

FILM REVIEW

Ines Johnson-Spain, director. *Becoming Black*. 2019. 91 minutes. German and French, with English Subtitles. Juno Films. \$149 w/o or \$349 w/ Public Performance Rights.

Becoming Black is an autobiographic documentary film by Ines Johnson-Spain, a Black German filmmaker who grew up in the 1960s as the biracial daughter of a white German couple in the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR). This is Johnson-Spain's second documentary, following *L'esprit de Madjid* (2009), a film about queerness and voodoo in Togo. *Becoming Black* also has a connection to Togo. Johnson-Spain's biological father, Lucien, was a Togolese student whom her mother Sigrid met as a young woman while she was working at a college in Bernau. But when Sigrid became pregnant with Johnson-Spain, she was already married to a white man, Armin, and ultimately Armin decided to adopt Johnson-Spain as his own, keeping Lucien a secret. In *Becoming Black*, Johnson-Spain dissects this secret and the pain it caused her and her family: Why did her mother hide the truth from her? What happened to Lucien? And could this be the reason why she felt like such an outsider growing up? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to understand the social construct of race in the GDR.

Although it was evident that Johnson-Spain had darker skin than the rest of her family, this was treated as a mere coincidence, and no one told her the truth about her biological father. It was only by chance that around age twelve, while her older brother Michael was snooping around the apartment, he happened upon paperwork that revealed the family secret: an application for an abortion that had been rejected and that listed the name and origin of her biological father. Johnson-Spain's story gives a rare glimpse into the experience of being Black in a white-majority society like the GDR, where racism was present even if it was not woven into the fabric of the national narrative. In the GDR, politicians preached anti-racism and international solidarity outward, while turning a blind eye to everyday racism at home. Johnson-Spain's interviews with white family and friends help explain why they believed they could keep the truth a secret. These interviews also

highlight the problem of white allies who mean well but believe that by ignoring race they are doing Black people a favor.

Throughout the film, we get snapshots of what Johnson-Spain's life was like as she was growing up. She frequently employs a disconnect between image and sound to convey the sense of alienation she felt. At one point, we see a series of photos from her youth as she repeats some of the phrases she heard from whites growing up: "Don't think you're someone special," and "You're not even that dark." She says she tried for years to be "normal" and often retreated into isolation, for fear of being teased. One summer, she recalls wearing long-sleeved sweaters in an attempt not to become any darker. Her anxiety around race caused her to have stomach problems.

Occasionally, Johnson-Spain includes interviews with white East German bureaucrats who worked closely with visiting African students to hear their explanation for why race was such a taboo topic there. One woman explains that although East German officials tried to impart a positive image about racial minorities, they did so without first dealing with the negative images that had existed since colonialism, and therefore the colonial mindset persisted.

Nevertheless, this film is not just about Johnson-Spain's trials. The film's title, *Becoming Black*, indicates a state of change rather than of stasis. The film is a delicate balance between tracing her experiences in East Germany and what her life has been like subsequently, since first going to visit her Togolese family at the age of twenty-eight. Traveling to Togo has a positive effect on Johnson-Spain's life; she learns that not only had her father been living in West Germany for years, but she also has ten additional Black German half-siblings. In a touching scene she sits with several of them, shares old photos, and hears stories about her father Lucien. Importantly, the film includes many scenes of Johnson-Spain visiting her African relatives in Agoué, Benin. A ceremony is performed to welcome her now deceased father back to the family. As her Togolese relatives share family stories and impart wisdom about their culture, it becomes clear that they welcome Johnson-Spain as another branch of the family tree. At the start of the film, they greet her by saying "welcome home." Nevertheless, the film does not give us the happy ending one might expect. As Johnson-Spain sits on a beach in Benin watching several dozen men work, a Black woman and two children walk past and greet her with "Hey, Yovo," which is translated as "hey, white one." This ending indicates that for Johnson-Spain, the subject of belonging will never be an easy one.

The film ends with a closely framed view of her face, as she stoically looks off into the distance, and the viewer has the sense that she has made peace with her life. Johnson-Spain's unique take on the documentary is to introduce multiple perspectives on a single issue or memory, so that we as audience do not simply accept what we see and hear at face value. She also emphasizes the absences; her father and mother are no longer alive to contribute, and thus there is always a part of the story we can not know.

Offering an intimate and honest look at issues of race, identity, belonging, and family history, *Becoming Black* is an informative and engaging film that is well worth watching.

Priscilla Layne 

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA
playne@email.unc.edu

doi:10.1017/asr.2022.17