

Interview with Emma Okomoh about her animation film 'A Story to Tell'.

Interview conducted on 13th November 2019 with Emma Okomoh (referred to as E) by telephone by Ester McGeeney (referred to as Researcher or R). The interview was transcribed, anonymised and edited by R., checked by E and shared with permission.

E: The first thing that interested me was the extract from the 80s with the women. And just like reading that and just seeing how like life is really similar to how it is now. I think that before hand, I never really thought about it, but I think I thought it was different times obviously, I thought maybe that girls my age would have acted differently maybe and would have abided with the rules that they. Reading the extracts it was really similar, some girls were rebelling, like not getting on with their parents and all of that and that is still happening now. And I think that's the thing that interested me.

R: So before you did this, do you think the image in your head was probably that girls 30 years ago were more compliant and kind of did what they were told?

E: Yeah I think I thought that, yeah like I feel like girls followed the rules, did what they were told and had a lot of restrictions. That's what was in my mind before.

R: Do you think it was like that for your mum when she was younger? Do you think she was restricted and followed the rules?

E: I think 'cos, coming from my culture and obviously my mum is a bit older, coming from the 80s. I think she did have like more restrictions and I think she did follow them. Like from a cultural point of view, you have to. You have to follow what your parents say, you don't have a lot of options around that. So going against that would be a bad thing and like other people - not even your own family - would look at you in a bad way and judge you.

R: Do you feel like that is a cultural difference?

E: Yeah definitely.

R: And what is your cultural background?

E: I'm Nigerian. My parents were born there but I was born in [a European country] so I didn't really go through all the very strict rules that they may have had in Nigeria. But I do have Nigerian parents so in some ways they were strict.

R: Do you think for you and your sisters, it has been like you describe it - like you have to do what you were told? Does it feel like that?

E: I think it's half and half. We did have more rules. For example, like going outside and maybe like a time that we had to be home by and like certain people, like being friends with certain people and all that. These are not really major rules and all that but they are mostly about our safety and all that.

R: I was thinking that the extracts that you were interested in. I feel like all through the project this was the theme that you were interested was this - like this idea of rebellion and restrictions and stuff. And a lot of that is about freedom and whether young women are free or not. Or like how much freedom because on one level you are not free when you are a child. You have all

sorts of restrictions - like legally - on what you can do. But I suppose I was wondering whether that was how it felt to you, like if it felt like that was something you were interested in looking at.

E: Yeah. 'Cos obviously as girls, and not only this time, but also in the 80s. Like, from parents, I don't know, there's more protection that they want to provide. Because we can be in a vulnerable situation more easier. And kind of the girls role of - people just look at girls differently. That's why we may be restricted of our freedom. We can't do a lot of the things that boys our age group can do.

R: And did you feel for you growing up, did you feel less free than other girls from other cultures?

E: I don't think I thought about it as being free or freedom but I knew that yes our parents are different and we are brought up differently. We have different values. That's it. I mean I didn't feel like I was kind of kept behind or anything. I just thought it was normal. Yeah we come from different backgrounds, that's how it is.

R: And do you think you've been rebellious? Are you a rebel girl?

E: I don't think so. Many of these things that people speak about - I'm not really interested in that. Like doing drugs. The thing in the extracts, there was a girl who did drugs, or smoked weed whatever, people do that now but i'm not really interested. I had friends that did that I was just like standing in the corner, just looking at them.

R: 'Cos I think you were saying in that session on risks that you are not someone who really wants to take risks?

E: 'Cos I think I'm just scared of the consequences of what might happen. Like if I don't know, I don't know the end point. ...I'm not saying I don't take any risks, like I just stay in a box. I just do what I know rather than doing something different.

R: So the reason why you chose, out of all the extracts and interviews that you looked at, what made you choose the one that you used to make the film?

E: I felt like I could relate to that specific extract and maybe other people could as well. Like in that extract I think it was a girl and she was like. I remember that I think she had a lot of siblings and I think she didn't get on with her parents that much and she worked and she was really tired during the week and like weekends she went out and she didn't have a curfew. All that. I felt like I could relate in a kind of way.

R: What was it about that that was relatable?

E: The way she spoke. It felt really modern, like the way that people speak now. And I found out that the girl was actually black girl. Yeah I think I was told, after reading it, that she was black after reading it. In my mind I was thinking oh all the girls that were interviewed were like white, white british. It didn't cross my mind that they could be asian, black or other races. I think that's why I chose that extract.

R: Is it possible to say why it's important to you to choose a black girl?

E: I felt like...It's like representing. Representation really matters. It's like seeing myself, in every area of life. Seeing a person who looks like you, like coming from your background, is really important. Like having role models as well.

R: Why did you think it was all white girls do you think?

E: I think it was the time period, like the 80s, and like coming from manchester. And I didn't realise that Manchester at that time was really diverse as well. I thought only recently maybe that people came from different countries. I really thought that it was just like white people.

R: That was never anything you were taught at school or anything, like black history, like local histories?

E: I don't think, no. In high school we were never taught like Black history in Britain. Yeah maybe like in America but like not in Britain.

R: Does that change the way you feel about Manchester, knowing that history, at all?

E: Yeah it's good to hear that. Always been a diverse communities in Manchester for a really long time and people grew up - like that other races - black people, asian people - they grew up and were born in Manchester from a long time ago and they created their own families. It's nice to hear that.

R: How did you actually make the film? What was the process?

E: So from the beginning. We read the extract. We picked out key themes and key quotes from the extract and we used those in my animation. We created the characters - the girl, two girls - I coloured them and cut them out. Using a green screen we like moved the images and the pictures slightly and I took shots with the camera to make it look like they are moving and walking. It was a really fun process. Like at the beginning I was like, 'what am I doing?' but then as I created more shots and created more scenes I kind of thought of the story and it was interesting seeing the story that I read in my animation.

R: Did you have an idea of the story before or did you feel like it was through making the film the story unfolded?

E: Yeah definitely, I feel like it was through doing the film. Like as I was doing it I had more ideas and like I could see it coming into a reality.

R: How do you feel when you watch the film now?

E: Yeah. I think it's really good. I'm actually proud of myself. It was a long process to be honest. Like some weeks, we had slow weeks, slow days. Some days we did more. I'm actually really proud of it. It took a lot of time and effort and like the help of [digital artists] P. and S and [youth worker] M. they really helped me a lot.

R: Have you ever done anything like that before?

E: No. I'm not really like an artist person. Even from the film, you can see from the drawings...at the beginning I was like, I'm kind of unsure about this animation. Will i be able to do it?

R: What do you hope people get from it when they watch it?

E: I don't know. I think its like telling the story. I feel like I'd have to explain before I show the animation, I'd have to explain the process of like my idea behind it for people to understand the point of it.

R: What is your idea behind it?

E: It's just like showing how the story from the 80s how it could look like in the modern day. And how life hasn't really changed that much because obviously the extract is from a young person from the 80s and I just made it look like it's from the today.

R: In some ways, was it easier, like do you feel like in any way it's your story or does it feel like it's someone else's story. Like whose story is it?

E: I feel like it's both. Like originally it was her story but I did create the art, I created the pictures and I put my point, my friend's voice and we made it our own, in a sort of way.

R: Do you think it's easier to start from someone else's story or would it have been easier to start with your own story?

E: I think it would be easier starting from someone else's story 'cos I remember in one of the sessions they did ask us to create our own to tell our own story but I was really puzzled, I didn't know what to do so I just told this extract cos I really liked it.

R: Do you feel like you've got a story to tell? Does the idea of someone saying to you that you've got a story does that seem strange in some way?

E: Yeah I don't know what to say to that.

R: I suppose, a big part of the original study was about was just collecting ordinary young women's stories and then kind of keeping them and treating them like they are special, not because those women - like they were ordinary but they were also special because everyone is special. And I suppose I was wondering if that seems like a strange idea that you might have a story that someone might want to listen to?

E: I don't think it's strange. It's very validating of everyone saying that everyone matters, that we are all special in our own way. Because nowadays people might feel rejected or isolated in some sort of way but everyone does matter. So yeah I think it's a good idea, collecting all these stories.

R: So I was wondering about the other girls in the girls group and whether you feel like you related to the material - because you were the only one who ended up making a film and that could be like practical reasons like you were around over the summer or I was wondering if you feel like you related to it in a different way or in a way that the others didn't.

E: Yeah probably. First of all I noticed that the other girls created their own story and they made their own. They basically made their own piece from scratch. And maybe they found it difficult. I don't know, as you said, they weren't around much. For me I felt like it was easier because I was around and I had a lot of free time and I actually enjoyed doing the animation so yeah and the story, like the script was really interesting for me so that's why I kept coming and kept working on it.

R: The last thing I wanted to ask you about was - when we started talking about doing the project the youth worker thought that it might be tricky to do the project with your girls group because a lot of the girls are quite young and quite a lot of the girls are from strict religious backgrounds and she felt that maybe because a lot of the focus of the project was around sex and sexuality that might make it difficult to do. So I was I wondered what your views are on that and whether it is hard-

E: Yeah, I think I noticed that many of the girls don't feel that comfortable talking about it or they don't have enough information or enough knowledge to have a proper conversation about sex or sexuality so yeah it might be a bit too, well it shouldn't be too much for them to be honest they should be given space to learn about it and like have that conversation, wherever they learn. So I think we should continue having these sessions and like learn about sexuality and all of that. I feel like it is important.

R: Is there something about it being difficult if it feels like the project is - Like you know how you imagine originally it was white girls and all the facilitators are white, it feels like it might be a

'white agenda' to talk about sex and sexuality or like that there might be some sort of clash there or it feels like an agenda that might not be respectful or different cultures and religions.

E: I didn't notice. It didn't bother me. I didn't notice it. I mean it's obviously nice to have a group of people from different backgrounds but that doesn't always work out so whatever you've got if you want to do a project like this with anybody, you work with who is there.

R: So with a girls group like yours where one of its strengths is how diverse it is and you were saying that people don't have enough information and it's hard to talk about sexuality but they need to learn about it. Do you have a sense of how you have those conversations in a way that feels safe, in a way that people feel comfortable?

E: Yeah I think it's definitely a safe space. We don't judge - the girls know that you shouldn't judge others and we have these rules to respect each other's views, no judging, no laughing and like to be mature about what people say. And I think it is a safe environment and because we are all girls as well I think that plays a huge part in that. Like in school maybe sometimes it's a mixed group boys and girls so it's hard to really talk about sensitive or mature issues.

R: Do you think in any way using extracts or using the archive like this one is a way of having that conversation about sex and sexuality?

E: Yeah. I think it made it easier like reading about it - it wasn't in an explicit way at all. It was just like a normal conversation, or like in a normal way. So it was easier to read that and understand it and create your own views from that.

R: Is there anything else you would like people to know about your film?

E: Maybe, just, I want to let them know that at the beginning it wasn't my story, it wasn't like my story to tell. It was another girl. I've never met this girl, she was from many years ago. She's probably alive doing whatever. I had this opportunity to bring her story to life and tell people how her life was like 30 years ago and bring a modern twist to it.

R: And if someone said why bother telling someones story from 30 years ago do-

E: I think why not! (laughs) It's interesting to see how people were before. It's interesting to know how people are doing now, not even 10, 30 years ago, like how your neighbours are doing, how their day went. And I feel like not everyone gets to learn about how things were thirty years ago.