

# Women Behind Canadian TV: Nathalie Younglai

[Bridget Liszewski](#)

| February 11, 2019 | [Canadian TV](#) | [1 Comment](#)



Super Zee BTS with Producer Farah Merani – photo credit: Leilah Dhoré

It's easy to tell people to go out and make diverse content, but real change won't happen until more and more diverse people are actually hired in meaningful positions behind the scenes. That's something writer Nathalie Younglai has realized after working in the TV industry on various shows such as *Coroner* and *Bellevue*, after starting in reality TV on shows like *Til Debt Do U\$ Part*. Younglai, who is also the founder of BIPOC TV & Film (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour in Canada's TV and film industry), has seen many of the challenges of making the industry more diverse firsthand. **BIPOC** is an organization of people working behind the scenes who are dedicated to increasing representation both in front and behind the camera.

Younglai, who just received a Canadian Screen Award [nomination](#) for Best Writing in a Children or Youth series for *Dino Dana*, recently spoke with *The TV Junkies* as part of our Women Behind Canadian TV [series](#). She shares her experience creating [Super Zee](#), a web series about a queer Black superhero that had a crew made entirely of people of colour, something that she says turned into a bigger challenge than originally anticipated. Younglai's work in fighting for representation has earned her a lot of respect from her peers. "She defers a lot of the attention to other people. She gives us strength, and she's an inspiration with how much she gives to the cause. It's so inspiring and incredible," director Winnifred Jong told *The TV Junkies*.

Also a member of the Writers Guild of Canada's Diversity Committee, Younglai details the challenges that still exist in order to make writing rooms more diverse. She also shares why writing in a diverse room, like the one Morwyn Brebner assembled for the first season of *Coroner*, was such a great experience.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

**The TV Junkies: Can you share a little about your background? Did you always want to work in film and TV?**

Nathalie Younglai: No. I don't think I knew it was possible. When I was a kid I had no idea it was even a thing. My sister and I used to recreate Bugs Bunny cartoons and act them out, but I don't think it ever entered my mind. I knew for a long time that I wanted to write, and as a kid I was writing little stories and books. I tried getting into longer form and knew I wanted to do something in that vein, creatively, but it took me awhile to get to TV.

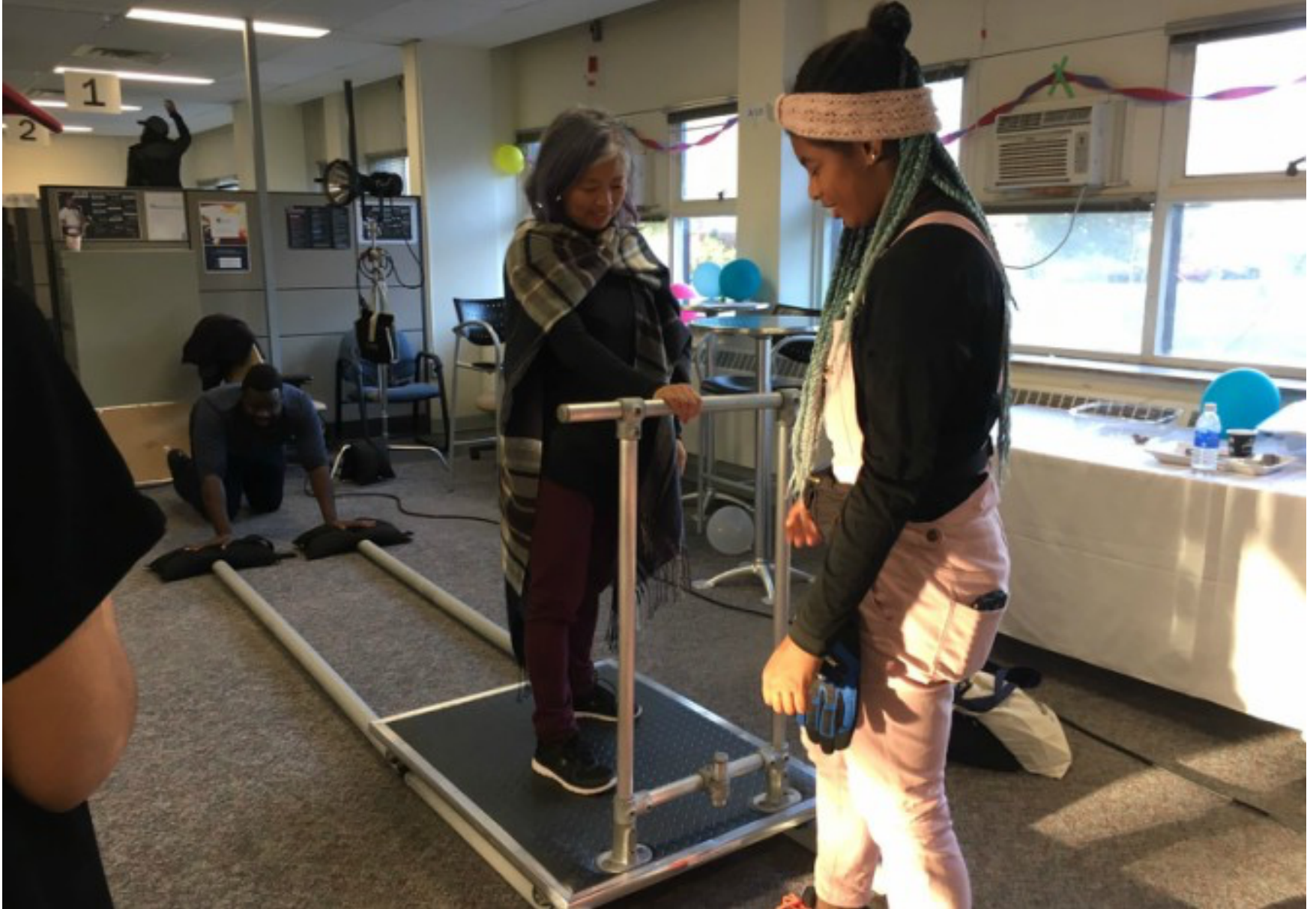
**TTVJ: Did you go to school then for television or start out in something else?**

NY: I started going to school for international development, but quickly got

caught up in political activism. I was more interested in organizing rallies and protesting thanks to eccentric feminist studies. [laughs] I then also got pregnant, dropped out and raised a daughter while I was freelancing as a musician. Being a musician is creative, but the kind of gigs I was doing, it wasn't thoroughly creative or what I wanted to be doing. I wanted to do something more creative so I went back to school for a one year TV writing and producing program.

**TTVJ: Since you are very involved in a variety of different diversity initiatives, what has your experience been like as a young POC working in the industry? Do you ever think that it's caused you to miss out on opportunities or have you had any big challenges in regards to that for you?**

NY: I started off in unscripted television [*Til Debt Do U\$ Part*], and I was really lucky because the first set I worked on was incredibly diverse. We would make jokes even that we were the perfect Benetton ad. That was my first experience and I was really spoiled. I was able to move up quickly from research to directing. I found that when I was trying to make the transition into scripted it was a lot harder, in the sense that you'd see photos of writing rooms and they'd be all white. I'd wonder if it was even possible or if there was a place for me. Also, just looking at the types of shows that were airing and getting greenlit was very discouraging.



BTS Super Zee with grip Fatima Camera and swing Winston Lewis – photo credit: Gillian Muller

**TTVJ: We often hear how important it is for young creators to make their own projects. You have wrote and directed on your own projects, like *Super Zee*. What can you share about that experience and series?**

NY: When I first started trying to make my way into scripted, at the time the trend was to discourage people from writing stories about people of colour specifically. We, meaning people of colour, were often told to make sure we made our characters white or it wouldn't get greenlit or audiences couldn't relate. It didn't really start changing until a few years ago, and now people like to say 'just create something! Once you create something you'll have all the power.' That's not true either, and the challenging thing with making that step to doing your own thing is that there isn't any money. You're pulling in favors, asking people to work for free, and then it becomes very easy to become part of the problem of exploiting people who need experience. To do it ethically is expensive and hard. In some ways it's good, but in other

ways it seems like another hurdle to climb.

**TTVJ: One thing about making your own project, like *Super Zee*, is that you have control over a lot of things. You not only featured a diverse cast, but also your crew was made up of a lot of people of colour as well. Why was it so important to put that priority on the project?**

NY: It was a definite conscious decision. I had been seeing a lot of things about an all-female crew, but again, it was all white women. That just doesn't seem possible. [laughs] I just wanted to show that you could do all-female crew and have people of colour, or do an all POC crew. It just happened that we got mostly women of colour. It wasn't something we sought. The baseline \we wanted were people of colour, and then it was cool that it ended up a majority of women in roles.

I think the hardest thing was that because it was free, you were then competing with people working jobs who couldn't take a day off. So we'd find crew, but they'd be booked, which was great for them. When we did put the word out there sometimes people would respond with a list of names that were not people of colour, even though we were really explicit. They'd say 'these people aren't, but they have the skills.' We would always explain why we wanted to do it and why it was important to us, so it was just a really strange thing. We even got a list where they said 'there aren't any people of colour, but they are all women.' So there was a bit of education involved when talking to people, but then there were others who totally got it. Everyone was so excited to be on a set like that. It was just a really warm and great vibe. For a lot of people it was their first time being on a set where they weren't the only person of colour.

**TTVJ: Well, as you said, it's not like we walk outside and see only white women.**

NY: It's a bit of a culture shock because you walk through the city and it's very, very diverse. You get a mix of races and representation, and then you

walk onto a set and it's like 'Whoa! What time period am I in?'



BIPOC TV & Film event at Elchi Chai Shop – photo credit: Maylynn Quan

**TTVJ: You founded BIPOC TV & Film organization. What motivated you to do that and what are the goals of that organization?**

NY: I had a series that was optioned and the production company wanted to pair me up with a senior writer. They told me to create a wish list, and they'd create a wish list, and then we'd get together. I really wanted it to be a woman of colour, and in Canada at the time, there were none that were at the level they needed to be for this. It made me feel very isolated, and I figured if I was feeling that way that there were many others feeling it too. So I wanted a way to connect with those people, know who they were so we could help each other out. This would be a way to form our own network.

When I have time and money, we'll pull together an event with people of colour working in the industry to speak about how they broke in, what challenges they had and how they navigated moving up. Last year we

accidentally did a huge undertaking and hosted a writing bootcamp. It was for writers of colour that wanted to work in kids' TV. I had been getting kids' TV producers approaching me asking for writers of colour, but I only had like five or six names for all of Canada, and I felt like there was probably people who wanted to but didn't know how. I thought we could bridge that gap.

I put out a call and there were about 30 people who answered, so we started holding workshops with John May. He created *How to be Indie* and is a white guy that's very committed to trying to change the writing rooms for kids' TV. He's always taking chances and hiring new writers of colour. We ended up doing a series of workshops where people had deadlines and it became this nine or 10 month project.

**TTVJ: Can you speak a little about the Writers Guild of Canada's [Diversity Committee](#) that you're a member of? What are their goals?**

NY: The WGC Diversity Committee's mission is to increase representation of diversity in Canadian writing rooms, specifically for People of Colour, queer and disabled-identifying people, recognizing the intersectionality of identities. Currently, the committee runs a script-of-the-month club, where a script written by a guild member who identifies as being diverse, is sent out to key industry players every month. It is one small step in the right direction, but not the only step that needs to happen. True change in representation can only happen with active efforts for more inclusive hiring – when we see writers of colour and queer and disabled writers populating writing rooms. More than one. And not just as tokens.

**TTVJ: As you mention, strides are being made and more people seem conscious of diversity, but what are some challenges that still exist or some of the biggest issues you think need to be addressed?**

NY: There is progress and I am seeing a few more writers of colour get their first credits this year, but I still see rooms that are all white. Or you see

rooms where there's one person of colour, and you can't put the weight of representation all on one person. There's a lot of really great programs in the States that are sponsored either by the union or networks, where they are actively seeking out writers of colour. I think we need to do more of that here in Canada. Right now it's a little piecemeal, and is really up to individuals who want to, rather than an industry accepted standard to aspire to yet.



Younglai with Coroner writers: Showrunner Morwyn Brebner, Seneca Aaron, and Motion.

**TTVJ: You recently worked on the new CBC series *Coroner*. It has a female showrunner and the writing room seems pretty diverse. What was that experience like and why was it so important for that series to have such a diverse group of writers?**

NY: It was really great. Morwyn [Brebner, showrunner] was very deliberate and conscious in wanting to make sure that her writing room was inclusive. It wasn't just putting the bodies in there. It was in the atmosphere that she created. On the first day, she was talking about how everybody's voices and perspectives were valued, and that if anything ever came up that felt unsafe, that we should come to her and talk to her. She had a whole line of



'if you feel like you can't talk to one person, then here's a whole list of people you can approach.' It was great to set the stage in that way.

Every time we would talk about story or characters, it wasn't up to the people of colour in the room to talk about issues of representation and race, or ask 'is this the way we want to represent this person of this race?' It felt like a very shared responsibility which made it feel very comfortable. When you don't have that whole burden on yourself, and other people are doing it as well, then it takes the pressure off so you can focus on bringing other things out about characters or story.

**TTVJ: You're not just there to police people for stereotypes or bad tropes, but you're actually getting to be creative and write, which is what you're there for.**

NY: Exactly! I'm very excited too because there was one episode that I remember thinking 'wow! I've never seen this type of story portrayed on Canadian TV!' But even with the casting, diversity felt like it was so organic to the series, making people of colour a part of the city, and that's who we are casting. We also had gay, lesbian and trans characters represented in the casting. It didn't feel forced.



Younglai at the Toronto Screenwriters Conference with Ben Watkins and Jessica Meya.

**TTVJ: What advice can you share with other young creators looking to get in the industry?**

NY: People will say it's who you know and unfortunately, that's true. I see how that happens and it's interesting to watch it happen. For people like me who are very anti-social or scared to socialize, we have to push ourselves to make the effort or find a way to do it that feels more comfortable. It's also important to know how to approach people. For example, when you first meet a senior writer, don't ask them to read your script the first time you meet them. Also, just support each other.

**TTVJ: Do you have any other projects coming up we should keep an eye out for?**

NY: I'm working on a new web series that's in development with CBC with Simu Liu (*Kim's Convenience*) that I'm really excited about. I have a feature that I'm writing as well. Earlier this year, I got a sponsored scholarship from

Ben Watkins to attend the Toronto Screenwriting Conference. It just means so much to people starting out to have a more senior writer wanting them to succeed like that.

Thoughts on Younglai's experience? Add them below!

*Coroner* airs Mondays at 9 p.m. ET on CBC. Read more from our *Women Behind Canadian TV* series [here](#).

