Contextualizing Feminism Within Igbo History And An Analysis Of The Works Of Ngozi Anyanwu

Chisom Awachie
Sarah Lawrence College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.slc.edu/theatre_written

Part of the Acting Commons, African American Studies Commons, African Languages and Societies Commons, Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons, and the Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.slc.edu/theatre_written/14

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Theatre Theses at DigitalCommons@SarahLawrence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theatre Thesis - Written Thesis by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SarahLawrence. For more information, please contact afreitas@sarahlawrence.edu.
CONTEXTUALIZING FEMINISM WITHIN IGBO HISTORY AND AN ANALYSIS OF
THE WORKS OF NGOZI ANYANWU

Chisom Awachie

April 2023

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Theatre
Sarah Lawrence College
# Table of Contents

Abstract.............................................................................................................................. 3  
Introduction......................................................................................................................... 4  
Nigerian Time Periods: Pre-colonial, Colonial, and Post-colonial....................................... 5  
Female Playwrights: Publishing Challenges....................................................................... 6  
Resisting Colonial Powers..................................................................................................... 6  
Contemporary Struggle......................................................................................................... 10  
Ngozi Anyanwu.................................................................................................................. 12  
Plays: .................................................................................................................................. 13  
  The Homecoming Queen...................................................................................................... 13  
  Good Grief.......................................................................................................................... 17  
  My Name…is Beatrice......................................................................................................... 20  
Conclusion......................................................................................................................... 22  
Works Cited......................................................................................................................... 24  
Interview with Ngozi Anyanwu........................................................................................... 26
Abstract

Throughout Nigeria’s history, Igbo women have contended with violence from colonial and imperialist forces and misogyny from the Igbo men in their communities. In solidarity with one another, Igbo women have continued to fight back to ensure their voices are heard in politics and access to professional careers. The Nigerian- and Igbo-American playwright Ngozi Anyanwu writes about Igbo women who assert themselves and maintain their agency throughout cultural and interpersonal conflicts, similar to these historical strategies. Anyanwu’s plays *The Homecoming Queen*, *Good Grief*, and *My Name…is Beatrice* feature women dealing with grief, sexual trauma, and access to reproductive healthcare between Nigerian and American societies. There is evidence that these examples of solidarity in struggle can be considered feminist in nature. Taking care not to force a definition onto an entire culture, I highlight aspects of feminism within Igbo culture and Anyanwu’s works to better understand feminism within an Igbo context.
Introduction

In order to discuss how the works of one Igbo woman playwright emulate feminist values, practices, and depictions, I will start by contextualizing time periods within Nigeria’s history. As British colonial rule of Nigeria began in 1900 (following actions of European imperialism in the region) and ended in 1960 beginning Nigeria’s independence, I will define “pre-colonial” as before the 20th century, “colonial” as the years 1900-1960, and “post-colonial” as 1960 to the present (Ifamose and Ojo 108). I will also specify the political structures of Igboland and the cultural expectations of Igbo women during these time periods. The article “‘Sitting on a Man’: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women” describes the political institutions that existed within Igboland and the spaces or spheres that Igbo women occupied before, during, and after British occupied Nigeria. The book Negotiating Power and Privilege: Igbo Career Women in Contemporary Nigeria examines how Igbo women with privileged access to education address cultural norms to pursue professional careers. I will also cite the research of Cheryl Johnson-Odim to develop a working definition of feminism to apply to the works of Nigerian- and Igbo-American playwright Ngozi Anyanwu, discussing her plays in detail. A throughline between Anyanwu’s selected plays and the history of Igbo women in Nigeria is women as fully-fleshed characters resisting cultural and societal confines. As a researcher, my goal for this paper is not to present an exhaustive history of the political structure of Igboland from beginning to end. As a first-generation Nigerian- and Igbo-American woman, my goal is not to force a concretized definition of feminism onto Igbo culture. I will provide some societal context for the perspectives that Igbo women playwrights may create from and
highlight feminist aspects within Anyanwu’s work in an effort to understand feminism from within the context of Igbo culture.

**Nigerian Time Periods: Pre-colonial, Colonial, and Post-colonial**

Igbo women were prominent in political life before colonial rule, though they did not have as much power as their male counterparts. Still, they attended meetings held by men and organized amongst themselves, holding meetings or “mikiri” to make decisions within their various economic networks (van Allen 165). Once the British invaded Nigeria and took power, they forced a male-centric view of politics upon the indigenous people. Van Allen writes that, despite the fact that Igbo women were highly politically active, “the dominant view among British colonial officers and missionaries was that politics was a man’s concern” (van Allen 165-166). Not only did these colonizers ignore and exclude the political power of Igbo women, but there has also been very little scholarship about the roles that they played during this time (van Allen 165). It is likely that the status of Igbo women in society has improved since Nigeria secured its independence, but remnants of colonialism remain. For example, Igbo women active in the Catholic Church face similar exclusion from cultural practices, such as the Eucharist during Catholic Mass and the kola nut within Igbo culture (Uchem 20). During a study led by Rose N. Uchem, several Catholic Igbo women recounted experiences within their communities in which this exclusion was commonplace, as well as men attempting to exert power over the few organizations that the women had created for themselves. When considering the persistence of this history of exclusion, these stories hold even more weight because they took place within the United States, a supposed haven that would “represent the frontiers of possible change in women’s subordination in Igbo society” (Uchem 74-75).
**Female Playwrights: Publishing Challenges**

There is no shortage of Nigerian playwrights who have documented the history of the country and challenged its present-day issues, but when attempting to highlight the Igbo people, and even further, Igbo women, the research becomes more limited. This is not to claim that Igbo women playwrights do not exist, but that for example, Wole Soyinka and his works are given a brighter spotlight. Additionally, Bosede Funke Afolayan cites the writer Onyeka Iwuchukwu in *Nigerian Female Dramatists: Expression, Resistance, Agency* explaining that it is difficult for playwrights to become published in Nigeria, period. While female-identified playwrights also experience misogyny, “many reasons are adduced for this: first, publishers are only interested in established authors where sales can be easily made. Second, they prefer to publish novels because they are also easily sold, unlike plays. Third, there is a high level of poverty that people would prefer to buy food than to buy a play text and four, many people read only for examinations (Iwuchukwu 3–5)” (Afolayan 6). Though this paper focuses on the works of Ngozi Anyanwu, my research has introduced me to Chinyere Grace Okafor and Tess Onwumene. These women are multi-hyphenates: playwrights, poets, and scholars. My disappointment in discovering these women several years into a life and career immersed in theatre is curbed by the knowledge that there is no real shortage of Igbo women working in theatre today and centering their lived experiences.

**Resisting Colonial Powers**

It is unsurprising that Igbo people and women, in particular led full, politically engaged lives before the British invaded and forced their ways of life upon Nigeria. It is also unsurprising, but certainly disappointing and shameful, that there has been minimal scholarship
on the ways that Igbo women resisted colonial powers in an effort to make their voices heard and humanity acknowledged. There are some events that were recorded, like the 1929 Igbo Women’s War. Van Allen describes the Women’s War as an uprising and mobilization of Igbo women in response to unfair taxation by the British and the puppet leaders that the British left in local power, called “Warrant Chiefs” (van Allen 171-172). I find it exciting to know that Igbo women succeeded in organizing to show out in record numbers for a month: “they ‘sat on’ Warrant Chiefs and burned Native Court buildings, and, in some cases, released prisoners from jail” (van Allen 174). Solidarity in the face of disenfranchisement—in this case economic—and refusing the resist the pressures of a violent status quo appear as common themes in Anyanwu’s works and the definitions of feminism that I have sourced. I do think that this solidarity can be recognized as feminism as we know it today.

In order to classify Igbo women’s resistance over Nigeria’s history and Ngozi Anyanwu’s plays as feminist, it is necessary to have a solid definition of “feminism” to work from. The challenge here is that, as my (and perhaps a mainstream) understanding of the term comes from Western culture, writers, and thinkers, I aim to take great care not to ascribe a meaning to women of a non-Western culture rather than allowing them and their work to speak to its own cultural context. As feminism has developed in the West, and the privileges of white women resulted in their visions of “feminism” becoming dominant, many Black activists and writers of color rightfully highlighted the ways in which these white women have either excluded people of color from their working definitions of feminism or glossed over the necessary differences in the lived experiences of different races. In Audre Lorde’s *Open Letter to Mary Daly*, she, for what feels like the hundredth time, calmly explains to another white woman that her exclusion of Black women’s thoughts, histories, and experiences is dismissive and
shameful. She asks, “do you ever really read the work of Black women? Did you ever read my works, or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us? This is not a rhetorical question” (Lorde 297). It seems clear that choosing to narrow the scope of women’s lived experience in attempting to define feminism leads to erasure, or simply misidentifying a particular movement. As I explore the works of playwrights outside of (but perhaps in conversation with) the West, I will work to avoid these pitfalls.

In Cheryl Johnson-Odim’s essay “Actions Louder Than Words: the Historical Task of Defining Feminist Consciousness in Colonial West Africa,” she says that it is necessary to place women’s movements in a historical context in order to understand how they worked to liberate themselves, and what situations they were fighting against (Johnson-Odim 362). This way, we can begin to form a better picture of what feminism looks like outside of European and American culture and context. She focuses primarily on Yoruba women in Nigeria, pre- and during colonial British rule, for the rest of the essay. Pre-colonial rule, it is clear that a woman's place in society was not cut and dry, but rather depended on a wide variety of factors: “a woman’s order as wife in a polygamous marriage (for example, as first or second wife), her ability to bear children, her status as mother and as mother-in-law, or her being postmenopausal resulted in often radically different constructions of ‘gender privilege’ or ‘gender oppression’” (Johnson-Odim 363). She reiterates that understanding differences across cultures can help infer how gender and feminism operate within those cultures, and begins to examine West African women’s anticolonial protest movements. Again, she focuses on Yoruba women under colonial rule, so I will refer to Judith van Allen’s “Sitting on a Man” Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women to center Igbo women. This
article describes the status of Igbo women in society before and during British colonial rule and references the 1929 Women’s War as an example of how Igbo women resisted colonial rule.

Before the British invaded, the leaders of Igbo society were men and women of a certain age and economic status. Neither age nor wealth alone made one a leader in the community; but rather “one who had shown skill and generosity in helping other individuals and, especially, the community” (van Allen 168). Women were able to sell some of their own crops, as well as prepared foods, and pocket the profits, but were still unable to take titles in the ways that men were (van Allen 168). As far as political institutions, “the women’s base of political power lay in their own gatherings” (van Allen 169). The mikiri would be a place to discuss the concerns of women’s work, like trading, but also personal concerns, like complaints about a husband (van Allen 170). Women organized through the mikiri to protect themselves and their work, showing complete support for their collective, and continued to organize in this way once the British came to power.

The 1929 Women’s War began with such organization in response to the British deciding to tax Igbo women after a number of years during which Igbo men were taxed, though the British claimed on census counts that there had been no taxation (van Allen 173). In retaliation, Igbo women demonstrated in front of the Native Administration centers where the figurehead “Warrant Chiefs” resided, demanding confirmation that the taxing would not take place. These demonstrations eventually ended with many women dead or injured. “The lives taken were those of women only–no men, Igbo or British, were even seriously injured” (van Allen 174). Following the Women’s War, the Native Administration was reformed and the Warrant Chiefs replaced, but the change in political structure only excluded women further (van Allen 177). The
British replaced village assemblies, *mikiri* included, with courts that only accepted men. As a result, there was very little chance that community concerns specific to women could be heard. Though this outcome does not feel like a success of collective action, the action itself, the communication and organization of women to protest unjust and violent treatment, is undeniable.

**Contemporary Struggle**

A contemporary example of the state of Igbo women in Nigeria can be found in their career prospects. In the book *Negotiating Power and Privilege: Igbo Career Women in Contemporary Nigeria*, author Philomina E. Okeke-Ihejirika discusses the cultural and systemic barriers that keep women from career advancement. She states that immediately following independence, several organizations popped up across Nigeria in an effort to address women’s rights, but due to “constant political upheavals” it was almost impossible for the issue of women’s rights to maintain priority (Okeke-Ihejirika 17). Though the male-dominated government continued to support the creation of these organizations, Okeke-Ihejirika believes that they were simply “not prepared to tackle the structural and ideological barriers that militate against women’s social mobility” (Okeke-Ihejirika 20-21). The book focuses on “highly educated” Igbo women, referred to as “elite,” because they have fewer barriers to paid work and career advancement when compared to Igbo women of lower economic status (25). Due to their privilege, these women ought to “reap most of the benefits associated with schooling” (25). Okeke-Ihejirika expects that focusing on elite women’s very real struggles will have “important implications for the welfare of the larger female population” (25).

One of the main barriers to Igbo women securing paid work positions and making progress in their careers is the cultural expectation that women reside in the domestic sphere,
concerned with marriage and starting a family (40). Okeke-Ihejirika points out that though women being pressured to stay home and out of the workforce is not unique to Igbo women, “Igbo culture places great import on marital and familial identities in very unique terms. Often, unmarried women remain excluded from many adult roles and their attendant privileges” (41). Ironically, when it comes to securing their social status via marriage, higher levels of education work in women’s favor, as long as “their career ambitions do not upset their primary roles” (40). This expectation often results in women who are determined to maintain paid work positions accepting lower-paid jobs so that their supposed priority of keeping a home remains unthreatened.

In addition to prioritizing domestic work, Igbo women simultaneously experience discrimination in the workplace, hindering their hopes of advancement. The more overt aspects are not related to Igbo cultural practices, but “have their roots in colonial administrative policies,” including women paying “proportionally more tax than their male counterparts because only working fathers receive a child benefit” (73). Less obvious issues include separating women and men into gendered or “sex-typed” positions, with jobs available to women having generally “less attractive working conditions than the male preserves,” and work settings with expectations of camaraderie and bonding in ways that are hostile towards women (73).

Okeke-Ihejirika’s work was published in 2004 and therefore may seem dated, but research conducted by Ngozi Eze in 2017 cites studies post-2010 confirming similar issues of cultural expectations that men are breadwinners and women should prioritize growing their families. That same expectation results in women not being seen as fit for advanced workplace roles and missing out on promotions: “Furthermore, McIntosh et al. (2012) proposed that this
A cultural model could limit a woman’s ambition and perceptions of the opportunities that are available to her, leading to a cultural stigma against women in the workplace, including lessened expectations and lessened promotion opportunities” (Eze 22).

Despite the many obstacles in their way, Okeke-Ihejirika’s research shows that Igbo women continue to fight to stay in the workplace, balancing their careers and domestic duties not only for financial gain but also for “emotional fulfillment” (Okeke-Ihejirika 77). This insistence is not an organized effort like the Women’s War, but can still be considered anti-colonial in nature considering the colonial roots of the barriers they face.

Returning to Johnson-Odim’s essay, she says that doing biographical studies of West African women leaders has led her to realize that much of their anti-colonial protest has come from tactics that were rooted in the histories of the women’s communities. These protests “made a theoretical statement about their gender consciousness, about their definition of feminism,” and none of the tactics were learned from colonizers (Johnson-Odim 364). She goes on to define feminism through biological studies: “I am using the term feminist here based on at least two of its most universally agreed upon components: women who seek to challenge both the restriction of women’s rights and women’s marginalization from centers of power and decision making” (Johnson-Odim 364). I will apply this definition of feminism to three of Ngozi Anyanwu’s plays: The Homecoming Queen, Good Grief, and My Name...is Beatrice.

**Ngozi Anyanwu**

Ngozi Anyanwu is an actor, playwright, and self-identified first-generation Nigerian-American. Her work has premiered at the Atlantic Theatre Company, the Kirk Douglas Theatre Company, and was included on the 2016 Kilroy’s List. She received her BA in Acting
from Point Park University and her MFA in acting from UC San Diego.

Plays:

*The Homecoming Queen*

*The Homecoming Queen*’s main character Kelechi (she/her) is a Pulitzer Prize finalist who left Nigeria for New York at fifteen. She returns to Nigeria fifteen years later to care for her father, Oga Godwin (he/him), at the end of his life. She is greeted by a chorus of women, Oga and his house girl Beatrice (she/her), and her childhood friend Obinna (he/him). The women serve as a Greek chorus and represent the culture with which Kelechi is at odds. When Kelechi arrives from the airport, they are inside Oga’s compound waiting expectantly for her to perform the duties as the acting head of her household. Over the course of the play, the chorus of women grows from four to forty. Kelechi settles into a familiar but strained relationship with her father and butts heads with Beatrice, who is fifteen years old, smart, and highly inquisitive. As Kelechi speaks with Beatrice and Oga, the audience learns that Kelechi struggles with her mental health. When Obinna comes to visit Oga, it is suggested that Obinna and Kelechi survived a traumatic event as children that served as the impetus for Kelechi’s departure. Flashbacks accompany Obinna’s entrances, detailing his and Kelechi’s relationship before and after the event, but specifics are not revealed. As Kelechi spends more time with Obinna and Beatrice, and Oga’s health worsens, she settles into the family she left behind. The play ends with Kelechi and Beatrice starting a new life together. The feminist aspect of this play lies within its central conflict. Kelechi returns to an environment of restriction that was harmful to her as a child and strongly affects her as an adult, and must overcome that restriction to fully embrace her life. Elements in the play highlight this restriction: the chorus of women, Oga Godwin, and the use of flashback.
The chorus makes a number of assumptions about Kelechi from the moment of her arrival. A striking example is the assumed familiarity with physical touch. After Kelechi greets them, the chorus surrounds her, grabbing her body parts, surprised by her strength and build.

KELECHI. I see we still have no need for personal space. Hey, did you just call me fat?

ANOTHER WOMAN. See her arm. You tink say you be man?

“You think you are a man?”

The women laugh.

They touch her bottom.

THE ELDEST. She her nyash. Helty, helty!

“It’s very healthy!”

They grab her breasts.

She aggressively slaps their hands away (Anyanwu 10).

Likely intended to be a comedic moment in the play, the scene highlights the expectation of access to Kelechi’s body as a woman. It’s culturally acceptable for people to approach women in this way, despite it clearly being very uncomfortable for her. At the same time, the chorus rejects her femininity, likening her to a man because she physically does not meet the cultural standard. Kelechi has done her best up to this point to remain respectful, but ultimately sets a strong boundary with the women, rejecting the behavior she deems inappropriate.

Oga Godwin is happy to see his daughter after many years, but expects an unwavering respect from her that does not suit their relationship. When Kelechi fights through the chorus of women and finds Oga inside the house, their greeting “is affectionate but awkward. They are bad at this” (Anyanwu 12). Ideally, they are emotionally close and respectful of one another, but physical and temporal distances are hurdles too large to cross. Their conversations over the course of the play alternate between playful and irritable:

PAPA. Nonsense, you must eat.
I want to hear of your adventures.
I want to live vigorously through you

KELECHI. You mean vicariously—
PAPA. It is rude to correct your father.
KELECHI. Of course (Anyanwu 13).

Related to this strained connection is his dismissal of Kelechi’s mental health struggles (as well as his own). As Kelechi speaks to him as an adult woman and sets boundaries, he rejects them. There is a general air from Oga that Kelechi living in America for fifteen years has made her a different, difficult person. While discussing Kelechi’s anxiety medication (among others), he insists that the pills are unnecessary and that America is to blame: “Are you alive? What kind of life do you have over dere in Americah? A life that has you taking those pills like chimchim” (Anyanwu 36). This is less of a rejection of the importance of prioritizing one’s mental health and more of the dismissal of trauma that Kelechi has endured. This, in addition to the expectation of Kelechi to be unquestioningly obedient to him, keeps them both at an arm’s length.

The societal pressures that Kelechi and Obinna face as young people raised in Igbo culture are established through flashbacks. The flashbacks depict Kelechi and Obinna’s relationship as children before and after they experience a traumatic event. The event itself is not explicitly stated, but one can infer that a group of young men sexually assault Kelechi and physically assault Obinna as he comes to her aid. In the face of such violence, men and women are expected to respond in rigid ways if at all, as shown via Oga’s reaction to the children immediately following the event. To Kelechi he says: “What did I tell you!......You wanted to be a boy/Stupid gal/And now they have shown you/Fungah” (Anyanwu 56). Throughout the play Kelechi is negatively described as strong and manly; she does not fit into the narrow definition of “feminine.” Thus, she is attacked and blamed for being attacked. Obinna was small as a child and was easily subdued by the attackers. He feels guilty for failing to protect Kelechi, telling Oga
“I am sorry… I know I was supposed to” (Anyanwu 56). Oga responds curtly to the bleeding and apologetic boy:

PAPA. Shut up your mouth or I will give you something to cry about.
We will not speak of this again…
What is tomorrow for?
OBINNA. Tomorrow is for forgetting…
PAPA. Ehn?
Tomorrow is for forgetting the bad things of today
PAPA. Forget Obinna.
Forget (Anyanwu 56-57).

Oga dismisses both children, reinforcing these stereotypes of masculinity and femininity and preventing them from processing the harm that they experienced. It’s a prime example of how patriarchal structures harm all society members. As a result, when Kelechi and Obinna meet as adults they struggle to connect. Kelechi is literally haunted by the assault and keeps those around her at a distance. Obinna works for the World Bank instead of fulfilling his dream to be a teacher, atoning for his sins by materially supporting their childhood village. The two slowly begin to process what they experienced together at the end of the play, rejecting the societal expectation that they bottle their emotions and continue to blame themselves for the harm done to them.

_The Homecoming Queen_ presents a society in which a young woman, Kelechi struggles to thrive. The elements of the Greek chorus, supporting characters, and flashback communicate stifling societal expectations: an Igbo woman who has a perfect understanding of her culture, a daughter who is “healthy” and obedient, and a woman who is responsible for the actions of her abusers. The character of Kelechi, as well as the entire play, is feminist in its depiction of a clear rejection of unrealistic and harmful societal beliefs. The play highlights the challenges that Igbo women face today, and how they bravely move forward.
*Good Grief*

In *Good Grief*, a young woman named Nkechi (she/her) tries to honor her late friend’s wish of being remembered. Nkechi drops out of medical school and moves back home with her parents, NeNe (she/her) and Papa (he/him) in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. When her dear friend and first love, MJ (he/him) dies in a car accident, Nkechi tries to make sense of her grief with the well-intentioned assistance of her parents and brother (Bro, he/him). She replays her memories of MJ: sometimes as they happened, sometimes with embellishments, and sometimes transformed utterly.

Within this exploration of grief, the female characters of Nkechi and NeNe are feminist in their well-roundedness and humanity. This is highlighted in the scene of Nkechi and MJ's not-quite-first time, and NeNe’s description in the character breakdown. Nkechi advocates for herself in terms of boundaries and pleasure while NeNe attempts to use the tools at her disposal to counsel her daughter through her grief.

During what would have been Nkechi and MJ’s first sexual experience together, and Nkechi’s first sexual experience period, she interrupts the moment to voice her discomfort. She is initially hesitant, her first line in the scene being “Uuumm/No/What the/No” (Anyanwu 25). MJ checks in with her and they engage in an unclear back and forth until he says: “So you–You don’t wanna have sex right now,” to which she emphatically replies “NO” (Anyanwu 25). At this point in Nkechi and MJ’s relationship, they are in their late teens or early twenties. Nkechi doesn’t have the experience or vocabulary to explain what makes her uncomfortable, but she still clearly advocates for herself. As the scene continues, the pair engage in a conversation about consent without actually using the word, instead substituting it with the phrases “red light” and
“green light.” Eventually, Nkechi begins the dreaded “What are we?” conversation:

N. But
Are we
MJG. Are we what
N. People who love each other? (Anyanwu 29).

Following MJ’s confirmation, Nkechi proceeds to outline her non-negotiables, even though they aren’t fully formed:

N. I have conditions
MJG. O
Okay
Lay em out
N. I want plans […]
N. It should be nicer
We should talk about it first […]
N. And…
there should be wine’ an shit (Anyanwu 29-30).

As she sets these boundaries and expresses her needs, MJ does his best to listen to and affirm her. At the end of the scene, he apologizes for not treating her with more care. It is exciting that in a scene about intimacy and consent MJ is attentive and remorseful, but it is even more striking that the character of Nkechi is given the space to process her emotions, set boundaries, and remain physically safe.

Though she is a supporting character, NeNe possesses a certain depth that is not often afforded mothers, in theatre and in real life. Within the character descriptions, before the play even begins, NeNe is described as “a psych student, a nurse, and N’s mother…in that order. She is also a Nigerian/Igbo woman. She desperately wants to understand her children” (Anyanwu 7). When NeNe sits with Nkechi to talk about her feelings about losing MJ, she does so clinically. She has all of the “proper grieving tools: a notepad, a pen; and a Bible” expecting Nkechi to methodically talk about her feelings, work her way through each step of grief, and then move on
with her life (Anyanwu 31). Nkechi rejects this, recording her “sad and morbid thoughts on death” and asking existential questions: “Do you ever feel like that? Like I’m not where I’m supposed to be?” (Anyanwu 32-33). Amusingly, NeNe is at a loss. She offers prayer as an alternative and then makes the observation:

NENE. You know Nkechi
One day we will all die
I will die
You will die…
We will decompose and be in the ground
Does that thought give you comfort (Anyanwu 34)?

Nkechi is not comforted at all. Despite this, NeNe is never described as a bad mother. She may not be able to connect with her daughter in the way that she needs, but not out of neglect. She has passions and studies outside of motherhood, she doesn’t exist for her children, and hilarity ensues when she tries to apply these passions to connect with them.

Nkechi and NeNe are written as women with strong opinions of themselves and how others ought to behave. The characters are feminist in that they are both active in their decision making rather than passively accepting their circumstances. As Nkechi wades through a confusing and potentially distressing sexual encounter with MJ, she is emboldened to interrupt in an effort to protect herself and ensure an enjoyable future experience. She rejects any assumptions that sex is something that happens to women, rather than something that women should enthusiastically participate in. NeNe understands her studies and her Bible more than she does Nkechi. She arms herself with her psychology degree and her faith to guide her daughter through her pain, and the comedic mismatch between this approach and her daughter underlines her interests separate from motherhood as well as her love for her child.
My Name…is Beatrice

My Name…is Beatrice picks up shortly after the end of The Homecoming Queen. Kelechi (she/her) has returned to New York with Beatrice (she/her) in tow, attempting to return to her role as Beatrice’s mother. Beatrice meets the people in Kelechi’s life that she briefly left behind, her first-generation Nigerian assistant Claire (she/her) and her white, nearly ex-boyfriend and ex-editor Graham (he/him). Kelechi tries to settle back into her old life as a new mother, with a new therapist and writing deadline. Beatrice tries to adapt to living in a new country with a new mother. Obinna (he/him) comes to visit, and the unconventional family continues to work toward healing.

In this play, Anyanwu broaches the topics of abortion and parenthood and provides perspectives that center birthing people. The work is feminist in its perspective because it explains the societal norms that Kelechi and Beatrice (and Claire) were raised in (conservative, religious), highlights the ways that those norms cause harm, and provides examples of what the characters having agency over their lives looks like. It also depicts abortion as a standard healthcare procedure, rather than a moral failing.

Only hinted at during The Homecoming Queen, Beatrice being a product of Kelechi’s rape is explicitly stated in My Name…is Beatrice. This is a large part of why Kelechi gave Beatrice up as a child and was sent to live in America, and affects Kelechi’s confidence in being able to take care of her. After Beatrice has an abortion, the two talk about Kelechi’s assault and Beatrice’s birth for the first time.

BEATRICE. Did you think of not having me?

......

KELECHI. I did have you.

BEATRICE. You did. Why?

KELECHI. Why?
I guess because not having you didn’t really seem like I had a choice.
Not in Nigeria
Not when I was growing up
BEATRICE. So you didn’t want to have me right?
KELECHI. ….
But I did-
BEATRICE. But you didn't want to?
KELECHI.
…
…. 
No (Anyanwu 93-94).

This moment highlights a complicated space that Kelechi occupies. After several years and some therapy, she is actively choosing to become a mother to Beatrice, but this doesn’t change the fact she was not afforded the agency to make this decision as a child.

Following her abortion, Beatrice has an appointment with Kelechi’s therapist. Beatrice expresses ambivalence over the procedure and states that she didn’t want to give birth, but asks the therapist if she is morally wrong for feeling this way.

BEATRICE. I’m feeling
…..
Should I have had de baby?
…. 
I did not want to do both.
Is that bad?
THERAPIST. It’s not.
BEATRICE. Am I bad?
THERAPIST. You are not.
BEATRICE. How do you know?
THERAPIST. It’s a hunch I have.
BEATRICE. Hmm
Do you believe in God?
THERAPIST. I do.
BEATRICE. Will I go to hell?
THERAPIST. Wow.
You are making me work for it huh? (Anyanwu 108).

The therapist confirms that Beatrice hasn’t done anything wrong by having an abortion,
and assures Beatrice that her feelings are normal. Neither the therapist, Kelechi, or Claire judge Beatrice’s decision. Kelechi and Claire even reminisce briefly about Claire’s own abortion. Anyanwu normalizes Kelechi and Beatrice’s choices and experiences, not placing any judgment. Having an abortion or not is not the issue, whether the characters have the power to make their own decisions is what’s most important.

In *My Name...is Beatrice*, both Kelechi and Beatrice regain and maintain agency over their lives after being affected by societal forces that declare otherwise. Anyanwu frames their choices as neutral, clearly communicating the importance of that agency to her audience.

**Conclusion**

From pre-colonial Nigeria to today, Igbo women have joined forces to organize in the face of misogyny directed at them by British colonial powers and Igbo men. To improve their quality of life by participating in politics and balancing domestic expectations with progressing in the workforce, they ruffle feathers and shed blood literally and metaphorically to make room for themselves. These actions speak directly to Cheryl Johnson-Odim’s definition of feminism, as they were carried out collectively to publicly call attention to discrimination and the immediate need for change. The works of Ngozi Anyanwu are also considered feminist based on this definition as her well-rounded characters reject unjust expectations in order to protect themselves. In *The Homecoming Queen*, Kelechi fights against the constraints of a culture that has inflicted deep harm. She opposes these impositions, affirming her own pain while reconciling with those who previously exacerbated it. In *Good Grief*, Nkechi asserts herself, her pleasure, and her safety during a moment that easily could have ended in suffering. She also refuses to process her emotions quickly and quietly as some of her loved ones would prefer.
She insists on being her full self. NeNe also insists on being her full self, attempting to care for her daughter the best she knows how even though their reactions to death and the comfort they need are mismatched. She is not a flattened “mother” archetype who only exists in one way. In *My Name...is Beatrice*, Anyanwu centers the perspectives of birthing people in her depictions of choices surrounding reproductive health, stressing the importance of the characters’ agency over their lives. Anyanwu and her works are quite removed from the 1929 Women’s War, but the insistence of her characters to be seen and heard remains.
Works Cited


Interview with Ngozi Anyanwu

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Chisom Awachie: I've noticed that the parent-child relationships in your work, are very strong, rich relationships that also feel familiar. So thinking about the father-child, and father-daughter relationships, what about them feels fertile for you as you create these characters?

Ngozi Anyanwu: For at least the paternal aspects, it's actually a little bit more wish fulfillment than it is realistic. I don't know if it's strict or not, right, like I don't have any comparison, I just have my experience. And so I look at the father-daughter relationship, as far as this man-identifying person, this female-identifying person, and what it is to raise a girl of an American generation that has so much more chutzpah, to raise that person in a different country, to unintentionally raise a rebellious person. And then also to have a father who was sort of like--and I am very much like him, for better or worse, so he's mouthy, he talks back, what have you--for him to raise somebody like him.

I wouldn't say that me and my father are not close, me and my family are pretty cool. But I will say that sort of father-daughter relationship for me has always just been something that I've actually noticed in all relationships. I try and make it specific to my own, or sometimes write down the parts that I wish, you know, like sort of being raised by the TV, being a latchkey kid, wishing to have those talks and those things, mostly because I was like, not really listening, when my father was trying to talk to me, not necessarily because he wasn't trying to talk to me, you know. So for me, it has been about bridging the gap of communication in a way where your father and you can really speak a different language, both literally and metaphorically.

For me, it's always been about that generation where we speak different languages because of how we were raised, we all just kind of come from a different place and we're all trying to bridge this gap. We're all just trying to understand each other, and we're all just really frustrated about how and why that doesn't come quick enough. And now choosing the vocation of a writer to have enough forethought or insight, if I have insight, to remark on how I think heartbreaking and/or funny that is.

CA: Thank you. Switching to mother-daughter relationships, as I was reading Good Grief, I noticed in the character descriptions for Nkechi's mother that she's described as "a psych student, a nurse, and Nkechi's mother in that order." I'm wondering what specifically brought that on as you were creating the character. It feels like a kind of subversion of the ways in which we're
socialized to think that mothers are just a parent and nothing else. How did that come about as you were writing?

**NA:** I think that for me it's almost the same thing. It's like the way in which I think a parent who is methodical or a parent who is a student, school is so important to the African or immigrant mentality that your education, whatever that means, does come first. And so that sort of like, maternal instinct, whatever that means, sometimes takes a backseat to education. It's sort of a remark on how sometimes I think our aspirations, or the things that we're shooting for, take a backseat to being a human being. And I think for *Good Grief*, as I was writing the play I was realizing, “Oh, it takes the mother a while to realize she just needs her mom.” You know what I mean? To just be there. She kind of does all these other things: “Okay, I can I can use my schooling on her that will help.” “Oh, I can do this on her that will help.” And then the idea of “Oh, actually, I just need to feed her and do all the things that it takes to nurture her and be a mom. Oh, that works.”

**CA:** I think I read in a previous interview that as you were working on *Homecoming Queen*, you had to reach out to extended family to outsource translation help. I don't speak Igbo either. Did they clown you as you were like, "How do you say this in this language that I don't speak?"

**NA:** Not really, once I started writing, they were so excited. They were so excited that I was writing anything about them, like in the First-Generation Nigerian Projects, in like 2009? That was with other first-generation Nigerians like Mfoniso Udofia, Yvonne Orji, people who are really thriving now, about being an American, being an artist. And so once we had done that, a little sketch comedy and scenes, I think once they had seen that, they learned something. They saw that we actually knew things, even though we don't necessarily speak the language.

So when it got to asking, it was actually fun, because sometimes they’d argue "No, you say it like this, no you say it like this." My mom and dad are from neighboring towns and they also have different levels of education. So it was like, even when it came to spelling, sometimes I'd have to Facebook a cousin, who was highly educated. And I go, "Hey," because I want to get it so specific. So like, "Hey, if this is *ndise* in the village, how they would say this, and what's the meaning of this?" Even the part where, in *Homecoming Queen*, where Kelechi is trying to say, "Can I have you for dinner?" I go, “Well, what would be the poor version of that? What's the colloquial version? And what's the version that’s the proper person who's trying to say something that doesn't quite translate?" She'll say just the words, but what's the colloquial version? So I need to write the wrong version of the right version. It would also be like, “How do I ask that question?” Not just like, “How do you say this?” It's like, what's the moment where she says a direct translation that's not quite right, or she'll hear something that’s not quite right, but of the thing. So they were actually really great and helpful with that because I think of the way that I
asked the question. I was like, "How do you say, I'll cook for you?" And they'll go, "Well, you have to do this, but if you say the wrong way it'll come out like this." So they were actually very, very, very helpful and excited to be part of the process.

CA: Because you were trying to get it in a way that was specific to Kelechi, are you worried about authenticity at all? "Authenticity" with a capital "A" like, "this is how Igbo people say this, this is how Igbo people behave," in writing Homecoming Queen because the main character has a very specific identity of being first generation.

NA: I mean, no--I don't really care. For me, the authenticity was about getting the thing right in terms of the experience, to this story. If I had my say, I'd have a bunch of different Igbo stories that take place in this moment or this moment. My Name...is Beatrice, there are four Igbo people in that play and they are all very different. Obinna is a different kind of Igbo, Londoner influence, than Beatrice, who has been in the village her whole life, who has just moved to America, than is Kelechi, who has been traumatized, who's basically identified an American identity, than Claire, who's never been, who has a queer identity.

And that's not to say that this is the only, there's a diverse array of experiences, but all I can do is tell the sort of story for this specific piece. I do not find myself responsible to tell all of whatever, because I don't have the capacity. And so everybody who needs that, like, "Well, that didn't represent me," feel free to go ahead and write your own story and then represent yourself, because that's what I did. I would see things that were African and go "That doesn't represent me." And while I was on my indignant, self-righteous path, I decided to go ahead and tell a story that was specific to how I felt. Good Grief is the closest thing that I have to what is autobiographical, the other stories are not. So for me, it's mostly been about the specificity of trying to get the story as close to what I deem to think is true. And that's all I can do.

CA: Going off of Good Grief and how it was very close to your lived experience, and I know that you studied as an actor primarily for several years, do you ever feel the need to write for yourself in that way that actors are encouraged to do? Do you think about writing for yourself in that way, as you're writing plays?

NA: I wrote Homecoming Queen for myself to do, the play just got so produced so quickly that I was like, "I'm not comfortable jumping in, in this way, and feeling like the play's not quite done." But we did a reading of My Name...is Beatrice and I'm playing Kelechi in that, so for the most part, so far, I've done most of my plays. I don't feel the need to be in all of them. Sometimes I'm like, "Oh, if I step out of this, maybe I want to direct," because I feel like I'm also wanting to direct more. But yeah, it's interesting. When the acting bug gets a little itchy in me, that's when I'm usually like, okay, "When we're producing this, what am I doing" you know, but it is a
different way to prepare when I'm writing for something that I want to be in, a different way to prepare for the work.

I have so many other things in the works, some of them I plan to be in, and some of them that like Nike, I have no plans to put myself in. And so there's some stuff that I'm like, “This is for me, because I want to explore this aspect of myself as an artist,” or “I want to do this, but I actually don't have that skill set to do that show because that one requires someone playing the guitar and I don't have time for guitar lessons.” You know what I mean? But then it's also like, “Oh, shit, but I want to learn how to play the guitar. And I probably should not be lazy and get on that.” So I think for me when it comes to things that I want to be in, I'll wait it out a little bit. Sometimes I get a little scared. Sometimes I'll write with the intention for myself to be in, but I also write so clearly how I talk kind of no matter what, that it is usually an easy job for me if I decide to step in and work in that way.

But I don't particularly think of it in that way. Usually, I have other artists in mind that I can sort of place in there and just work from that aspect. But I am more coming into or being more at peace with the fact that I'm a multidisciplinary artist who writes plays for herself, even though they're not necessarily celebrated as much as like if you write a one-person show. Or if you write a play for other people to be in, it is sort of still a weird thing for you to "Lin-Manuel" it. But at the same time, it's very like, what people are used to in my work, so I don't think about it as much. I used to definitely be like, "Will I or will I not" sort of double dutch and be like, "Oh, I don't want to be too...you know," but that has a lot to do with my own imposter syndrome and taking up too much space, that I'm learning to get over because I'm like, "if I don't take up that space, someone else will take it up for me, there are people who–knock on wood–are dying to be at my place.” So let me just actually be in my place. So yeah, it's more sometimes I struggle to put myself in my stuff. Because I've got this sort of weird programming of like, “you're doing too much, you're doing the most” that I'm still, even at this age trying to get over.

**CA:** What would the process look like if you were working on a new play and you were like, “Yes I'm going to be in this as well?” Do you need to have it finished by a certain time to give yourself some distance before you jump in as an actor? Or do you think you can do them at the same time? That'd be very impressive.

**NA:** I remember doing Homecoming and thinking, “Oh, well, I can't jump into that because it's not done yet.” And I used to think that that was the process, and the process ended up being fine, but then I look back and I go, “That's just not true.” Like I actually just worked on a workshop of My Name...is Beatrice, and I was in it. And you know, I don't sleep much when I write, so I get up early, I do whatever, I’m probably in the worst shape when I'm just writing. So when I'm acting in it, then I’m up, I'm working out, I'm like "mind is a temple," getting my coffee. I know
I have to have pages in because I have to act in it. So for me, if I'm doing both it just means I have to have a certain regimen when I'm taking care of my body. I have to have my stuff written in earlier because, you know, if I have a mini epiphany during rehearsal, rehearsal’s canceled. Because if I'm the lead the show, right, I gotta go write. But these days, because I just think I have much more hold of my process, it would look like: say one of my plays was done in the fall or something. Say someone goes, "Hey, we want to do your play in the fall," and say it's *My Name...is Beatrice*, which is like done, but not totally done, in my opinion. I'd be like "Great, can I get a workshop?" I'd ask for a workshop, we’d do a rehearsal, I might do a workshop where I know that I'm going to be doing the production. I'll ask an actor who's a friend of mine who needs two weeks of insurance to be my stand-in as an actor and get my director and we'll look at the thing from the outside.

That's what we did for *Good Grief*: when *Good Grief* was going off-Broadway, even though I had premiered it at the Taper, I was like, “Well, I need to do some rewrites, let's hire this actor to play N, even though I'll be doing the production.” And it’s complete transparency, so the actor knows they're not doing it. An actor who I love and trust, there are certain actors who are really great at workshopping plays and giving feedback and inhabiting. And so that's the actor I would cast if I wasn't doing it. And so that actor works on it, and then I can look at it from the outside, and do that. I also workshopped *Homecoming Queen* as an actor from before we went off-Broadway, where I was in it, and yeah, we'd have to end rehearsal early because I would have a mini epiphany, and then I would go write and be like, "Alright, we're gonna try this out, during the reading, we're gonna try a new scene out during the reading and see how it goes.”

I have another play that requires being proficient in the guitar, and if a theatre wanted to do that I would need them to give me maybe six or seven months. I'd have to start taking some guitar lessons so that I would feel comfortable in doing the show, or I would have to redo the concept so that I don't have to play the guitar. So it just means that depending on the piece and what the piece requires tells you what the cost will have to be. If the piece requires more of you then you ask for more protection, which might be a stand-in during rehearsal, so that rehearsal isn't canceled because you want to go off and write. So that the director can still work and think of staging. It means protecting the process and going, "Okay, well, if you have to step out and write, rehearsal can't be canceled, because the director needs to move forward with production." That means "Hey, does the theater have enough budget for us to do that?” Or an understudy in off-Broadway. They don't necessarily have understudies, but with COVID, they might. You know what I mean?

So it just means knowing what the thing requires, if I can't write and act at the same time, I would ask for a two- to three-week workshop before we start rehearsals, so I have more of a hold on the script. It just means protecting the piece. And so if the piece feels like it's still deeply,
deeply, deeply in flux, I may not do it, but if it feels deeply in flux and I want to still do that? Then I ask for more rehearsal time.

CA: Wow, that sounds like it takes a lot of self-awareness and also maybe a little bit of trial and error.

NA: That's right. I did *Good Grief* at the same time that I was writing, and we had a dramaturg, we had a director, and we also had incredibly patient actors. And I'd done a million readings before that. *Homecoming Queen*, I never got to do it, and I regret not getting to do it. When *Love Letters* went up, that was a quick and dirty process so even as the show was produced, I was like "That play is not done." And it might have been different if I was not in it, I might have gone "Oh, this is actually the ending," if I could see it from the outside. And I was willing to risk that because it was just kind of a quick learning process. So I agree, it's a self-awareness thing. Going "What does this thing need?" Before I want to act, what is needed?

CA: I listened to an interview that you did about *Homecoming Queen* where you mentioned that it was initially an adaptation of (Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s) *The Visit*, but that it became a love play rather than a revenge play. I personally love a good revenge play. Do you still feel motivated to write revenge stories? Do you think that those sorts of works can still serve a healing purpose, or are you in general leaning more toward healing plays?

NA: I'm definitely still leaning more towards healing plays, but absolutely they can serve a purpose. I remember sitting through *Is God Is*. And sitting through that sort of rage. That was so awesome. It was satisfying, you know what I mean, it made me go, "Hm, maybe I should have," but at the same time going like, "No, no, I did what I did. I said what I said." There's a part of me that might still even adapt *The Visit* and do it sort of African style. But at the end of the day, it is healing plays, and how hard it is to take that step towards healing. I don't know that it would be true to do that unless it was still one that went towards healing. My thesis would still have to go that revenge brings you healing, or maybe the thesis would be that it doesn't. Even in *Homecoming Queen*, she does kill those--you do find out that she did something, but she's still not okay, right? So I don't quite know. We'll see. We'll see how many more plays I want to write. I don't feel like I want to do too many more. I feel like I love deadlines. I'm like, "Oh I think I might be done after these next five." But we'll see.

CA: If you were done after those next five, would you just focus more on acting? Did you mention that you're writing for TV?

NA: I write for TV. I'm moving into directing. We'll see. We're past the quarter-life crisis and moving into middle age. So we'll see. I need to get a life.
Let me go back to the writing group that you were part of with other first-gen Nigerian folks. How did you find them?

**NA:** Facebook, me and my sister. I had a mentor John Gould Rubin, and I talked to him about how I wanted to do this Nigerian group about writing about being first-generation and Nigerian. And I talked to him like we were already doing it, but I definitely was not already doing it. So I was like "We've already done it!" He's like, "I would love to direct that" and like, okay, cool. I think the first meeting ever was like me, this friend of mine Chinasa, Nneoma, Adepero Oduye and it was just us. And then Adepero couldn't do it because she had just gotten this short that turned into a feature called *Pariah*.

**CA:** Oh, hell yes!

**NA:** So she wasn't able to do it, and then Chinasa wasn't able to do it because of scheduling. So then it was me and Nneoma, and then Jennifer Akabue, and Joy Notoma, and then this girl from DC saw that there were just Nigerian Americans doing stuff: Yvonne Orji. So she used to drive up from Maryland to come to our meetings. She was like "I saw it on Facebook, I didn't know any other people who are Nigerian who are also trying to make shit." So she just kind of joined us, and we did it over a period of three years. We would write together, John would stage it, we would do workshops.

We eventually couldn't sustain it, because we weren't making any money, we were just raising enough money to pay for the space and pay for some Ankara costumes. And there were some people who were doing it who literally could not eat, I had a survival job, I was working as a personal trainer at this time. And I was in grad school. And also, you know, trying to get four to six Nigerian women to agree on content and ideas is...exactly how you'd expect it to go. But at the same time, it was really great, I really started to think of myself as a writer and a performer, and realized “Oh, if I really want this to get done, I need to do it myself and finish that play.” At that time Mfoniso Udofia had joined us as well. She was in [sic] the beginning of writing her Ufot Cycle, so she really also inspired me to finish a work because I'm like, "Okay, Mfoniso's writing, I should be writing too." I didn't have enough at the moment, discipline, to finish a work on my own. And then I was in grad school firing on all cylinders and finished my first play, which was *Good Grief*.

**CA:** Yeah, I'm thinking a lot about networking across and trying to figure out how best to do that. Social media is your friend.
NA: Social media is your friend. It's a friend that you have to be very self-aware of to see how much it can be your friend. But if you ask, they will come. If you build it, the right ones will come. Right? So if you ask, everybody will come, everybody will have an answer. Everybody will have a suggestion. But if you haven't built the infrastructure, and the infrastructure just might be a play, a finished work. The infrastructure might just be clarity. I had to learn a lot in self-producing with people. I wouldn't say it was a failure, but 1st Generation Nigerian Project was not able to sustain itself because there was no clarity around what we were truly doing. We were making these things, but who were we making these things for? How are we making these things, who's in charge? But once I made that play, that's the infrastructure. The infrastructure is "great, we're all here to build this play." You're the director, great, you're the actors, great, you're the whatever, great. So I know why we're raising money, everyone knows the parameters of how things work, because this is a play.

So I think when you're asking for collaborators or helpers, or what have you, be specific about what it is that you're asking for, and be specific about how you want them to come. Because everyone will just come, they just want to like help. And then you're like, "Why aren't you helping?" And they're like, "I don't know how I'm supposed to help," And that's very much trial and error. But I think the more self-awareness, and the more awareness you can have under what it is that you're trying to make, the more advantageous it can be to ask how people can help you.

CA: There was this one interview that you did with the British Theatre Guide podcast where the interviewer asked about the effect of Trump becoming president on the work of theatre makers of color. You mentioned that it felt at the time, that these Broadway and off-Broadway houses already sort of reflected Trump's America, and that ideally, they would, in seeing him elected, need to be much more introspective, and hopefully begin to produce more diverse work. I'm wondering, a few years out from that, if you feel like that happened, or happened to a point where you can say, "Okay, there's progress being made." There are a lot of shows that are being produced that have predominantly casts of color, but they're also closing really quickly. I'm thinking of Ain't No Mo' and KPOP, specifically. Does it seem like we can celebrate a little bit? Or do bigger swings still need to be made?

NA: Keeping it funky? I don't think people have learned a thing. Or they perhaps learned the wrong thing. They think, I think, that it's good enough to hire people who look like us. Hire the different person to distance themselves from people like Trump. I think I was hoping–I don't even know what bullshit I said a few years ago, so we'll see–if I said anything, maybe it was the hope that they would take the America that we're in and see how much they're like that person, and then they would change. I think when you don't identify with your monster if you didn't see that [in] Trump's America that we all have to take a look at ourselves, not like blame, but go,
"Okay, how did I contribute to the world getting used to this way," and doing better, I think the ways in which people are trying to do better is the bare minimum.

I'm not really in the Broadway, but I'm in the beginning of the Broadway space, I'm more in the off-Broadway space. I think that it's gotten better with the regime change. So different people in charge, different people at associate levels, the right people who are moving up in the ranks, I think are making it better. So there are some people that are directors that are the right people to be artistic directors in this time. There are some people who are still the same artistic director. And they've maybe hired a Black person now, or there's the producer who goes, "I will hire a Black writer, I will hire this person," and they took that one diversity course. And so they think that they've solved the problem, but they have no idea how to speak to us as artists. So that's the uphill pattern that we're approaching, the Black artists are getting into the doors, but the people who are opening the doors, and own the table, don't know what kind of food we eat. They said they'd let us sit at the table, but we're lactose intolerant and they're saying, "Here's our milk", as opposed to like, that's my analogy, as opposed to learning how to make new things, learning about us, or having someone else who looks like us at a table that is also about our agenda. Because there are people who are Black who are now in charge, or people who are of color who are in charge but are still fulfilling their internalized racism, it's not actually making the thing better. A lot of people have used the time that we've grown into get into a position of power, just to be in a position of power and not to elevate or expand the art form. And I'm here to expand the art form. I'm here to also pay my rent. So I want to be clear about that.

CA: Right.

NA: I'm not righteous, I want to be clear, I'm not righteous, but as far as has it gotten better? I think some things have gotten better. It doesn't feel better for me, particularly, it feels the same for me, particularly. And as I move up artistically in the ranks or ambitious-wise in the ranks, I am meeting the problems. And I'm going, "Hoo, this doesn't feel good. And this doesn't feel better. This feels like the shit that they've been talking about." So I don't know that it's changed too much. Because I find myself moving up in the ranks and I find it just as bad or just as harmful.

While sometimes I'll be in TV, and I worked on a show, and I was like, "ooh, this script is not it." And I talked to the showrunner and I had a beautiful conversation in which they changed some things and made some things work. So I do feel like it just depends on who they've expanded the table for and if those leaders can facilitate real conversation and real structural change, it's not that people who are leaders will be great off the bat. It's can they take being challenged? Can they take someone that they've hired or someone that they bring to the table going, "Hey I don't know that this is right." And if they can take that, then I do think that people have learned, and I
do think that we'll have a sort of better artistic world, society, whatever. But when you have people constantly in charge that cannot take being challenged, that will treat [everything as] a challenge or double-down, then, yeah, I don't foresee how it gets better. So we're in a challenging time. I don't know that I'm feeling pessimistic or optimistic about it. But I don't know that it's ever been different. For me, it challenges me and why I'm an artist, and how long I want to do this, and in what ways I want to do this.

**CA:** Yeah. That makes sense. I also work a little bit in DEI and have had some great conversations with my manager about how long she wants to stay in that space. It's a similar sort of like, "Well, we are trying to solve X problem," but we do need people 1) to be patient because it takes a while, but also 2) listen and implement things and be okay with being challenged, because if you're not going to let us work, then why are we here? But I also consider you maybe not being pessimistic or optimistic about it as sort of optimistic for me. Because I think I would prefer at least to hear from your experience that it isn't the worst. I mean, certainly not the worst it's ever been. But also being very honest about the harm that is still there.

**NA:** Yeah, I don't know that I have a barometer for it being worse. I've had a pretty, I will say, easy time in the not-for-profit sector, compared to some of my peers, I've skated by pretty much without any harm. But I also know how to sort of protect myself with the director that I pick, or the collaborators that I have, and I find myself particularly right now for the first time in a precarious place. So I've recently sort of like, gone through something that felt really harmful. And I've recently been in a place where I felt really open and vulnerable. And it's just a new experience. So I don't know if it's better or worse than it's ever been. It's just new for me. Just because it's the commercial space, and I haven't dealt with that and it's new collaborators, new people that I'm working with. And this is like the first time that I have not felt protected. In the worst case, I don't know if that's how it is. I just know how I feel.

**CA:** I'm sorry to hear that. I hope that you have a solid support system when shit like that happens.

**NA:** We got it. We got a dope therapist. So you know, we're doing two a days like a CrossFit athlete. But we're good. [laughs]

**CA:** Thank you. This was a lot of fun. And just very exciting for me. I wasn't expecting this to be as fulfilling as it just was, and I really appreciate being surprised in that way. Thank you.