

BLACKITY BLACK

Simone Zeefuik

Five pictures from the moodboard of Blacker Blackness, the temporary course at the Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam.

1. NOT SO MUCH ONE... BUT EVERY SINGLE SHOT OF THE CO-AUTHORS OF THE BOOK
NOIRE N'EST PAS MON METIER DURING THE CANNES FILM FESTIVAL OF 2018

Aïssa Maïga, Sabine Pakora, Maïmouna Gueye, Nadège Beausson-Diagne, Mata Gabin, Eye Haïdara, Rachel Khan, Sara Martins, Marie-Philomène Nga, Sonia Rolland, Firmine Richard, Magaajyia Silberfeld, Shirley Souagnon, Assa Sylla and Karidja Touré: together, in their Friday's best, walking that red carpet in Cannes like Justice itself bent over to put their shoes on their feet. I'm not certain enough to put my hand on the archive and swear it to be true, but I think it was the Afro-Dutch philosopher Grâce Ndjako who retweeted the picture of these 16 actresses *Blaccupying* the Cannes film festival in 2018. *Noire n'est pas mon metier* (Black isn't my job) is the movement that introduced me to the majority of these actresses, these experts whose current body of work doesn't match what they, as craftspeople, could bring to the screen. The screen is a space I hold dear. Before art galleries, museums, theatre, and microphones at poetry events held my attention... there was film. That's the arena where I, in changing vocabularies and a variety of understandings, started asking critical questions about storylines, casting, and cinematography. It was a review by one of my favourite poets about a movie I enjoyed that I often (sometimes in an anonymized form) credit for inspiring me to be a better writer and viewer. It was our absence in genres that triggered questions about everydayness and who thinks we're worth, options and who thinks we don't crave it but also, and very much so, joy and who believes we deserve it. One of the truest things I keep reminding myself of in both my work and my personal practice is something Ava DuVernay said in a conversation about the kind of films Black people would like to see: "We just want options."

2. A BLACK AND WHITE PICTURE OF TONI MORRISON AND EDWIDGE DANTICAT, SITTING NEXT TO EACH OTHER IN TWO LARGE CHAIRS, SMILING AT EACH OTHER. DANTICAT IS AT THE EDGE OF HER SEAT AND LEANING TOWARDS MORRISON.

When Flavia Dzodan and Tom Vandeputte of the Amsterdam-based Sandberg Instituut informed me about a call for pitches for a new series of temporary programmes, I instantly knew I wanted to put together a programme centred around imagination. Blackity Black imagination, to be precise. I wrote a pitch

focusing on construction instead of critique. Not because I had lost faith in the value and necessity of criticizing work that's a result of what Fela called colonial mentalities but because I was in dire need of something joyful, something that energized me. I wanted to create an institutionalized equivalent of Black joy and offer a way to salute the often unrewarded emotional, spiritual, and intellectual labour it takes to create spaces for the proper representations of Blackness in art and design. The course which I, after giving two work titles the chance to marinate, named *Blacker Blackness* has that at its core. It's one that heavily relies on imagination as access.

For me, imagination is the only way to create the options DuVernay talks about. When I think about these options and the writers who bless us with uncoded, liberated, unapologetic representations of Blackness, one of the authors I think about is Toni Morrison. Morrison often stated how she starts her novels, none of them anything less than stellar, with a question. The more I study her reflections on her own work and that of others, the more I try to imagine that one question that drove the European novel, film, exhibition, photograph, sculpture or design that aims to represent Blackness. To highlight how life-changing this one-question-method has been for me, I opened my pitch with the following quote from Toni Morrison's essay *God's Language* in her book *Mouth Full Of Blood*: *"My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'. The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic.*

Moving that veil aside requires, therefore, certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus, memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant. Zora Neale Hurston said, 'Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me.' These 'memories within' are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me."

For me, both ancestral memory and imagination fill these voids left by the structural, intentional erasure and un(der)documentation of Black experiences. When I think about ancestral memories, I think about what they mean in Afro-Caribbean contexts and how they root so many of us. Seeing this picture of Toni Morrison and Danticat, forces in centring Black audiences is like witnessing the personification of this Afrodiasporic union of inspirations.

3. NOUR

When properly enjoyed and executed, imagination demands a recentring of perspectives and an eye for the grandness of details. The *Noir n'est pas mon metier*-movement is one about imagination and the expectations produced by a lack thereof. For example, people who have a very narrow understanding of Blackness will, whenever they include Black people in their work, always resort to performative Blackness. In their minds, there are certain ways a Black grandmother behaves: she either yells or is overly nurturing. She becomes the embodiment of the only ways in which the imagination-less person understands the grandmother's country of origin: through thick accents, a lot of food, outfits that are aimed to pass for traditional dresses, certain hairstyles or headdresses, and ties to The Motherland that are so tight that it seems as if the grandmother arrived not a day earlier than yesterday in the European country where the story is set. Often, whenever a Black character isn't the sum of the scriptwriter(s) colonial imagination you don't see their blood relatives and /or their significant other is white. It's as if in the minds of the vast majority of mainstream writers there's no room for unperformed, everyday, non-spectaclized Blackness. I now, at least better than in the years when I used phrases like Bun Babylon as interpunction marks, understand that not all Black artists have the option to say no to such performances. Families need to be fed, homes need to be paid for. The Blacker Blackness course can't solve that, but what I aim for it to do is to institutionally amplify the demand for and the creation of work that doesn't exhaust us.

4. IRA KIP

For the April (2020) edition of the *Theaterkrant*, a Dutch publication for professionals in and enthusiasts of the Dutch theatre world, playwright Ira Kip and actress Samora Bergtop wrote letters to each other about the current state of theatre in The Netherlands. These two craftswomen, both of them key players in the unbleaching of Dutch theatre, watched from the mountain with exhaustion and boredom as many stages and sets have been overseen by the offspring of *colonizahs* who scoff at inclusivity. In her letter, Ira Kip writes: "*My life in New York is phenomenal but also too complex and too long for this letter, so let me write about what strikes me in the field in the Netherlands, based on the experiences I have had in - among other things - the past twelve years. New York.*"

Here it goes ...

WTF ya'll be doing for these past twelve years? How is it possible that so little has changed? The theater schools are still white, the halls are white, the committees are white, Frascati is even whiter, the reviewers are white. And film and TV? My god, don't get me started. Faka sister?? In our sector it strikes me that white liberal men mainly want to make theater with refugees, white women make theater about feminism and their vaginas, and black makers make theater for white people. Nothing said about the quality, but let's be honest: A seat at the table, dope, but for whom? Othello, dope, for whom? Black Memories for whom? Let's keep it real! And then those images about our black fathers that were always absent? Sister, I'm tired of that shit, and by the way, mine was just there! And he worked very hard to make sure that I could go to a theater school in Amsterdam, where I was also asked time and again if I wanted to be here on this course?

Let it be clear, I am not attacking anyone, really. I just want us to fuckin win, I want my people to win. I want us to be able to freely make art about what is current, about what concerns us all, without doing homework for the other. I don't want to see any more didactic performances!"

Kip, who co-founded Kip Republic together with her twin sister Ayra Kip, is a force. In the autumn of 2017 the play *Shrew Her*, the spin on Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* she initiated and directed, premiered at Amsterdam's Compagnietheater. In February 2019 the play went up for a second run, this time premiering in Amsterdam's Bijlmer Parktheater. Around that time I was in the midst of writing a play myself and as we all jumped up to give Ira Kip, her actresses, the costume and set designer, plus the DJ who blessed us with an outstanding soundtrack the standing ovation they deserved, I thought: "This applause should last forever because she deserves it... but I also want to rush home because Kip raised the bar and I can't wait to continue writing."

Truly, few folks give you homework the way Kip gives you homeworkrrrk.

The play I was working on at the time was *Nour*. I was part of Nieuwe Stukken (New Plays/Pieces), the playwright programme of the Dutch Fonds Podiumkunsten and my script was about three Afro-Dutch women who formed the political party Nour: Zaynab, Sarah and Helen. Another important character is Stella, an Afro-Dutch woman who is number 5 on the candidates list

for the Green Labour Party, a fictional party symbolizing the Netherlands' Old Left as I like to call them. During the first Nieuwe Stukken-gatherings when all the writers shared their ideas for their stories, someone said to me: "Ah, Afrofuturism, I like it! So this is set in what... 100 years from now?" "Nah," I said, "it's set in March 2022." *Nour* is set in the week leading up to, and the day after, the elections. Back in 2018 and 2019 when Stacey Esajas and I were the two playwrights selected by Bijlmer Parktheater, it was more futurist than it is today (April 2021). Now, since March 18, 2021, we have Sylvana Simons. Simons is the first Afro-Dutch person who got a seat in the Dutch Tweede Kamer (House of Commons) representing the political party that she formed: BIJ1. When I wrote *Nour* this, to paraphrase the Honourable Christopher Wallace, was all a dream.

Before I started writing the play, I committed to three principles:

1. Every scene has to have a solid display of Sisterhood. Even in the scenes that centre around the sharper sides of political campaigns, the ones where there was a certain conflict, there have to be moments where the women on stage display a certain level of care for each other.
2. None of the four lead characters, all to be played by Afro-Dutch actresses, will lash out at each other.
3. There will be no forced accents or other stereotypical markers that truly serve no purpose than to make white people comfortable with, and perhaps even feel they 'recognize', *alla dat* Blackness on stage.

I remember Milone Reigman, who was my coach during the programme, saying: "Your production notes are a script by themselves." I felt and knew they had to be. During the programme, our scripts were presented twice, which means that twice, actors and a director whose politics I don't know, would not just be handed my script... they'd perform it. I've seen and heard, during meetings in preparation of shows as well as while being an audience member, what Dutch mainstream-whiteness demands from Black actors, writers, curators, programmers, etc. It's a suffocating grip, one that structurally exhausts and demotivates, which to me makes it an artistic, spiritual, intellectual and educational tactic of war. So I knew I had to be specific about body language and how I didn't want any neck swinging, finger waving or other 'interpretations' of the so-called stern Black woman, about how native tongues and the normalcy of switching between languages without overdone accents... I wrote instructions to prevent

everything that can and often does go wrong when non-Black theatre folks (re) tell the stories of Black people.

There is no resistance without imagination: no newness, no recentring, nothing fresh. Nothing happens until someone, long before it appears to even be possible, sees it happening. Imagination moves you to – or at least towards – create stories strong enough to hold the attention of those who don't need basic introductions to people and histories who are dubbed 'complex', 'confrontational', etc. because their presence, their heritage, and their truths remind whiteness of how and why it's constructed. This goes for both non-fiction and fiction.

For me, there's no shame in admitting that sometimes fiction is all we have. We are, after all, often dealing with archival material that is collected and categorized to serve a very specific mindstate. This is a mindstate that erases, denies, renames, cheats, robs, and limits. What good could come from that? What good could come from those who sell their renamings as realities and who don't blink twice before labelling someone as "unknown". Unknown or unregistered? Certainly, every single person whose face can be found in an archive is known to somebody. Perhaps not to the photographer whose sole mission it was to document the so-called Other, maybe not to the person who decides that a name is "too difficult", "too long" to register... but definitely to more people than those who decided to erase them. And these are just some of the holes, some of the absences we're dealing with. As decolonial Black people who know we deserve better, how could we ever fully rely on the memories and collection habits of those that don't consider our humanity to be equal to theirs? Spiritually, mentally, socially, and intellectually we simply can't afford to link our presence in history to our absence in the vast majority of archives. Can't afford to keep consuming the most general forms of art through work that doesn't grant adequate space to our interior lives and lived experiences either.

5. THE WOMAN WHO WAS RENAMED 'SARAH BAARTMAN'

In 2011, my cousin and I went to the cinema to watch a film about the woman who was renamed as Sarah Baartman. The film felt like at least five hours. Five long hours of Black suffering. A continuum of pain we, according to the three white women who, after the film, descended the stairs behind my cousin and I, should have endured. Or at least not be so dramatic about. "I mean, you can cover your eyes or look the other way but this is what happened. We need to

show what happened so we can understand how horrible it was and make sure it never happens again. We need to make people understand how terrible her life was." More than their exact words, I remember how hard I fought not to drag their lipless faces down the stairs. Imagine only recognizing Black pain when you see it being inflicted upon someone. Everybody who understands even the most basic forms of humanity knows that the Black woman who's standing in the middle of a group of medical students who are examining her body like she's an abnormal species knows that she must be in pain. Instead of showing and reproducing that pain and that humiliation, other choices could have been made.

That same year I wrote a blog post about this for my website. In it, I stated: *"Besides a short scene in an English court when she is asked if she has children and the scene when Hendrick Caesar, one of the two main abusers, yells something about how she used to breastfeed his babies there isn't a single moment that gives the viewer any insight in who she was. I'm not saying Kechiche should have summarized the complete colonial history of South-Africa but there's at least one political event that should not have been left out. Why wasn't there more emphasis on the initiation of the law with the derogatory name 'Hottentot Proclamation'? One would figure that anything that prohibits a Khoi woman from going anywhere without a pass and forces her abusers to literally smuggle her to London is significant enough to pay proper attention to.*

To not mention any political events is one thing but failing to understand the necessity to give the audience something, anything that would connect the main character to a family, a people, a country, a town, a time and a tongue is an unforgivable shame. We needed to be taken back to 1789 to see the then still untouched Gamtoos River Valley where she was born and, where besides the constant threat of lions and Christian missionaries, her community lived in peace. We should, be it in high speed, have been shown how the colonizers succeeded to make their way to Gamtoos and yes, there had to be at least one shot of a little 6 year old girl with eyes that mirrored a childhood drenched with fear caused by the violent wars between the original South Africans and the Dutch and other European colonists. Mind you that in none of the shots her father nor her Brothers, Sisters and the members of her community should refer to this little girl as Sarah because 'Sarah Baartman' isn't the name she was given at birth.

She should have been shown as a young woman who was engaged to a young man named Solkar who gave her the tortoiseshell pendant she continued to wear for the rest of her life. If not to show her as someone who loved and was loved then to at

least pay subtle homage to the necklace that is depicted in so many of the drawings they made of her. Black Venus should have featured scenes of a young woman who, after yet another outburst of violence, lost her father and her husband-to-be but was bold enough to love again. There had to be a glimpse of the young soldier who stole her heart, took her out, found the house they called their own, was a father for their newborn but who left her in the midst of grieving the death of their baby. How would she later refer to these tragedies?"

In their motivational letters and during their interviews, it became clear that all the Blacker Blackness students are done with films that target audiences who can't imagine Black pain if it's not explicitly shown in some sort of trauma-loop. So nah, I won't subject the Blacker Blackness students to this film. Instead, I'll ask them to think about and, through facts and imagination, answer the questions they'd centralize when retelling the stories of historical figures like the woman who was renamed Sarah Baartman. What would this film be like if her story was told from a Black-feminist perspective and with a decolonial, Black audience in mind?

BLACKER BLACKNESS

To unite the things I love and to prevent focusing too much on what I detest, I phrased the following research question for Blacker Blackness:

"What are the questions you ask, your way of archiving, your use of existing archives and/or your selection of art when you centre the interior lives, memories, connecting identities, and lived experiences of Black people?"

Blacker Blackness is a testimony to and from a Blackity Black self. On the one hand, it's a resignation letter to colonial constructs that limit, dull, simplify, stereotype and in other ways are unworthy of Blackness. More than that, it's a declaration to continuously search for, amplify and produce work that's part of longstanding genealogies of imaginations that centre the well-being of Black people.

From our rest to our rebellions, our remembering to our futurisms... there have always been plenty of Black people who looked around as well as within and came to the conclusion that there is more. More and better. A better, if not best, that prioritizes the spiritual, mental and intellectual well-being of Black people.

With Blacker Blackness, I hope and intend to present a Master's programme that will leave the students with a realization that I borrow from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: that we, as (re)tellers of what we experience, inherit, pass on, preserve and change, as those who live our lives, are our own best thing. Our own best thing, our own good luck.

Imagine that.

Blacker Blackness will take place from September 2021 until July 2023. For updates and vibes, please check www.blackerblackness.com and the @BlackerBlackness on Instagram.

Simone Zeefuik is an Afro-Dutch, Amsterdam-Bijlmer based writer, cultural programmer and organizer whose work centres around representation, everydayness, inclusivity and social justice. She focuses on imagination as access, joy, the (de)spectaclizing of Blackness, digital archives and movements against the illegalizing of the so-called undocumented members of the Afro-Dutch communities. She's a programmer for Amsterdam's Bijlmer Parktheater, a teacher at Zawdie Sandvliet's Afro-Dutch Studies and a ginger tea critic. Together with Richard Kofi (her fellow programmer at Amsterdam's Bijlmer Parktheater) she set up and hosts the podcast Project Wiaspora. From 2021-2023 Zeefuik will teach the temporary master Blacker Blackness at Amsterdam's Sandberg Institute where she's also a guest lecturer.

C O M M I S S I O N E D

C R I T I Q U E

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