

TRYING TO START A REVOLUTION ON BLACK REPRESENTATION IN FRANCE THANKS TO YOUTUBE

"My name is Soraya Milla and I am an Afro French filmmaker." This sentence seems simple, but it took me ten long years to manage to pronounce it. "Afro French"...? In France, claiming your difference is still not widely accepted. The policy towards people of foreign origin is assimilation and the school of the Republic is its vector. We are taught to be color blind, not to see the difference between each other, to consider that we are all the same, even when our difference is obvious and that we are reminded of it daily. It was difficult for me to build myself in this context. I felt like I had to give up my West African culture at home in order to be accepted by the French nation. I grew up in some sort of denial.

Clear proof of this discomfort in fully assuming its dual culture in France, is embodied in the reaction of Franco-Senegalese director Mati Diop, to the way the press spoke of her when she was nominated at the Cannes film festival. Headlines of an American newspaper proclaimed her to be the first Black woman to be in official competition at Cannes and she wasn't comfortable with the label. In a Hollywood Reporter magazine, she said, "In France, we have a very different relationship in terms of blackness." I'm not called black - I'm called a Frenchwoman. But I have noticed that in America, as soon as you have a little - even 10 or 20 percent of blackness - you become black. Being black is not something I think about every day when I wake up. I don't think of myself as white or as black. I just think about me as me."

I am very familiar with this denial. When I was 20, I entered film school and was the only black woman in all departments. During the four years I spent there, I never dared to address the identity issues that moved me through my films. I preferred to do remakes of Woody Allen's "Manhattan", documentaries on ecology or pheromones... I finally left film school, tired of writing scripts without substance. I felt that I had nothing to say and that it was better that I devote myself to film production to help the writers who had found their voice. Leaving this school and this environment lacking cultural diversity finally freed me. Just a few months later, I felt the urge to write my first short film called "Blacking Out" (now "Exotic") and which enabled me to do my Blacking Out. I dared to talk about the conflicting relationship of a teenage girl with her frizzy hair. Her hair roots were a metaphor for her cultural roots that she didn't know what to do with. To please a young white man in her class, she is doing her very first weave and this artificial hair gives her the feeling of having metamorphosed. But has she really changed in the eyes of others?

The question of the perception of "the other" is crucial when you grow up in France with foreign origins. France pushes us to ignore our differences to ensure that we share a common French cultural pillar. Perhaps they fear that too much cultural particularism would dislocate the idea of Nation. But very often, despite all our efforts to integrate ourselves into this dominant culture, we come up against a form of rejection: discrimination in employment, difficulties in obtaining housing, daily micro-aggressions... So I want through my films to send the strong message that double culture is an asset and that there is no need to destroy a part of oneself to find a place in France.

I also claim to showcase protagonists who are educated black women who do not necessarily live in ghettos because the black community is very under-represented in the French audiovisual landscape and poorly championed. We are often referred to the working class and to the roles of delinquents, rappers or migrants. Only these types of scenarios seem to get

funding. In 2019, my mother and I proposed to Netflix France a script for a TV show that we had co-written and which depicted an Afro-French family who worked in *Little Africa* in Paris. We were told that the idea was very interesting because there was no entertainment format that portrayed this community, but they were not sure that "France was ready for this". This feedback felt like an uppercut. First, because we had been working on this project for years. Second because it was clear that for this person, we were not part of the France he took into consideration. He was unaware of any part of the racially mixed population that craves for more representation. We are so invisible. And it seems that the institutions remain blind to our demands.

Thankfully, a form of resistance is blooming little by little. In 2018, French actress of Malian origin Aïssa Maïga published the book "Black is not my Job", a book that gathers testimonies of French Black Actresses describing how casting directors often offer them roles of stereotypical characters, like house cleaners or prostitutes. They organized a protest at Cannes Film Festival on the red carpet against racism in the French Film Industry. For my part, I recently realized that fighting in Cinema for better representation of the black community in France was futile if this community which I was addressing did not have access to my work. My work has been shown in film festivals and art galleries where the audience is predominantly white, and made up of professionals from the industry. At first I was delighted with this critical recognition, but ended up being disillusioned. What is the meaning of my work if the audience I want to address does not have access? Those people who do not have the habit or the leisure of traveling to festivals, museums or galleries, how do I get to them instead of waiting for them to come to me?

The answer came to me thanks to the refusal of Netflix France. This is a fine example of those "Nos" which ultimately benefited us. My mom and I decided we were tired of waiting for the green light to come from privileged decision makers insensitive to our cause. We decided to adapt our 26-minute series format to a shorter one that we could self-finance and release freely on Youtube. It was the birth of Afropolitaine the web série, a 10 x 5 minute show that tells the daily life of two Afro-French sisters in Paris, one very integrationist and the other militant and Afro-feminist.

We are very proud to have created this form of entertainment, which allowed me to reach and interact directly with my audience and reach the widest audience I have ever had to date. For the first time, I felt reconciled with myself, in the themes addressed in my work, and the way in which it was broadcast. Finally, a non-discriminating way of creating.