



darker
by Arthur Jafa



Nefertite Nguvu

Nefertite Nguvu is a writer, director, producer and founder of the production company Hollywood Africans. Her first feature film, *In the Morning*, was independently released in 2014 to critical acclaim.

Would you mind starting with introducing yourself and describing where you are?

My name is Nefertite Nguvu. I'm a filmmaker and I'm currently in Harlem.

Is Harlem where you're based?

Yes. I just bought a place here, so that's been crazy.

Were you living in Harlem previously?

No, I was living in Newark, New Jersey – which is where I'm from – for a couple of years. I moved back and it was amazing to be a part of Newark's cultural rebirth. My parents were in Amiri Baraka's organisation many moons ago.

Were your parents Black nationalists?

Oh yeah. One thousand percent.

What was it like growing up in that community?

It was really great. I have a different appreciation of it as an adult. I took all of the jazz, art, and poetry for granted. It was just life. But looking back, I realise how fortunate I am to have had that sense of consciousness from a very early age.

Did it influence your approach to filmmaking?

Absolutely. I think having a very early seed planted about art being connected to cultural revolution and being a means to transform communities was something that always lived inside of me. It's really, really hard to make a living as an artist. But the thing that motivates and keeps me going are the larger ideas that I'm doing this for.

What was it like when you were first on a path towards becoming an artist?

Newark is home to one of the oldest Black film festivals in the country, the Newark Black Film Festival. When I was younger, my mother took me to see Gordon Parks's film *The Learning Tree* and that really shaped my consciousness. I started out writing poetry and tried my hand at acting but ended up at film school.

Who are some of your north stars, in terms of filmmakers or artists who inspire your work?

So many. I'm very much influenced by jazz music and the culture surrounding it. Coltrane has been super important to me since very early on. Both Alice and John. Lee Morgan. Who else? I listen to a lot of old school jazz music. Outside of jazz, the Black women image makers who've shaped my consciousness. Definitely Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems. I love their work. Abderrahmane Sissako is someone I really love. I got the opportunity to meet him at a film festival a couple years back, and it was just really riveting to listen to him talk about his work in the context of being an African filmmaker. Arthur Jafa, of course, has definitely been super important.

If you had to pick one jazz album, your top of all time – you're on an island, you can only have one – what would it be?

Oh, without a doubt it would be John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. I listen to that album every morning. It changes your nervous system. It re-adjusts something in your body. It's a spiritual experience.

Congratulations on your feature In the Morning, because I think it's beautiful and doing something that is so rare in terms of what we usually see.

I'd love to know what images you are dying to create or see. I'm always interested in what other Black women are craving. I feel like if I'm craving anything, it's the truth. That is the one thing that I consider when I think about Black image making. The truth of who we are has rarely been captured on screen. Often, especially when dealing with Hollywood, we get really reductive images that don't even begin to express the breadth and the depth of who we are. For me the truth really is the light, the truth of what it means to be a Black woman, take up space and have the emotional capacity that we do. If I'm after anything, it's the truth because that's where the glory is.

What is your process usually like? Do you watch a lot of films as you write? Do you read?

It depends on the material. Some of it was inspired by what I was listening to. I had to reference Bergman and Fellini for a new project I'm working on, and some of the filmmakers who had done things that I'm trying to do in the script

very successfully. But it's very hard to describe what it feels like to be Black in America in straightforward terms, because the things we have to experience, deal with and live through every single day are so outrageous. You have to dip into the surreal when you're talking about Black lives, because it really is the closest thing to describing what the emotional experience is like.

If you could have dinner with three people, alive or dead, who would you pick?

That is tough. Let's see. Definitely Brother Malcolm. Malcolm X has always been someone who I think about often and I've always been fascinated with, especially now. I live right off Malcolm X Boulevard here, so every day I see his name. He's always been a big figure in my life, especially being raised by Nationalists whose life he really transformed. I definitely would love to have a conversation with him, so that's one. Who else? Let's see. John Coltrane. And the third, Toni Morrison.

That's a great dinner table.

Absolutely. I feel like I'm in conversation with them all the time. That's the beauty of being an artist and getting into the work of other artists. It's like they're communicating with you.

Well, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. It was so nice hearing more about you and your work. Thank you. It was great to speak with you too.

text
Elodie Saint-Louis

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