

ONYEKA IGWE'S *THE NAMES HAVE CHANGED, INCLUDING MY OWN AND TRUTHS HAVE BEEN ALTERED*

at Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival, 2019

“What does it mean to go looking for yourself in the archive?” Onyeka Igwe thinks out loud on the other end of our Skype call. We are discussing her latest film, *the names have changed, including my own and truths have been altered*, which won the New Cinema Award at the 15th Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival in October 2019. A web of overlapping origin stories that puts personal, mythic, and bodily ways of knowing on par with official histories, *the names have changed* goes looking in four sets of archives: diary entries from Igwe’s visit to her family hometown in Nigeria’s Imo State, modeled on the papers of colonial inspector E. H. Duckworth; a folktale of two brothers, illustrated with British colonial film; the story of Igwe’s paternal grandfather, enacted by herself and dancer Titilayo Adebayo; and

a Nollywood TV series based on the first published Igbo novel. Whether or not Igwe ‘finds’ herself in all this is, for me, beside the point. Her film is remarkable as a study of how we interact with the objects, bodies, and institutions that make memory – and how these interactions position us in relation to the lives the archive contains.

The names have changed looks and sounds like a collage. Jittery ethnographic reels alternate with cool digital shots of yams, hens, and earth. Intimate family conversations blend into low, pulsing synths. But each part brings us back to Arondizuogu, where Igwe’s family is from (“ARO-NDI-ZUOGU,” she breaks it down for us in one of many interrogations into the politics of knowing a name). This town was once the largest settlement



ALL IMAGES Onyeka Igwe, *the names have changed, including my own and truths have been altered* (2019), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.



of the Aro Confederacy, the dominant power in Igboland (Southeastern Nigeria) during the 18th and 19th centuries. It was also a key supplier for the Aro slave trading network, which continued up until 1912. By the turn of the 20th century, as British rule encroached, a new class of merchant elite trading in palm oil and human beings was rising to challenge the authority of local chiefs.¹ When Igwe's father handed her the biography of one such aristocrat, she was afraid, she tells us in voice-over, that her grandfather would turn out to be the eponymous hero Omenuko. Instead, he appeared as Omenuko's "side-kick," a third-party advisor who helps the former reconcile himself with the land after selling his workers into slavery. A dim presence haunting the film, the grandfather Igwe never met becomes a stand-in not only for the land and history with which she is vaguely familiar, but also for the archive's promises to mediate and reconcile.

In one scene, Igwe plays clips from a TV adaptation of *Omenuko* for her father. We only hear their conversation, and we only see the images – warm, fuzzy VHS with English subtitles but no audio. Omenuko sits down with a creditor to repay him "three or four boys," and a line of bound men wearing burlap sacks shuffles through the forest. In snatches of off-screen dialogue, we sense the difficulty of Igwe's relationship with her father, triangulated by the hazy traces of their shared ancestor. As the distance between them becomes entwined with their distance from this obscure figure, the viewer, too, is placed at a remove from images we cannot hear and speakers we cannot see. By the time Igwe's grandfather appears, bearing a wooden staff and feathered cap, the layers of mediation only add ambiguity. This is not Igwe's grandfather, but the image of an actor playing a character on the fringes of a semi-fictional account of another man's life. A black text box above his head reads "[my grandfather]" – as if to remind us that this archive lies, but to also sit with its truth and ask, *could this really be my grandfather?*

That question returns when Igwe scans a colonial documentary in the Jos National Film, Video, and Sound Archive. As we watch the take-up and supply reels spin in place on the German scanner, Igwe's voice-over narrates what they

hold. A title card reads "Arondizuogu," she tells us, and we hear garbled voices off-screen – this time sound without image. Black men unload bricks from a train and pile them onto their heads as another Black man looks on. Igwe hesitates. "He looks pretty... stern, but serene." A text box appears at the center of the spinning reel, in close-up: "[my grandfather]."

When I ask Igwe about these invisible images, she grins: "How much do you want to know?" Apparently, the film she describes is entirely fictional – or, almost. Igwe's grandfather built the first brick house in Imo State. What I had taken for a variation on the *Omenuko* scene, where we meet a semi-stranger in the archive, is really Igwe's imagined account of what might have been, substituted for an absence in the colonial record. It is the nervous question, *who built my family's house in Arondizuogu?* As the lines between artist and archive blur, the channels through which they affect each other come into focus – and new ones open up.

At the end of our Skype call, we talk about a scene where Igwe films herself in the Jos archive. Wearing a white face mask, she rummages through shelves of old footage, picks one container, and walks towards the camera to show us. First the metal surface, labeled many times over, then the reel, wrapped snugly inside. Cut. The reel and container are gone, and Igwe holds her hands up for the camera, palms out. There is some dirt on them. Igwe is curious, she tells me, about what it feels like to be in those spaces where history happens. She is interested in the moment when you touch the archive because that is also when the archive touches you back. Its dirt rubs off on your hands, its dust enters your lungs. "You get bits of it inside of you."

JOSH VAN BIEMA

¹ Raphael Chijioko Njoku, "Ogaranya (Wealthy Men) in Late Nineteenth Century Igboland: Chief Igwebe Odum of Arondizuogu, c. 1860-1940," *African Economic History* 36 (2008): 27-52