

Michael Oshindoro

PhD Candidate in the Department of African Cultural Studies

Destination: Lagos, Nigeria

### **IRIS Graduate Summer Fieldwork and BLAC Foundation Award Report**

With generous funds from IRIS and the BLAC Foundation, I spent three months over the summer completing fieldwork research toward my dissertation. The dissertation *Animating Subjectivity and Fabricating Identities in Nigerian Animation* puts 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. The dissertation takes the study of animation practices as not just a lens for examining how 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. I am thankful for the IRIS and BLAC awards, which afforded me the time and resources to focus on research at three animation studios in Lagos, including the luxury of revisiting two studios I have worked at and a new one that has proven invaluable to my work.

When I started my fieldwork in Nigeria in 2021, I visited every studio and talked to every practitioner I could find. There was not a lot of animated productions in circulation at the time and the art and industry was still emerging, hence the urge to want to cover lots of grounds. This broad approach to data collection had its down sides, even though I got to connect with many actors in the space including the animation guild and other key institutions promoting the growth of animation in the country. Yet, that method became unsustainable. For the purpose of my

dissertation, I had to define my focus, selecting precise animation studios based on how they help me answer my research questions. A burning question, for which I embarked on the trip this summer, is: “In a country with virtually non-existent animation schools and programs, how are animators made?” This question is at the heart of one of a chapter in my dissertation where I seek to capture the role of the studio as not just a space for creating cultural artifacts like films and ads, but also a citadel for producing animators.

My first stop was at 32ad Animation Studio, the animation studio responsible for Nigeria’s first feature-length animation in 2020. 32ad is both an animation studio and an academy of arts dedicated to training new animators. On this trip, I consolidated my knowledge of their workflow, studio organization and ecology, and backstories on new and previous in-house projects since the last time I worked there. Even though the director, Adebisi Adetayo, was away for the most part of my stay—he was attending the Annecy Film Festival where his film was an official selection—studio business continued with other animators, most of whom Adetayo trained, taking charge of daily deliverables. I was able to see the changes that have been in place in the bid to increase studio production capacity. Being on the ground made it possible to document first-hand the strides the studio has made, especially in relation to collaborating with foreign producers to make animation productions that might be available to American audiences.

It was my first time at OrangeVFX, the second studio I visited. OrangeVFX is an animation studio specializing in 3D computer animation and visual effects. It started out as an animation-for-service studio creating branding solutions and advertising services for companies but is now venturing into the animation-as-product terrain, working with local and international producers on animated feature films. In my first week, the team filmed live-action footage that will be part of an animated ad for a renowned beverage company. Like 32ad, OrangeVFX has an animation

academy which attracts different kinds of students. These students range from graduates who had no backgrounds in the art but are looking for opportunities in digital graphics, to those who are pursuing their passion for digital visual storytelling. The studio's elaborate training program consists of physical and virtual classrooms where students can enroll in courses like animation, motion graphics, cinematography, and visual effects. Students register for a fee and courses last between two and three months.

My last stop was at Radioxity Media. I worked with the founder, Esther Kemi Gbadamosi, her junior artists, and one intern, many of them are new to animation and the studio's stop-motion technique. At Radioxity, I had to revise my primary inquiry—to observe how trainees learn the process—because even though the assistants and interns still have to learn the strategies of stop-motion, some of these animators-in-training arrive at the studio with skills that are integral to the stop-motion process. Fortunately, the studio was in the development stage for a new animated film project throughout my stay, so I was able to see how interns and assistants not only learn the process hands-on with a major project, but how they bring residual knowledge to bear in the pre-production stage. The team comprised of screenwriters who wrote and developed stories, a long-term set design artist who created sets and props building on his artisanal experiences with furniture work and bricklaying, and a sculpture graduate who cast puppets with natural clay.

In addition to my work in the studios, this summer travel was also very productive for me in terms of the public-facing scholarship I engage in with the animation practitioners. A major academic event in Nigeria is the annual Lagos Studies Association Conference (LSA) hosted at the University of Lagos. In collaboration with Animation Nigeria, the Nigerian guild of animators, I organized a screening of two recent animations at LSA. The first is *Iwaju*, an

original series produced by Disney Animation in conjunction with pan-African storytelling studio, Kugali Media. The second animation is *Irapada*, a short animated film produced by a Nigerian-based studio. We could only show the latter because we could not get screening rights for the former. Still, the panel hosted key animators who worked on both animations. After the screening, the audience engaged with the creators who provided background to their films. This type of event is aimed at fostering conversation between academics, artists, and the broader public audience. The panel also featured two short responses to *Iwaju* which have been published on *Brittle Paper* and can be accessed [here](#) and [here](#).

Thanks to IRIS and the BLAC Foundation for making this trip a productive and significant one for my research and scholarship.