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Wake With Me

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WAKE WITH ME

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Theatre

by
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B.A., University of the Witwatersrand, 2016
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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
I. A place to start: Cultural Identity.....	2
II. A Crisis of Identity	7
III. Pressing thoughts: Facing Myself.....	14
IV. Nsangi and the Ogre – The ‘Original’ story.....	18
V. Character Analysis	21
VI. Play Script.....	30
VII. Reflection/Oral Defense Presentation.....	40
Conclusion.....	49
Bibliography.....	50
Vita.....	52

Abstract

This thesis outlines my research, writing, and performance process, leading up to and reflecting on the final product of my MFA Solo Thesis project. The project is entitled *Wake With Me*, and its performance is a shamanistic portrayal of a folklore story from my native place of origin; Kampala, Uganda. It is an exploration of the metaphorical loss of cultural identity through the literal loss of a family member, and the journey through story telling as a method to reclaim or preserve what was lost. Throughout the piece, the performer plays the role of narrator, using voice, body and mind to explore five distinct characters. These characters are all representative of significant aspects in the narrator's life, and they act as stepping stones to a new realization and appreciation of cultural identity. A version of the original story of *Nsangi And The Ogre*, a copy of the final script, and my reflection on this process will be included in this document.

Introduction

As is required by the demands of the MFA track at Louisiana State University, the culmination of this degree was marked by the writing and performance of an original piece of theater performed as a one-man show. These pieces are graded by a specific performance rubric that pays special attention to the voice, body and characterization of the performer, and their ability to command the stage and an audience for a pre-assigned length.

My performance rested on the pivotal point of my grandmother's passing. It deals with my experience of that loss in absentia due to academic obligations, and how that loss introduced me afresh to my own cultural identity through an exploration of the folklore culture in Uganda. This document outlines my process from the first mention of the thesis project, to my arrival at the story of *Nsangi and the Ogre*, and how that story was monumental in finding closure as well as a new connection to my cultural identity.

I. A place to start: Cultural Identity

Where do children gather clues about who they are supposed to be? In the places where they learn. The further away I have travelled from home to study, the more significant cultural identity and responsibility have become in my life. My initial thought concerning the one-man thesis show presentation was to create a piece on what it means to be a nomad with roots. I have been quite taken with the experience of leaving a place for a time, then returning to find both myself, and it changed. Not changed beyond recognition, but beyond re-assimilation.

I remember having a conversation with my mother, during which she was quite upset that my younger sister did not know how to peel matooke. Matooke is the traditional food of the Buganda tribe. “Buganda was one of several small principalities founded by Bantu-speaking peoples in what is now Uganda. It was founded in the late 14th century, when the kabaka, or ruler, of the Ganda people came to exercise strong centralized control over his domains, called Buganda.”¹ The kingdom of Buganda is now the largest and most consolidated in Uganda, and matooke is a significant feature in nearly all of their traditional ceremonies. Learning to peel and prepare this dish is an extremely important rite of passage for the girl-child in the Buganda culture. It is therefore only natural for a girl of twelve to have, at the very least, a working knowledge of this procedure.

It is not only important as a reminder of gender roles and the woman’s function within that culture, but it is also a representation of the principles of work and hierarchy, and of the survival strategies that preserved the ancestors of the Baganda.²

¹ Etheredge, Laura. “Buganda East African Kingdom”. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15 December 2008, www.britannica.com/place/Buganda. Accessed 16 June 2019.

² ‘Buganda’ refers to the tribe as a whole, and ‘Baganda’ refers to the people who make up the tribe.

Activities like these are also how the importance of the culture is passed down. The mother teaches her daughters how to take care of their families, they pass it down to their daughters, and thus the tradition is preserved. This is not a new idea, but I think it is particularly important because there are few widely accessible tangible representations of the Buganda culture. Books are housed in bookstores or on the shelves of those who can afford them, and our history is only taught in schools from the perspective of the trader, the colonizer, or the missionary.

Cultural history from the perspective of the people is therefore largely oral, but because it is poorly preserved. Those who do know our history are dying and taking their stories with them. Web sources are plenty but difficult to verify, and one is therefore forced to swallow dated information that mostly favors the biased viewpoint of the author. The culture then becomes crystalized into a series of actions and events that are customized according to the user, and so a mother is in despair when her daughter cannot peel a banana in the correct way.

“It has of course been frequently noted that African cultural values suffered and continue to suffer as the colonizing powers forced Africans to abandon their religious beliefs, governmental systems, and a host of other traditional ways of doing things...for example, the introduction of Christianity led to the creation of new values which, in the long term, led Africans to neglect and despise their past cultural values. Following decolonization, the need to restore lost cultural values and pride has been part of the post-colonial agenda of many African nations.”³

³ Pwiti, Gilbert, and Webber Ndoro. "The Legacy of Colonialism: Perceptions of the Cultural Heritage in Southern Africa, with Special Reference to Zimbabwe." *The African Archaeological Review* 16, no. 3 (1999): 143-53.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25130675>.

Although this article was written as an investigation into Colonialisms effects on the Southern regions Africa (particularly Zimbabwe), I find the sentiments expressed in the above quote to be applicable to my East African experience. My mother's despair emerged from a pressing need to restore what she perceives as a heritage that is fast disappearing in a modern world. The loss of this particular tradition is not only a blow to the culture, but also to her legacy and her family line.

The longer I thought on these expectations placed on the younger generation, the more I began to question the cultural responsibilities required of a child raised in a largely English-speaking homestead, formally educated and entertained in English, and primarily surrounded by Western cultural expectations. The first folk stories I heard as a child were in Uganda's equivalent of eighth grade in a Luganda Class, and I recall my attention span being unforgivably short. Looking back, I deeply regret not making the most of this because, the older I grow the more at odds I am with what I know about my culture, and what I am expected to know about myself as an occupant and participating individual therein. I grew up in a predominantly English-Speaking household, and although we were encouraged and expected to know about our culture, the opportunities to engage with it on the folklore front were few and far between.

The resulting quagmire is an uneasy relationship between tradition and modernity, where "...the acculturated African can no longer relax in the ease of social sanctions which were clearly understood by all, for through having changed he has also adopted-whether he likes it or not-the shifting values and uncertain rewards of modern society."⁴

⁴ Shelton, Austin J. "Behaviour and Cultural Value in West African Stories: Literary Sources for the Study of Culture Contact." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 34, no. 4 (1964): 353-59. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1157475>.

Upon further questioning of my mother and a few other relatives, I found confirmation of this balancing act in the disconnect between the cultural upbringing of twenty-first-century children from the middle-class group in Uganda (of which I am a part), and the cultural expectations required of them to be considered as functioning members of that society. If children like my sister are given “good education” that will enable them to become successful members of an ever-evolving world, how can they continue to learn about their culture in a way that will allow them to maintain inclusion in both circles? The living conditions and goalposts of success have shifted so vastly that it is difficult to find relevance in activities that meant life or death a few centuries ago. My attention then moved away from activities themselves, to how these activities were justified, and how their significance was preserved and passed on – through oral communication. Moral tales, fables and folklore are how we are taught about the world around us. From primary school, we were regaled with tales of how Tortoise got his shell, why dog barks, and how bark-cloth came into existence.

As children grow, however, these tales make a shift from cultural significance to entertainment. The stories are no longer for the purposes of learning about why we do what we do, but they are twisted and changed to increase their crowd-pleasing value. During my four-year stint in boarding school at King’s College Budo, the older girls in our dormitory terrified us with stories of Henry Walter Weatherhead floating around through the toilets after dark. King’s College Budo was founded by H.W Weatherhead under the Church Missionary Society on land donated by the

Kabaka of Buganda, with its original intention being to educate the sons of kings and chiefs.⁵⁶ These stories had nothing to do with the Buganda culture, but they existed as an important part of the boarding school culture of Budo. Although on the surface they did nothing to preserve an accurate representation of who Weatherhead was or how he interacted with the Buganda kingdom, these stories still functioned within a larger sphere. They were specific to the experience and maturity of adolescents, who then grew up to, at the very least recall the name of an important figure in their kingdom's history.

Although the purposes and accuracy of these stories morph as a child grows, they still play an important role in reminding children of the modern age of, at the very least, their native language. Stories have always been part of the moral tapestry of the Buganda culture, and it is my belief that folklore may be the greatest reservoir of Buganda culture that there is.

⁵ King's College Budo. "Background". *King's College Budo*, circa 2017, https://www.kingscollegebudo.com/school_overview.aspx. Accessed 23rd June 2019.

II. A Crisis of Identity

My initial impulse to write about folklore was quickly squashed by fear. Irrational though it was, I was certain that being identified as African would relegate me to the box of curiosities. I did not yet know that my heritage was one of the things that made me unique. As a result, I interpreted any query regarding my origins as a slight on my intelligence – this negatively affected the relationships I formed and placed me on the offensive for any new interaction I found myself in. Looking back now, I see that this impulse to take offense from well-meaning and curious individuals was not new, but rather was a by-product of years of code-switching as a survival tactic. This way, I can occupy the space of “other” and “not other” when it best suites me. I can play both judge and jury, existing in a liminal space where I can view the world from both perspectives without being directly involved, and thus without having any fear of consequences. By maintaining an existence based on skirting the edges of identities, I can be both myself and everybody at the same time. This standpoint caused serious obstacles in working relationships, and in navigating the research process for the project, particularly with regards to how I wore my identity.

Very often, I hear myself being referred to by Americans as “African.” This is not a false identification, and I am honored to be recognized as an educated woman of color from the African continent. However, although this identification of me as “African” is not false, the cultural expectations that come with that title extend beyond the borders of my nationality.

As a Ugandan national, I know little about the fine details of my own Buganda culture, not to mention the several others that exist in Uganda alone. Uganda occupies a small space in the central-

eastern part of the continent, and thus the rest of Africa is an immense landscape of language, culture and manners that I am not nearly as familiar with as I would like to be. Therefore, when I am identified as African, it creates the illusion that I am privy to the inner workings of cultures and histories that I may never have come across. Indeed, every time I hear myself referred to as African, I feel the pressure of representation that compels me to slide into the place where I am responsible for the perception, opinions and beliefs of all 54 countries.

During my time at the university of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, I often found myself at two ends of a fixed spectrum. I was either questioned about our way of life up above the cape or chastised for not learning quickly enough how to speak the languages of the black community. It was an interesting space to occupy, and I quickly found myself learning the art of code-switching at an insidious level. I edited my speech and my accent when speaking to shop-keepers, I erased all evidence of “blackness” from my speech when addressing my professors, and I adopted the street slang when socializing with my friends. Slowly but surely, I grew a new skin, a chameleon skin that could change and take on the colors of its surroundings. This way, no one was ill at ease in my presence, and I could learn to properly enjoy their company.

When I moved to the United States for my Masters’ program, my immediate impulse was to do the same thing. Out went the South Africa dialects I was beginning to master, and in came a neutral American. I was often complimented on speaking like an American, and people would remark that, had I not told them, they would not have realized that I was from Africa. Success.

I do not mention this to stir up discontentment and discomfort in those who are either recipients of the same situation, or givers of said compliments. This was not a destruction of my Ugandan

heritage, or a stripping away of layers of my personality. This was merely my chosen method of survival. Society speaks the language of assimilation. There is room for difference only in as much as it enhances what already exists, and drastic change creates immense division before unity can be found again.

I was determined to be united with this land of opportunity, and my desire to explore folklore was quickly replaced by the desire to create a piece of work that would be familiar to an American audience. I set to work learning the references my classmates made, and educating myself with the ads, songs, plays and movies that the ‘average American’ grows up experiencing. I was determined to be as neutral as possible, to create a piece of theater that my audience did not have to learn about, because they would already know that I knew what they know. I was also afraid that if I did go the route of creating a piece based on the folklore culture of Uganda, there would be too much room for error. These stories exist in a massive interconnected network of language and history, and I was afraid that because of my western-based education, I did not know enough about these stories and the culture surrounding them to do them justice. There was no way twenty minutes could account for the breadth of the Ugandan experience, let alone the nuances of an entire continent.

There were also unpleasant flash-backs to the show-and-tell machinery of the oddity shows which were rampant during the mid to late eighteen-hundreds. African bodies in the past have often been displayed for the viewing pleasure and profit of their European masters.

There was often no regard for their inherent humanity, and they were treated close to animals, paraded around the world as token treasures from a land of barbarians. Although we have come a significant distance from that treatment – my acceptance and attendance of this university is proof of this – there is still a lingering curiosity that remains attached to the African body. In addition to my fear of inaccuracy, there was still a strong chance that any sort of representation of my culture on an academic stage would attract that kind of curiosity. Not curiosity that seeks to take part in the discovery and generation of knowledge, but curiosity that seeks to witness from afar and dissect the knowledge through the eyes of the knowledgeable instead of the eyes of the known. There is a distinct difference between the two, where the knowledgeable learn from afar; occupying a distant space above the culture, they are examining and exerting loosely grounded assumptions based on pre-conceived notions about its inner workings. The known are those who occupy said culture, and whose identity is slowly replaced by the assumptions and emerging stereotypes created by the knowledgeable. This concern is what brought to mind the experiences of Sara Baartman.

Sara Baartman, otherwise known as the “Hottentot Venus” was taken from her native South Africa when she was about eighteen years old, to work as a domestic servant for a Dutch man. In 1810, this illiterate girl “signed” a contract with an English surgeon who would take her and use her for both domestic and entertainment purposes. After four years of being put on display around England, she left the hands of the surgeon and was sold to a French man who sold animals. The Hottentot was often displayed naked with only a loincloth to cover her most private areas and was treated on an almost similar level with the baby rhino whose cage she shared during her ‘shows’.

The success of her shows attracted the attention of a French naturalist who requested that she be examined for scientific purposes, until he reached the conclusion that “...she was a link between animals and humans.”⁷ Sara died at age 26. The causes of her death are unclear. After her death, Sara’s body was obtained by the French naturalist who encased her body in plaster, pickled her brains and genitals and put them on display at the Musée de l’Homme until 1974. It wasn’t until 2002 that Sara’s remains were finally returned to her native South Africa at the request of Nelson Mandela, and properly laid to rest.

There is something fascinating about the other, and I cannot say for sure that if I were an explorer in the year 1800, that I would not have gawked at Sara’s unusually large buttocks. Civilization has done much to erase that kind of blatant disregard for humanity in favor of satisfying the curiosity of the knowledgeable, but I propose that it lives on at a deeper level. It lives in the kinds of questions we ask the other. It lives in the instant conclusions we made based on dated information tainted with the viewpoints of early colonizers. I was not afraid that I would be dissected and put on a shelf. Rather, I was afraid that if I performed a show that in any way represented my heritage, I would be instantly othered. I would face a mental dissection that would put me far away from the careful speech and mannerisms I had adopted to seem just like the rest.

In the face of this, I made the decision that my thesis would be something intellectually and emotionally relatable for a predominantly American audience, instead of something culturally identifying.

⁷South African History Online. “Sara “Saartjie” Baartman.” *South African History Online*, 16 August 2013, www.sahistory.org.za/people/sara-saartjie-baartman. Accessed 16 April 2019.

I searched my history for an aspect of myself that would not immediately identify me as an African woman of color, and I came up with Sleep Paralysis. This malady has plagued me with lesser and lesser frequency as I have grown into adulthood, but it seemed to light up an interest of significant proportions in all the people with whom I shared my idea. I dedicated my efforts to doing research that led me in many weird and interesting directions. I found documentaries, diary entries, websites, experiences and works of fiction that explored elements of the supernatural, the extra-terrestrial, the psychological and – there it was – the cultural.

There were several interesting accounts of cultural interpretations of the experience of sleep paralysis, from several parts of the world. There were a few African perspectives from the western region, and I decided to offer this up in lieu of my own. I poured my efforts into creating a fantasy world that I could inhabit as a human being untainted by my culture and my heritage, and I very nearly succeeded. The written word has such power that, with a little poking and prodding, with a little force and effort one can create history from nothing, one can create passion from dust. My one-person show on sleep paralysis grew from a small idea to a fully-formed story, in an American setting – a therapist’s office – speaking American English and dealing with subject matter that names that which Africans do not name.

In her best-selling novel *Americanah*, Chimamanda Adiche Ngozi follows the journey of a bright Nigerian girl who moves to America to continue her studies.⁸ The girl faces seemingly insurmountable financial hardships and does something she never thought she would in order to survive. In the aftermath Ifemelu, the young lady, finds herself sinking into a state of depression.

⁸ Adiche Ngozi, Chimamanda. *Americanah*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2014.

Ifemelu refuses to admit that she is depressed until her Nigerian friend gives her state of being a name. Chimamanda remarks on the namelessness of psychological maladies in the African cultural setting, and she explores how an individual goes into battle against an intangible enemy that does not have a name.

It was quite similar for me as I was growing up, and even in a home with two college-educated parents, sleep paralysis was relegated to the arena of supernatural mystery. Prayers were said, and that was that. It was perfect subject matter for an American audience, because they would recognize this condition as part of the family of so many others.

My solo piece would not be the African piece, it would be the one about sleep paralysis, that thing that we know and have named and can talk about scientifically and can prescribe drugs for. It was a wonderful, albeit short lived period of freedom during my creative process. My subject matter had a name. My subject was understood. My subject matter was relatable and tangible. Best of all, my subject could be anyone. In this solution lay my problem.

III. Pressing thoughts: Facing Myself

If my subject could be anyone, what was the purpose of telling this story? What was the importance of telling this story? I was so engulfed by the effort of maintaining the plain canvas cultivated over years of code-switching, that I forgot to write a play. What remained were meaningless words floating in a void of generality, there was no culture and so there was no nuance. There was nothing to represent because the creator of the subject had removed every trace of what had the potential to make that subject come to life. I am not ashamed of my culture, but in attempting to protect myself from the implications of being identified with it, I had, in fact, become unwilling to access it entirely.

At this point in the process I took a break from writing to do some soul searching. I thought back to the story-telling tradition through which history is preserved, and I came across a path-finding discovery; there is so much that I do not know. I have reiterated this several times through this document, but it is important to mention at this point, because here is where I recognized my perceived lack of knowledge as my biggest drawback. Not only was I afraid of creating work about my heritage because I was afraid of the identity politics that came along with it, I was afraid of my own ignorance.

The experience of history through tangible artifacts is something I did not experience until my first visit to the United States. An aunt drove me to Washington, and we spent an afternoon getting lost amongst statues and monuments and busts and quotes of people long dead.

Their likenesses, accomplishments and contributions were firmly set in the massive piece of land attributed to preserving America's history.

The one monument that remains with me to this day is the incredible sculpture of Thomas Jefferson and his surrounding structure. The founding father is simultaneously rooted in the earth and rising from his pedestal, standing tall and firm in the aura of his words. The interior of the dome was silent, with sight-seers taking muted pictures and respectfully bowing their heads. Even the children were silent, and to this day I am still in awe of the powerful effect that properly preserved and maintained historical monuments can have on the members of a nation. I thought back to my own culture and country – to the absence of towering sculptures and the small remnants housed in the Uganda Museum – and I felt sad. How can I speak about my culture when I have nothing tangible to point to? How can I represent something so nuanced, detailed and complicated with only, at best, a beginner level knowledge of what it is?

At this juncture, I would like to define the word “culture” as it pertains to the views expressed in this document. Culture refers to the amalgamation of language, manners, beliefs and practices that are identified with a particular group of people. Culture is as subjective as it is objective, and while there are widely known and accepted aspects to my Buganda culture, there is also my own experience and interpretation of these aspects. And this interpretation is valid enough to be expressed through my creative process, as well as in my lived experience.

One of my aunts gave me an interesting viewpoint regarding her relationship to culture, and to folklore within the Ugandan Culture. We shall call her Jane. Aunt Jane said that even though she was born in Uganda, she self-identifies as a citizen of the United States, because that is the life she is living. I was initially struck with offense and the strong desire to defend my country.

However, Jane went on to elaborate that the life she had chosen to live just so happened to find her in the United States. She does not believe that she would have expressed herself any differently, conducted her business any differently, or raised her children any differently if she was living somewhere else. Jane grew up in Uganda then emigrated to the US to study because she loved her husband. She does not identify with the strong cultural identity that has shown itself to be a feature with other Ugandans I know who are living in the US. She sees herself as a human being, in a place with other people who are doing the best they can with what they have.

This was fascinating for me to hear, because it was proof that one's lived experience of culture did not have to be laden with the weight of the unknown. One can make themselves known to whatever version of their culture they are living and can sit quite comfortably in that without being plagued by the guilt of cultural responsibility.

I would also like to touch on the aspect of race as it pertains to this process. In her novel *Americana*, Chimamanda makes a statement that gave me pause and made me question that singular aspect of my identity;

“The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it's a lie. I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America” (Adiche N 359). This is a powerful statement that only became true when I read it for the first time. I must admit that I first properly thought of myself as “black” when I studied in South Africa. After reading this statement, however, I realized that there is always truth in a good piece of writing, even when it is false for the reader.

My family has always proudly identified as black, but the significance of this did not hit home until I read this statement after I moved to the United States. At this point in my process however, it threw a wrench in the works and made me even more self-conscious than I already was.

Was I drinking the Kool-Aid of black culture and black representation? Is this not really my problem, but just something that has entered my sphere of social operation and thus my identity? The world of identity politics is quite foreign to me, and I strongly believe that human beings are well within their rights to choose what group of people they associate themselves with, or to create a group for themselves if they feel unaccommodated. It is slippery ground because so much of it is subjective and close to the hearts of all those who argue for, or against it. Identity is, after all, how we know ourselves, how we recognize ourselves in society. It is the murky pool that we gaze into and make out the ever-changing image that is "I." Thus far in the process, the reflection was unclear and ever-changing. It took me a while to realize that the reflection would always be changing, and that it was up to me to make out what I wanted to make out. There would always be things I did not know about my culture, always things about race that would make me uncomfortable, but for the purposes of both this performance, and my peace of mind, it was time to lay them to rest.

IV. Nsangi and the Ogre – The ‘Original’ story.⁹

After tackling the hurdle of identity crisis, I returned to the idea of folklore and set to finding a structure that would work for a one-man show. I decided to retain the narrator character who had been a strong feature of past drafts, and to build the story around them. After digging through some of my older thesis materials, I came across a story that featured a grandmother, mother and daughter who were all telling three different stories that interconnected through their relationship. By marrying this matriarchal structure with the narrator, I found a system that worked. I continued to do some research on folklore, and I found a great collection of stories from Buganda by a Mrs. George Baskerville that featured the story of Nsangi.

I chose the story of Nsangi and the Ogre because of the song that is featured in the telling of this narrative. It is the point at which this story “clicked” because I have heard this song sung for the longest time, all the way from my childhood to my late teenage years. It is one of those songs that one cannot necessarily pinpoint, but that echoes through the memory every so often, reminding the bearer of its existence. In addition to using the matriarchal and narrative structure, I decided to use the song as a place to return to at different points in the story. Taking liberties from the original story, I built the new narrative of *Wake With Me* with a new found freedom and rekindled desire to embrace my heritage.

⁹ The word “Original” is in quotation marks because there are so many versions of this story that it is difficult to pin-point what the archetype would be. The version I picked for the purposes of this document is the one that didn’t differ too much with my own interpretation of the story.

Before I proceed with the play script, I'd like to include a version of the "original" narrative for purposes of clarity. This version has been sourced in its entirety from an article in the *Daily Monitor*, a local Ugandan newspaper who published this version in 2008:¹⁰

"Once upon a time there lived a beautiful girl called Nsangi. She was so beautiful that each time her mother would go out to get food she would tell her to lock herself in the house and not let anyone in.

One day when her mother had gone out a monster called Wazike came and knocked on the door asking Nsangi to open it. When she refused to open the door, the monster started to sing a song in his big gruffly voice.

Nsangi, Nsangi,

Nsangi my dear child

You have no breasts yet

When you do get breasts

I will then go with you

Please open the door.

After hearing Wazike sing in a big gruffly voice, Nsangi knew that it was a monster knocking and so she refused to open the door and Wazike went away.

¹⁰ Salira, Nagudi. "Nsangi and the terrible monster." *Daily Monitor*, 30 June 2008. www.monitor.co.ug/Magazines/689838-741892-9tyy26/index.html. Accessed 10 May 2019.

The next time Nsangi's mother went out she again warned her not to let anyone into the house. A short while later Wazike came and knocked on the door. When Nsangi did not open, the monster started to sing his song, but this time he sang it in a sweet soft voice that sounded just like her mother's. Thinking that it was her mother knocking, poor Nsangi went and opened the door only for Wazike to enter. Before Nsangi could do anything the monster quickly ate her up and went back to the forest.

When Nsangi's mother returned and could not find her daughter, she immediately knew that a monster had eaten her so she decided to go in search of Wazike.

When she reached the forest the brave and angry woman found five monsters in their home and she asked which one of them had eaten Nsangi. When they all denied she decided to check them by cutting their little fingers in turn.

All the first four monsters were innocent but when it came to the last one, Nsangi leapt out after its finger had been cut. They then went back happily to their home after Nsangi's mother had given a stern warning to the monsters to never go near her home again."

V. Character Analysis

Creating characters was an eye-opening phase of this project because it opened up possibilities for the narrative that were not apparent before-hand. Although these character analyses all happened after the solo show, there was a distinct point in the creative process where the shape of the story became more dependent on the characters, instead of the other way around. The script was now divided into chunks that relied on the character's journey in order to make coherent sense. Creating these characters is a work that is still in progress, but their initial discovery and implementation into the existing story was a crucial push that put my cultural identity, crisis of identity, and self-awareness into a fresh perspective. The bodies they inhabited, the people they represented in my life, and the way they interacted with each other began to give me a way to navigate the new world that I was trying to create. Here are character analyses for the narrator, mother, grandmother, Nsangi and the ogre.

a) The Narrator:

The narrator is the longest surviving character in *Wake With Me*. As soon as I was aware that the format of this assignment was going to be a one-man show, I knew that I wanted some kind of story telling figure to guide the trajectory of the story. This character's journey has ballooned and deflated as the writing progressed through its different phases. In the beginning stages, the narrator took on a very aloof viewpoint in the story, participating in an almost clinical manner as one who was merely observing the action, having no real stake in the unfolding events. As I kept on writing however, this character's lack of direct involvement became an inhibiting factor.

The narrator and the protagonist were then morphed into one and as a result, the teller of the story took on the duty of experiencing the story they were telling. Although this worked for the purposes of providing information, it took away from any action that the story had. This resulted in a static piece of writing that was lengthy and heavily dependent on direct address to the audience. It took a few drafts for me to realize that I had locked myself into an impossible place where I was limited as both author and performer. As a writer, I was unable to create clarity and detail without overwhelming the performer, and as a performer, I was unable to engage with the material because I was occupied by making sure that my audience would follow along. Because of the personal nature of the work, I also found myself caught in the trap of overexplaining in order to remain accurate, and as a result the bulk of the narration had no direct effect on the flow of the story.

In the final draft, I had made several cuts to the narrator's words and created more active but brief sentence structures that allowed the narrator to both share crucial information and have a more dynamic point of view in the events. I also divided the information up amongst more active characters and gave them all an opportunity to play the narrator in some way. In this way, the character of the narrator created the framework, and the different characters shared crucial pieces of information at their points of the story. A major deciding factor in the shortening of the narrator's role was time.

The closer we grew to the final performance, the less time I realized I would have to memorize what was turning out to be unnecessary information. This was good practice for me and gave me a good first-hand experience of writing with effectiveness, not only for the purpose of ease and clarity, but also for discovering a more dynamic way of conveying important information in a story.

b) Nsangi:

This titular character was a challenge for me in both the creative and fine-tuning phases. In my mind, I knew that I wanted her to be a ten-year-old – still petulant but beginning to show signs of maturity and self-importance. It was very difficult for me to divorce my adult thought process from my performance of Nsangi and as a result, the first few times I put her on her feet she read more teen-age than pre-teen. It took a certain amount of re-aligning mind-sets and appreciating the POV of a child to finally create something close to what I remember my ten-year-old self being.

Finding a body for Nsangi was instrumental in helping me to clarify her age, and in finding her voice. Because she is supposed to represent the narrator as a young child, I tried to find some links in the thought-process between the two. However, I did not want them to become so similar that they were indistinguishable. I decided then and there that Nsangi would be unrepentant in her petulance, and that she would be a disagreeable character. This may have been a dangerous choice, but I think it worked as a contrast between an older, more mature narrator and a younger child who does not appreciate the possible consequences of her actions.

Nsangi's was fun to create and perform, but I am afraid that I may have made her too one-dimensional by removing any chance for a redemptive arc. Taking this piece forward, I would seek out opportunities to expand her petulance into something more nuanced that allows her to grow through the story.

c) The Mother:

The mother was a later addition to my character pool, being a product of my decision partway through the creative process, to shift my focus from sleep paralysis to folklore. She is an amalgamation of several powerful female characters in my own life, as well as a representation of what I imagine I would be like as a mother. Her role in the play, surprisingly enough, is also that of a narrator. Because this play features a play within a play, it took me a while to realize that the mother was fulfilling the same role in her story that the narrator was filling in the over-arching story of *Wake With Me*. It was also an ‘aha’ moment for me, because it was through the Mother’s character that I realized the importance of a clear objective.

The character of the narrator is tricky because very often, if asked what the objective of the narrator is, an actor will respond with ‘to tell the story’. However, that simply isn’t enough, especially because the narrator is the character who gives an audience the first glance into this new world.

One must begin to think of the narrator as an independent character in the story, even if they are outside it. They should receive the same treatment as other characters, and should be gifted with compelling actions, objectives and motives, otherwise there will be no reason for them to tell the story. The character of the mother gave me a strong place to start in creating objectives for other characters, because her words were specifically geared to incite a response from Nsangi. She set the ball rolling for the inevitable demise of the protagonist and reminded me to keep my writing consistent.

The mother was also the place where the audience could touch base and was the vessel through which they were given the opportunity to process the action they had just witnessed. During the performance, I also discovered that the mother functioned as comic relief from the more serious sections, and as a result was much more enjoyable to play than I had initially anticipated.

d) The Grandmother:

This is the nexus upon which the whole performance is hinged. She is the *Inception* quality that appears in both layers of the story and is the “kick” that reminds the audience what the whole operation is about. This character was especially tricky for me to create, flesh out and engage with because the original idea is based upon a real, deceased relative. My initial instinct was to make it as real and accurate as possible – I quickly ditched this because I realized the pitfalls of using real loss and emotion in a stage play. There would be too many traps to fall into: over-indulgence, risky vulnerability, preciousness with the material, prostitution of private emotions and loss of objectivity to name a few. I combated this by creating a big voice and a big character for the grandmother character in the Nsangi story.

I started with the basics: a stooped back, tyrannosaurus rex elbows and an imaginary walking stick. After playing around with her pace and a possible limp, I moved on to her voice. I also sought out variations in her facial position using “Gurning”. During a voice class, our vocal instructor introduced gurning as a way to free up the voice by exploring all the possible facial configurations through which a voice could emerge, and all the different vocal qualities that emerged through each face. According to the first page of a google search, gurning can be defined as “making a grotesque face”.

There is also a centuries old competition that originated in rural England which employs the same moniker, during which competitors go as far as having teeth removed in order to make the most grotesque face.¹¹

Using gurning, I toyed around with the muscles in my face until I found a position that was sufficiently odd (but still truthful and coherent with the story), but not too uncomfortable to remain consistent. I then spoke through this face and found a voice that was loud and flat, inhibited by a lazy tongue that almost caused a lisp, and trumpeted through pouted lips that pointed off to the side.

I am forever grateful for this fictional version of my own grandmother, because it gave me the gift of objectivity. The character I created here was almost cartoonish in its presentation, but because it was based on a figure that was so real and tangible in my mind, I had no fear of falling into caricature. This character provided a great opportunity for me to explore the possibilities I have in my voice and my body, especially when it comes to playing older characters. It was an extension of the work I began during my undergraduate career, when I was given the opportunity to play the Old Woman in *Yerma*. It is important to note that, when playing the very old or the very young, a performer must ensure the specificity of every movement of the body and every intonation of the voice.

¹¹ Riggs, Ransom. "Gurning, the 800-Year-Old Face-Making Competition". *Mental Floss*, 4th March 2010, mentalfloss.com/article/24115/gurning-800-year-old-face-making-competition. Accessed 16 June 2019.

It is not enough to simply say that “old people talk like this” or “young people move like this.” The nature of the stride and the tone of voice need to speak to the specific imaginary lived experience of this particular character.

This is not to say that there is no room for spontaneity and discoveries in the moment, but rather that the more specific the vocal and physical work are, the more genuine and believable the character will be.

e) The Ogre:

In almost all of the feedback I received after my performance, the ogre was a favorite. This was very unexpected because throughout the second phase of my creative process, the ogre was formulated as a supporting character. His stomping feet and gravelly voice were something that I expected would work for the story, not to take it over. After the performance I had a talk with one of my acting professors, and he gave me the opportunity to view the ogre through the lens of metaphor. Because of the nature of folklore, all the characters in this story are laden with some kind of hidden meaning, but the ogre is especially important because of how central he became to the story. This character appears at, is central to, and creates the climax of *Wake With Me*. He appears at the point where Nsangi has become over-confident in her own knowledge, and she has wandered from the persistent warnings of her grandmother. Unlike the original story, there is no redemptive arc where the ogre is tracked down and Nsangi is restored to her family. The significance of this came to me after speaking to my professor about the symbolism of death and the significance of loss in this performance.

In *Wake With Me*, the ogre is referred to as “the white-faced ogre.” From first glance, this already has some racial inflections, and is indicative of the foreign world into which both the narrator and Nsangi venture. The grandmother cautions Nsangi against wandering too far into the unknown for fear that she will be “eaten.” I think it is important to note that eating is a theme that runs throughout the whole performance, but when it comes to the ogre, Nsangi being eaten is more than meets the eye.

This is a loss of her innocence and her world. Everything that she thought she knew up until that moment is drastically changed when she at last comes face to face with the creature who consumes her without pause. Throughout the story, the ogre appears at the fringes; first brooding through the forest and then tracking Nsangi and her fruit-picking shenanigans. He meets Nsangi very briefly and creates the turning point of the entire story, then disappears as quickly as he came.

I think the ogre's most powerful feature was the brevity of his appearance. Because he is such a humongous, outlandish creature, I think an audience would have tired of him if he stayed too long or misunderstood him if he went too soon. Even though he is a creature of metaphor, I realized in speaking to audience members that his strength was in the solidity of his body and voice. This was a learning point for me – you cannot play metaphor; you can only create around it and hope that it comes through. When I continue to work on this piece, the ogre will become more of a focal point, and I hope to flesh out his character without overloading him with metaphors.

VI. Play Script

WAKE WITH ME

A Solo Show

By Sarah Nansubuga.

SCENE 1: Narrator

My jajja always told the best stories. She wasn't like my teachers, who told them because they had to, or my well-meaning mother who told them to make a point. No, she told stories because she loved to tell stories. I haven't seen my Jajja in such a long time. I was supposed to go home last year, but it didn't work out. Once when I was a child, I almost broke a glass orange that she kept on her coffee table. It was so smooth and translucent, and the light caught it in all the right places. Its little nubbin was a green crystal and its orange pulp looked so real, so juicy, that I just wanted to take a bite. I was always such a curious child. I never could sit still, and I cannot count the number of times she called me into her office. You see, my Jajja ran a nursery school, and it was decided long before I was born that that is where I would go. And I did. Her office was a cave of wonders, full of posters and toys and little knick-knacks that she picked up from her friends and acquaintances and business partners. And it always, always smelled like...oranges. It was a citrusy smell, tangy and underlying and all pervasive, and she sat in the middle of that smell, in her office, and she ruled the world. I guess I didn't know just how big the world was back then. I was always such a curious, playful child.

SCENE 2: Young Narrator

*(She plays a children's game that ends with her "frozen" in place.
Her game is interrupted by her mother.)*

SCENE 3: Mother

Nansubuga, Nansubuga, NANSUBUGA! Jangu wano! (*She follows Nansubuga with her eyes until Nansubuga is standing in front of her.*) Okya tunula? Gweno zanya, olowooza obudde tebuja kukya. Why are your eyes still open? Homework? Homework my foot! Do you know what time it is? Do you know what happens to little girls who stay awake past their bedtime? There is a story my mother used to tell me. Sit down! Olwatuuka...Once upon a time there was a little girl called Nsangi. Nsangi, and her grandmother lived in a village next to a forest. Nsangi didn't like to go to bed on time. She didn't care for the laws of work and rest or for her grandmother's warnings about the restless spirits of the forest. Her grandmother often worried about her, and she told Nsangi stories about the dreaded white-faced ogre who roamed the forest after dark, but Nsangi didn't listen. Every day at sunrise, Nsangi would go off into the forest to gather fruit, and her grandmother would say: (*In an old voice*) "Beware the white-faced ogre! Do not stay in the forest after night has fallen!" And her grand-daughter would say:

SCENE 4: Girl gathering fruit

(Transforming into the daughter, in a bored voice) Yes grandmother, I won't stay in the forest after dark. She has always been on my case about getting more sleep, you'd think I wasn't almost a woman. *(She stands up straight)* Ten whole years! I am ten years old. Long into the night, I hunt and gather fruit. I am the best fruit-picker in this whole village! *(She holds up her fingers in quotation marks.)* Apparently, I am "Unknowingly disrupting the flow of magic that sustains the forest, unknowingly disrespecting the laws of work and rest." Pfff! No one really believes in the white-faced ogre anymore. I am not scared of any ogre because I don't fear things that don't exist!

(She continues to 'pick' fruit off nearby trees. Humming as she goes and stuffing it into her 'bag'. She 'bites' into a fruit and continues on her merry way, munching as she goes, then stops suddenly as if she hears something. She recovers and continues to gather fruit.)

SCENE 5: Narrator

My grandparents have this lovely orchard in their enclosure. It has pomegranates and guavas and paw-paws and strawberries and sometimes passion fruit. I remember when I was young, they used to have a fruit stall outside their house. My grandfather would sell all these fruits from his garden and he would let me eat them for free. My favorite were the gooseberries, we call them *entuntunnu*. I loved how they had a tight skin that broke and burst into a million tiny seeds and sweet, tart juice in your mouth. I think I had a real, live strawberry long before I even knew what a strawberry was. And in the dusty heat of Kampala real, live strawberries are hard to come by. *(Beat)* My grandmother died last week.

SCENE 6: Grandmother

(An old, old woman at the stoop of a hut, one of her eyes is closed shut from blindness. She beats her thigh as a drum.)

Nsangi, nsangi, nsangi mwaana wange

Tonamera beere, Lwolimera ebeere lwendigenda naawe.

Nsangi komawo!

Ooba aliwa? Omwaana oono tampuliriza! This child never listens. *(She looks up)* Hey! Hey, you small mango thief! Get out of my garden! Were you there when I planted my mangoes? Shameless cabbage. You know, people these days have no respect. They walk around like empty containers, making a lot of noise but producing a lot of nothing, trampling all over my garden and stealing my mangoes. YOU! Don't you have ears in your head? Don't make me come for you! *(She raises her cane and shakes it threateningly, then brings it back down.)* I wish my granddaughter was here, then I could marry her to that mango thief and at least he could tend the plants he is stealing. Nsangi? Nsangi!

Scene 8: The Mango Thief

(He laughs uproariously and dodges.) Nyanyanyanyanya! You can't catch me! I'll steal your mangoes and you'll never ever ever ever ever ever ever catch me! *(He blows a raspberry and dodges around, ducking and diving, missing the old lady's stick. He runs until he finds Nsangi)* Your grandmother is looking for you.

SCENE 7: Girl in forest

(She looks down at the little boy and shrinks her nose.) This is my forest! Go away now or I will call the white-faced-ogre, and he will EAT YOU! *(She takes in a breath and roars with all her might, then laughs out loud.)* Coward! There is nothing to be scared of! It is just the trees settling in for the night. Are you afraid of trees? *(She poses.)* Like I said, I am the best fruit-picker around. I know my way around the forest even after dark. *(She looks around her and spots a tree.)* Oooh! These are my favorite. Some girls in the village use these to play a game, to see if a boy likes them or not. My grandmother always saves the last seed and buries it in the floor of our hut, because she believes that it will make me have many children. Stupid girls. Stupid old woman. A pomegranate is a fruit, just like any other. Here, I will show you. *(Throughout the following she proceeds to take seeds out of the fruit and spit them out.)* The ogre will eat me. The ogre will not. The ogre will eat me. The ogre will not. The ogre will eat me. The ogre will not. The ogre will eat me. The ogre will not. The ogre will eat me. *(She goes to pick another seed, but the husk is empty.)* He'll eat me?

SCENE 8: Ogre

(The ogre hulks around the forest. He is an ancient, ancient being that only knows ravenous hunger and thirst. He tramples through the forest, following the same path that the girl did before her, then catches her scent heads in her direction.)

SCENE 9: Mother

(Clapping her hands loudly) Nansubuga! Now you want to fall asleep? Zuukuka! Wake up and listen to my story! This is the price you pay for not going to sleep when I told you to go and sleep. Now, where was I? Anha, every day at sunset Nsangi's grandmother would stand at the door of their humble hut, beat a small drum and sing a song to call her granddaughter home.

SCENE 10: Grandmother

Nsangi, nsangi, nsangi mwaana wange

Tonamera beere, Lwolimera ebeere lwendigenda naawe.

Nsangi komawo!

SCENE 11: Ogre crouching on girl

(He rises up behind the girl and creeps in closer.)

The night has fallen, and the girl wanders ever closer. I can hear her dainty footsteps breaking little twigs, and can hear her humming voice, I can smell her tasty smell, and I am *hungry*. I hang back, I think she may have heard me...no, no she hasn't. My mouth is watering, and my teeth are pointy and sharp and...and...and here she is...sleeping.

SCENE 12: Girl + Ogre

(The Girl snaps awake. Movement piece that ends in Ogre eating girl.)

SCENE 13: Mother

One day at sunset, Nsangi's grandmother stood up from her low stool and hobbled to the front of their hut. She cupped one hand around her face, beat her little drum and sang

(The following text is intersected with a steady beat, either on the thigh or on the cube)

Nsangi, nsangi, nsangi mwaana wange

Her grandmother waited, the final notes of her strong voice dying out over the horizon. She looked down the path, but there was no Nsangi to be seen. She cupped her hand, beat her drum and sang again.

Tonamera beere, Lwolimera ebeere lwendigenda naawe.

Still no Nsangi. She put her hands over her forehead and peered down the path, but there was no sight of her.

Nsangi komawo!

Long after the sun had set, Nsangi's grandmother sang her song into the dawn, begging her granddaughter to come home, singing until she had no voice left. *(Beat. The drumbeats end.)* This all happened many, many, many years ago, but the people who live in that area claim that the old lady's voice still rings through the trees, that her hollow drum beats still resound in the earth beneath their feet. Every day, early in the morning they hear her wailing notes hovering in the chilly air, begging for her grand-daughter from the white-faced ogre. Now, be a good girl and go to bed.

SCENE 14: Narrator

One afternoon after the school had closed, I ambled absent mindedly into my Jajja's office. The sun was casting long shadows into the evening, and the orange sat atop her desk. She looked radiant in the sunset. She was saturated in the colors of the sunset, and she looked, almost...I picked up the orange without even thinking about it. If I could just get a closer – CRASH! Slowly, slowly, slowly, glinting and taunting and bright and juicy, it separated almost soundlessly on the cement floor.

Ever since I got the phone-call last week, I've had some fitful nights. This morning, I woke up, and I looked in the mirror, and I did a double-take. I looked in the mirror and there she was. But it wasn't her exactly. It's the eyes, I think. I looked in the mirror, and she was there looking back at me. But instead of her sharp, twinkling, brown eyes, there were bottomless, black holes. Instead of its usual, velvety luster, her plump, round face was paper white. Just like the ogre. My grandmother, my Jajja had become the ogre. And it was all my fault. I intended to go back home last year but it didn't work out. I thought she would always be there.

END.

VII. Reflection/Oral Defense Presentation

This section is the final requirement of the solo-show thesis project, during which we offer an oral presentation to our mentors and the head of the MFA program, explaining how and why we arrived at the final stage of our creative process. For my oral presentation, I gave a speech that offered the panel a view into the aspects of the show that they were not privy to, including a breakdown of my writing process, the way in which it changed as I progressed, and the ways I intend to proceed with the project. After the presentation the panel offers their feedback and communicates ways in which the student can improve their work. For performance students, that might include elongating the show to an hour, tweaking the script for a particular audience, directing the student to a theater company or practitioner who may be in the same field of study, and giving the student advice on how to make the show more marketable in the theater industry at a given time. My oral presentation is as follows:

I'd like to begin this presentation with a quote. In her TED Talk *The Danger of a Single Story*, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adiche Ngozi made the following statement: "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."¹² This quote nicely encapsulates much of what I encountered as I began to contemplate what my thesis performance would be about.

¹² TED. The danger of a single story | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Online video clip. Youtube. Youtube, 7 October 2009. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>. Accessed 16 April 2019.

My biggest fear upon embarking on this project was that my performance would be interpreted from a single perspective: that of a black, African woman. As proud as I am of my heritage, I have found that quite often in my academic experiences, that aspect of my identity is often regarded as the root cause and end result of any work I produce. I was therefore certain that if anyone in my audience was made aware of my heritage, that would be the only lens through which my work could be understood and assimilated, especially by a group of educated American university fellows. In my limited travels, there has been a tendency to collate my Ugandan identity and my African identity into one thing. The last thing I wanted was to be confined to a representation of what it means to be an African woman because I am so much less, and so much more than that.

It is for this reason that I was determined to create a piece that had nothing to do with who I was or where I came from. And so, it began. I was going to write a show about sleep paralysis. Not because I was deeply passionate about it, but because it inhabited the realm of what Chimamanda refers to in her novel *Americanah* as the “un-named.” In the Nigerian context of this novel, and in the context of my own Ugandan upbringing, there are several things and concepts that simply do not have a name in the local language. Maladies of the mind, for instance, are acknowledged but misunderstood, therefore often going unidentified and untreated. There are no words that I know of in my language for depression or anxiety, and these illnesses often go unchecked and untreated because they are either relegated to the supernatural or the religious.

It is important to note that this has changed in recent years and serious efforts are being made, especially in schools, to make sure that struggling children get the help they need.

My mother is a counselling psychologist by profession and has served for over ten years as a voluntary school counsellor in the boarding school I attended and in other prominent schools around the country. Her work helped to demystify these maladies for me at a young age, and to understand what was going on when I found myself in dangerous mental health situations. When I began to experience sleep paralysis, however, I was no longer satisfied by the answers I was receiving. This wasn't something with clear, defined symptoms; it ended almost as quickly as it began and left no trace behind except a morbid fear of closing my eyes. I decided then that this project would be an experiential one, with the objective of diving into the sufferer's mind during the episode, instead of after the fact.

In the early stages of research, I actively sought out medical prognoses on what exactly caused sleep paralysis, and how it could be avoided. I quickly discovered that the medical world knew about as much as sleep paralysis as it did about yawning. No one really knows what causes it, or where it comes from, and preventative measures which included sleeping on your back and drinking enough water did not satisfy me. I did not know enough about the condition to build a story around it, so I decided to do some more digging.

My own experience was largely metaphorical and couldn't really be explained, so I went online and checked out what other people had gone through. At some point, I had more information than I knew what to do with. I compressed it all into bullet points:

- I wasn't the only sufferer of sleep paralysis – this was a welcome relief.
- If other people suffered from this condition, then they surely had experiences that had been documented in some way.
- If I could find detailed accounts of those experiences, perhaps I could draw on them to create some kind of dreamscape-based piece that catalogued a condensed form of these people's stories.

I found all sorts of websites, documentaries, medical journals and detailed blog posts of wildly varying accounts of sleep paralysis experiences. These ranged in subject matter from the extra-terrestrial to the supernatural, and as soon as I found what I thought would work, I began to write. The first few drafts were a combination of difficult and easy. They were easy because I know how to write to be read, and they were difficult because this was not meant to be read. They were easy because I was full of that lovely adrenaline that accompanies the beginning stages of any project, and they were difficult because of the demands of Dr. Femi's class. In retrospect, my time in this class was invaluable for my experiences as a playwright and a story teller. I learned so many interesting facts about how to write for specific audiences, how to activate text, how to edit without mercy and most importantly, how to write with a specific focus/objective in mind. These experiences streamlined my process and gave me some much-needed objectivity in later drafts.

At the time however, I found some of the methodology limiting and strict – I wanted to fly with my ideas and be reckless with the work, without stopping to consider the importance of structure. I therefore found it increasingly difficult to create work that was both enjoyable for myself, and enjoyable for others.

One of my most important take-aways from this process is the realization that we make theater to be seen, understood, and ultimately enjoyed by an audience. This does not mean that the work cannot be true to the playwright – because very often the most personal work is the most universal – but it does mean that the playwright has a serious responsibility to sometimes write from the perspective of an audience member.

After the Christmas break, I found myself in an uncomfortable place. The work was well-written but did not at all translate to the stage. I received feedback that said the piece was more narrative than dramatic, and it took me a couple of weeks to swallow my pride and stop writing for the sake of writing. At this point, I was no longer grooming the beast, but merely covering it up. My ‘edits’ featured adding more chunks of dialogue and less making the dialogue come alive.

Aside from being too precious with the text, another thing that really held me back was my unwillingness as a performer to really go to the places that my concept demanded. I was afraid of being hysterical, ridiculous, emotional or dramatic. I was seeking the cool, the unaffected and the self-contained, but the sleep paralysis experience I had created was the opposite of that. The final thing that limited me with this text was the fact that it wasn’t close to my heart. At this point it was just a piece of writing that said nothing about who I was or where I came from, and that IS what I thought I wanted. I thought it would be easy to create a western world and lie my way through my utter disregard of its relevance to my own experiences, but it was not.

The answer to this quandary came in the form of a comment from Dr. Femi. Since I began the writing process in August of last year, his one complaint was that the work was too stagnant. There were walls and walls of text with no real dramatic action or motivation. He suggested that I activate it, but the application of this answer did not come until many months later. In January of 2019, the most recent rendition of the draft included a section with a short folklore story from Uganda. At this point in the journey, that was the most active part of the script.

I took a hiatus from writing and re-visited one of the early documents we had to submit outlining our plans for the thesis project. I found that one of my original concepts was story-telling, especially the idea of an old lady gathering children around a fire. I also found an earlier copy of a possible thesis draft that featured the story of a matriarchal lineage interconnected by a single narrative. When I re-visited these things, I discovered something. Heritage is not something you can erase. You can hide it, you can code-switch around it, you can disown it, you can create falsehoods over it, but it always remains. It is the fire that flares up when it finds another like itself. And I had found my fire.

I returned to the shrine of sleep paralysis and burned it down. With it I incinerated the fear of being misunderstood and the hesitation to embrace my roots in a foreign land. What remained in the ashes was that story. The story of Nsangi and the Ogre was the one thing that worked, and I set to work building a narrative around it. I decided to use the matriarchal lineage as the through-line between the segments of the story, and I found myself discovering new characters that actually meant something to the narrative.

I changed the direction of my research from Google, and instead began asking several family members what their versions of this story was. I did do some internet searches, but now my primary source of inspiration was the story culture of Uganda.

The more I wrote, the easier I found it to make the story come alive – to make it dramatic instead of narrative, the easier I found it to make these stories fit my purposes. I toyed with the facts and twisted the details in a way that I believe remained true to the original idea and moral fiber of the story, and of the people whose lives I was toying with. But why? Where did this come from? Why did it come so easy? I began to remember the stories my father told my sisters and I when we were younger. At home, he read bible stories to us with dramatic pauses and hilarious voices. On the car rides to school, he told us wildly erratic versions of traditional fairytales. My father had planted seeds he probably didn't even know he was planting. This came easy to me because I was just doing what I had seen all along.

From this point on it was a matter of crafting the story through my excitement, maintaining the energy of discovery while creating a structure that set up an audience for enjoyment and not confusion. Very early on I realized that I would have to work very specifically with my body and my voice to denote different characters with clarity. It was a welcome challenge to create distinct, whole characters with specific voices and objectives, who all demanded different things from my instrument. The process of finding the voices and bodies was very rewarding because it gave me the opportunity to explore my limits in a safe, controlled environment. It also allowed me to explore storytelling in my culture with a vigor and passion that I previously did not possess. I'd write up a new section, then play around in a space until it felt right.

I faced two significant challenges during this phase of my work: editing and transitions. The editing came from a place of needing to make up for lost time; I had spent so many months writing about something that did not ignite a fire in me, that when I did find something I enjoyed, I never wanted to stop writing. I was precious about the work, but not in a way that blocked me from seeing the value in allowing it to grow and change. I met with Diane weekly, and after every meeting I felt the immense need to write up new bits of dialogue and monologues for the different characters. I found myself adding a whole new story the weekend before our tech, much to Diane's vexation. She proposed that I reserve the additions for the future and advised that I focus on transitions.

This was a huge challenge. Transitions were especially difficult because I did not have the opportunity to see the world I was creating from the outside. It all made sense in my mind, and it took me a minute to realize that I had to create a structure that allowed my audience to breathe, to respond, to see and to follow along with each moment. How was I going to shift seamlessly from character to character without dropping energy, without compromising the moment and without losing the thread of the story, all while keeping the audience's attention? I still don't know how I did it. I struggled with this right up to the end of the performance, and I think that if I take this piece into the future, it is something that will continue to be honed.

Both Diane and George suggested a piece of cloth as a signifier for the different characters and a method of moving between the different vignettes. This was especially important because from the very beginning I had decided that I would perform my piece in theater blacks. It is something I find easy, accessible and applicable to any character.

I contacted Kyla in the costume shop and asked her if she had any red pieces of cloth (because this would contrast nicely with the black), and she was more than generous with her stores. After acquiring the cloth, I returned to a playing space and toyed about with it until I found a method that ended up being about 70% effective. I received some very helpful, supportive feedback from my audience and at the end of the day, I was glad that I created and performed something that spoke to my heritage.

At the end of this process, I have come away with several golden nuggets:

- I really enjoy Theater for Young Audiences, and this has the potential to be that kind of piece. I have always enjoyed working with children, and I hope there is an opportunity for me to grow this piece in that direction.
- This is a story-telling model that works for me, and for my creative process. The over-the-top, non-naturalistic, audience engaging and high energy way that this story was told was incredibly enjoyable, and I hope to do more work like this. I hope to create more work like this.
- I have learned to trust the director's hand. They can observe the shaping process from a distance, they can see what will make the statue crumble, and what will make it stand tall. My eternal gratitude to Diane Robinson for walking with me and being patient with me through this process.
- I am in love with the story culture of my home, and I want to explore the folklore archives that are available for consumption and curation. If my path takes me to a PhD, there is a

very high chance that my research will be geared towards the role of folklore in cultural preservation and cultural identity.

- There are some stories that only I can tell.

In her TED Talk *The Danger of a Single Story*, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adiche Ngozi made the following statement: “Show a people as one thing, only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.” Ever since I left home for the purposes of education, I have felt constricted by what other people have seen of my kin. Although the term ‘Dark Continent’ has faded from everyday conversation, it is still very much active in the way Africa and Africans are perceived. I experienced this during my time in South Africa, even though they are part of the continent, and as a result, I armed myself to the teeth once I knew that the United States was my next step. But I have found survival to be a pitiable existence. I cannot change what people have seen, or what they see when they see me, but I can change how they see what they see. This process reminded me of the power of stories to color outside the lines of expectations and to break the confines of ignorance. I faced myself throughout this process, and I learned to love what I found facing me. I would like to end with a final quote from Chimamanda:

“Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity....when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.”¹³

¹³ Ngozi Adichie, *The danger of a single story*.

Conclusion

Even after majoring in it for my undergraduate degree, I have never considered myself much of a playwright. I have constantly been comparing the work that I create to the work that has somehow made its way into literary canon. This process reminded me that writing is not done for the purpose of being remembered, but rather for the purpose of bringing the human experience ever closer through the written word. It is a mission in recognizability, where we recognize part of ourselves in the stories of others and find that we are not alone in the struggle that takes up our waking hours.

Creating this solo show reminded me of the all-consuming nature of creative work. Its process was a constant struggle towards refinement and clarity, and I found that the more I worked on the piece, the more I discovered about the story I was trying to tell. The creative journey can be likened to the growth of a seed. Although this can be broken down into further detail, there are three major parts to the “growth” of a creative project. There is the first step that is filled with a rush of joy and a never-ending wellspring of ideas. This is the first shoot. There is the middle that is the dreary, weathering sludge during which the creator’s very essence is put to the test. This is where the roots are taking hold, where nothing tangible is happening and where, very often, the desire to give up is strongest. And then there is the third step during which the created becomes the creator, and the work breathes a life of its own, leading the weary traveler into new lands of discovery that they could never have imagined. There is no end to creativity, and it is my genuine desire that *Wake With Me* continues to breathe new life, into those who find themselves within its grasp.

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Vita

Sarah Nansubuga was born in Kampala, Uganda. She majored in performance and dramatic theory, with minors in play-writing and musical theater before she graduated from the University of the Witwatersrand with a Bachelor of Arts in Dramatic Arts. She spent seven months volunteering as a theater worker at Ugandan high schools and freelancing as an actress before accepting a position at Louisiana State University as a member of their MFA Acting Cohort for the class 2017-2019. During her time at LSU, Sarah appeared as an understudy in *Arcadia*, and as a member of the company in *Airline Highway*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* and *A Servant of Two Masters*. She worked also locally, appearing in Southern Rep's production of *Eclipsed*, and under Tulane's Lynn Nottage series in *By The Way; Meet Vera Stark*.