

Faculty Research Grants for the Arts proposal April 2021

Project title: Big Mouth film project

Collaborators: Bremen Donovan (PhD candidate, Anthropology), co-producer
Nomi Dave (faculty, Music), co-producer

Other collaborators: Anne Coughlin (Law), Mamadou Dia (French),
Giulia Paoletti (Art); external collaborators in Guinea and the US

Project description

We are requesting funding for two documentary films that we are co-writing and co-producing, as well as plans for University and community screenings and programming around them. Our first film project, 'Big Mouth', explores defamation as a legal tactic to silence journalists reporting on sexual misconduct. It tells the story of a recent lawsuit against a Guinean journalist and how the case ignited debates around public speech, voice, gender, and protest in Guinea. In a post- #MeToo world, it shows how activists form new coalitions and mobilize new strategies to make noise and be heard on their own terms. Our second film project [untitled] explores what it means to be feminist by considering modes of female solidarity and potency beyond words, activism, and direct political participation. In contrast to the narrative storytelling of 'Big Mouth', this second project will be an immersion in women's sound worlds and spaces of interaction in Conakry, Guinea. Using the medium of film, this longer project will explore cross-class affective experience in light of broader questions about ambiguity and precision in the pursuit of justice, and social injunctions about what should and should not be spoken out loud.

We will use these films to foster discussions through a series of community events at the Betsy and John Casteen Arts Grounds. These events will involve film screenings and panel discussions on questions of public speech, media, and gender justice work in Charlottesville and at the University; as well as works-in-progress sessions for students and faculty, on ethnographic film-making, methods and ethics in creative and engaged scholarship, and community collaboration. We will also hold listening sessions around both films while they are in production, to get audience feedback and generate conversation.

Big Mouth description

In January 2019, the Guinean journalist, Moussa Yéro Bah, was found guilty in a defamation suit. The suit involved a clip on her radio news program, *Les Grandes Gueules* (Big Mouths) about an ongoing sexual assault case. While she never named the alleged perpetrator, his identity was well known on the street and in social media. He promptly sued Ms. Bah for defamation, and won. Activists in Guinea were inflamed by this decision and rallied in Ms. Bah's support, on- and off-line. Meanwhile, the alleged perpetrator was never brought to trial, despite the existence of video evidence against him, and charges against him were quietly dropped.

This tangled web of legal actions raises critical questions about truth claims, the production of proof, and parallel systems of justice in highly mediatized cases. While formal criminal justice processes require compiling evidence and investigating claims, the outcome of cases is often greatly shaped by gossip, digital and media activism, and public opinion. ‘Big Mouth’ explores whose voices are amplified in this process and how they are heard. What happens to audio-visual evidence when it spills out of courtrooms and into public life, and vice versa? How should journalists and activists balance free expression with respect for the rule of law? What ultimately constitutes justice for those involved?

‘Big Mouth’ takes the case against Moussa Yéro Bah as a point of departure to explore questions of voice, shame, activism, and truth in gender justice work. It is based on ethnographic research in Guinea across three years, archival research, and interviews and close collaborations with many of the people at the center of this story. It also builds on our own backgrounds in law, audio-visual anthropology, film-making, and gender justice.

[untitled] film project

While a number of feminist coalitions have emerged in Conakry, Guinea and other cities in West Africa in recent years, these groups are largely comprised of educated, literate, middle-class women and men. Our second film project will explore alternative modes of feminism by considering ways of being and doing that live outside of traditional political spheres. A companion film to ‘Big Mouth’, this second project will explore female expressivity, performance and refusal in spaces of work and play in Conakry. As the anthropologist Adrienne Cohen asks, how can we take non-elites seriously in conceptualizing their communicative agency and female potency? We will explore these ideas through immersion in women’s urban sound worlds in Conakry, to evoke senses of affect and experience in everyday life.

People and departments involved

Our project across these two films will involve our own departments, Anthropology and Music, and will be of interest to students, staff, and faculty in each. As we are currently already in the early stages of the first film, we convened a roundtable of scholars around this project, and also received feedback on an early cut from members of Ethnocine and the Brown Girls Doc Mafia during an Anti-Racist Film-making workshop at the RAI Film Festival in March. We have scheduled a roundtable discussion event at UVA in May 2021, involving Anne Coughlin (School of Law), Meredith Clark (Department of Media Studies), and Kevin Everson (Department of Art). This roundtable is being sponsored by the Performance Cultures Lab under the Institute of the Humanities & Global Cultures, led by Marianne Kubik (Department of Drama) and Michelle Kisliuk (Department of Music). These individuals and their departments will all continue to be involved in programming around the project in 2021-22.

‘Big Mouth’ is also connected to a new initiative that the two of us are starting, the Sound Justice Lab, at UVA. The lab bridges work across law and the humanities, and will bring together students, staff, and faculty from a number of different schools and departments. The lab is already housing a collaborative project, Amplified Justice, involving Anne Coughlin (Law),

Bonnie Gordon (Music), and Nomi Dave. The Amplified Justice project explores voice, activism and gender justice in Charlottesville and at UVA, through applied research and creative work. As a result, its work and aims are closely aligned to our films and we plan to engage with the project leaders as well as other students, staff, and faculty involved in 2021-22. These individuals include Lanice Avery (Department of Psychology and Department of Women, Gender & Sexuality), Abby Palko (Director, Maxine Platzer Lynn's Women's Center), Verónica Zebadúa-Yáñez (Department of Politics), and Liezl Vergara (MA student, Anthropology).

In addition to these individuals, departments, and units, we also plan to involve students and faculty from the Department of French, because of the Francophone context of our films. In particular, we are already in contact with Mamadou Dia and Alison Levine. One of us (Bremen) is also teaching a new course on race and the francophone world, in the French Department in Fall 2021, so this project will intersect with discussions in the class. We also plan to engage students and faculty from the Woodson Institute, the Power, Violence, and Inequality Collective, the Global Development Studies program, and the proposed Gender Justice Lab at the School of Law.

We will also involve community members in Charlottesville, as well as our collaborators and their community members in Conakry, Guinea. Through our series of public events in Charlottesville, we aim to engage with community advocates, such as the women's rights lawyer Gleibys Gonzalez, with whom we are already in contact. We plan to host screenings, public discussions, and listening sessions at Arts Grounds; as well as a series of practical workshops with students to open up the editing process and brainstorm collectively through questions of form and content. We will also organize an event around radio and social media in the 'Big Mouth' story, including Nathan Moore (WTJU). In addition, we plan to submit our films to the Virginia Film Festival to engage larger audiences.

In Guinea, we plan to screen both films and host public discussions around them, in December 2021 and in May 2022 (contingent upon the lifting of travel restrictions). These events will be moderated by our partners in Guinea, including Moussa Yéro Bah, Halimatou Camara, and Maitre Salifou Béavogui, as well as the local organization F2DHG (Women's Development and Human Rights in Guinea). We will also give copies of the film to our collaborators there and encourage them to use it in any ways they find useful for their own work. We will also develop an impact strategy and support and collaborate with outreach.

Programs and events

We propose a series of events in 2021-22 and Fall 2022, alongside our work on the films-in-progress, as well as their launch and subsequent screenings. As we continue to work on the films, we aim to have collective discussions with individuals at UVA, such as the roundtable we're organizing in May 2021, as well as continuing discussions with our collaborators in Guinea and others outside of Charlottesville and UVA. Once each film is finished, we are planning a series of public events in Charlottesville and (contingent on the lifting of travel restrictions) in Conakry, Guinea, to launch them and engage audiences and community members on the questions they raise. These events will include panel discussions and Q&As, as well as listening and feedback sessions in Charlottesville and Conakry.

Learning objectives

We outline four main points that we hope people will learn from this project: 1) examining the impact of defamation suits on journalists; 2) examining the role of media activism around gender justice work; 3) exploring ways of hearing female, queer, and marginalized voices; and 4) considering the use of film and creative practice in multi-modal scholarship and advocacy.

1) The impact of defamation suits

Recent years have seen a number of high-profile defamation suits filed by politicians and powerful individuals against journalists across the globe. In the United States, for example, Donald Trump sued *The New York Times* for defamation over a 2019 opinion essay. Many of these cases involve allegations of sexual misconduct. In Australia, a Labor party leader publicly threatened to sue a journalist and her broadcast station in 2018 for accusations against him. In India, the journalist Priya Ramani was recently acquitted in a defamation suit brought by a former government minister who sued her for accusing him of sexual harassment. These cases resonate strongly with the case against Moussa Yéro Bah, who was sued by a wealthy businessman for reporting on sexual assault allegations against him.

Our film hopes to shed light on this use of defamation as a legal tactic against journalists, particularly in the context of gender justice work. In particular, we explore the use of defamation as a means of silencing, alongside other strategies such as non-disclosure agreements and over-zealous victim shield laws, like the one recently overturned by Australian activist and survivor, Grace Tame. As Tame and others have argued and campaigned, speaking out and being silent are not simply metaphors in these cases but material, sounded – or silenced – practices and strategies that influence outcomes, both in the courtroom and beyond it. Through public-oriented discussions with journalists and media scholars, such as Meredith Clark, Carrie Rentschler (McGill University), and Nathan Moore, as well as with our journalist partners in Guinea, we will examine the impact of defamation and similar tactics against journalists, particularly in the context of sexual misconduct. We will also consider how defamation exists in counterpoint with non-legal mechanisms, often grouped together under the now-ubiquitous name of ‘cancel culture.’ These discussions will illuminate why voice and sound matter beyond metaphor in these cases.

2) The role of media activism in sexual assault cases

A growing body of scholarship and public commentary exists on the role and impact of the media in the context of gender justice work. On the one hand, scholars and commentators have documented the rise of media activism responding to the failures of states and legal systems to protect and support survivors. Through ‘feminist digilantism’ via social media, open letters, and other means, activists seek justice even when perpetrators are unfairly exonerated or overlooked entirely by the law. Yet, some scholars caution that these efforts serve to shift the burden of responsibility away from the state and onto women in the private sphere (Jane 2016), thus devaluing due process and creating parallel systems of justice (Molyneux et al. 2020). In

addition, Pratiksha Baxi analyzes the effects of highly publicized rape trials that end up “feeding into the nervous system of the carceral state” (2016). Her critique of ‘carceral feminism’ warns against stoking public outrage in order to seek punitive measures against perpetrators, which often disproportionately affects marginalized men and marginalized women (ibid.).

The story around Moussa Yéro Bah’s case illustrates many of the dangers and possibilities at play here. The case played out both in the court and in the court of public opinion, through radio, social media, and street corner conversation. Activists protested the verdict on Facebook and in protests and press conferences. As we explore in the film, such actions allow for adjudicating cases beyond the courtroom by appealing to the broader public. Jean and John Comaroff describe this process as ‘lawfare’, through which activists use legal contexts to push for social change.

In our discussions, particularly around ‘Big Mouth’, we will explore the role of old and new media in shaping public opinion around criminal cases. We will invite participants to consider the debates around feminist digital activism, in Guinea, the US, and elsewhere, in order to understand the many issues and points of view at play here, as Baxi and others note.

3) Ways of hearing female, queer, and marginalized voices

Both of our films explore the politics of listening to female and other marginalized voices. Thinking beyond metaphor, we consider the sound *effects* of voice and silence in the context of sexual misconduct and activism around it. Legal proceedings, disciplinary measures, and the broader discourse around sexual misconduct often are implicitly premised on and shaped by existing social scripts and narratives. For example, pernicious ideas exist of ‘real’ victims – innocent, chaste young women – in assault cases. Similarly, such ideas are intertwined with long histories of white supremacy, by which Black men have long been feared and demonized for their perceived threat to white women. We aim to draw attention to these existing narratives to show how they shape legal and political outcomes.

But in addition, we also show how longstanding ways of hearing certain voices shape ideas about credibility and authority that greatly influence verdicts and public opinion. Scholars and historians note the ways in which female voices have long been heard as unauthoritative and unreliable, in many historical and cultural contexts (Beard 2017; Durán 1999; Hoegaerts 2015). As Mary Beard argues, familiar critiques and mockery of female voices, such as describing them as shrill, whiny, or strident, are ways of disciplining women and preventing them from fully participating in public life. Such critiques also resound around queer or other minority voices, similarly serving as tactics of discipline and silencing. Jennifer Lynn Stoever shows how Blackness is imagined in the US through sound and “willfull mishearing.” In our project, we explore sound and silence in the context of gender justice activism to show why voice matters and how, through their vocal practices, activists attempt to re-train the “listening ear” (Stoever 2016).

4) The use of film and creative practice in scholarship and advocacy

As scholars in the humanities and social sciences are increasingly exploring creative and activist modes of producing and disseminating knowledge, our project provides opportunities for

students and faculty to discuss and learn about particular methods and related issues. Through works-in-progress events, we will open up the film-making, research and editing process to involve and share with others. We are already in conversation with Kevin Everson (Department of Art) and Mamadou Dia (Department of French) about their own film-making practices, and have invited them to participate in public events around our project as a way for us and others to learn more about their own work, experiences and insights as artists and film-makers. Other events proposed around the project will similarly discuss the use of sound recordings as forms of knowledge. We will also host discussions with students, faculty and community partners on engaged scholarship and advocacy, including through film.

In line with our emerging work in the Sound Justice Lab, we will also use our two film projects as ways of thinking actively around anti-sexist, anti-racist film-making. In March 2021, we had the opportunity to discuss related ideas and techniques, at the Royal Anthropological Institute's (RAI) Film Festival conference. Through a competitive process, our film, 'Big Mouth', was selected as one of three projects to participate in a special session on anti-racist film-making. As we actively use these principles and guidance in our project, we plan to have ongoing conversations with members of the UVA community and others to get feedback and open up discussion on what it means to do affirmatively anti-sexist, anti-racist scholarship and practice. We draw inspiration here from programs such as the Collective for Advancing Multimodal Research Arts (CAMRA) and the Center for Experimental Ethnography (CEE) at the University of Pennsylvania; and we aim to create this kind of practice-oriented critical community at UVA.

Programs and events

We are requesting funding for three sets of activities for our project: 1) research and production for the films; 2) works-in-progress roundtables and workshops; and 3) public screenings and discussions in Charlottesville and in Conakry, Guinea.

As outlined in our work plan and budget, we anticipate expenses associated with both films, including filming in Conakry and production costs. We are requesting funds to pay stipends to our collaborators in Guinea for their research assistance, as well as stipends to videographers, sound recordists and musicians in Guinea.

In Charlottesville, we plan to organize a series of workshops and public discussions around both film projects. Some of these events will be works-in-progress sessions where we invite students, staff, and faculty at UVA to discuss the film-making process, include affirmative steps for anti-sexist, anti-racist film-making. The aim of these sessions is to open up the process itself and engage with others who are working on or interested in their own projects. We also are planning works-in-progress discussions to help us address ethical issues around representation. One of these events will involve three invited speakers from other institutions, with whom we have been consulting through the process so far.

We will also organize a series of screenings for both films, as well as submissions to the Virginia Film Festival and other festivals. Our screenings will include panel discussions around key themes in the film content and about the film-making process.

Learning objectives

As outlined earlier in this proposal, our project has four main learning objectives:

- 1) examining the impact of defamation suits on journalists;
- 2) examining the role of media activism around sexual assault cases;
- 3) exploring ways of hearing female, queer, and marginalized voices;
- 4) considering the use of film and creative practice in multi-modal scholarship and advocacy.

Detailed plan of work

We are currently in the production and editing phase for *Big Mouth* (film 1), and in the research & development phase for (film 2).

Spring 2021 – ongoing research, production, and editing

In February, we finished a short, early cut of *Big Mouth*, around which we convened a roundtable of scholars at the RAI Film Festival in March. We also presented the work at the festival's Anti-Racist Filmmaking live session and received feedback from the Black Girls Doc Mafia and Ethnocine. In May, we will host another public roundtable discussion, at UVA, for feedback from Kevin Everson (Art), Meredith Clark (Media Studies), and Anna Coughlin (Law), which will help us in the final editing phase.

Summer 2021 – post-production, filmmaking communities, and scholarly publishing

June will be an intensive period of post-production: Bremen will be editing a final cut of *Big Mouth*, in collaboration with Nomi, as Nomi attends the Ethnographic Documentary Short Course at the University of Manchester's Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology. We have been invited to publish a colloquium section in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, with papers from the participants in our RAI roundtable, and plan to do so over the summer. In July, at least one and possibly both of us will attend the Flaherty Film Seminar, whose theme this year, *opacity*, is deeply connected to both our films, especially (film 2), dealing with what is and is not made explicit.

Fall 2021 – final cut feedback sessions, research & development, pre-production

In the Fall, we will organize screenings and conversations at UVA around the *Big Mouth* (film 1) final/rough cut, and then complete post-production on the film in preparation for curated screenings in Charlottesville and Guinea, and submission to festivals. Meanwhile, we will continue research & development and pre-production for (film 2), and planning for a trip to Guinea during Winter break (late December-January). This latter will be for production of (film 2) and audience engagement around *Big Mouth* (film 1).

Winter break – collaborative field research, film production, community screenings

We will both travel to Guinea in late December, Nomi for 3-4 weeks, Bremen likely a bit longer. The goals of the trip are multiple and intersecting. First, we will organize local events around *Big Mouth* (film 1), to include exhibitions, community discussions with a public historian, and

advocacy events in partnership with Moussa Yéro Bah and others. This trip will be primarily dedicated to intensive filming and sound recording: the production phase for (film 2). This latter will include in-process screenings of daily rushes and other material with film participants. An important part of this process for us is experimenting with collaborative sound and visual elicitation practices with our partners in Guinea. In the spirit of attending to different ways of hearing, and of exploring creative and activist modes of producing and disseminating knowledge, we also plan to also document the filmmaking and research process itself. To note that if travel restrictions remain in place and we are not able to go to Guinea ourselves, we will provide funding to our partners and collaborators there to organize community screenings themselves; and to continue with research, filming and recording for the second project.

Spring 2022 – production, works-in progress sessions, engagement strategy

During the Spring semester, we will finalize production on (film 2), maintaining our ongoing collaboration with partners in Guinea. We will begin post-production, and host work-in-progress sessions with departments of Art, Music, Anthropology, French, Media Studies, the Carter G. Woodson Institute, and the broader community of artists, scholars, and activists involved in the project. We will continue building out our engagement strategy for both films, reaching out to academic and non-academic communities as momentum builds.

Summer 2022 – feedback sessions and elicitation; post-production

In early summer, we will conduct a second round of film elicitation and engagement in Conakry around (film 2), in order to continue developing our collaborative approach. We will finalize post-production for (film 2) during the summer of 2022, and shift our focus to audience engagement and impact strategy for the project (which encompasses both films).

Fall 2022 – screenings and community events; engagement and impact; scholarly articles

In Fall 2022, we will organize screenings of (film 2) and related community events in Charlottesville, to generate conversation around its themes. We will submit the film to festivals and will host a workshop at UVA with invited speakers. We will also work on two scholarly articles: one on the critical themes of ambiguity and activism that the film raises, and a second article on findings from our collaborative, community-based approach to film-making.

BUDGET INFORMATION EXCLUDED FROM PUBLIC PROPOSAL

Biographies of collaborators

Nomi Dave is an interdisciplinary researcher, former lawyer, and Associate Professor in the Department of Music at UVA. She researches voice, sound, politics, and violence in authoritarian and post-authoritarian contexts. She is the author of *The Revolution's Echoes: Music, Politics, and Pleasure in Guinea* (Chicago, 2019), which won the Ruth Stone Prize for best first monography in ethnomusicology, in 2020. Her work has been funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation. Nomi previously trained as a human rights lawyer and worked for five years for the United Nations, including three years with the UN Refugee Agency in Conakry, Guinea. She earned her MPhil in Social Anthropology and her DPhil in Music from Oxford University. She was a Visiting Assistant Professor in the departments of Music and Cultural Anthropology at Duke University, before arriving at UVA.

Bremen Donovan is a filmmaker and Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology, writing a dissertation about policing and audiovisual evidence in France. Her work has been commissioned by the Open Society Justice Initiative, Conciliation Resources, ABC 20/20, and *The Guardian*, among others, and she has facilitated creative workshops from New Urban Arts and Light House Studio in the U.S., to We Own TV in Sierra Leone, to Ciné Institute in Haiti. As a postgraduate Arnold fellow at Brown University, she produced a collaborative ethnographic research and filmmaking project called *Ursula* in eastern Sierra Leone. Later, she co-wrote and directed the film *Talking Borders*, which was translated into seven languages and toured border areas of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea with moderated community screenings. Before undertaking doctoral studies, she joined the team at Namati: Innovations in Legal Empowerment, and reported on grassroots justice efforts in West Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. She has been awarded the Chateaubriand Fellowship, the École Normale Supérieure Fellowship, among others. Most recently, she produced an audio documentary about the fight against racial profiling in France (*Sacred & Profane* podcast), and participated in the Brooklyn-based UnionDocs Summer Documentary Lab for Research & Development. She holds an A.B. in Architectural Studies from Brown University.