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2022 Tejumola Olaniyan International Student Travel Award

Lagos, Ibadan, and Abuja Nigeria.

When I decided to study African visual culture with a focus on animation in Nigeria, I had to contend with the fact that there is not a lot of animated content in circulation from which I could pull a substantial amount of data for critical analysis. In order to enrich my inquiry, I had to adjust to fit that reality. It seemed reasonable to conclude that I had to complement textual analysis with an ethnographic study that explores the network of actors, events, and infrastructures that define animation practices in the country.

My proposed doctoral dissertation will examine African subject formation—the ways in which Africans become conscious of their identity and how they try to take a subject position on the material conditions of their lives in the contemporary world. With a focus on African visual cultural forms, the dissertation will put into historical perspective the representational power of the visual medium of animation by exploring the contexts of art creation in Nigeria, the role of practitioners, and the effect of the art on the publics they convene. I take the study of animation practices as not just a prism for capturing the ways in which culture-themed visual productions represent and produce their audiences, but also precisely, how the creators of animation are themselves being shaped by their hyphenated social positionings: as artist-citizens, native-cosmopolitans, and participant-recipients in the politics of the industry, state, and global economy.

With generous funds from the Tejumola Olaniyan International Student Travel Award, I spent the summer of 2022 from June 1st to August 18th conducting ethnographic and archival studies in Nigeria. The two-and-a-half-month trip proved extremely useful for the preliminary research needed for my dissertation project. During that time, I visited animation studios in Lagos (the economic capital) and Abuja (the capital city). I also traveled to Ibadan (the capital city of Oyo State) to do archival work at the National Archives located in the University of Ibadan.

As planned, I visited four animation studios: Magic Carpet Studios, Radioxity Media, 32ad Studios (all in Lagos), and Peak Frame Studios (in Abuja). I also paid courtesy visits to two other studios: Basement Animation (in Lagos) and Blackhouse Studio (in Abuja) and conducted phone conversations with respondents who could not meet with me in person. In the studios, I had one-on-one and group conversational interviews with animators and studio executives regarding their motivations, workflow, studio culture, and relationships with local institutions and global capital. From the interviews and

participant observation, different aspects of the budding creative industry have emerged that will be generative for my doctoral dissertation.

Animation studios vary widely in terms of modes of operation and creative techniques. While some studios approach animation ‘as product,’ others do animation ‘as service.’ The former produce animation as independent film projects with a thematic and aesthetic direction while the latter provide animation as a valuable commodity serving clients through ads, branding, and visual effects although I found that ‘animation as product’ studios still partially rely on service provision to “keep the light on.” With regard to styles and techniques, creatives adopt different methods. Techniques range from traditional two-dimensional drawing, two-dimensional and three-dimensional computer animation, to 3D stop motion. A few studios provide visual effects services that blend live action with motion graphics and computer-generated imagery. These different methods are employed in telling culture-themed narratives, visual stories that target local and international viewing audiences and sponsors.

While most studios mockup the Fordist model through an office-based production pipeline, others present a unique outlook on the operational structure of the creative ecosystem. This other group moved production entirely remotely after the global COVID pandemic. Empty chairs and tables and air condition units remained as traces of a workspace that once beamed with activities, but the same office provided studio executives with a formal ambiance to meet with local clientele and researchers like me, while creative work took place at home. The remote model allowed such studios to work with freelance artists from within and outside the country.

Through a creative approach that exploits local cultures and stories for wider consumption and an operational model that favors a flexibility of labor time and a decentralized work-place, animation in Nigeria presents another instance of how African creatives integrate into the global visual entertainment industry and how the practitioners negotiate their neoliberal identities and their subject positions. In the second week of my research, a delegation of Nigerian animators attended the world’s largest animation festival at Annecy in France to pitch their independent projects to potential collaborators and sponsors. This is an indication of the artists’ global presence but also, as a matter for further investigation, a test case for whether presence equals guaranteed favorable outcomes.

To understand the historical link between animation and other popular visual forms, I worked in the archives to discover editorial cartoons, comic strips, sketches, and illustrations that were published in newspapers from the 1970s. The connection between cartoons and politics has focused researchers on daily newspapers whose primary content were sociopolitical topics. Editorial sections offered a busy

site for the retrieval of political cartoons. I found new names that add to the list of famous cartoonists in Nigeria, but in addition to cartoons with political commentary, I looked to entertainment and lifestyle magazines that offer a broader range of artistic expressions that explored modern subjectivities in post-independence urbanized spaces like Lagos. These cartoons and comics manifest a wider genre featuring romance, advertisement, cultural and countercultural ideologies about social conduct, religious propriety, and profanity. Apart from the inspiration that they represent for contemporary Nigerian visual artists, these topics reflect more accurately the creative breadth of animation production circulating on social media and video-on-demand platforms.

With much appreciation for the Tejumola Olaniyan International Travel Award, two major highlights make this a trip I will always remember. The first was when I was asked by one of the studios to give a lecture about traditional African art. I count it a great privilege to be able to speak to these creatives about the historical and cultural dimensions of art as well as the value of art to society. Second, in another studio, I was thrilled to discover the story of a female 3D modeler who had started as an office assistant. In that role, she ran office errands and completed managerial duties. Now, she is the in-house costume designer, a position for which she qualified based on her experience learning fashion design. Limited manpower is a major challenge to the Nigerian animation space, but the story of this young artist is inspiring on its own and symbolic of the self-help culture characteristic of many studios where government support, training, and investments are seriously lacking.

I am grateful to the Tejumola Olaniyan family for creating the Tejumola Olaniyan International Student Travel Award. Because of the award and the travel in the summer of 2022, I have a clearer direction for my research and am poised to take my preliminary exam as a third-year Ph.D. student and look forward with confidence to crafting a viable dissertation proposal as I anticipate becoming a dissertator.