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## I can't tell their stories

### Aga Pokrywka

*The goal of Black Films Matter is to give Black filmmakers the creative freedom to add to the tapestry of Black art. Black Films Matter aims to fund stories that break away from the one-dimensional stereotypical depictions of Black people in current media, and create stories that speak to our lives, our experiences, and our society.*

*The underrepresentation of Black creatives in the film industry stems from a bias toward filmmakers with access to wealth and resources. Black Films Matter supports the inclusion of creatives from low socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic minorities who otherwise would not have access to filmmaking funds. Our purpose is to create an inclusive space that amplifies a plethora of unique stories, from the creative process to the production of content.*

*We need to support Black voices. We need to support Black filmmakers.*

*Much love,  
Musonda*

This letter was written by Musonda Chola. It was written to all of us. One can find it on the Internet: <https://www.blackfilmsmatter.co.uk/>

I responded to it.

It was the beginning of a dialogue, and it brought forth the following conversation.

Aga Pokrywka: Who are you?

Musonda Chola: I'm Musonda. I'm an Assistant Location Manager in film and TV. I've been in the industry for about five years now. I started the project Black Films Matter. Kashif joined me. How long has it been now?

Kashif Boothe: About six weeks, I think.

M: We've had the project running for about six weeks. Slowly trying to figure out the best way to navigate and get to our goals.

K: I'm Kashif. I work in broadcast operations at the Discovery Channel Europe. I also have a production company where I produce films, web series, and more.

A: I imagine Black Films Matter was established in response to what has been happening in the US and its echoes around the world. Am I right?

M: I would say yes. The things that have been happening in the last few months have influenced how we approach certain barriers in our lives. It was also definitely an influence in starting this project. I know for me, and I know for Kashif as well, that there are personal and professional goals. Our professional goal is to have production companies, to have completely inclusive crews and completely inclusive storytelling. We're just not seeing it at the

moment. My push to establish Black Films Matter was like, “What are we waiting for?” “Why are we waiting for people that have the power but aren't doing anything?” That was the main intention.

K: I would say the same for me as well. I think everything that was going on in the world pushed us to want to do this more, but at the same time, we are just at breaking point. We constantly hear people of many different races talking about the issues that we face, but now is the time when we're actually going to make a change. Within the UK, and across Europe, I felt like the film and TV industry isn't very diverse behind the scenes and in front of the camera. With Black Films Matter we really are pushing to make sure that there are more senior positions for people of colour in film and TV because there is not enough. And for us to have more diverse stories told. That doesn't mean just getting beaten up by a cop, racism, and stuff like that, but just telling diverse stories, normal stories of different people of colour.

A: I noticed that so far, your main activity is to crowdfund. You want to create a fund to support film projects by Black film directors. I was wondering if this is your main activity? Is it something you want to focus entirely on? Or do you see that your activities also contain other approaches to achieve the goals you described?

M: At the moment, our means of gaining the finances is through crowdfunding, and it's open to any person that wants to support and can support. We are working on reaching out to companies in the industry, and it's time to just ask them: are you supportive of an inclusive industry? Can you show that by backing it up? The other thing is to create a group of people that don't have the money to go to film school and that don't have the money to buy the equipment themselves, but have passion and creativity to make their films. For us, it really is a matter of giving the control to Black people to tell their stories themselves. That for example means having a Black director, because they know that a certain story needs certain art direction; it needs certain props, and locations. We need Black producers because they're in charge essentially of making sure that all the HOD (Heads of Department) are hiring fairly and everyone is treated well. And then also Black writers because if you don't have the story that reflects our experiences in the first place, if we don't write our stories ourselves, it won't be authentic. So those three HODs are the key people that need to be Black.

K: We are doing crowdfunding but at the same time we are looking for sponsorship from organisations like the BFI (British Film Institute), film industry organisations within the UK and internationally who want to support Black Films Matter.

A: Funding in the film industry can be quite inaccessible for some, but in general, film

production involves authorship and very concrete hierarchies. Are the existing systems of media production inherently oppressive? Should we attempt to rethink the way in which films are produced? Could diversifying film crews be a first step towards it?

K: I think that the way films are produced is fine. I think it's about the hiring process. That's what needs to change. A lot of the time within the film and TV industry it is about “who you know”. People get jobs through recommendations or through, “Oh! I know this person! They are really good. Let's hire them!” Not a lot, at the time, outsource somebody completely different. So that's what it is. The industry, in my opinion, is very cliquy. So, if somebody did work with somebody, they are going to work with them again. And fair enough. I understand that you don't take the risk; you don't want to hire somebody who might do a bad job and might reflect badly on you. That is the issue because a lot of people are hiring the same type of people, and then those people tend to be the same race or gender. So, it's really about trying to break out of that mould. Some people might get an opportunity because, “Oh! Their uncle's best friend who works in this production company” or “Oh! I can hook you up.” Then it is really hard for somebody who's a person of colour trying to get in. You might even get discriminated against if you don't have an “English” name. There are several different factors. But I think the film industry moves in terms of making the film or TV show. I think it is fine, but it is just about how the hiring process is.

M: It is not necessarily out of greed that people hire who they know, but we can't confuse that with hiring people that aren't qualified to do their job. There are processes where you can apply for jobs, but because your name isn't “Tom”, you just won't get it. People have that preference. I go to work every day and I know that everyone on the set is white because that's how they wanted it to be. I can't describe how much power each individual person has on set. Anybody in my department can have a say on who gets a job, especially on the entry level roles in which you don't need any qualifications. Everyone has a say: “Oh my uncle's available. He has never stepped on set before, but I'll give him a chance” or “Oh! My brother is available” or “My best friend is available.” It really does not come down to qualifications, it doesn't come down with all they've had, all of these experiences. It really is a discriminatory process. The hiring process is very, very discriminatory.

A: Maybe a more transparent way of hiring could improve that?

K: Yes, I feel so. There are a lot of organisations which are trying to diversify. Especially in the UK. I don't know how it is across Europe. It has probably been so in the last five to eight years. People are still working up into the industry. Once there are more of

them in the senior positions, more diverse people will be working in different levels. We're getting there.

M: Diversity looks a certain way. It has stages. I talked a lot with people in the industry that say, "We came a long way! We came a long way!". This is coming from white men and white women. If a place is predominantly white male dominated, diversity will initially look like white men and then white women. And then it will be like, "Oh! Ok, fine. We will let some Black people in" or "Oh! Right, fine. We will let some Asian people in." And even those first Asian and Black people will be men, and then it's the women. And then people who are Gay, Trans, or whatever. It doesn't all happen at once. It's definitely in blocks. In the film industry, it's definitely white men. Now white women are being let in slowly. Then everyone else needs to be let in. But we can't keep waiting decades and decades till it happens.

K: It also feels like many people who think "diversity" don't think of people with disabilities. And that's really an issue as well. Because if someone is deaf, they can still work on set. If they have a wheelchair, they can actually work on a set, but a lot of the time the industry is very impatient. They think, "I don't have time to modify my set to have somebody who has a disability and be on board," and that's an issue. I know so many people who are deaf, who have some other different disabilities, and they want to be filmmakers, directors, and they can't do it or they have to do it just independently.

A: Something I worry about is that since topics like equality and inclusion have been growing and becoming more and more "fashionable", many people seem to repeat some slogans without actually supporting them with real actions. It's about more than just having a black square as a social profile picture to show your support.

M: That's absolutely true. We saw how many people posted about Blackout Tuesday. And then, I'm not sure if they looked back. If that was their activism, if that was their change, then Black Lives Matter will never be there.

A: We are talking here about how film production could change. But something that could also change is how people watch movies; particularly, how critical they should be as viewers. Do you have any ideas or thoughts on how to influence the public?

M: Public opinion is so strong these days because of social media. This whole cast changing of white people that were playing Black animated characters, or characters that were not Caucasian. I think it was Alison Brie who came out and said, "I shouldn't have played this role in this project." She came out and said, "I really regret voicing this Asian character because I'm not Asian. That was not right." That kind of took off on Twitter and you saw the coming weeks a lot of animations were recasting white actors and actresses to somebody who actually has an ethnicity of whatever

character they were voicing before. So, the court of public opinion is very strong.

K: When it comes to films and TV shows which may have a Black cast, I think a lot of the time there is this perception that, "Oh! That's just for Black people" or "That's just for Asian people." We as black audiences have grown up watching, or even till this day are watching shows and films with predominantly white people in, and we just watch them because we enjoy films. I think if you get past that bias of not watching something because it has only a black cast, then that's what the roadblock between some of the public is. I'm not saying that's everyone, because there are a lot of classic shows like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* or these days *Queen of the South*. People are watching them, but I think more people need to do it. People just need to know that you can watch anything. It doesn't matter who is in the cast or what colour they are, as long as the content is good. I think that's what it is to be honest.

A: Talking about film titles. Do you have any favourite films or emerging actors you would recommend? What are you watching these days or being excited about?

M: Well, I can answer for both of us. We've been watching *Insecure*, we've been watching *I May Destroy You*. What else have we been watching?

K: I've been watching *Pose*, which is really good.

M: I need to start watching that. I just started watching *The Mandalorian*.

K: What else have I been watching? I did like some films as well. Not films that came out this year, because there are none due to COVID-19. I'm trying to remember the last film I watched...

M: I think "emerging" is a very tricky word when you are talking about artists that aren't Caucasian, because we are here. We just haven't got the *Star Wars* or whatever. I think it's tricky to say emerging when somebody has been working for quite a long while, and you just didn't know.

K: I did like *The Wedding Year*, that was quite good! That was an interracial romantic comedy with Sarah Hyland and Tyler James Williams. They are both well-known people. I did enjoy that film. It was about a white girl and a Black man but they didn't bring up the issue of their race at all. It was just about their relationship, and I thought it was really well written. That was the most recent film I did like. It probably is on Netflix International. Everyone in the *Top Boy* series; everyone in *I May Destroy You* by Michaela Coel; she is already quite a known name. I highly recommend *Insecure*, *Top Boy* (season three), and *I May Destroy You*.

A: That's a long list! I'll definitely look into it in the future. Talking about the future, what kind of film industry or, let's go wild, what kind of world would



you like to see? What are you aiming for?

M: I would say that one of the first things definitely is to be more sustainable and conscious of the impact the film industry has on the planet. When you are on set, water is bought for the set, right? When I first started in the industry, I don't know about you Kashif, I don't know about you Aga either, but when I first started it was little bottles of water, literally. Maybe you can just have a cup-size amount of water in one bottle and that's it. So, what would happen throughout the day was that someone would take a sip of one bottle, close it, and leave it on the side and go and get a new one, and do that like 10 times in the day. But times up by seventy people and you've got all of this waste. We don't have time to sort through it, unfortunately. So, everything just goes to the same bin, and it goes to landfill. Now there's been a huge difference in how they handle water. They get really big bottles which you can use like a tap. On my last production, everyone brought their own bottles to fill up. So that's been the biggest change I've seen in the industry. And also, now we recycle. We didn't recycle before. There is still a long way to go. That's just one production that has fully taken on like that. But I hope more begin to work in a less-selfish and self-serving kind of way, and as quickly as possible. And more like, "OK, maybe if we get these bottles that you can recycle after you use them, that would be better for the environment." And then obviously, I want more. I want to see more than just two types of shows on any time on the telly. I want to see what my Nepalese friends' lives are like in England. I want to see my Filipino friends, and what their lives are like. I can't tell their stories; Kashif can't tell those stories; they have to have been given the power to tell those stories themselves. Which is what we, as Black people, are fighting for. Let us just tell our own stories. It gets mishandled if somebody of different experience tries to talk for us. We see from time to time when we are just watching it and then it is like, "Oh my god! It's so wrong. Why did they do this?"

K: I agree. I think I would love the industry to become eco-friendlier because I've seen some people are very careless, wasteful. It's really bad. I would also like the industry just to be a little more respected by the government. Especially during COVID-19 pandemic; they don't really care about the arts. They're forgetting how influential the arts are. Without the arts, you don't have books, costumes. They are not able to make their speeches and make their announcements and stuff like that. I think it should be more of a priority because arts are bringing tourism, they are bringing money to the country and populations across the world. And again, just to say what Musonda said, definitely more inclusive. We need to see more diversity; have an Asian girl in a sci-fi film, have a Muslim girl in hijab who is a superhero. These things are normal. Because everyone watches what is put out to the world. We watch the Marvel films, we watch the sci-fi, we watch the romantic comedies. Regardless

of racism and sexism and homophobia maybe everyone goes through the same thing about problems at work, romance, ups and downs in the family and friends.

M: Intergalactic battles!

K: Exactly! Everyone! We just want to see more of that told from so many different perspectives.

A: To me, the abuse of natural resources is part of the same story.

M: Yeah. Honestly, I would say that the industry needs to be gutted. There are too many people that do not care about other human beings, that do not care about the planet, and that are unfortunately in the power to make decisions about those things. That's just my view.

K: Yeah, I agree. It's just like when people are saying, "defund the police". I don't think "defund the police". I think there needs to be more training, there needs to be more understanding of biases. The industry has to let go of those old values. Certain people who are at the top right now will maybe move on, retire, and have more people who are young and fresh, and are more up-to-date with what's going on in the world. Then hopefully we can reach another step. Or maybe it's even more about people's mindset, regardless of their age. Having some deep understanding of what's going on in the world, from Chinese rights to Gay rights to Black and Brown rights, like everything.

A: I have an impression that the lack of recognition of arts happens more in the countries which have already issues with xenophobia. Arts and film is such an amazing tool for education and learning about yourself, others, and the world. Limiting people, cutting resources for education, culture, film, might encourage fear of the other.

M: I hear that. The arts in particular are very lucrative, and you need to have money to get into the arts, which nobody had told me, thank god. But when the lockdown happened, everyone I know from the industry had a family home to go to in the country. When we talk about government funding, we talk about people that actually need it. People that have had to go to university to work their way to the industry. Not people who are getting hired because of their best friend, dad, uncle, whatever it is. We are talking about everyone that doesn't have the opportunity to be in it, because they don't have enough money to move to London and have six months' rent paid by somebody else while they're trying to figure it out. Neither of us had that. I mean, we've struggled. There are a lot of people in our position that don't have the safety blanket that a lot in the industry have of just being able to either ask a family member for help, or have people to pay for whatever it is, whether it is a rent, vehicle, food ...

K: I agree with what you are saying. There are people who didn't live in London for example and who moved down to London to work in the industry, and they got to pay rent for like 700 pounds a month for a room.

M: And you are getting dailies initially, all you are doing is getting one day here, two days there. That's not enough to pay your rent.

K: Exactly.

A: What is your experience in the UK? Is it possible to move from one social class to another? Is it very hard to work your way up?

K: The class system is always going to be there. There are so many people that I know who have worked, who are doing so well, who are Black and thriving in their careers. At the end of the day, not everybody is racist, not everybody is classist. There are people who see the value in how well they work. People still are able to work up to get to where they want to be, but sometimes it is just that one person who will make it impossible.

M: I'm just going to add to the end of that. There are a lot of hard working people, but unfortunately the opportunities for those people are very few. I'm in the position that I'm in work and I feel very mixed emotions about this sometimes. Because I shouldn't be the only Black woman in that position in the film industry in England, but I think unfortunately I am. And that's really crazy to me because I know so many people that are talented, that are gifted, but I'm very aware that the opportunities are few and far between.

K: Yes, because a lot of the times within production companies, networks, shows, films, whatever, they sometimes are not aware of it. Sometimes they are so oblivious because they don't really notice and see, "Oh wait! We are all white here." We will think, "This is kind of crazy, what do you mean you can't see?" You need more forward-thinking people in the places of senior positions. It's not saying that they are all racist because I can't say that. There might be some, but there are a lot who aren't, and they just don't see. Once somebody points it out they are like, "Oh, you know, you are actually right." That's the catch-22 kind of situation.

**This conversation was conducted remotely on July 29, 2020.**

