

# Fringe of Colour Films 2023: Ashanti Harris

## Q&A

29/06/23

With Ashanti Harris and Tomiwa Folorunso

Ashanti Harris: Hi.

Tomiwa Folorunso: How are you?

Ashanti Harris: I'm good, thanks. Yeah.

Tomiwa Folorunso: How does it feel? I'm always surprised, like, because we watch so many films at home or on our laptop or on a TV screen, and then you see it on the screen like this, and you're like, yeah. How does it feel?

Ashanti Harris: It feels good. I feel like I'm almost, like, not ready for this. I'm just still a bit like, oh, it's, uh it feels really nice to see it big and also to feel it have the weight that yeah, I feel like it should have. Thank you. Thank you, everybody.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Thank you. Thank you. We're going to chat for a little bit and then I'll open it up to the floor for questions. So, yeah, it would be really nice to know about your research process, I think, a little bit, and what led you to the point and the kind of themes in the film.

Ashanti Harris: So, I suppose for the past few years I've been doing a lot of research into the relationship between Guyana, which is the country that I'm from, and Scotland. And that research has taken a lot of different forms. So I've done some looking at Gyanese women who were in Scotland in the 18th and 19th centuries. And it was really sort of situated in a time like, I guess, a past time, and thinking about how that time finds a form in the present moment. And then whilst I was doing that research I learned about the sort of contemporary relationship between Guyana and Scotland through the oil industry. And I sort of spent some time in 2020, during the Pandemic doing a project with, uh, an organisation called Fertile Ground in Aberdeen, who looked at different ways of kind of exploring relationships of oil. And I used that time to kind of do the research and think about this. So just as a little kind of background context, Guyana is a Caribbean country in South America, next to Brazil, Venezuela and Suriname. And, it's a really sort of mineral rich country. It's got a really long and complex relationship with forms of extraction similar to the oil industry. So I guess probably an earlier form of extraction would have been the gold industry. There's lots of gold mines. There's also diamonds in Guyana. There's Bauxite. Guyana was also a country that was I guess part of the triangle trade. So Guyana specifically was one of the Caribbean countries that was colonized by Scottish people, specifically from the Black Isle in Scotland.

And then sort of into the early 20th century. Guyana was a farm, like, before it became independent, when it was still part of the British Empire. It was a farming country. So I guess it was a country that provided food to the rest of the rest of the colonies. Thank you. So, yeah, it's a country that has a really long and complicated relationship with forms of extraction. And then in 2019, Guyana, Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, was twinned with Aberdeen. And I was like, oh, this is weird. What's this about? And yes, did some research and found out that it was because in 2015, there, uh, was a large discovery of oil producing sandstone off the coast of Georgetown. And the company ExxonMobil that was, like, leading the extraction of the oil funnily. The head's offices were in Scotland, and there's, like, a funny kind of Scotland Guyana kind of relationship going on. And then the twinning happened, and it just felt like there was all of this sort of, like, insidious connections that kind of spoke to the past, but also felt like there was something new. And, um yeah, I've spent a lot of time thinking about it and thinking about what it means and how it feels in my body and kind of struggling with the tensions between I suppose I mean, the main thing that happened when oil was discovered in Guyana was there were all of these headlines that are like Guyana goes from being one of the world's poorest countries to one of the world's richest countries per capita. And then like, family being really excited about this. But then, also this deeper understanding of the complexities and insidiousness of oil. Also the kind of detrimental impact in the environment and all of these tensions existing in this one thing. So that's the kind of research that was the starting point, and for kind of all of the work that I do, all of the things I'm thinking of. And then, to be honest, when I got to making this film, I was just kind of stuck. Like, I was just really stuck. I was feeling lots of blockages. I was just having a kind of difficult time. I think a combination of a lot of things when you're sort of, like, embodying some complicated and difficult histories, it's just a lot on you. And I was thinking a lot about pressure. I also have this, like, I was having this heart thing when my heart rate was, like, over 100, just all of these different things that sort of felt like they were really based around pressure. And one day I was like, okay, I need to go and think about this film. I need to go and think about what I'm going to make to this film. And I was really tired, and I was, like, on a zoom kind of conference thing. I was watching a Zoom conference. And I listened to therapist writer for Luke Taylor read an extract from her book. And she was talking about pressure, essentially. She was talking about all of the things that stop you from doing just starting to write, starting to kind of say, put together what you're making, what you're creating, and I'm going to totally butcher this sentence. But there was one sentence she sort of talked about all of the things against you, all of the reasons why you might persuade yourself that something is too difficult or it's too much pressure, or all of the reasons why you shouldn't or can't do something. And then she says, in order to make a way for the audience, for the reader, first of all, you have to make a way to do the writing, to do the work itself. You have to stop interrupting the ancestors and let them finish their sentences and give yourself permission. So I was like, okay, you know what? I was really inspired by that and was just like, let's take it from there. I work with movement. I work with feeling. I work with dance quite a lot. I work with touch. So I was like, okay, let's just stop interrupting the ancestors and let them finish their sentences. And, um, what happened was the first the text, like, the text first thing that came, I started thinking, like, what do I even know about oil? And just then writing. And then once I started writing, it just became this really physical thing where it was almost like I felt like I was becoming it. I was imagining what it meant to be submerged in this ancestral presence that's been around forever. And also, there is a condensing of everything that's ever happened. So it's like all of this history that I was spending time researching, I

was like, okay, imagining that I was submerging myself in it and that that was a sort of physical act. And, yeah, then kind of everything just came from there.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Thank you so much for telling us more about that. I think I'd like to know. So you do the writing and then what we see on screen. Did you have that already? Did you go out and find that?

Ashanti Harris: Yeah. So the writing came first, and then I guess once I felt like I had this permission to go and just see let what comes comes. On my birthday, like the weekend before I went and did the filming, on my birthday, I'd gone to this waterfall, and it was just this place that felt so full of energy. It felt like all of this pressure, it wasn't that it lifted away, it was that this energy inhabited the space in a different way, that the pressure was like finding a new form. It felt like a relief of some kind.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Where were you? Sorry.

Ashanti Harris: This waterfall is in Scotland. It's, like, near Largs. So went back to this waterfall, and really hilariously, when I got there the weekend after, the waterfall wasn't there. It has not rained, it's not been Scotland. And the waterfall wasn't there, but this space was still really full of energy. There's, like, something about the way that it's placed and the way that you have a sight of the sea, you have this huge sky. There's all of this plant life and this mass and this warmth and heat and energy that comes from the environment. And the sunset, like, the light there is beautiful. And I had this poem, my partner was there helping me, and we were just like, let's try and bring this poem to life. And, I'm a performer, I work with movement. And I just kind of danced, just tried to embody the poem and tried to embody the feelings and tried to capture it in ways that didn't necessarily make it about kind of my experience, but also the way that my experience is embedded in the landscape alongside other people's experiences. So all of the images of me, aside from one, the hands, all of the images of me are in reflection. Their images are embedded in the landscape. And thinking about how my story is part of this infinite archive that is embedded in the landscape and eventually becomes condensed and becomes this magical, ancestral, oil substance.

Tomiwa Folorunso: And the sound, because I know you like sound.

Ashanti Harris: I love sound.

Tomiwa Folorunso: You like sound.

Ashanti Harris: So the sound is at the end when it says, recorded between Guyana, Tanzania and Scotland. The sound is the part that's recorded in all of these places. And I like, everywhere I go, I, like, kind of taking just field recordings of where I am, just sort of, like, archiving the environment that I'm in. And, in a lot of the film works that I do and the sound for performance works that I do, I like to layer different places. I like the idea that there are so many connections between all of these places. There's the ones that I'm personally researching, and there's the ones that I don't know about, the ones that only other people know because of their own experiences of these places. And I like to kind of layer them to evoke the fact that it's all a connected history. The sound is it was recorded. Some of it was

in Mikumi National Park in Tanzania. Some of it was in, like well, it was near Kaieteur Falls in Guyana. And, some of it is at the waterfall in Largs. And then actually, there's one other recording from [inaudible] as well, which was a place that one of the Guyanese women who was in Scotland 200 years ago was where she lived as, um well, I just like to think that through the sound, all of these places, people stories are embedded in the film.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Yeah, they are. And sitting with each other and kind of being in conversation with each other and layered with each other, it's really, really beautiful. You work with film a little bit, right? So how was this for you, kind of knowing that at the end you were going to create something that was film or moving image?

Ashanti Harris: It was really exciting. Yeah, it was really exciting. My background is in Sculpting. I trained, studied sculpture, and I like thinking about dance when I make performances. I like to think of them kind of sculpturally. I like to think about them as a sort of process rather than a kind of like, final product. And I like to think about and also like, thinking about movement as a material and how it can be sort of, I don't know, reformed, reworked, played with as a material. And I tried to do the same thing with film. So I suppose rather than thinking about creating a sort of narrative from start to finish like thinking about how to work with something as a material so how to find to build textures to kind of evoke processes to really create a sort of tactileness to something that's kind of flat and also to kind of create something that maybe you can feel in your body in some way. Yeah, it was really fun. I had a really nice time. I got to work with Tao-Anas Le Thanh, who's like, an amazing editor. I'd never worked in this way with an editor before. And it was just such a gorgeous process. And Tao, we were leaving voice notes back and forwards to each other, and Tao was sending me things, and I was talking. And the way that Tao sort of added their own narrative to it was also this really gorgeous process of being like, yeah, this is how this poem can speak. This is how it can speak through more than just sort of my perspective. And also made me see things in the footage and in the sounds that I had never even thought of or considered. There's this one, the section at the end, um, where there's a sort of reflection of a body and the body kind of becomes made of greenery and just like, pal's narrative for that section and why that part went in that moment. It was a really, really nice process. I feel really grateful to have gotten to work in that way.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Yeah. Tao yes.

Ashanti Harris: Thank you.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Always. Thank you.

Ashanti Harris: Always.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Thank you Tao.

Pressure is something that is so kind of like, uh, at a huge part of this film and is at the forefront of this film. And in Eilidh Akilade's response, she writes a lot about she talks about that and talks about pressure as a Black woman and a Black person and growing up in

Scotland. So read the response because it's very good, but I wanted to hear more from you about how you navigate that pressure in your work.

Ashanti Harris: I think my work is just navigating that pressure. Like, the whole of it is navigating that pressure in doing research and thinking and writing for this film. It didn't make it into the film sort of directly, but it definitely made it into the film in feeling. And it feels like my next step continuation after this film. So somebody made a comment about extraction and, not extraction, excavation. And the comment was, why do artists feel the need to excavate, to excavate from the past, to always be uncovering these hidden truths? Like, when an artist going to feel like they can talk about something else? It was like a kind of negative comment. And, I sort of said my piece to this person, but I went home and I just couldn't stop thinking about it. And I was thinking about not just this person sort of not understanding actually what was happening, but also just this idea of excavating. And, really feeling that as much as I sort of argued why we were doing this, I also didn't actually feel like that was what I was doing. And I took some time to kind of think about it and sit with it and, um, kind of came to the conclusion that, okay, it's like I'm digging. Like I'm digging, I'm digging into all of these places. I'm digging, I'm searching. Why am I digging? It's not to pull something out of the ground. Like, why else do you dig? And I started thinking about a burial and you dig. Another reason why you dig is to put something into the ground. And this idea of I guess, okay, a burial is an honouring of the past, of something that has passed. It's an honoring of your sort of ancestor, your family, your ancestor, like, someone that you deeply care about. It's also like, uh, it's a ritual, but then it's a moment to grieve. It's a moment to kind of feel pain, like, feel the pain that's potentially associated with loss or loss of something. But it's also like this incredible and a moment to care to yourself, a moment to come together as a community with this shared whatever you're burying is the thing that you're sharing in common. And then it's also like the burial itself. In going into the earth, this amazing energy exchange is happening. So it's like drawing from the earth. It's drawing from the energy of the people that are there. It's like shapeshifting changing form and becoming something new that's part of something bigger. And, it's also, I guess, like a moment for you to find peace. And I think that actually, all of the research that I do is a process of this kind of burial. It's like honoring and celebrating, but it's also like allowing some kind of energy exchange to happen in order to process something. And ultimately, it's kind of about finding some kind of peace. So that's kind of how I deal with pressure in what I do. Yeah. Wow, that was thank you. I think that's what there's so many amazing artists actually, I think working in this way, I feel like I am participating in burials with so many people. I feel so lucky to be participating in this kind of work and this kind of thinking and feeling and reset with so, so many people.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Yeah, there's something really, really beautiful about digging to find peace. Yeah, I really like that. Yeah, I really, really like that. I'm going to open it up to questions in a couple of minutes, but I'm going to ask one more. I'm interested. What does film and moving image, I suppose, maybe offer you that other art forms don't? And I'm not saying that in a way that film is the best.

Ashanti Harris: Yeah.

Tomiwa Folorunso: I'm just asking.

Ashanti Harris: Okay, so I guess my medium that I use most often is performance and I feel like they're really, really linked. But what I can do with film that I feel like I can't do with performance is, I suppose you have more control of how you're showing something to someone. What I really enjoyed about that I could do in this film that I feel like I don't think I could do it in the same way with the performance is this view that you have that's kind of, like, through this funnel. It's kind of looking into something, and that was done with a specific lens that just made a frame. But I've worked with this sort of circle image in some other videos that I've done in the past. I like the idea that it's, like, looking into something or, like, illuminating something, or it's about zooming in or like, a focused perspective. But also that it evokes, like I don't know, it evokes, like, planets and evokes, like, the way that Tao made it kind of slightly move across the screen. It evokes the way that we are always orbiting each other. We're always part of these individual orbits, and sometimes these orbits kind of pass by each other. There's so much that you can do with just creating the shape of how you focus in on the image that I feel like I would really struggle to do in a live performance. But I loved doing that with this and also loved seeing, I guess, in the way that you can pass because it's a material. You can pass it back and forwards between people. So with the image and with tau, and you kind of manipulate and you kind of play, and then you pass it back, and then you do the same and you pass it back and you change it back. And the same with the sound as well. So my partner helps me a lot with the sound, and it's like you can elongate and you can reverse, you can think about symbolism, and then you can kind of embody it in the material of the sound. I feel like it gives you a way of, like I'm like touching. You don't actually touch it. You know what I mean? Yeah.

Tomiwa Folorunso: When you said play, I'm just thinking of, I don't know, like, playdoh or plastic moving.

Ashanti Harris: Yeah. In a way that I would never do with a human. I guess when I'm making performances, you play, but I don't know it's like I am not playing with them or manipulating them or it's a different kind of way of working with the material that I really enjoyed to do.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Yeah. And I think it's always really cool to see people who maybe don't come from a moving image background come to it and explore it differently and do things differently. I think that's always really exciting.

Ashanti Harris: So thanks for giving me the chance to do it.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Okay, I'm going to open up the questions. Thank you. I'm going to repeat the question for the recording. It really feels like you have your signature in the film. And the question was around as someone from a post colonial country and your relationship with oil.

Ashanti Harris: I mean, in my sort of wider research of oil, I kept coming back to Carnival and um, also form of this specific performance on music within Carnival called Jab Jab, which is a carnival character that wears horns and um, the kind of performers cover themselves in oil. And um, I just kind of kept coming back to and there's something else about Jab Jab music that is like slightly offbeat. It's hard to explain. It's like there's something out of place or out of pace about it. And I really like that. It feels symbolic of like you can sort of be in the zone, you can be feeling the feeling. But there's also something else. There's also this other thing

that's like pushing and niggling at you. And there's something about Jab Jab that you can dance to it and you're embodying this, but in embodying it, you're also recognising that there's something like there's this tension there. And ah, it feels like another process of kind of like embodying that tension to kind of understand it without it having to be about words. Uh, it's just about the movement and feeling it in your body. There's that. And then there's also in Carnival, um, I guess this idea that it's a moment when you are embodying history and um, you can get taken over. You're taken over like you're taken over by history. You're taken over by the, um, ancestors that you're honoring in that moment. You're taken over by the gods. It's like you're taking over and you're performing something that's bigger than you but also so personal to you. And I think they're things that I've been really interested in in this research. And I feel like they're things that really kind of came out when thinking about oil. I guess another thing in Carnival is like steel pans and they're such a kind of classic imagery of Caribbean carnival. But then why are they oil drums? I suppose it's like there's always these kind of little links to that history that are always there. And um, they're right in front of you. And maybe you're not thinking about them in this way, but they're kind of always there. And I suppose somehow I think I'm going on a little bit of a tangent, but I suppose all of those things okay, there's this carnival and this idea of, like, you're embodying the steel pans, are there? I used to play steel pans in Carnival when I was a kid, and it's like, okay, so when I'm playing these steel pans in some way, I'm embodying that colonial relationship that's based around oil and then doing further research into ExxonMobil the specific company. And I was, like, getting all of these, uh, 1970s sort of, like, Business Today magazines on Ebay because they were mentioning this company, and the image of the oil company is a tiger. And it was, I guess, a different time when a lot of the countries that were part of this colonial relationship that's very much to do of oil were not independent yet. And, um, it's a time when Britain's really showing off. It's like Commonwealth. Not Commonwealth, but it's what's it like a colonial power. It's like, these are all of the places and it was this kind of image of this map coming out from Britain, and it was, like, jumping out to all of the places where oil is extracted. I suppose it's like capitalism in its entirety. Entirety. Anyway, it's like this tension with something that, as a colonial subject, you're taught to desire, but it's also the thing that's kept you subjugated, and you're always in this kind of tension with that. And actually, when that tension is too complicated to put into words, you can process it in your body, like at Carnival, like, when you're listening to this music that's got an offbeat, and you just let that find a form in your movement in some way. So I don't even know if I've answered your question. I've gone on a tangent, but I think, yeah, that's the way that I sort of address that, uh, kind of colonial relationship with oil, I think.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Thank you. It was a good tangent. I don't think it was a tangent, but any more questions? I think someone at the back had one, but I can't remember who.

Ashanti Harris: That's a fun, pressured question.

Tomiwa Folorunso: I'm going to repeat it again. Since you've made this film work, what's coming up next for you?

Ashanti Harris: Well, I'm making a performance for a performance festival, I guess, in this burial process that I was talking about. In doing some research for this film, actually, I created a kind of movement workshop movement score that, um, is going through the

process of a burial, but in movement and dance. I've been working I tried it out with, um, three collaborators that thanked at the end of this film because the footage didn't make it into the film, but felt like a really important part of it. And, um so turning this kind of movement score into an interactive participatory performance where we kind of can embody some of these histories in a room together and kind of moving between personal and collective that's what's next?

Tomiwa Folorunso: Excited?

Ashanti Harris: Yeah. Some interactive performance.

Tomiwa Folorunso: I'm interested. You just mentioned the footage that didn't make it into the film. What was it?

Ashanti Harris: Why? It wasn't a film. It was very much a live moment. And that's why it's going to make it into this sort of interactive performance. And it wasn't even necessarily a live moment to be watched. It was a live moment to be experienced. So I have three really incredible collaborators that I work with. Jess, Paris, Hampshire, Rajkuma, and Titano Matui, all from really different backgrounds and like in relation to movement and together we went through a burial or they they each went through a burial that I kind of talked them through in this facilitated movement workshop. And, I didn't film all of them. Some of them I did just for the research. Jess, who's an amazing performer who made this incredible film of her. And it's a beautiful film, but it didn't feel like it was this it felt like this really special, unique moment between me, between her, and between the filmmaker, and just not quite sure it's going to be something, but this wasn't quite right. It's like it needs to sit completely on its own to give it the sort of weight that it needs. Thanks.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Yeah, there's something kind of nice when you have those moments when you have something and you know it's good, but also you can say, I'm not going to use this. It's not quite right. There's something really powerful about that.

Ashanti Harris: Yeah. And especially when it's about personal histories. There are some personal histories that may help us to all feel more connected. So sharing them feels really powerful and really important. And there are some personal histories that feel it feels like I feel very humbled and I guess grateful to have been able to participate in that experience. But ultimately I feel like I've been let into someone's personal story and I was part of it for that moment. But it's not to share with anyone else. And I think that's also the kind of thing with researching Black histories. It's like you can speak for your own experience and you can find connections with other people's experiences. But it doesn't feel like something that I would never want to sort of extract somebody else's experience. I feel like that's something that's done so often to black stories and black histories. It's done in this extractive way where something that isn't yours is taken. And I feel like being mindful and respectful of the ownership of that thing and what to do with it is really, really important. It's like going into a process of that care. And part of that care is being able to say, like, no, this is in caring for this story, this story is not going to be public. And in caring for this story, this one is.



Tomiwa Folorunso: I'm just going to repeat the question part. Even. In a metaphorical sense. What would you like to put in to the ground?

Ashanti Harris: That's actually a really hard question. That is a really hard question. What would I like to, I guess, thinking about taking and giving back. I suppose this isn't necessarily what I want to put into the ground, but maybe it is metaphorically, like, appreciation in the form of an honoring kind of thing. I think it's not just about saying, like, okay, hello, Elizabeth Jr. You are this person who is here 200 years ago. Your mother was African. Like, you were born in Guyana. Like, you exist. That it's actually about more than that. It's, like, honouring her, uh, memory by, I guess, like, I don't know, is this really going to be really cheesy to say by living by living and celebrating and creating and having relationships? And I guess in this research that I'd been doing for a long time, I was, like, falling in love with these women who I'd never met, who existed before I was ever born. And I was just getting so obsessed with them, and people would say to me, and, um, what? Oh, that's amazing. And what did they do in this? Like, what did you achieve? What did you contribute to society? And I was like, they lived, they lived, they existed. They existed here in this moment. And there's no way that I can sort of communicate to you the warmth and joy that it brings me to know that they existed. And I feel like the giving back is kind of the continuing to do that, like, continuing to exist, continuing to create, continuing to uplift the people. I feel like I keep saying it, but I'm surrounded by so many amazing artists doing such incredible research, like, all of the artists in this program, and it's just, like, uplifting all of it as an honoring of everything that has gone before. That's my cheesy answer. Thanks for the question.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Yeah, thank you. Any more questions? Was it straightforward to come to the title of your film? It's okay.

Ashanti Harris: Thank you. Thank you. It yeah, it kind of came out in the writing. It kind of just came out in the writing. And the writing really was just, uh, okay, I'm just writing, and I'm seeing what comes. And it was the final line, and I guess Black Gold is what oil is called. I guess it's, like, the new gold. It was the new gold. It was, like, the new mineral that everybody wanted. There was the kind of gold rush. Guyana is a country that there was when, um, Highland Scots were going to Guyana in the 1890s. It was called the gold rush. Even though it wasn't for gold, it was actually for the slave trade and plantations. But, yeah, I guess it was coming from that language of, like, El Dorado and the kind of conquest, uh, daws going to the New World in the hunt for this lands made of gold. And gold, I guess, like, gold was replaced with, I guess, like, sugar and cotton and the new gold. And then gold is replaced with minerals and other minerals, and then gold is replaced with oil. But also, gold is a thing that I find I find is so dear to my identity. Not in the sense of wearing it or owning it, but mostly in the sense of coming from a country that is, like, built. You're standing on top of gold. You're literally walking on top of gold. But also, my Guyanese family, my name is Ashanti because my Guyanese family always really recognised their Ghanaian heritage and also this other sort of, like, high importance of gold. And, I suppose it's another mineral that I feel like I embody not in the same way as this with the oil. This is a full imagining of embodying history. Oil is something that's, like, condensing history. But gold is, like, embodying this cultural heritage, this preciousness, this gorgeous preciousness that comes from cultures that I feel I hold really dearly and I feel so connected to. And I also feel like they're such a big part of me. So I don't know. I know of black gold as, like, a phrase for oil,

but it also feels like this gorgeous phrase for black culture as well. It's like, it's gold. It's just, like, so precious, so magnificent. Just yeah. Amazing.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Thank you so much. Thank you so much.

Ashanti Harris: Thank you.

Tomiwa Folorunso: It's been such pleasure, I know, for this conversation, but also, I know for our entire team to work with you and have your film in the programme along, like, your commission in the program means a lot, so thank you.

Ashanti Harris: Being in the programme means a lot, so thank you so much as well. Thank you.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Thank you. Thank you.