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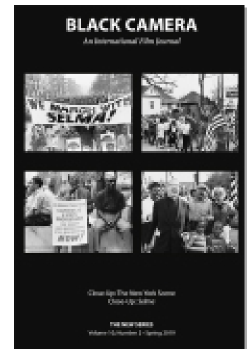

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Close-Up: The New York Scene

Art on Her Mind: The Making of Kathleen Collins's Cinema of Interiority

Hayley O'Malley

Abstract

This essay traces the evolution of writer and filmmaker Kathleen Collins's multifaceted artistic oeuvre in order to explore her central, if still largely unacknowledged, place in the black film scene of 1970s New York and to track her subsequent, symbiotic movement between literary and film projects. The first part of this essay shows how Collins's early professional experiences gave her an acute sense of the aesthetic and political possibilities of film but also demonstrated for her the limitations of both mainstream Hollywood, with its stereotypical depictions of black life, and still-masculinist independent black film productions of the 1970s. The second part of the essay then turns to Collins's short stories, screenplays, and her best-known work, Losing Ground *(1982), to argue that her signature contribution emerged in response to such limitations: by experimenting within and across media, she developed an alternative filmic practice capable of and invested in representing the individualized subjectivities of black women. Indeed, her ceaseless experiments with film aesthetics reveal a deep belief in the unique power of cinema as a tool to present interiority, perhaps especially the inner lives of black female subjects typically ignored by Hollywood films.*

In a 1984 lecture at Howard University, the writer and filmmaker Kathleen Collins explained the impulse behind her work in progress, a film about Bessie Coleman, the first black woman aviator.[1] Collins was not interested in the mythified "heroics of [Bessie] as the first," she said. Instead, her aim was to "reconstruct a woman." To this end, the screenplay she wrote, *Only the Sky Is Free*, emphasizes Bessie's inner life rather than her aerial theatrics as a stunt pilot.[2] It also self-consciously explores the desires and challenges involved in narrating Bessie's life: a central premise of the screenplay is that Bessie's niece, haunted by childhood memories of

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her once-famous, now-forgotten aunt, tells her story night after night as part of a 1970s nightclub act. Collins never found the financial backing to make the movie, but her screenplay demonstrates her deep commitment to developing a cinematic language for portraying the everyday experiences and individualized subjectivities of black women. This essay argues that Collins was able to develop such a filmic grammar for interiority by experimenting across a range of artistic media, from writing short stories, novels, plays, and screenplays to working as a film and TV director, editor, and producer. These experiences ultimately gave Collins a varied set of tools for representing the complex lives of black women and bringing them to the screen.

Most of Collins's writing was unpublished in her lifetime, and the two films she did direct, *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy* (1979) and *Losing Ground* (1982), never received wide theatrical release. It is only now, within the twenty-first-century arts scene, that her work has found a larger audience: *Losing Ground* was the centerpiece of a 2015 program at Lincoln Center, and a short story collection, *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?,* was posthumously published in 2016 to considerable acclaim.[3] Alongside this artistic recovery, newly available archives, including Collins's own papers at the Schomburg Center, reveal the full range of her cinematic labor. While scholars have focused mainly on *Losing Ground*, these new materials allow us to recognize how *Losing Ground* fits together with Collins's other filmic and literary work as part of a career-long experiment with the unique ways that film can depict subjectivity.[4]

This essay traces the evolution of Collins's multifaceted artistic oeuvre in order to explore her central, if still largely unacknowledged, place in the black film scene of 1970s New York and to track her subsequent, symbiotic movement between literary and film projects. In the first part of this essay, I show how Collins's early professional experiences gave her an acute sense of the aesthetic and political possibilities of film but also demonstrated for her the limitations of both mainstream Hollywood, with its stereotypical depictions of black life, and still-masculinist independent black film productions of the 1970s. I then turn to Collins's short stories, screenplays, and *Losing Ground* to argue that her signature contribution emerged in response to such limitations: by experimenting within and across media, she developed an alternative filmic practice capable of and invested in representing the individualized subjectivities of black women.[5] Indeed, her ceaseless experiments with film aesthetics reveal a deep belief in the unique power of cinema as a tool to present interiority, perhaps especially the inner lives of the black female subjects typically ignored by Hollywood films.

Navigating the Sixties and Seventies Film Scenes

Collins's approach to filmmaking stemmed, at least in part, from her participation in several different arts scenes early in her career. Her fascination with film began in France, where, as a master's student at the University of Paris Sorbonne in the mid-1960s, she took a course on literature and film adaptation and wrote her thesis on André Breton and the "cinematic notion behind surrealism."[6] She also dabbled in film adaptation herself: on a trip to Normandy, she and her first husband, Doug Collins, shot an 8mm short film inspired by Samuel Beckett's poem "Dieppe."[7] In Paris, the couple immersed themselves in an avant-garde scene of poetry readings, gallery exhibitions, and French New Wave cinema. And the second film they made together—he directed, they both edited—fittingly focused on the conceptual artist Dennis Oppenheim. Entitled *Stock Exchange Transplant* (1968) and made when they had returned to the United States, the film documents Oppenheim's "free-moving architecture" project in which he transported four tons of debris from the New York Stock Exchange to a nearby roof. With vertiginous camerawork and editing timed to an operatic score, the film's aesthetics match the avant-garde energy of its subject, and it was selected for the Director's Fortnight at the 1970 Cannes Film Festival.[8]

After Collins returned to the United States, the intellectualism and bohemianism of Paris remained alive for her through the films of Eric Rohmer, whom she cited as "the only person who's ever influenced me cinematically." Collins was especially drawn to his literariness, the fact that he "was not the least bit afraid of language in film," for words in his films "don't stop being visual." Collins emphasized the importance of Rohmer's Moral Tales series, and singled out *My Night at Maud's* (1969) and his period film *The Marquise of O* (1976) as especially influential.[9] The latter is an adaptation of Heinrich von Kleist's 1808 novella and visually cites Henri Fuseli's iconic painting *The Nightmare*. In *Losing Ground*, with its mise-en-scène designed, at points, to look like a painting, its narrative about artists and would-be artists, and its discussions of existentialism and ecstatic experience, Collins crafted an arts-saturated aesthetic consistent with Rohmer's cinema. But whereas Rohmer's 1980s series *Comedies and Proverbs* subordinates its thematic interest in the creative lives of women to the director's own artistic vision, Collins's *Losing Ground* brings the exploration of female interiority decisively to the fore.

Although Collins cited Rohmer as a singular and exclusive influence, her filmmaking was arguably more directly shaped by her participation in the emerging black film scene of New York City in the 1960s and 1970s. When she returned to New York from Paris in 1966, she worked as a researcher for a public television network, but with her graduate work in film and her experience with production, she quickly transitioned to filmmaking jobs,

becoming a sought-after editor. She regularly worked on WNET television shows, and collaborated with *Black Journal*–affiliated filmmakers William Greaves, St. Clair Bourne, and Stan Lathan.[10] She was, for instance, a production assistant for Greaves's foray into cinema vérité, the Central Park–set *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm, Take One* (1968), and she edited Lathan's museum education film *Statues Hardly Ever Smile* (1971) and Bourne's documentary about the black church *Let the Church Say Amen!* (1973). These projects showcased film's ability to capture and celebrate everyday black life, a lesson that Collins would later translate into narrative film.

In the 1970s, Collins also worked on commercial films, although she was rarely credited. She earned her union card while editing *When Cotton Comes to Harlem* (dir. Ossie Davis, 1970), she served as assistant producer for *The Baron* (dir. Phillip Fenty, 1977), starring Calvin Lockhart, and she likely did some freelance editing for *Shaft* (dir. Gordon Parks, 1971).[11] Her work on commercial films gave her an appreciation for the stylistic innovations and flair for entertainment of directors like Melvin Van Peebles and Gordon Parks, and in an unpublished essay from 1975, "Black Films Come Back in Style," Collins argues for recognizing differences among the so-called Blaxploitation films.[12] Working on a wide variety of film and television productions—far more and of far greater variety than would likely have been possible had she immediately begun directing feature films—ultimately enabled Collins to sample from a range of approaches and aesthetics when developing her own particular cinematic vision.[13]

I want to single out two early projects that must have raised questions for Collins about film's capacity to represent black women's lives. In 1968, she edited a film directed by Larry Neal entitled *May Be the Last Time* (1969).[14] The twenty-minute film chronicles the 1968 "Peace and Power" campaign in Newark to elect black public officials, and it also frames the medium itself as an important tool for mass-movement politics. *May Be the Last Time* opens with a man reading a Stokely Carmichael–headlined *Black Newark* newspaper, cuts to a man engrossed in *The Black Power Revolt*, and surveys tables of black-themed books and art posters. The sequence displays film's multigeneric ability to yoke together other art forms, and uses it to circulate black nationalist ideologies. Indeed, the film documents a black media ecosystem and invites viewers to extend its lessons in spectatorship to other forms of reading, nominating film as an ideal medium for political activism in the vein of W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of art as propaganda.

May Be the Last Time was a production of Harlem Audiovisuals, an all-male filmmaking collective that Neal and Amiri Baraka formed with Studio Museum director Edward Spriggs, documentary photographer James Hinton, and others. Collins was thus at once an outsider to the group and, as an experienced editor, an essential collaborator for the would-be filmmakers.

The work of Neal and Baraka's group has recently been taken up by several scholars, but no mention has been made of *May Be the Last Time*. Instead, the emphasis has been on its cinematic sibling, a film directed by Baraka entitled *The New-Ark* (1968). Baraka's film focuses on the community-oriented activities of his Spirit House and probes the political potential of avant-garde art, from street theater to his own poetry. But like *May Be the Last Time*, *The New-Ark* takes the 1968 election as its backdrop, and the two films not only share virtually the same crew, but also use some of the same footage. Viewed together, their editing stands out as crucial to the stories they each tell. And while the rest of the crew for both films was male, Collins edited Neal's film and Hortense "Tee" Beveridge edited Baraka's.[15] The political potential of these films would appear to be predicated on both the labor and the creative vision of two black women.

Collins's editorial choices in *May Be the Last Time* appear to advance a masculinist and propagandistic use for film, especially in an early montage at a political convention. In that sequence, Collins splices together various clips of speakers animatedly addressing the crowd but silences their voices to create a soundtrack of a single male voice proclaiming, "We are in the vanguard of something that has never before been done . . . the emergence in the second part of the 20th century of the *black man*, the reemergence of the *black man*." At a political convention that stressed the interests of black people as a collective, Collins's editing offers an aesthetic equivalent of the convention's "all for one; one for all" ideal.

And yet, her editing also leaves open the possibility of reading a counter narrative in the images of black women.[16] The footage Collins used of everyday life in Newark consistently registers the presence of black women and girls, whether walking down the street, gazing out windows, or working at election headquarters. And near the film's end, when the black political ticket has failed to win any seats and an election worker is sweeping up candidate flyers, the first flyer we see features a woman's face. Wynona Lipman may have lost in 1968, but it would not be her last time on the ballot: in 1971, she became the first African American woman in the state Senate. Sonically, a chorus of women's voices provides the soundtrack for the film's opening montage of reading, and in the convention hall, one of the participants whom we see at the microphone, but do not hear speaking, is, importantly, a black woman. Her image, coupled with the muting of her speech, invites a critique of the masculinist rhetoric of the film's voice-over. We might then begin to wonder what the political message of this ostensibly dogmatic film is, after all. Collins's editing raises two powerfully open-ended questions: what might a black politics sound like if women's voices registered within a masculinist film space, and what might black film look like if black women had directorial and authorial control?

If Neal's and Baraka's films generally emphasize masculinity, by 1970, there was also an expanding discourse in arts and culture about black feminism and intra-racial gender politics. *Black Journal* reflected that zeitgeist with an episode focused, in the words of executive producer Tony Brown, on "one of the greatest institutions in the world: the black woman." It is not clear whether Collins worked on this particular episode, directed by Lathan, but the episode was inspired by and included a montage of images from *Black Woman*, a photobook made by Chester Higgins and Harold McDougall that includes a photograph of a pregnant Collins. In the book, anonymous comments from focus groups of black New Yorkers caption Higgins's photographs, whose subjects are not identified.[17] Collins's portrait, for instance, is captioned by the exclamation, "How black I am going to be while I'm pregnant!," a statement that seems an ill fit given Collins's consistent desire in interviews and her writing not to essentialize racial experience.[18] But regardless of how Collins felt about her place in *Black Woman*, both the book's approach to representing black women and Brown's framing of them as an "institution" in his episode of *Black Journal* raise an important artistic, ethical, and political problem that shaped much of Collins's work: how can one explore the collective identity of black women while also accounting for the particularized experiences of individual subjects?

The inner lives of black women were, of course, being explored in literature at the time: 1970 saw Maya Angelou's memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* nominated for a National Book Award, and Toni Morrison and Alice Walker made their debuts as novelists with *The Bluest Eye* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The black women's magazine *Essence* also got its start in 1970. But it would be decades before black women filmmakers made similar inroads into mainstream culture—the 1970 Black Woman episode of *Black Journal* was, after all, directed and produced by men and inspired by a male-authored book. Collins's artistic work in the 1970s and 1980s was therefore a major effort, as I will show, to expand the portrayals of black women on screen, and it should be seen as part of what scholars have called the black women's renaissance. Collins's focus on film, though, gave a unique twist to that renaissance and may even, I will argue, have influenced some of her better known literary contemporaries.[19]

A Woman's Place on Screen: Collins's Screenplays and Short Stories

A year after she edited *May Be the Last Time*, Collins wrote and sought to direct a radically different type of film. Her 1971 screenplay *Women, Sisters, and Friends* explores the individualized desires and the quotidian routines

of three middle-class black women living together in a beach house. But as Collins later recalled, "Nobody would give any money to a black woman to direct a film. This was in 1971. Forget it.... People would love the script, thought it was a wonderful idea, but thought I should find a [male] director and a [male] producer."[20] Despite this setback, Collins continued writing. And in her screenplays, she tested a range of techniques—internal monologues, intimate conversations between women, dream sequences—to make visible and celebrate the complex subjectivities of black women in ways that were rarely seen on screen. Unfortunately, few of her screenplays made it off the page. But Collins found in fiction, particularly the short story, an available, and perhaps even an ideal canvas for exploring how to represent black women's daily lives and for developing a cinematic approach to interiority. By experimenting with filmic techniques in her prose, Collins prepared to make a movie of her own—if she were ever given such a chance.

From *Women, Sisters, and Friends* to her final screenplay, *Conversations with Julie*, Collins's work consistently foregrounds black women's interpersonal relationships. Like James Baldwin, Toni Cade Bambara, and many other black screenwriters, Collins wanted to provide black actresses with complex roles that would let them showcase their talents, and she often wrote roles with particular actress friends in mind—especially Seret Scott and Carol Cole.[21] By molding roles to actresses' personalities, Collins could create greater specificity and naturalism in performance. Collins's characters also reflect her own experience, and that autobiographical foundation enabled her to write against the tendency to flatten black women's subjectivity on screen. One notebook draft underscores the personal nature of her writing when "Kathleen Conwell," Collins's maiden name, is crossed out and "Mildred Pierce," her mother's maiden name, is substituted as the name for a character.[22] Collins's screenplay *A Summer's Diary* also exemplifies her autobiographical technique. In the screenplay, arguably her most personal, Collins takes up a psychologically tangled experience from her past: with her marriage unraveling in the early 1970s, Collins had moved in with another single mother, a woman who had recently lost her husband, himself a former lover of Collins, to suicide.[23] *A Summer's Diary* includes a play-within-a-film, and similar to the film-within-a-film in *Losing Ground*, the play begins to mirror the personal life of one of the main characters, and the play itself is a version of Collins's own 1976 play *Portrait of Katherine*. Collins's ability to navigate this emotionally fraught terrain in a manner that produces psychologically complex characters, rather than merely melodramatic ones, is ultimately a testament to her skill as a writer.

Collins's early screenplays are also a record of her efforts to experiment with a range of devices to capture characters' interiority. *Women, Sisters, and Friends* uses lengthy monologues, while *A Summer's Diary* employs

voice-over to similar effect. In *The Story of Three Colored Ladies* (1975), the main character, Lillie, routinely talks to herself, often imagining herself in dialogue with an ideal lover, and Collins's description of the character explains that she is "happiest when she is left alone to dream."[24] Psychics appear regularly in Collins's narratives, and Lillie has clairvoyant power in *The Story of Three Colored Ladies*. Perhaps channeling her earlier interest in surrealism, Collins also frequently wrote dream sequences, and although occasionally otherworldly and bizarre, they are often relatively realistic and seem designed not so much to shock as to offer another point of entry into a character's psychology and memories. And whether in dreams or simply as part of the narrative structure, Collins's screenplays regularly move back and forth between times, highlighting the power of memory to define characters' lives. In that regard, *Losing Ground*—which remains more or less in the present moment, with only a few brief nostalgic reflections—departs from Collins's earlier original screenplays.

Unable to find financial backing for her scripts in the 1970s, Collins honed her cinematic craft through other means. Her short stories, in particular, often comment on the process of filmmaking, and they also enabled her to work out the particular aesthetic and affective affordances of a filmic grammar. And while African American literature boasts numerous scenes of characters watching Hollywood movies, including in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Collins's film-themed literature is unique for its sustained attention to the process of making movies. One short story in Collins's archive, for instance, explores the relatively banal daily life of a female location scout, while the story "Documentary Style," published posthumously in *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?*, focuses on the conflict between a black cameraman and the black woman in charge of editing his footage. Tonally distinct within her oeuvre, "Documentary Style" deserves particular attention as a bracing example of Collins using fiction to grapple with what it means to have a raced and gendered point of view in the inherently collaborative art form of film.

In "Documentary Style," Collins narrates the kinds of interpersonal conflict that can occur on a film set from the perspective of a macho young black man who is impatient to make his artistic imprint on the world. The narrator's sense of his own artistic prowess is bound up in his physicality: "My body was tight from years of karate and I could handhold a camera, pan, tilt, track, like a motherfuckin' dancer. I knew more about filmmaking than most of those dudes coming out of the film schools and I was gonna make me some films!"[25] Having secured a job as second cameraman on a documentary about workplace discrimination—the type of piece Collins regularly worked on at WNET or Chamba Productions—the narrator is tasked

with shooting footage of black employees at a bar. He assumes that by virtue of being a black man he will automatically capture aspects of his subjects' lives that white cameramen would miss, but the narrator ultimately seems most concerned with giving the footage his own personal style. And when the black employees do loosen up—for whatever reason—and offer less censored commentary, some of the footage is marred because of the fast zooms and out-of-focus transitions the narrator employs. When he screens the footage, the director is, to the cameraman's chagrin, more patronizing than encouraging. It can be tempting to romanticize black filmmaking and focus exclusively on shared commitments to resisting Hollywood ideologies, but Collins insists on a more nuanced view: on a day-to-day basis, the practical realities of filmmaking necessarily involved (sometimes intense) collaborative friction.

The most intense conflict, however, occurs between the cameraman and the assistant editor, a lighter-skinned black woman who is six months pregnant. The cameraman is incensed about having to cede any creative control to her and being forced to work collaboratively: "What the fuck was he [the director] doing puttin' me in the goddam cutting room with some smart-ass high-yaller chick."[26] He initially refuses to let her sync his footage, and then later, when she—very reasonably—asks him for his footage to code before sending it to the film lab, the cameraman can no longer control himself, and Collins ends with the following sentence: "I gave her my foot karate chopped right in her fucking fat stomach and told her who the fuck did she think she was fucking with 'cause I was the best fucking goddamn black cameraman in this country and I'd walk all over her before I'd give her my footage to code."[27] Such violence might be typical in a Blaxploitation film, but within the context of this story, to say nothing of Collins's larger oeuvre, it is shocking. In the space of a sentence, Collins dispenses with any notion that we can think about race and gender separately within the emerging black film scene.[28]

In a very different vein, Collins's short story "Exteriors" also depicts the filmmaking process, but for the purpose of probing the affective affordances of film aesthetics. The story is experimental and explicitly intermedial, relying on the conceit of a film technician lighting the scene of a couple's New York apartment. It begins jauntily, while also noting the gendered power dynamics: "Okay, let's light it for night. . . . Now let's have a nice soft gel on the young man composing his poems or reading at his worktable. And another soft one for the young woman standing by the stove killing roaches."[29] If this were a film, a cut between the man and the woman would be easily legible for audiences long accustomed to the logic of continuity editing. But by isolating a single aspect of the filmic grammar, lighting, as she regularly did in her film studies classes, Collins meta-artistically alerts

her readers to the various techniques that literature and film both employ to direct how we look and feel. Collins begins the two-page story by moving frame by frame, but the overall effect is not of slowing down, but rather of unstoppable action as the man and woman's relationship unwinds across two nights. Collins withholds all specifics about the couple and instead offers only details about the lighting: "Now find a nice low level while they're lying without speaking. No, kill it, there's too much silence and pain."[30] She thus jettisons standard narrative techniques for helping the audience empathize with the characters' inner lives: she tells us "there's too much silence and pain," without revealing why, and throughout the story, the man and woman remain anonymous, ostensibly distanced from readers. Yet Collins proves here that infusing literature with a filmic vocabulary can change how we relate to characters and can produce different forms of emotional investment and intimacy.

"Exteriors" also points to new possibilities for film, framing it as a medium particularly suited to the nuances of everyday life. Film's potential, Collins's story suggests, depends on treating the various components of film as languages in and of themselves, with sound, lighting, camerawork, and editing all telling their own stories. As Collins closes her story in a meta-artistic tableau—"then fade him to black and leave her in the shadow while she looks for the feelings that lit up the room"—she seems both to be experimenting with the possibilities of conjoining literary and filmic mediums and sketching a proto-scene for a future film.[31] One of a pair of stories, "Exteriors" is complemented by "Interiors," which relies on confessional first-person narration. We might therefore see these linked stories as a foundation for *Losing Ground*: an attempt to get at interiority by any literary or filmic means available—to play with lighting and camera angles and montage, even if in a literary text, as a mode of access to private emotion.

Some of Collins's writing was published in her lifetime, including a story called "Losing Ground" that appeared in *Story Quarterly* in 1976, but her work never received the public audience that it is now beginning to achieve. Nevertheless, her fiction was known and admired by her literary contemporaries.[32] Walker wanted to publish a set of Collins's stories in *Ms* but was overruled by the magazine's white editors; registering her dissent, she ended her page-long and very personalized rejection letter to Collins by saying that "[t]he friends who told you you are good, are right."[33] Morrison, in turn, "rav[ed]" to her Random House colleagues about Collins's novel-in-progress, which in 1978 was titled "Treatment for a Colored Movie"; Morrison called it "stunning."[34] As Morrison relayed in rejection letter after rejection letter to other writers, she was taking on very few projects. Morrison also rarely agreed to read unfinished manuscripts. So the fact that she read and raved about the first third of Collins's novel suggests the depth of her admiration.

Collins seems, though, not to have finished her novel; she may instead have written the screenplay for *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy*, her directorial debut.

Collins's Aesthetic Theory in Her Film Criticism and Interviews

In 1986, at the Atlanta Third World Cinema Festival, Collins told David Nicholson, "I keep saying that I am more a writer than I am a filmmaker, and I think that's really true."[35] She repeated the sentiment in several other interviews. Yet regardless of how she prioritized them, her two art forms—writing and filmmaking—seem to have been always already intertwined: filmmaking influenced the style and content of her short stories, and her perspective as a writer and her related interest in narrative theory shaped her cinematic craft. As recorded in a number of archives, Collins's discussions at film conferences in the 1980s, as well as an essay seemingly inspired by one such gathering, reveal her ambition to develop a film practice that could be in dialogue with and provide an alternative to male-dominated film and literary traditions.

Collins repeatedly framed her film *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy* as an opportunity to work through narrative and stylistic problems posed by the medium of film and the process of adapting literature for the screen. The film adapts a story about Puerto Rican brothers from a novel by Henry H. Roth, Collins's close friend and Nyack neighbor. Working with a narrative from which she had some distance allowed Collins, in her mind, to focus on the more basic problem of how to tell a story on film.[36] When she introduced her film for discussion at a 1981 Flaherty seminar, Collins explained, "I wanted to start with material that would allow me to say, 'How do you tell a story on film?' What is important to say? What will the image say that doesn't require a full plot elaboration? What can be left out? What voice should it be told in?"[37]

In her screenplay, Collins remained faithful to Roth's plot, but approached the characters in her own style. Over the course of several drafts, she developed Miss Malloy's "personality" and added a pivotal and poignant dream-like sequence in which the elderly Miss Malloy dances with two of the brothers.[38] She also worked within the constraints of a tiny $5,000 budget, effectively representing the character of the "father's ghost" through a handheld camera aesthetic. Finding last-minute funding for *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy* and editing it in her living room was grueling, and as she declared at the Flaherty seminar, "I would never do a movie that way again. . . . It brought one close to death . . . truly. But in the end, I discovered that I really wanted to make that movie."[39] And if Collins described the film as a first directorial

experiment, she also clearly wanted it to launch a much longer career, saying, "I'm trying to develop, slowly, starting with this film, a certain kind of language for telling a story."[40] Her emphasis at the Flaherty seminar and in other interviews on developing a filmic *language*, in turn, seemed to stem, at least in part, from her long-cultivated literary frame of reference.[41]

Literature also shaped her film criticism. In early 1980, exhausted from making *The Cruz Brothers* and fighting the early stages of cancer, Collins spent a period recovering and reading voraciously, including "volumes of classic novels" and "all of Henry James."[42] She would almost certainly have been familiar with James's "The Art of Fiction," in which he lays out his theory for a novel of interiority and everydayness. James challenges novelists to expand their subjects—"Why of adventures more than of green spectacles?"—and argues that writers must be people "upon whom nothing is lost."[43] Collins, we might say, reimagined that Jamesian view for a feminist purpose when developing her film criticism and her own directorial style.

Collins articulates her narrative and directorial priorities in her essay "*A Place in Time* and *Killer of Sheep*: Two Radical Definitions of Adventure Minus Women," in which she lauds Charles Burnett and Charles Lane for making movies that explore quotidian experiences of black Americans but also critiques their films for their flat representations of black women. Collins argues that Burnett and Lane reorient the American film trope of the adventure narrative by presenting black male protagonists whose quests are largely psychological. She praises Burnett's "daring willingness to be particular," noting that "while it is surely possible to view the film as a metaphor for the plight of the black man in general, Burnett seems to go to great pains to make his hero [Stan] one man rather than *all* men."[44] For Collins, *Killer of Sheep* (dir. Charles Burnett, 1977) is the most complete and realistic portrait of working-class black life yet on film. Of *A Place in Time* (dir. Charles Lane, 1977), a silent film that "took [her] breath away," Collins explains that Lane's street artist protagonist, played by the director himself, is able both to invoke the antics of Charlie Chaplin's little tramp and to transcend "the terrible mythology around Black people as *true* bunglers and fools." She is most moved by Lane's development of a black protagonist "with the soft humane consciousness of a being whose adventure is life itself."[45] Collins praises both Burnett's and Lane's films for their refusal to let mainstream norms dictate their themes and aesthetics.

But especially given the risks Lane and Burnett take to represent their male leads, Collins is understandably dismayed by the gender politics in their films. In *Killer of Sheep*, Stan's wife is not even given a name. In *A Place in Time*, neither of the characters have proper names, and there is of course no dialogue, but Collins rightly emphasizes that the artist's love interest, a dancer, conspicuously lacks interiority. She enters the film when the artist convinces

her to let him sketch her portrait on the New York sidewalk, and while she sits gazing blankly ahead, Lane's expressive face registers his changing emotions, and the film matches that dynamism by providing different angles on his work. In a damning critique, Collins notes that all creative agency is, despite the dancer's own vocation, in the hands of Lane as writer/director: "When I recall the film visually, I see the girl-friend as a puppet through which the hero pulls certain vital strings. She is one of the *things* that happen during the course of the film . . . In an otherwise radical movie, the women are once again reduced to still-lifes, background tapestry for a complex male dance."[46] Collins concludes her essay with a call to action: "In American film terms, the notion of adventure has certainly undergone a Black metamorphosis. Yet how sad that in the end, we are still left with stagnant female souls hovering aimlessly around the male universe. How limiting is the idea that only men despair; Women can only comfort."[47]

Collins's essay was published in a 1984 pamphlet for *In Color: Sixty Years of Images of Minority Women in Media, 1921–1981*, a program sponsored by Third World Newsreel and curated by Pearl Bowser. It is unclear when Collins wrote the essay, but she may have been responding to seeing Lane's and Burnett's films at another symposium convened by Bowser, "Independent Black American Cinema, 1920–1980." Held in Paris in October 1980, the festival was Europe's "first major retrospective of Black American films" and included forty films.[48] It also brought together L.A. Rebellion and New York filmmakers, giving them the chance, in another country, to discuss ideas and the state of black independent filmmaking. At the time, Collins was starting to plan *Losing Ground*, which may best be described as a black woman's adventure in everyday life, so by mixing the traditions of the Jamesian realist novel, political investments in documenting daily black life, and her own aesthetics as worked out in fiction, film, and criticism, Collins aimed to produce a cinema of interiority not seen before.[49]

Gaining Ground: Black Women's Subjectivity on Screen

In the spring of 1981, Collins was working on three different film projects: screenplays for *Losing Ground* and *A Summer's Diary* and research for a narrative film about Gouldtown, New Jersey, an all-black community from which she was directly descended. For the latter, Collins planned to build on her short story "Dead Memories, Dead Dreams," which she wrote after her grandmother's death. *A Summer's Diary*, as noted above, also recalled a relatively painful past. *Losing Ground* was comparatively lighter fare. Writing to her actress friend Carol Cole, Collins reported: "intend at this point to use bill [Gunn] and seret [Scott] as a married couple involved in a somewhat

crazy, topsy-turvy relationship. Ronald [Gray] (my cinematographer) and I are eager to try a zany kind of 'jules and jim' movie, so since there's not a lot of money involved we've decided to go off the deep end and do something funny and a bit insane."[50] *Losing Ground* ultimately proved to be an ideal opportunity for Collins to put her aesthetic theories into practice with an original script.

In her 1984 lecture at Howard, Collins described *Losing Ground* as a film about a husband and wife who "go through a trauma in their marriage" and then "try to resolve it." "It's really not any more complicated than that," Collins declared.[51] But telling that story was, as she well knew, a politically charged endeavor. Not only was Collins one of the first African American women to direct a feature film, but the autobiographically inflected *Losing Ground* centers on the ordinary, everyday experiences of a black couple—Victor is a painter, Sara is a philosophy professor—and dives deep into Sara's inner life as she struggles to find a creative outlet and personal fulfillment.[52] A simple story, perhaps, but also one with much loftier aspirations: to demonstrate that the quotidian experience of a black woman is a compelling subject for narrative American cinema and to bring black feminism to the screen.

Losing Ground opens with Sara lecturing about Sartre and existentialism. An intellectual and college professor herself, Collins celebrates her protagonist's scholarly pursuits.[53] But she also insists that Sara is not reducible to her profession. Collins creates space for idiosyncrasies and contradictions in Sara's character, departing from the flat models of black womanhood offered by mainstream cinema and many independent black films. *Losing Ground* also reverses the gender dynamics that Collins critiqued in Burnett's and Lane's work: Victor is important mainly as Sara's husband, even as he embarks on his own quest for artistic reinvention.[54]

In one early sequence, Victor nonchalantly privileges his painting over Sara's research while he reviews his day's sketches. But while Victor does not notice Sara's reaction, Collins's camera does, catching Sara in close-up and then recording her striding angrily out of their living room-cum-art studio. The film then cuts to Sara in their bedroom, standing in front of a mirror. In *Killer of Sheep*, the first extended scene with Stan's wife finds her critically assessing her own appearance, first in the reflection of a cooking pot lid and then in a mirror. Sara's orientation in Collins's version of a mirror scene is radically different: Sara shouts back a retort to Victor while fiddling with her shirt collar and muttering to herself about his insensitivity. But even as she ostensibly gazes at her reflection, Sara appears more internally focused, implicitly replaying scenes from their marriage, for her heated response suggests a battle fought once too often.

For the first time in the film, Sara starts to imagine life otherwise. When Victor enters the room, she leverages her academic vocabulary to lecture him

about his self-absorption, but then switches her tone, letting herself fantasize with girlish coquettishness about becoming an actress, "the next Dorothy Dandridge," before catching herself and exclaiming with frustration, "I am so reasonable." Sara cycles through these subject positions quickly, quixotically, and we are left, like Victor, to search for a deeper motivation. But Collins's point seems to be that even in front of a mirror, Sara is not fully knowable to herself or to us. This sense of an interiority that is always already unreachable is part of the pleasure, the realism, and the distinctiveness of Collins's film.[55]

Sara does ultimately trade academia for acting—for a week—by playing a dancer in a student film adaptation of the song "Frankie and Johnnie." *Losing Ground* thus becomes, in part, a movie about making movies. In a number of film-within-a-film scenes, Collins celebrates the make-it-work energy on the student film set, and she applauds, if also lightly mocks, the amateur director's aesthetic aspirations as he emotes about a "subtle *mise-en-scene*." But even as the "Frankie and Johnnie" scenario in the student film starts to merge with Sara's problems with Victor, Collins is careful to distinguish her own film project from the students'. For while there already was a film adaptation of "Frankie and Johnnie"—in 1966, starring Elvis Presley—Collins's film is not derivative, and her characters are not flat.

In her metacinematic script, Collins also seems to be working out a theory of collaborative art making, even if the script ultimately contains few examples of productive partnerships. In the mirror scene, Sara describes Victor's art as almost masturbatory: "You stay in an ecstatic trance, do you ever notice that? A kind of private, ecstatic trance. It's like living with a musician who sits around all day blowing his horn." So it is perhaps unsurprising that the Puerto Rican dancer, Celia, who agrees to model for Victor collapses in exhaustion after being forced to hold a pose too long. Sara's experience on the student film set is more comfortable—when she arrives, the student director shows her to a chair and rushes off to get coffee—but when she recaps her experience, she never conceives of herself as an artistic cocreator: "I just do what I'm told." The student crew, who were played by some of Collins's own City College students, must collaborate by necessity, but although the student director proudly acknowledges that his production assistant, Vicky, made the costumes, most scenes include him screaming for her to do something. And if he is effusive in his admiration of and gratitude to Sara—he calls her "Professor Rogers"—he is more apt to admonish than to praise the film's other actress. Unlike in "Documentary Style," collaborative frictions in *Losing Ground* are humorous, not violent. But Collins also seems to have taken her own narrative as a clear model of how not to direct.

After shooting wrapped, Collins wrote to Seret Scott that "in some ways it has been like 'hometown movies,'" for indeed, not only had Collins previously worked with most of the cast and crew, but when shooting went late,

they often stayed over at her home, with Collins cooking for everyone.[56] Collins did, however, have a particularly close relationship with Scott: she had, after all, been writing roles for her since the early 1970s, and Scott considered her to be both a mentor and her best friend. Collins sent Scott the *Losing Ground* script in pieces—presumably as she was still writing it—and although Scott worried about how she could best embody and visually "activate" a script that was "so full of ideas," Collins seems never to have doubted her ability to do so.[57] Collins ended her letter by saying, simply, "You have become such an essential character in my way of thinking and writing. Why, I've found my actress!!"[58]

Likely due to a combination of trusting Scott as a performer and having gained directing experience with *The Cruz Brothers*, in *Losing Ground* Collins largely dispenses with the monologues and voice-over backstories common in her earlier screenplays.[59] She instead uses a visual grammar to explore Sara's interiority. Sara grew up with a stage actress mother whose eyes, she remembers, could be so bright after a show that she would think her mother had gone to heaven and only come back to kiss her goodnight, and she has been married for a decade to a painter who, in her telling, has "sex all the time with a color, a room, the way the light bulbs cross a building," and who, at present, seems more attracted to his dancer model, Celia. Sara, though, feels divorced from creative or, in her words, "ecstatic" experience. In a particularly poignant scene with her mother, she speaks animatedly about discovering a new line of argument for an academic paper, explaining that her "head just starts dancing like crazy" because she knows she is right and can prove it. But her demeanor quickly shifts, even before her mother's bemused "hmm," and as the camera moves from showing mother and daughter to showing only Sara, she continues with quiet dejection, "That's so cold, Mamma, so dry. How did someone like you produce a child who thinks so very, very much." Collins, ever the editor, holds the shot, staying with Sara in a close-up that is nevertheless distant enough to show the sheet music resting on the piano over her shoulder and an abstract painting on the wall above her head. In a film that celebrates an array of artistic expression, Collins suggests, in that moment, that watching Sara think is what energizes the project and gives it its cinematic raison d'être.[60]

Collins's commitment to creating a cinematic space for black women's subjectivity is most compelling in the explicitly meta-artistic scenes. A scene in which Victor sketches Sara is paradigmatic in that respect, as well as a radical departure from Lane's version in *A Place in Time*. Victor and Sara have just taken a "country house," which inspires the abstract painter Victor to transition to painting landscapes and people. As a model, Sara must remain still, but Collins implies that Sara is a character who can differently occupy—and that Collins herself is a filmmaker who can differently represent—a

position long associated with female passivity. As Sara and Victor banter, Sara unselfconsciously retains her subject position as a professor with a quick reference to a faculty meeting, and she also, at one point, gives herself over to private reverie, so that she only half-hears what Victor says. Collins's camera powerfully orients us toward Sara's inner life even in a meta-artistic scene seemingly all about spectacle. For as Victor remains nostalgic for the "purity" of abstract art—"color, form, space"—he is also, not unlike a photographer or filmmaker, taken by the room's light, musing, "You think about light differently when dealing with people." Collins, too, as she develops her own mode of filmmaking, is hyper conscious of form, but while she shares Victor's enthusiasm for reimagining the use of light—we might recall "Exteriors"—it is always for the purpose of thinking differently about people. And when Sara utters a whimsical, spontaneous exclamation that surprises Victor because he thinks it is "totally unlike" her, not at all cerebral, the camera moves toward Sara, connecting audiences to her and suggesting that her remark is not surprising after all. For she is a character, and this is a film, in which being a black female philosophy professor is only the start of subjectivity.

Yet in the early 1980s, film distribution companies were skeptical of *Losing Ground*. White studio executives questioned how the film reflected black life—where was the "racial angle," they asked—and said they did not know any black women like Sara.[61] Clearly they did not know Kathy Collins. According to her cinematographer Ronald Gray, this lack of recognition "cut Kathleen to the heart. Because she is an academic. She is brilliant. She speaks in multiple languages. She reads some of the most arcane books on the planet. Because she could. So Seret as a character is her. And when these people did not acknowledge that, it really hurt her."[62]

There are many ways to remember Collins, and one of the most important is as a teacher. Sara's philosophy lecture at the start of *Losing Ground* could have been lifted from Collins's own City College classroom, where she taught comparative film and literature courses and film production from 1974. But Sara's professorial identity is more than an autobiographical anchor. It points instead to Collins's overarching desire for her art to teach: to show how the cinematic tools so long used to malign blackness might offer the best resource to correct racist stereotypes and celebrate the full complexity of black subjects; to teach moviegoers (and studio executives) how to read such characters on the screen; and to teach other filmmakers how to create them.

It has taken the re-release of Collins's work for us to begin to unpack her lessons, but her contemporaries listened. As mentioned, Walker and Morrison avidly read Collins's drafts, and even after their Random House discussions came to naught, Morrison remained interested in Collins's work, making efforts to see *Losing Ground*.[63] And when Morrison was herself writing a screenplay in the early 1980s, Bambara advised her to go

see Collins for technical advice.[64] That meeting never seems to have occurred, but Morrison did list Collins as a possible consultant when Morrison organized her own black film symposium.[65] The symposium, entitled "The Birth of Black Cinema," was held in November 1988, just weeks after Collins passed away at forty-six, and in his opening keynote, Clyde Taylor dedicated the proceedings to Collins's memory.[66] Most importantly, Collins's filmography paved the way for black feminist filmmakers such as Julie Dash and Ayoka Chenzira: Dash, whom Collins mentored in the early 1970s and whose 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust* was picked up for commercial release, said that *Losing Ground* was the film she had always been waiting to see, and Chenzira dedicated her film *Alma's Rainbow* (1994) to Collins.[67]

Writing to her close friend Peggy Dammond in 1974, Collins worried about her reception: "Film plans, realization and recognition (external recognition) still hasn't come my way. So I go about continuing my work and know that if I'm really good and really do have something unique to put out there, it'll happen when it's supposed to."[68] Collins may not have received the recognition or the filmmaking opportunities she deserved during her life, but she was undoubtedly a crucial figure in artistic networks of her own time, and should be in ours.

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Notes

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1. Kathleen Collins, "Kathleen Collins Master Class," April 10, 1984, Howard University, https://vimeo.com/203379245.

2. Kathleen Collins, *Only the Sky Is Free*, MC 927, Box 7, Folder 9, Camille Billops and James V. Hatch archives at Emory University, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

3. Kathleen Collins, *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?* (New York: Ecco, 2015). The recovery of Collins's work is largely due to the efforts of her daughter, Nina Collins, who has now edited a second volume of her mother's work, which includes personal letters, screenplays, stage plays, and additional short stories. See Kathleen Collins, *Notes from a Black Woman's Diary* (New York: Ecco, 2019).

4. For earlier critical engagement with *Losing Ground*, see: Gloria J. Gibson-Hudson, "African American Literary Criticism as a Model for the Analysis of Film by African American Women," *Wide Angle* 13, no. 3 and 4 (July–October 1991): 44–54; John Williams, "Re-Creating Their Media Image: Two Generations of Black Women Filmmakers," *The Black Scholar* 25, no. 2, Black Drama & Film (Spring 1995): 47–53; Geetha Ramanathan, *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women's Film* (London: Wallflower, 2006); L.H. Stallings, "'Redemptive Softness': Interiority, Intellect, and Black Women's Ecstasy in Kathleen Collins's *Losing Ground*," *Black Camera* 2, no. 2 (2011): 47–62; Jacqueline Bobo, "Black Women's Films: Genesis of a Tradition," in *Contested Images: Women of Color in Popular Culture*, ed. Alma M. García, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 27–44; Michele Prettyman Beverly, "Phenomenal Bodies: The Metaphysical Possibilities of Post-Black Film and Visual Culture," PhD dissertation, Georgia State University, 2012.

5. I do not mean to imply that Collins's work can be reduced to a mere reaction to other people's art, but rather to say that Collins's art was a consistent attempt to make something different and better than she thought the film scene around her had yet produced.

6. Kathleen Collins, interview by Phyllis R. Klotman, April 10, 1984, transcript, courtesy, *The Black Film Center/Archive, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.* A portion of this interview is also included as a bonus feature on the *Losing Ground* Deluxe 2-Disc Home DVD. See *Losing Ground*, DVD, dir. Kathleen Collins (1982; repr. Harrington Park, NJ: Milestone Film and Video, 2016).

7. Doug Collins in discussion with author, July 2, 2018. See also Kathleen Collins, interview by Phyllis R. Klotman, April 10, 1984.

8. Doug Collins in discussion with author, July 2, 2018; December 10, 2018. See: *Stock Exchange Transplant*, dir. Doug Collins, 1968, posted to YouTube, July 2, 2018 by Doug Collins, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwjRJT3Jgcg.

9. See: Oliver Franklin, "An Interview: Kathleen Collins" In Pearl Bowser and Valerie Harris, eds., *Independent Black American Cinema* (New York: Third World Newsreel, 1981); David Nicholson, "A Commitment to Writing: A Conversation with Kathleen Collins Prettyman," *Black Film Review* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1988/1989): 6–15; Public Television Seminar, June 3, 1980, The Robert Flaherty Film Seminar Archives; MSS 326; 326.1014; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries; Kathleen Collins, interview by Phyllis R. Klotman, April 10, 1984.

10. Collins frequented edited film projects for St. Clair Bourne's Chamba Productions. See *Tell It Like it Is: Black Independents in New York, 1968–1986, Losing Ground (1982), Peggy Dammond, Julie Dash,* YouTube Video, 32:01, introduction by Peggy Dammond to screening of *Losing Ground* and post-screening discussion with Julie Dash, moderated by Shannon Kelley, at the Billy Wilder Theater on July 18, 2015, posted by UCLAFilmTVArchive, July 31, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=5&v=MWpLvSOlxD0.

11. Doug Collins in discussion with author, July 2, 2018. While editing is an art form, it was also, for Collins, a vocation that paid the bills. In a letter to her mother-in-law,

Collins explains her decision to work on the film *Cotton Comes to Harlem*: "it will give me my union card as an assistant editor—which guarantees a minimum weekly salary of 225.00 and assures me of being able to work steadily on a free lance basis. Plus other forms of protection. I'm not always in much sympathy with unions, but in a tight, fast-growing industry like this it's rather essential." Letter from Kathleen Collins to Carol Collins, May 24, 1969, Kathleen Collins Collection, unprocessed, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library [hereafter referred to as Collins Schomburg Collection].

12. Kathy Collins, "Black Films Come Back in Style: An Interview with Phillip Fenty," November, 1975, Charles H. "Chiz" Schultz/Fireside Productions Collection, Sc MG 396, Box 6, Folder 16, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

13. In New York City, the boundaries between the black film and black theatre scenes were particularly porous. Collins was herself a playwright, and *Losing Ground* cast members Bill Gunn, Seret Scott, Billie Allen, and Duane Jones all either appeared in or directed at least one of her plays. Collins often revised her screenplays to be stage plays, and vice versa.

14. Larry Neal, *May Be the Last Time*, 1969, item 14636, James E. Hinton Collection, 1968–1992, Harvard Film Archive, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University. For discussion of other films in the James E. Hinton film collection, see: Lars Lierow, "The 'Black Man's Vision of the World': Rediscovering Black Arts Filmmaking and the Struggle for a Black Cinematic Aesthetic," *Black Camera* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 3–21; Whitney Strub, "*The Baraka Film Archive*: The Lost, Unmade, and Unseen Film Work of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka," *Black Camera* 7, no. 1 (2015): 273–87; Chuck Jackson, "The Touch of the 'First' Black Cinematographer in North America: James E. Hinton, *Ganja & Hess,* and the NEA Films at the Harvard Film Archive," *Black Camera* 10, no. 1 (2018): 67–95.

15. For more on Hortense Beveridge, see: *AMIA 2017: Nontheatrical Film and Race*, YouTube Video, 1:07:31, discussion at AMIA Conference, New Orleans, featuring presentations by Walter Forsberg, Marsha Gordon, Martin L. Johnson, and Todd Wiener, streamed live on December 1, 2017 by AMIA streaming, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eocn6yW84Jo. A chapter on Beveridge, written by Forsberg, will be part of *Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film*, ed. Allyson Field and Marsha Gordon, forthcoming in November 2019 from Duke University Press.

16. Collins rarely discussed her editorial work in letters or in interviews, but her story "Interiors" suggests that she may have seen it as a gendered art form. In "Interiors," Collins's autobiographical narrator focuses her attention on art making after separating from her husband. She tries playing the violin, but then begins making magazine collages: "I snipped and pasted, snipped and pasted . . . pouring into my masterpiece the frenetic, absorbed posture of the woman artist at work." Collins, *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?*, 12.

17. Some portraits, such as those of Nikki Giovanni and Valerie Maynard, would likely have been recognizable to readers, but most were of non-celebrities.

18. Collins explained in her interview with Oliver Franklin: "I think of myself as someone who has an instinctual understanding of what it is to be a minority person. That is someone whose existence is highly marginal in the society and understands it in the gut but will not be dominated by it. Therefore, I refuse all of those labels such as "Black Woman Filmmaker," because I believe in my work as something that can be looked at

without labels. For instance, in *The Cruz Brothers* . . . politics and ethnic sensibility would all have to be analyzed with small letters, not capitals, because that's my sensibility. Also, insofar as my sensibility is intuitively "Black," or intuitively "Feminine," or intuitively "this, that or the other," then those labels apply with small letters."

19. On the black women's renaissance, see, among others, Caroline Rody, *The Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

20. David Nicholson, 10. In the fall of 1972, St. Clair Bourne published the first issue of *Chamba Notes,* a newsletter on the black film scene. That inaugural issue mentions Collins several times and announces that she was working with producer Kris Kaiser to find a shooting location for "Women, Sisters and Friends." Carol Cole and Beverly Todd were set to appear in the film, and Collins planned to direct. The spring/summer 1973 issue then reported: "Bill Gunn is tentatively scheduled to direct. They will be shooting in Nassau with Kent Garrett producing." See St. Clair Bourne, *Chamba Notes*, Vol. 1, ed. Dolores Elliott (Chamba Productions, Fall 1972), 1–4, St. Clair Bourne Collection, 1965–2000, courtesy, *The Black Film Center/Archive, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana*; St. Claire Bourne, *Chamba Notes* 2, no. 2 (Chamba Productions, Spring/Summer 1973): 1–6, St. Claire Bourne Collection.

21. Collins, Carol Cole, and Gilbert Moses were among the first residents of Westbeth, which was the largest federally subsidized artists' housing complex when it opened in 1970. Collins also met Seret Scott at Westbeth, at the apartment of Moses, whom Scott had known from working with the Free Southern Theater. Constructed on the former site of Bell Labs, where sound films were first exhibited, Westbeth was home to numerous well-known artists—most infamously Diane Arbus—and with regular arts exhibitions and performances in addition to various community-building recreational initiatives, the complex hoped to foster a thriving and especially collaborative arts scene. For more on Westbeth, see Ellen Perry, Berkeley, "Westbeth Artists in Residence," *Architectural Forum*, October 1970, 45–49. 1970; and Ada Huxtable, "Bending the Rules," *New York Times,* May 10, 1970, 111.

22. Notebook drafts, Collins Schomburg Collection.

23. Commentary by Nina Collins, Collins Schomburg Collection.

24. Collins, *The Story of Three Colored Ladies*, Collins Schomburg Collection.

25. Collins, *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?*, 115.

26. Ibid., 118.

27. Ibid., 120.

28. C.A. Griffith makes a similar point in her essay "Below the Line: (Re)Calibrating the Filmic Gaze" In *Black Women Film & Video Artists*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo (New York: Routledge, 1998), 153–76.

29. Collins, *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?*, 1.

30. Ibid., 2.

31. Ibid., 3.

32. Kathleen Collins, "Three Shorts/Losing Ground," *Story Quarterly*, nos. 5/6 (September 1976): 17–22.

33. Letter to Kathleen Collins from Alice Walker, December 22, 1975, Collins Schomburg Collection.

34. In a memo to Jason Epstein, Morrison wrote, "This is the book I have been raving to you about. There are some problems with it, but it is stunning." Letter from

Toni Morrison to Jason Epstein, March 20, 1978; Random House Records, 1925–1992, Box 1528, Toni Morrison General Correspondence, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York. For additional discussion of Collins's writing in Morrison's Random House files, see Letter from Toni Morrison to Kathleen Collins, March 22, 1977, Box 1528.

35. See Nicholson, "A Commitment to Writing," 7.

36. Kathleen Collins, interview by Phyllis R. Klotman, April 10, 1984. What Collins did not disclose publicly was that she and Roth—not to be confused with Henry Roth of *Call It Sleep* fame—had been having an affair for several years. Their relationship would seem to complicate claims about "distance." Nina Collins, phone discussion with author, March 22, 2018.

37. Public Television Seminar, June 3, 1980, The Robert Flaherty Film Seminar Archives. This session was part of a five-day "Arden House Seminar," which also featured Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, and Ronald Gray's *Transmagnifican Dambamuality*.

38. See Franklin, "An Interview"; Kathleen Collins, interview by Phyllis R. Klotman, April 10, 1984.

39. Public Television Seminar, June 3, 1980, The Robert Flaherty Film Seminar Archives.

40. Ibid.

41. My claim here departs from Jacqueline Bobo's explanation that "Collins embraced the principle that cinema has a literary parallel—not in any direct way, but in the sense that every element of composition is a specific convention that makes up a film language." See Bobo, "Black Women's Films," 36.

42. Letter from Kathleen Collins to Peggy Dammond, February 16, 1980, Collins Schomburg Collection.

43. Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in *Henry James: Major Stories and Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1999), 572–93.

44. Kathleen Collins, "*A Place in Time* and *Killer of Sheep*: Two Radical Definitions of Adventure Minus Women," In *In Color: 50 Years of Images of Minority Women in Film . . . 1921–1981*, ed. Pearl Bowser and Ada Griffin (New York: Third World Newsreel, 1984), 5–7.

45. Ibid., 5

46. Collins, "*A Place in Time* and *Killer of Sheep*: Two Radical Definitions of Adventure Minus Women," 6.

47. Ibid., 7.

48. Pearl Bowser and Valerie Harris, eds., *Independent Black American Cinema* (New York: Third World Newsreel, 1981).

49. In a discussion with film scholar Manthia Diawara, Toni Cade Bambara described the distinctiveness of Sara as a character: "She is quite interesting, she's complicated. We have not seen her before either. We have not seen that woman before on screen . . . She's strong, she has opinion[s?], she has a mind. And that's a given, her mind. We don't have to demonstrate it." See "The Representation of Black Women," Interview transcript between Manthia Diawara and Toni Cade Bambara, Box 4, Toni Cade Bambara Collection, Spelman College Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.

50. Letter from Kathleen Collins to Carole Cole, April 9, 1981, Collins Schomburg Collection.

51. Collins, "Kathleen Collins Master Class," April 10, 1984.

52. Kathleen Collins, *Losing Ground* (1982; Milestone, 2015), DVD. *Losing Ground*, DVD, directed by Kathleen Collins (1982; repr. Harrington Park, NJ: Milestone Film and Video, 2016). For discussions of black women directors in early cinema history, see: Kyna Morgan and Aimee Dixon, "African-American Women in the Silent Film Industry," *Women Film Pioneers Project* (2013), Aimee Dixon, "Early African American Female Filmmakers," In *Silent Women: Pioneers of Cinema*, ed. Melody Bridges and Cheryl Robson (Twinkenham, UK: Supernova Books, 2016), 35–68; Yvonne Welbon, "Sisters in Cinema: Case Studies of Three First-Time Achievements Made by African American Women Directors in the 1990s," PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 2001.

53. Stallings offers an extended reading of the film's opening, and argues, "From the first frame of the film, Collins provides a jolting alternative to the historic representation of black women on screen. Sara stands before her class as a dominant master of knowledge, specifically knowledge usually associated with the white male body. The spectacle of this black female body, then, arises from her intellectual expression." Stallings, "'Redemptive Softness,'" 51.

54. In her 2015 interview at UCLA, Julie Dash described Gunn's performance as "brave," since his character broke with conventional portrayals of black masculinity at the time.

55. Stallings and Beverly also discuss Collins's investment in portraying Sara's interiority as part of their larger arguments. Stallings focuses on Collins's groundbreaking portrayal of black women's sexuality, and Beverly argues that Collins is in the "vanguard of post-black aesthetics" and discusses what she terms the "affective intensity" of *Losing Ground*.

56. Seret Scott, phone conversation with author, January 5, 2019.

57. Ibid. "Masterworks: The Creative Life of Kathleen Collins," panel discussion with Opal H. Bennett, Nina Lorez Collins, Seret Scott, Shola Lynch, and Ronald K. Gray, November 28, 2017, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, livestream, https://livestream.com/schomburgcenter/events/7773872/videos/166544470.

58. Collins also noted that working with Scott "transcended friendship and placed us squarely in the professional arena as actress to director, director to actress. That is a lovely feeling, perhaps the loveliest of the whole movie. For it inspires a deep wish to do another movie with you and explore a new character with you, and something tells me that the spirits that guide both yours and my rather complex existence, have that in mind for us." Letter from Kathleen Collins to Seret Scott, August 3, 1981, Collins Schomburg Collection.

59. *Losing Ground* does include voice-overs, but while they do reveal Sara's character, the voice-overs are of her reading from books rather than narrating her personal past.

60. Stallings argues that with *Losing Ground*, "Collins produces a film that imagines a viewer or audience who can get turned on by seeing a black woman think, be conscious, and create consciousness on screen." Stallings, 49.

61. See Kathleen Collins, "Kathleen Collins Master Class," April 10, 1984. Her interview with Phyllis Klotman at the University of Indiana is also cited as occurring on April 10, 1984. Although it is possible that she had events at Indiana and Washington, DC, on the same day, it is more likely that one date has been recorded in error.

62. "Masterworks: The Creative Life of Kathleen Collins," Schomburg Center livestream, November 28, 2017. Gray made these comments nearly thirty years after

Collins's death, but his seemingly unconscious switch to the present tense suggests the pain that both he and Collins felt at this rejection of *Losing Ground*. In a similar vein, pioneering filmmaker Jessie Maple recalled Collins saying, "Jessie, I thought that when I made my film that they were going to really snatch me up." Audrey T. McCluskey, "Doing It Her Way: An Interview with Jessie Maple," *Black Camera* 20, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2005): 1–9.

63. See "Birth of Black Cinema Transcript," November 17–19, 1988, Box 173, Folder 15, Toni Morrison Papers (C1491); Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. The symposium proceedings are also accessible as audio files. See Toni Cade Bambara, *Birth of Black Cinema Symposium*, The New York State Writers Institute, State University of New York, http://luna.albany.edu/luna/servlet/view/search?QuickSearchA=QuickSearchA&q=Black+Cinema&sort=archive_collection%2Cauthor_name%2Cauthor_name_2%2Cauthor_name_3&search=Search.

64. Letter from Toni Cade Bambara to Toni Morrison, July 31, 1981, Box 70, Folder 1, Toni Morrison Papers (C1491); Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

65. "The Birth of Black Cinema Project," Box 103, Folder 1, Toni Morrison Papers.

66. Clyde Taylor began his keynote address by saying, "These comments and remarks are dedicated to a member of our family whom we recently lost, Kathy Collins—a very courageous, spirited, and dedicated independent black filmmaker, who died a few weeks ago in New York City." See "Birth of Black Cinema Transcript."

67. *Tell It Like It Is; Peggy Dammond, Julie Dash,* July 18, 2015.

68. Letter from Kathleen Collins to Peggy Dammond, April 1974, Collins Schomburg Collection.