

## Review: *Notre Étrangère*

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### *The Place In-between (Notre étrangère)*

“But she’s *white*,” I blurted out as I watched Sarah Bouyain taking to the stage to introduce her film, *The Place In-between*, at FESPACO, Ouagadougou. It was the last day of February, the last day of a CODESRIA workshop on African Film and Video and belatedly, I’d arrived at the Cine Burkina to watch my first movie of the 22nd edition of the biggest Pan-African Film Festival in the world.

Despite appearances, it turns out that Sarah Bouyain is a product of a Burkinabé-French mix. With a father of Burkinabe origin and a French mother, she is the granddaughter of a mixed-race woman and cherishes her heritage from which her affinity to Burkina Faso derives. The nuances of this dual heritage infuse Bouyain’s first feature film, as much as it did her previous work: a documentary *Children of the White Man*, 2000, and a collection of short stories *Métisse façon*, 2003.

*The Place In-between* follows Amy (Dorylia Calmel), a young, mixed-raced woman. After her father’s death, Amy leaves Paris to go to Bobo in Burkina Faso, to seek out her mother, from whom she was separated at eight years old. Unbeknown to Amy, Mariam (Assita Ouédraogo), her mother, has left her home and migrated to live on the margins of Parisian society, working as a cleaner. Her boss, Ester (Nathalie Richard) wants to learn Dioula, Mariam’s maternal language. As Mariam teaches Ester, the two women become friends.

*The Place In-between* is a beautifully realised film. Brilliantly acted, it explores the theme of ‘otherness’ from multiple perspectives: Amy’s in Burkina Faso and Mariam’s in Paris. For example, Amy’s return to her mother’s town is painfully hesitant. As she walks through the streets in her western dress, the local men call out, “Hey, white lady!” She then takes to wearing a kaba, but still attracts attention and fails to blend in.

When Amy visits the home of her aunt, Acita, (Blandine Yameogo) to try and find out her disappeared mother's whereabouts, the welcome is no less muted. She learns that her mother had somehow shamed the family; and Acita is not about to discuss these matters with a foreign girl who might as well be a stranger. But Amy persists, bravely digging deeper.

*The Place In-between* contrasts Amy's journey in Burkina Faso with that of Ester and Mariam's back in France. At first it's not clear why Ester – white, middle-aged and middle class – wants to learn an African language. But as the film juxtaposes these stories of women bridging the gap between Europe and Africa, the connections become clear and ultimately heartrending.

Where the film truly excels is in its evocative treatment of 'mothering'. Amy is in search of a mother who, it seems, will never recover from having given her up. Indeed, when Mariam discovers that Ester is about to adopt a baby from Burkina Faso, her outrage ruptures their burgeoning friendship.

The multiple layers threaded in Bouyain's film are treated with camerawork that is both intimate and confident, as she depicts the very different locations: African immigrants coming together in the outskirts of Paris, the muted bourgeois elegance of Ester's home and garden, and the brightly printed clothes and dusty courtyards of Bobo. Overall, Bouyain's film creates a mood that is tender but unflinchingly honest. Occasionally spiked with a humour that the Ouagadougou audience loved, an underlying sense of sorrow pervades this film, which won the European Union Prize at FESPACO.