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Am I: The Film

Nadia Marie Sasso
Lehigh University

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Am I: The Film
A Documentary Film with Synopsis

by

Nadia M Sasso

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in Candidacy for the Degree of
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Nadia Sasso / Am I: The Film

Thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Arts American Studies.

Am I the Film
Nadia Sasso

Date Approved

James Peterson
Thesis Director

Monica Miller
Co- Director

Dedication

This is dedicated to anyone who has struggled with his or her dual American and African identity as an African migrant or child of an African migrant. To my parents, Siah and Abdul Sasso, who always reminded me to believe in myself while completing this thesis. To Dr. James Peterson for always given me the best advice, building my confidence and making sure I had everything I needed to make this project a success. To Juila Maserjian for sparking my interest in Documentary filmmaking and turning me into a great digital storyteller. To Maryann Haller for always giving me a great guidance to see the light in a dark tunnel at times. To John Pettegrew and Dr. Edward Whitely for always giving their support. To Monica Miller for meeting with me every time I needed draft edits. To Corey Packer for great cinematography skills, Chidi Onyejuru for your editorial help, and the wonderful women casted in the film for a great story that needed to be heard. Lastly, Allen Kingsbury and the DMS team for getting me through every technology problem. Thank you everyone for your starring roles!

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Overview	2
Outline	18
Timeline	20
Scope of Film	22
Film Specifics	23
Research	24
Production Elements	25
Subjects	29
Distribution and Media	34
Conclusion	35
References	36
Vita	42

Abstract

For this Thesis project I interviewed seven women of West African descent and documented their unique stories about identity and the tensions they have experienced between their West African and American cultural heritage(s). One important charge of the film is to engage the influx of immigrants that are moving to metropolitan areas in America and those that return to the home country, intermittently and permanently. Responses from the subjects in this study, especially their migrations back and forth in the African Diaspora, inform transnational identities in West Africans communities, particularly amongst Sierra Leoneans, Nigerians, and Senegalese. In my research and documentation I also explore the preservation efforts made by generational immigrants in order to unveil some of the tensions made accessible via the stories of those participants interviewed in the film. This film generates qualitative insights into the fusion of US and African experiences as well as several critical suggestions for new identity formations among those immigrants beyond the first generation. Respondents in the film are especially poignant when it comes personal conflicts with identifying culturally, racially, ethnically, religiously, politically, socially, and creatively via media. This film also shows how the women experience their transnational identities via language, culture and acclimation. Lastly, the viewer will witness the tension inherent in simultaneously having a global and local mindset that are sometimes at odds with each other – a fact that often sets each of these women apart from their peers.

Overview

‘I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton’s Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas...I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave-owners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

It’s a story that hasn’t made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one.’

President Barack Obama

Speech on Race, March 2008

The presence of Barack Obama as a presidential candidate in 2007 ignited public discourse in both the media and scholarly realm on identity formations and racial classifications. In this 2008 speech, President Obama acknowledges that his story makes him an unlikely candidate for President of the United States given his racial, cultural, geographic and linguistic experiences. However, what is most striking about President Obama’s statement is that, “we are truly one,” suggests an illusion that as a national public figure he is able transcend the labels of race, ethnicity, linguistics and identity politics at large. President Obama’s discourse on identity and his exceptional American

success give audiences the sense that he has transcended traditional racial discourses and categories.

As a result of this illusion of transcendence, MSNBC Host Chris Matthews, stated, “I forgot he was Black,” after President Obama’s state of the union address in January 2010. Although this statement at first may seem as if President Obama has succeeded in transcending race and ethnicity in America, it actually contradicts the idea of a post-racial nation and most importantly it works against the President’s narrative that he so eloquently explained in his speech on race in 2008. In the NBC News article “Do Blacks Want to Transcend Race” Princeton University scholar Imani Perry suggests the following: “[t]he ideal is to be able to see and acknowledge everything that person is, including the history that he or she comes from, as well as his or her competencies and qualities, and respect all of those things.” This is imperative so that categories or the transcendence of categories does not flatten or make one’s identity linear. Instead, the idea is to grasp and contain the complexities of identity. The limited notions of identity in the U.S. are problems of over-seeing and/or hyper-legibility that rely upon a certain sort of unitary essentialism rooted in phenotypical conceptions. In President Obama’s case there is no linguistic, performative, or conceptual metric to decipher if he is Black, White, African, African American, Kenyan, American, Biracial, etc. or in sum, there is no one category that could possibly hold in tension all facets of President Obama’s identity.

According to anthropologist and scholar of communication studies, John Jackson Jr., “America suffers from racial paranoia; in which the post civil rights lives of “affirmative action babies” brought up by experiencing legal segregation as little more than black-and-white images from one PBS special or another, or as family stories passed

down through generations (Jackson, 2010).” For Jackson, America relies too heavily on identity classifications and categories in relation to race and ethnicity that are affecting its inhabitants and citizens. This is an issue because race and racism rely on the theory of authenticity, which allows the policing of one’s identity by both the individual and society. Hence, when requiring one to choose “either/ or” of their respective racial and ethnic identities based on social constructions, it produces expectations or roles that subscribers to certain racial categories feel compelled to follow. Racism and the uncertainty of the role that race plays in the lives of Americans in particular, especially in the form of racial paranoia, is difficult for all segments of America to shake (Jackson, 2010). America has achieved a modicum of racial equality in law, but we are far less skilled at figuring out what this recent change in race (from blatant to subtle, from explicit to inferential, from biological to cultural) means for how we relate to one another after courts adjourn and the unabashed bigots have been publicly lambasted (Jackson, 2010).

The stage upon which such identity politics is set in America is less about categories and classifications and more about performing race and/ or ethnicity. “Identity” is not so much the issue. Instead, it is the politics by which identity must be adhered to in the context of the rigid and plastic strategy known as identity politics. These discourses continue to restrict and flatten the complexity of identity. As such it not only affects the President of the United States but everyday citizens such as the women interviewed for this thesis *Am I: The Film*. This project is an ethnographic study through documentary film, which engages the transnational identity formation amongst eight women as generational immigrants to the U.S. as well as returnees to the host country.

For the purposes of this research, "1.5-generation" is defined as West African women who were born in West Africa and spent most of their lives in America, while "second-generation" is used to connote West African women who were born in America to West African parents.

"Race: I define myself as Black, ethnicity African. I say I am Sierra Leonean, Facebook says I am from freetown SL, I was born in the U.S. in Cheverly, Md." ~ Mariama

"I'm African American, (Half)frican but African American, I am Black, and African American, literally that." ~ Issa

"I found that while I was appreciated for being American there, I was undervalued or dismissed for being African in the states." ~ Issa

As highlighted within epigraphs above, the stories of these women are far from the traditional immigrant stories of families that move to the Western world to build anew. Their stories showcase the constant negotiation of identities in being African American, American-African, Sierra Leonean American, Nigerian American, and/or Halffrican. They can never totally being one singular identity or another. Each of them is a multiplicity of identities. In many cases the limits of identity politics discourse stems from the fact that White and Black Americans as well as Africans in America, see difference as "their traditions versus ours," usually not in a positional way, but in a mutually exclusive, autonomous, and self-sufficient one (Hall, 1996). Therefore too many are unable to grasp the dialogic strategies and hybrid forms essential to the diaspora aesthetic (Hall, 1996). Thus, traditional migrant stories are told as a story of total assimilation or transcendence as with the President, in order to succeed. What makes these stories unique, is that it goes beyond the work of Paul Gilroy with British Blacks,

where there is a push for dissolving the essentializing of difference into two mutually opposed either/or's (Hall, 1996). Many of the women interviewed are beyond combining or coupling their multiple identities because doing so can not exhaust all of their identities. This underscores Blackness as a fluid identity somewhat similar to the amorphous identities of characters in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1995).

These stories reveal the ways in which identities emerge in the context of changing locales, breaking down the boundaries of an imagined, singular other (D'Alisera, 2004). Reflecting on their lives in relation to the de-territorialized realities of their world, I believe that these women are empowered by the "liminal spaces between cultures and societies that represent new imaginations about power and about self" (Ong, 1996). Their stories reflect an emerging sense of self as a transnational woman. All the stories reveal the emergence of gendered identities that bridge the gap between homeland and abroad, constructing unique multi-faceted identities.

"Because I grew up in little Sierra Leone itself. Your parents always made you feel that you were not American. You're African. There is more to us than being born in America. I was first and foremost Sierra Leonean." ~ Sarran

"I grew up, in an African household. My mom cooked, we ate rice, cassava leaves. When I was 6 years I was on a stool in the kitchen. You will learn how to cook. Africa came alive everyday in our house! We had masks in our house, paintings; it was an African embraced household. We heard music in our house all the time. Africa came alive through music, food, and art. My parents told me I was an African woman and you embrace it." ~Yeniva

These stories are an ethnographic entrée and firsthand account into how "delocalized communities maintain and enhance a sense of social identity in conditions in which the "totality of their relations" is not "played out within a single geographic

location and a single universe known to others,” but rather “is played out at a given point in time and across time” (Ortner, 1997).

“I didn’t know there were Americans until I went to school... I can say I can’t really relate to what African Americans go through because I felt like I was so removed from that whole lifestyle. From greetings to making certain foods, I never had that experience except from maybe in school and once you’re home you better snap back. You might as well be getting on a plane to Nigeria when you get home. Once you get home you can smell it.” ~ Oyato

Home is rarely recognized as the “site of the community [that] should be understood to be moving and moveable — even a multiplicity of “sites”—in which realities are defined by discursive practices rather than by pre-established social structures or the fixed coordinates of a semantic space” (Ortner, 1997). Space is named by Michel Foucault as “heterotopic” - a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which real sites, all other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.” In these ways, Americans have yet to fully understand Africans in their “physical, cultural and emotional movement back and forth between African homeland and American metropolitan centers,” (D’Alisera, 2004).

“I didn’t want my friends to come to my house because of the smell of food, and running to lock my door and put towels so it would not get on my clothes.” ~ Yeniva

“I did everything I could do to fit in with the Americans. I shamelessly wouldn’t acknowledge you if you were Sierra Leonean.” ~ Mariama

“I was forced into embracing culture. You may have other Africans that went to your school or lived in your apartment complex. You were probably outed and then you just have to go with it.”

~ Sarran

For many of the subjects growing up, the home was so African centered in America that many of the subjects felt as though they had to choose the more dominant

culture, in this case American culture, in order to acclimate themselves socially outside the home because they felt as though it clashed with what was taught at home and would not be acceptable to parents and family. This experience is known as the Transnational Circuit, “in which the distance between seemingly separable worlds is brought into close juxtaposition, creating complex heterogeneities” (Rouse, 1991). Thus, making many of my subjects transnationals; individuals that establish links between multiple sites, situating themselves exclusively in neither one nor the other, community and who can no longer be understood in terms of a single central orientation (D’Alisera 2004). As these transnational communities grow in number (and size), the ways they organize meaning and action become embedded in both the displacement and juxtaposition of cultural forms. Hence, such communities must be understood as increasingly deterritorialized (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997b, 1992; Bhabba 1994; Hannerz 1996; Clifford 1988,1992, 1997; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; D’Alisera 2004).

“You know when you’re young and you don’t want to be identified as African, I remember not wanting to identify as African. African was nothing cool. When people say you’re African, you’re like my parents are African. My parents were always like, what exactly does that mean. You are African. So in my head I always heard it but never felt it until I became myself.” ~ Yeniva

In this excerpt, Yeniva is not only trying to decipher who she is but rather what her identity represents in America being the child of African immigrants. Through her recounting of her experiences she is pushing for discourse of transnational communities and identity politics in America. On the other hand, the same way Kenya is conflicted on exactly how to accept their “son” who happens to be born in the United States of America as well as the nation’s current President, those from the home countries in West Africa of

my interviewees struggle with this same feeling or acceptance. A complex process of compliance and resistance to the “melting pot” of America, community boundaries are drawn, affirmed, reinforced, and contested in a series of assertions anchored in symbolic/ritual statements of “authenticity” that are often constructed for the children of West African immigrants (D’Alisera, 2004). The concept of “transnationalism” has had parents viewing their own children as strangers, as parents struggle to make those children familiar with national and cultural identities. They lament that their children, neither fully Sierra Leonean nor any other West African nationality, nor fully American, do not know who they are—or who their parents are (D’Alisera, 2004).

“In Brooklyn there was a lot of Nigerians and there was a church, Christ Apocalypse Church (CAC) that had a Nigerian pastor, that we called him Daddy Church. There were a lot of small families that were coming together. It became a community that was my family. I only knew CAC, didn’t even know there were other tribes.” ~ Oyato

“I remember going to choir rehearsals and birthdays etc, and everybody was Nigerian and everybody was Yoruba.” ~ Oyato

Oyato’s accounts of her childhood highlight an African-centered upbringing that reinforces an African identity. This reinforcement is important to parents because often times Africa is painted as the “Dark Continent” and parents work hard to create constructive images of the home country. There is a notion of “authenticity” that is centered around parents’ powerful, romanticized, and deeply nostalgic telling of homeland (D’Alisera, 2004). This issue is significant because it affects the authenticity that parents romanticize about when it comes to their homeland but also serves as a particular national connection to African countries that they believe their child should have as well. That is why parents are particular in raising their children via the

participation in rituals, ceremonies and other cultural events. In a multiplicity of ways, in particular through ceremony and ritual, they draw a set of boundaries for their children that reflect a collective identity and so, they hope, protect their children from a variety of outside forces (Cohen, 1985).

“Growing up as a first generation child in America, you live a double life. You have the way you talk to your parents, the way you talk to your friends, and the way you talk in professional settings.” ~ Sarran

“I fit in multiple places, when in Capitol Heights I do code switch to African Vernacular English, which I don’t consider to be a bad thing because that is the culture I am ascribing to at that point in time. When I am at school, I speak Standard American English. Although I do that now I did not always know how to code-switch and people even called me ghetto girl. In Sierra Leone sometimes I speak English to get what I want as at times it elevates my class and times I speak Krio to relate to my fellow Sierra Leoneans.” ~ Nadia

The stories represented in this film showcase the manner in which the cultural, ethnic, racial, and linguistic boundaries of West Africa and America are dynamic, complex, and multidimensional. The “problem” here is that while such stories represent the manner in which identity is dynamic, complex and multidimensional; there is a certain sort of rigid and flat discourse on identity that short circuits the complexity of such accounts.

“Children born in the U.S. to African parents, develop accents that are not typically African American and in the process encounter difficulties, particularly, with Americans in general both Black and White. They are neither American nor African.” ~ Dr. Cecil Blake

Given the constant conflicts of cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic identities represented by the women in the film, viewers will be able to see the development of social consciousness and call for new and novel meanings of Black representation. The information and insights provided by the respondents in the film argues for a new

discourse on Black representation. The complexity of the firsthand accounts provided by this thesis are not as much new but what is new is the scholars and analysts acknowledging the complexity and the suggestion that such data requires something new and different of our current analytical, theoretical and conceptual terrain and approaches. W.E.B Dubois has given a great framework of how to begin to analyze such data with the theory of double consciousness; “the history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self...He would not Africanize American, for American has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American...without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.” - W. E. B. Du Bois (Dubois & Farrah, 2005).

However, the work here goes beyond double consciousness. Filmmaker and scholar, Akosua Adoma Owusu, suggests that “the African immigrant is unlike the African American who has a double consciousness because the African immigrant has a triple consciousness.” Owusu believes that; 1) the African immigrant has to assimilate in White American culture in order to succeed in American society; 2) the African immigrant is grouped and identified with African Americans in the eyes of others because of their shared skin color, although the African does not always identify with African American culture and history; 3) the African immigrant has to deal with the African world and his or her own line of descent. This project shows that in addition to all the aforementioned 1.5 and 2.0 African immigrants not only have to deal with the

African world and his or her line of descent, but rarely settles into one cultural nationality because they were born in America, lived in America too long or struggle with the identity politics that include but are not limited to language, cultural, racial, and ethnic expectations.

“I used to blame my parents that they did not teach us the language. The language barrier was a defect.” ~ Oyato

“Even the way I say Nigeria is different. Something is just not right with me, how can I get right? My hair is not even what they expect it to be.” ~ Oyato

“I didn’t know anything concrete whereby nobody can question me. I can be born in New York or Alaska but as long as I knew the language nobody could question me.” ~Yeniva

“Coming to Sierra Leone, you walk a thin line. People think you’re just a JC (Just Come/Visitor) or Americanized so you really have to bring yourself down. I remember walking down and people stopping traffic and staring. Now I think JC assimilates more into society. But our people can tell you’re a JC even if you speak Krio. Sometimes speaking English is an added bonus and sometimes it’s not. You better weigh your options.” ~Yeniva

Viewers will see how immigrant experiences, diaspora social realities and/or consciousness are constructed, communicated, and contested in America and/or host migrant societies (Author et al, 2012). According to the anthropological data of the ethnographic study collected and collated by scholars such as D’Alisera and Awokoya, identity is fluid, situational, and socially constructed. Individuals have multiple identities that emerge in different social contexts. The women I interviewed often have to balance the identities; Black, African, African American, American, the specific West African

country in which they come from, ethnic groups of the home country, and assimilating to what is White in order to succeed. It is hard for 1.5 and second generation African migrants to culturally assimilate in both America and the respective African country because they are neither African or American but represent an identity that is more fluid. Many of their identities are molded through parents, schools, media, social and cultural clubs, peer groups that comprise of both non-immigrant and immigrant children.

Despite the identities they are socialized to perform, the women never fully feel African or American; they are always negotiating new forms of blackness from all their experiences of either living in the U.S., living in West Africa, or having had the chance of being in both arenas.

“Because I didn’t grow up in Freetown, SL I didn’t have any background of preconceived notions of how I was supposed to behave or not act. In that process, I found that I could do a lot because I didn’t care what others thought. But as you start to live within this community, you start to want to tame down a bit, because eyebrows were being raised and you started to conform to what society wanted you to be.” ~ Ami

“Ultimately, I tried to adjust. I started observing how I was supposed to act or talk. I tried to study talking black, black accent. L.A. accent. I turned in an essay in Ebonics like in middle school and they called my house. It was so stupid. It was tryna be something I wasn’t, because that’s how I was expected to behave socially. Now I’m just me” ~ Issa

The negotiation of multiple identities reveals the complex and often contradictory messages that these women receive from society from their parents, communities, peers, and institutions. They negotiate these multiple identities as they attempt to understand who they are and where they belong.

Moreover, the complexities of race and ethnicity in America have made the relationships of African immigrants in the diaspora with that of American born blacks

and Caribbean immigrants the centerpiece of how continued expressions are constructed, lived or negotiated (Awokoya, 2009). The various black diaspora groups i.e. Caribbeans, African Immigrants, and Blacks represented and handled in the U.S. via the complexities of U.S. discourse have had both positive and negative attributes in relation to intra and inter relational bonds.

"I can relate to African Americans in black professional struggle" ~ Mariama

"Hanging out with American friends wasn't really something they were too happy about. They thought Black Americans were a bad influence. American friends weren't really encouraged."

~ Sarran

"I felt as though African Americans were trying to be like me." ~ Mariama

"There are a lot of negative connotations associated with African Americans so you want to disassociate yourself. People like to shy away from that so I used to shy away from that because Nigerian/ West African parents they have these negative ways that they refer to African Americans and sometimes White Americans." ~ Oyato

Participants find themselves relating to the discriminatory racial and ethnic experiences of their counterparts but they like to shy away from the negative attributes associated with "blackness." In America, Blacks are criminalized and face stereotypes of being lazy and violent (Awokoya, 2009).

"This is a stigma that I usually I take to the socialization of children in the U.S. The image of the African American had always been derogatory in terms of the dominant culture and history. The African American has contributed a lot and the African children don't really understand the American history. They buy the negative dominant narrative. The narrative seems pretty hard to dispel even with Barack as president. When you have such a narrative, deeply entrenched in the curriculum and media. The stereotype becomes an issue from African children because they don't

want to be identified with what they read, what they hear and at times what they see in the media. So that resentment is there.” ~ Dr. Blake

Given the social pressure to perform being “Black” or “African” there is often a back and forth related to being Black versus African. In most households growing up, the preference was the African perspective while living/ being in America there is a pressure to perform Blackness. Participants are expected to have African centered identities, which were based in the allocation of authentic African names, and expectation to attend cultural celebrations, and religious rituals. On the other hand, the women tried really hard to fit in performing both Black and American identities taught outside of their parents’ rearing. They also used different names and/or changed the pronunciation of their names to make it easier for those in America and so that they can more easily fit in.

“My name blessing is for the American people. I am Nigerian and follow that because that was the culture I was accustomed to.” ~ Oyato

Many recognized that their love/hate relationship with other Blacks in America were based on sharing certain discriminatory experiences, trying to fit in with them, and being teased about being different and/or simply being African.

On the other hand, when 1.5 and second generation families visit or move to the home African country they are faced with complexities of ethnicity, nationality and class that result in identity negotiation. There is always a question of authenticity resulting in inter and intra ethnic bonds working in tension when it comes to nationality in ethnic groups in the home country of West Africa. The unique experiences of the women interviewed navigating local and transnational spaces not only highlight the establishment of new, fluid identities but the search for authenticity and purpose of being “at home.”

“For me coming back home I can do whatever I did in America, here at home and not have to worry about race. Granted we have tribal issues but it is not in my cipher.” ~ Ami

“What still keeps me here is that there is still a lot of work that needs to be done. Although I have been here 6 years, I feel like I’m just starting to understand what Sierra Leone is really about. My life right now is the continent. I don’t really see myself going back to settle in the west. I think there are so many amazing things going on right now. Even if I left SL, I would explore other countries. There is so much potential in Africa so I prefer living here. I see myself as a positive contributor to African progress. SL is my heart. The platform is more than SL, it’s for the continent.” ~ Yeniva

The women express that they “go back” because they feel an obligation and yearn to revive their respective African countries so that it does not resemble the way their parents had left it or for some the way they had left it, but to refashion and diminish the idea of a third world and poverty-stricken country. However, natives living in the respective African country do not always openly accept their energetic spirits and activism. Despite the pushback of their presence, all participants have noted the importance of visiting the home country and eventually moving “back home.” Those that have already moved back, feel they have an important job to do, whether or not the locals accept their presence. They too have the right to be apart of the evolution of their respective countries.

In the world we live in today, media has proven to be a powerful tool of learning and socialization. People seldom learn values from their parents and/or religion but from what they watch. Many of the complexities associated with this film derive from media-generated portrayals of immigrants, particularly Africans, and the media-generated portrayals of Blacks and African Americans. Thus, I use this very same medium that has molded the minds of many to change minds and build a sense of what it is like for 1.5 and second generation migrants in both America and on the continent of Africa, to build better relations among Blacks and African migrants, African migrants and Americans, and to cultivate returnee and diaspora relations within the respective African countries.

Most importantly, my sense is that this multimedia project showcases the fact that we need everyday, scholarly discourse that does not flatten the concepts of race and ethnicity to exclude those with multiple identities so that individuals do not feel pressure to perform one racial/ ethnic identity at a time in a specific region. Although individuals often lament choosing a racial and ethnic identity all the while celebrating the best of both worlds, one should be able to celebrate one's self in their entirety at all times.

Outline

Am I: The Film explores the history of African migration to the U.S. via the oral histories of participants. Although the majority of the participants were born in the U.S., thus telling the story of their parent's migration. There was one person born in West Africa who migrated at an early age. Furthermore, many of the participants' parents migrated in search of new educational and economic opportunities. In coming to the U.S., most established and lived in close-knit communities, as the first step in creating a transnational experience. This also aided in their parents raising them with an African centered identity.

The uniqueness of this migration process and transnational upbringing has left the participants that are 1.5 and second generation in a space where they had no choice but to learn how to negotiate various identities. Many of the participants encountered linguistic bias in multiple arenas such as: having an American accent when speaking the native language, "talking White", speaking African American Vernacular English, and code switching. The various language obstacles also translated into performing certain identities including being American, White, African American, Black, African, and the ethnicity of their respective countries. To maintain all of these multiple identities resulted in being teased. Almost everyone interviewed remembers being called an African booty scratcher as child or adolescent. In addition to being teased for being African because of negative portrayals in media, most of the women in the film were also scared of being associated with non immigrant Blacks. For some it was something their family had warned against given the negative media portrayals of Blacks. For others being Black was something they couldn't relate to culturally or they assumed had no culture.

The film also discusses beauty ideals that include both hair and fashion. In this scene various perspectives were shared from natural hair, weaves, colorism, and upholding western beauty in order to blend and succeed. The women of the film were also comfortable to talk about dating, marriage, and raising kids both in America and West Africa and how their dual identities affects or will affect that aspect of their lives. Many feel that the close-knit community they once knew to help with the identity process will no longer be around when they are ready to have kids. Those that live in West Africa with kids, depended on the family oriented community of their home country to help with all around family life.

Most interestingly, the women that reside in West Africa found that as much as they had a hard time negotiating their dual identity in America, they also had a hard time negotiating their identity on the continent in their respective country. However, they found the process more rewarding at “home” in Africa because they were apart of something bigger than themselves and that was changing the image of home for one that is positive. In the end, the women revealed that it was necessary to visit or move home to be a part of something that would “rebrand” home as something to be proud of and to celebrate.

Timeline

After earning my dual bachelor's degree in English and Sociology from Bucknell University and completing most of my graduate course work at Lehigh I have discovered the academic discourses necessary to explore and explicate the transnational experiences of 20th and 21st Century first and second-generation West African immigrants in the United States. My family's journey and transnational experiences inform my scholarly interests as well as my capacity to conduct and collect a robust body of research through interviews and a studious documentation of various rituals, events, and experiences. I decided that the most effective vehicle to showcase my research has been to combine traditional critical writing and research with digital media in the form of documentary film.

Before I started filming interviews, the topics represented were conversations I had with several of my peers and mentors. As a result of social media, I was also able to observe people commenting on their everyday life, and I knew that there were several people I wanted to interview. I reached out to some of those individuals and they were more than ecstatic. There were also others who saw my early promotions of the film and really wanted to be a part of it. I finalized individuals who had something different to offer. For instance, Mariama was unique because she hosts the biggest Sierra Leonean Independence day event in DC yet she was not born in Sierra Leone and married an African American. Issa Rae had a distinctive story given that she is an American Icon but also attributes a lot of Senegalese traditions to who she is today and not too many people know that. Everyone had something different to contribute to the film.

I spent the entire summer of 2013 researching the subject matter, reading, and traveling to Sierra Leone and Ghana to begin the interview process with the aid of the Lehigh Strohl grant. After that summer I began transcribing my footage and analyzing the data. When I realized the findings were so dynamic, I decided to do an in depth proposal for additional funding from every department at Lehigh University in order to hire a cinematographer and to travel back to Sierra Leone to capture quality footage and sound. I also conducted local interviews from September 2013 until January 2014.

After having completed all 8 interviews, seven of them women, and one from Dr. Cecil Blake as an expert, I transcribed each interview averaging an 1.5 hours and completed an in depth script for an editor. I also worked on film branding and conducted additional interviews that I constructed into blogs to garner a social media discussion about the film and subject matter. In addition, I did an additional fundraiser via Indiegogo to raise funds for postproduction costs. For that fundraiser, I wrote a detailed script to create the trailer and recorded the importance of why people should fund my project.

As of February 2014, I have been in postproduction. This process was delayed in efforts to find an editor but I have decided to edit the film myself. I started the process syncing the audio with the visuals, searching for music, and writing a 23-page script with time codes for each scene. I am currently still conducting literary research, editing the film to the above outline and preparing for distribution and media publicity.

Scope of Film

Am I: The Film is a multimedia intervention with a discussion on politics of identity with respect to immigrant populations and movements back and forth of the diaspora. The dynamic experiences of the film's participants include women that range in age 26- 40. They represent three countries; Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Nigeria. There are as many similarities as there are differences in class, upbringing, education, and religion. Four of the women live in the United States while the other 3 live in Sierra Leone. All but one of the women, were born in America. All of the women have had at least some college education. All share the same sexual orientation. The shared history of being of West African descent is revealed through the visual media of the film. Wherever possible, I try to showcase the effects of the pervasive history to highlight the negotiation of identity.

Having had a majority of their lives spent in America, they cannot seem to disregard that part of their identity. Whether they live in America or in West Africa, these women are also unable to ignore their African identity as well. I believe the film will show all of this and more. The constant negotiation for what part of their identity they are to express or perform is seen in the similarity of interview responses. The research conducted directly mirrors the personal and transnational experience. The media produced in this film not only speaks to a limited number of academics but a much broader scope of interlockers.

Film Specifics

The target length of this film is 30 -45 minutes, which is the max time for a film to be considered a short documentary film. I hired Cinematographer, Corey Packer, to film the interviews and he used his camera, a Canon 5D. I edited the footage on a Macbook Pro via Final Cut X. Other editing software included Quicktime and Adobe Photoshop. The photography consists of photos collected from the personal archives of the participants. Overall, I was responsible for directing, producing, writing, and editing for the film. I was also responsible for managing Corey Packer.

Research

The research for this film began with conversations with family, and others from first and second-generation African migrants. In order to ground my ideas I reviewed countless articles, books, ethnographies, artwork and films on the subject matter. Close attention was paid to the visual media on the subject matter in order to tell a concise and accurate story in film format. In the bibliography you will find a list of the texts I read prior to and during production.

Production Elements

Interviewed participants with the following theories and questions:

Part 1: Settlement Practices

I will explore how African immigrants create and sustain their own communities and this community building affects the assimilation process in the U.S. Lastly, I will explore the reasoning's for returning to one's home country in Africa after living in the U.S.

1. When and where were your parents born?
2. When and where were you born?
3. How would you describe your family dynamics?
4. Where have you lived?
 - a. When did your family move to America/ respective African country?
 - b. When did you move to America/ respective African country?
 - c. What was reasoning for your family/ you migrating?
 - d. Where did you settle and why?
 - i. Did you settle around people that shared your cultural background?
5. Do you want to live in America/ Africa having experienced both? Why or why not?

Part 2: Social Mobility

I plan to identify patterns and practices in social mobility from both a historical and contemporary perspective in comparison to American born racial/ethnic groups.

1. How would you describe your social class in America?
 - a. How were you affected by it?
2. How would you describe your social class in your respective African country?

- a. Did this affect your class in America?

Part 3: Re-defining Ethnic Identity

I plan to explore the assimilation processes of African immigrants from an individual perspective via personal narratives.

1. How do you define yourself?
 - a. Race
 - b. Ethnicity
 - c. Culturally
2. How do you think others perceive you?
3. How has living in America affected your identity?
 - a. Describe attending school in America?
 - b. Describe working in America?
 - c. How did you find ways to embrace your culture?
 - d. Describe how your parents taught you cultural practices in America?
4. How has living in Africa affected your identity?
5. What kind of cultural celebrations and publications did you participate/ embrace in America?
6. How do you feel amongst Americans, Black Americans?
7. How do feel amongst those from your respective country?
8. How do feel amongst other Africans in the states and in other countries?
9. How does your career choice and hobbies reflect upon your cultural identity?
10. How has your cultural identity affected your career choices?
11. Describe your different looks over the years from fashion to hair?

- a. Does it vary depending on what country you are in?
 - b. Did you feel pressure to conform to a certain look while living in America/
Africa?
12. How would you describe dating over the years? Were you ever worried culturally?
- a. How was it dating an American? How did both parties handle it? How did the families handle it?

Part 4: The effects of Language, Religion, and Politics

In the section I will explore how language, religious beliefs, religious institutions, and political knowledge affects the assimilation process for African immigrants.

1. What languages do you speak?
2. Have you ever face linguistic bias?
3. What are your religious beliefs? Do you they have anything to do with you cultural background?
4. What kind of religious institutions did you attend in the States?
5. What are your political beliefs? What policies do you follow?
6. Do you identify with President Barak Obama in any way?
7. How are you or were you affected by American policies?

Part 5: Transnational Identity Formation

The section will explore the progression or lack thereof for African immigrants to the U.S. in relation to politics, education, and income and the impact of immigration policies.

1. Tell us about some of your accomplishments?
2. Has your transnational identity affected your success in any way?

3. Where do you see yourself in the next ten years?
4. Is important that Africans/ both natives and generational reach back to their respective countries?

To conduct these interviews I travelled to Washington DC, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ghana and Sierra Leone. In many of the interviews I had issues with audio and relied on using my iPhone. In Sierra Leone, I traveled with Corey, a White male, which made it difficult to go unnoticed at times in capturing footage. We were often asked to erase footage or harassed for the camera. Also while there, electricity served as an issue and as a result had to use natural light in most of the interviews. The minimal amount of Internet available made it hard to upload and back up footage and share or collect information via the World Wide Web.

In post- production, I did transcribe each interview, sync audio, and conducted a detailed storyboard for this film. Although a visual thinker, I wanted to be as detailed as possible with the story of film to so that as edits are made to the film it would be easy to follow and maintain the pace.

Subjects

Odunayo Adeoye (Oyato): Creative Director of OYATO Designs & Artistry

Odunaya is the third child of six children, is a proud Nigerian born and raised in New York City. She grew up with a love for art and pursued that love faithfully throughout her academic life. From middle school to high school she perfected her craft through fine art and soon enough found her niche through an Apparel Design degree and recently capped it off with a degree in Marketing from the Fashion Institute of Technology. Upon graduation, in 2008 she debuted her first collection; Enigmatic and began producing custom made clothing for friends and family. Odunayo took up jobs as an intern at Tracy Reese, an assistant designer at another small design firm, a stylist at an indie boutique and a freelance makeup artist further immersing herself in the world of fashion and beauty. With the knowledge acquired from her formal education, internships and work she started OYATO Designs. A full service clothier where she designs and manufactures ready to wear and custom made clothing for women. About a year later, she partnered up with her cousin, Abi Yussuf to find a way to utilize their love for makeup and OYATO Artistry, the sister company to OYATO Designs was born. A beauty oriented business that conducts makeovers for women and men through makeup, hair and wardrobe styling.

Ajara Bomah: MSW and CEO Rhoyalty Concepts Events and Project Management Consultants

Ms. Ajara Bomah. Originally from the U.S., Ajara obtained her Master degree in Psychosocial Therapy at Smith College School of Social Work and her Bachelors of

Science in Sociology & African Studies at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Ms. Bomah has worked with International, Public & Private Sector, Non-Governmental and Governmental Organizations. She worked under the Office of the President Of Sierra Leone as the Logistics Manager for the Office of Diaspora Affairs, where the main focus was capacity building and Diaspora relations with the Government and people of Sierra Leone. Currently Ms. Bomah is working as an Events & Project Management Consultant in Sierra Leone. She recently set up the Royal Ladies Club which is scheduled to be launching September 2013. The purpose of the Royal Ladies Club is to provide a positive experience for young women ages 13 to 16 in leadership development, academic counselling, personal counselling, mentoring, community service, and serve as a rites of passage.

Aminata Dumbuya: Proprietor and BSI, Pinnacle, & Masada Waste Mgt

Ms. Aminata B. Dumbuya is a Business Woman thriving in the emergence of Sierra Leone's budding private sector. She spent all of her youth and young adult life in the United States of America. After the war ended in her native Sierra Leone, she felt a strong urge to return back to Sierra Leone and contribute in the transformative process by giving back and sharing her skills and passion. She heeded to this call in December of 2004 and has been living here since then. Her passion for her country's development in both the private and public (social) sector has seen her actively involved in various professional and social organizations geared towards nation building and development throughout this period resulting in the emergence of a new Sierra Leone!

Mariama Jalloh-Heyward: PMP and Director of KPMG and Founder Green White and Blue Ball

Mrs. Mariama Jalloh-Heyward is the Founder and Co-chair of the GWB Commission. Although born in America to Sierra Leonean parents and married to African American, she is an active member within the Sierra Leonean community and the creator of the Green White & Blue Ball, an annual gala celebrating the independence of Sierra Leone. Mariama is also a Director at accounting firm KPMG, LLP. GWB Commission: The GWB Commission, a subsidiary of Abstracts Event Management is, the leading event planning brand within the West African community in the Washington, DC Metropolitan area.

Sarran Jabbie: Model and CEO and Founder BrandKultured

Sarran Lan Jabbie born in America and having only travelled to Sierra Leone once at the tender age of 3 Sarran looks forward to going to Sierra Leone for the first time as an adult in December 2013. (I plan on capturing that journey). She currently serves as co-chair of the GWB Commission and oversees its day-to-day management. She has played an integral part in Fashion Empowering Women as the Director of Social Media and is currently a co-founder of non-profit Edu-Share, an organization that focuses on the empowerment of young women in Sierra Leone. Additionally she is launching a boutique marketing firm known as Brand Kulture with clients such as Face to Face Africa.

Issa Rae: Producer, Writer, Director of Issa Rae Productions

Issa Rae, the multitalented CEO and Owner of Issa Rae Productions, is a pioneer in the fight against the narrow, mainstream portrayal of people of color in the media. With a dedicated and passionate team, and supportive fan base, Issa Rae Productions lends a voice to a demographic that largely goes unheard. The widespread success of Issa Rae's web series, "The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl," has unanimously placed Issa Rae at the forefront of the digital web revolution. With her own unique flare and infectious sense of humor, Issa Rae has garnered over 20 million views between her various web series, and just short of 125,000 faithful subscribers on YouTube – with no plans of slowing down. Issa Rae Productions continues to be a growing, digital media phenomenon, catching the attention of major media outlets such as The New York Times, National Public Radio (NPR), The Washington Post, CNN, and naturally, widely across the digital blogosphere. Issa Rae is American born to Senegalese parents and talks about doing a webseries related to her African roots and how her traditional father is reacting to her success. She received her B.A. from Stanford University.

Yeniva Sisay-Sogbeh: Value Creator/ Principal of New Frontier Associates

Yeniva Sisay- Sogbeh is a Value Creator. With over 19 year of experience as a teacher, leader, mentor, coach; Yeniva has developed a portfolio of diverse skills and experience across private and public sector in the United States and Africa. In 2007 Yeniva relocated to her ancestral home Sierra Leone, West Africa. Since then she has pursued her passion to develop, build and transform the continent through her work, creating value by way of youth empowerment, training, project management, business development, branding, communications and events. Bringing vision into action in many

areas of development in Sierra Leone, Yeniva has spearheaded a variety projects such as The EXCEL Education Program, PLAY ON WORD's Poetry Showcase, The Ma dengn Beach Festival and Sierra Leone's first luxury resort The Place. As a thought leader in the New Africa discourse you can find her contributions in AfroElle Magazine, Evoque Magazine, African Luxury Magazine (ALUX) ,Substance and Style, and The African.

Distribution and Media

In efforts to start the necessary discourse around the film, I started with a trailer on YouTube and IndieGoGo, which has amounted to about 2,000 views. I have also presented the film trailer and theories to TrueBlue Inclusion Consulting firm conference, which included a room full of executives ranging from American Express to the National Baseball League. We had a great discussion as to how they can implement diversity inclusion policies for their customers and employees and possibly planning private screening for their company. I have started to brand the film with an official film logo and currently developing a website. The domain has already been purchased and the site is being coded. In the meantime I have been blogging about the film making experience and pertinent topics on iamnadiamarie.com. Including celebrity Issa Rae into the film has also proven to be beneficial as her millions of fans looks forward to her talking about her African identity in detail for the first time publicly.

This September I plan to apply to major film festivals including Sundance, Tribeca, Raindance, Cannes, Toronto International Film Festival, South by Southwest, to name a few in hopes to gain distribution deals so that film can be purchased on DVD. After completing the film festival circuit, I will be co-hosting screenings in New York, Philadelphia, Washington DC, Los Angeles, Sierra Leone, and Ghana.

This summer I plan to further my scholarship on the film and topics at hand by working Dr. James Peterson to complete, a “Guided Discussion Packet” to be used by general viewers of the films, educational institutions, and corporate institutions. Lastly after the film has made its rounds, I will submit the film to Netflix and Hulu for mass distribution.

Conclusion

The film is multi-dimensional in that it captures the lives of women that are similar yet so different and their experiences when it comes to patterns and practices of social mobility, settlement practices, sustaining their respective communities, exploring the assimilation process, exploring language, religious beliefs, political beliefs, dating, fashion, and just being personal in terms of their progression. The use of high quality footage, pictures curated by participants, and impactful interviews from various angles create a dynamic scope of cultural production giving way to the negotiations of multiple identities.

The production and editing of the film is not only aesthetically pleasing but it showcases a cohesive storyline that reveals how each of these women deal with living in the juxtaposing worlds of their respective West African heritage and the US. Through the arrangement of each frame and compliments to each succeeding frame, the overall message of the film is achieved. The film is an accurate articulation of each participants experience and my achieved aesthetic and message envisioned as an artist and digital storyteller.

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Vita

For Nadia Sasso, the connection to the African Diaspora has always been strong. Born in America to parents who emigrated from Sierra Leone, Sasso is a leader in building cultural connections and fostering civic responsibility.

In 2010, she co-founded Yehri Wi Cry (YWC), an organization that distributes birthing kits in Sierra Leone to increase the successful birth and delivery rates for women. Now, she is a fashion consultant and the new media strategist for Royal Dynamite.

Sasso believes in the potential for collaboration to inspire innovation and has experienced this first hand. She spearheaded the corporate social responsibility initiative at Royal Dynamite that gives back to those in need. For every t-shirt purchased, the company donates an educational care package to children around the world. The initiative has touched more than 300 organizations in countries around across the globe.

Named among Katie Couric's "Next Generation of Female Leaders", Sasso received the Young African Committed to Excellence Award by Face2Face Africa magazine. She is also the 2013 recipient of the Posse Foundation's Ainslie Alumni Achievement Award where she was honored for her commitment to social responsibility and her ability to inspire others.

Sasso has a dual bachelor's degree in English and Sociology from Bucknell University. She is currently completing a master's degree in American Studies with a certification in Documentary Film from Lehigh University. She will be pursuing a PHD in Africana Studies and Film Studies at Cornell University this fall.