with my head tilted up. I was able to break up this simple dance sequence and use it with various interviews in different parts of the film. I also use close-ups of dancers' feet, hands, hips, and faces throughout the film.

## **Conclusion**

This project, *My Nigeria: Navigating Narratives of Disappointment and Hope*, started out as an attempt to share optimistic stories from the African continent, with a particular focus on Nigeria. As a Nigerian living in the United States, I have noticed that the images portraying

Africa and Africans in mainstream media tend to focus on poverty, violence, disease, and corruption. Although these ills do exist on the continent, they are not the only side to the story. Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) said, “[t]he single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” Seeing as there are a plethora of stories out in the world about the problems that plague several African countries, I would like to show that stories of goodness and triumph also exist. I decided to focus on the beauty in simple, everyday activities, such as interactions between friends, open fire cooking for special events, shopping in open-air markets, kids playing soccer in makeshift soccer fields, household chores, family gatherings, and friends coming together to watch sports. These would be good scenarios to show Nigerians going about their daily lives, without necessarily focusing solely on negative aspects.

I went back to Nigeria for winter break, December 2017 – January 2018, to gather interviews and footage for the project. I contacted family and friends to discuss my vision for the project and plan out the interview schedule. When I arrived *home*, however, I found myself faced with the reality of some of the stereotypes I was trying to challenge; issues such as misogyny, corruption, and inter-religious and inter-tribal conflict. It did not help that my interviewees provided stories that intensified the disappointment I was already feeling. My mission to share optimistic stories of my home became more of a challenge than I had expected. I went there prepared to collect stories that reflect goodness and hope in simple daily activities of Nigerians, and I had to quickly learn the value of allowing a story to pan out. I attempted to stick to my initial plan by trying to find ways to make the interviews fit into it, but my preoccupation with this goal distracted me from gathering appropriate footage to go with the interviews. I got shots of busy streets with many cars and people moving around. I also got shots of people buying and

selling in an open-air market, people selling by the roadside, workers at a construction site, a man washing a car, a woman cooking with outdoors with a charcoal stove, and children playing, etc. These shots have not necessarily been an appropriate fit for the film. When I was still in Nigeria, I did not try to reassess the direction of the film and record footage for it. I have learned from that experience the importance of following the path a film takes a filmmaker on. If I had done things differently, I would have gotten footage to work well with the issues brought up in the interviews, such as images showing the effects of economic hardship, or images depicting the resilience of Nigerians.

This entire process has been humbling and enlightening. I got to a point where I was unsure I would be able to appropriately make this film. It was tough to deal with the mixed feelings and emotions that it created. I was experiencing a deep love and disappointment for my country all at once. I wanted to share a hopeful picture, but I could not necessarily find any feeling of hope or optimism in my heart. The two generations of individuals I interviewed, people my parents age (50s) and people my age (20s) shared the same thoughts of frustration with the state of things in Nigeria. I began to ask myself if I truly believed there is beauty and goodness in Nigeria, and if I truly believe things will get better for the nation in the near future. I was unable to verbalize my feelings and experience appropriately, but I found that allowing myself to reflect on my emotions and move my body accordingly, helped me navigate the conflicting feelings I was struggling with. It was very therapeutic and healing to discuss this journey with friends, brainstorm on ideas on how to move forward, and create movements and dances to express the feelings and message. I did this with my close-knit network of friends and then opened it up to other schoolmates who enjoy dancing. These were Nigerian and American friends who caught onto how important this project is to me and willingly dedicated time and energy to walk along with me. I cannot begin to

express how grateful I am to them.

The film does not end with any overarching arguments or grand solutions. In fact, it ends with the same thoughts it starts with: “how do you share an optimistic story about a place, when the things that continue to disappoint you about it are difficult to ignore?” I want to encourage my viewers to research, discuss, reflect, and ask questions. I want my Nigerian viewers to reflect on the journey of our nation so far, consider what needs to change and what needs to stay the same, and also consider what they may be able to do in their own way to make a difference. I want all other viewers to listen to the personal stories and reflections of my interviewees and put a face to the stories they see or hear about Nigerians and Africans in mainstream media. These are real people living their daily lives; they are not mere statistics. I want them to see that while things may be tough in the country, Nigerians generally continue to be resilient in their hope for a better tomorrow. Perhaps this film will encourage some people to research and reflect on the history and trajectory of their own home country, consider what needs to change or stay the same, and also consider what they can do to make a difference.

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