



## Black Debutantes: A Collection of Early Works by Black Women Directors

# Losing Ground

### Losing Ground

Directed by: Kathleen Collins

Production Company: Losing Ground Productions

Executive Producers: Kathleen Collins,

Ronald K. Gray

Producer: Eleanor Charles

Written by: Kathleen Collins

Cinematographer: Ronald K. Gray

Editors: Ronald K. Gray, Kathleen Collins

Music: Michael D. Minard

Choreography: Pepsi Bethel

Cast:

Seret Scott (*Sara Rogers*)

Bill Gunn (*Victor*)

Duane Jones (*Duke*)

Billie Allen (*mother*)

Gary Bolling (*George*)

Norberto Kerner (*Carlos*)

Maritza Rivera (*Celia*)

Michelle Mais (*Nelly*)

USA 1982

86 mins

Digital (Sat 3 May)

35mm (Sun 11 May)

Restored by the Yale Film Archive and  
The Film Foundation. Funding provided by the  
Hobson/Lucas Family Foundation

New 35mm made with funding from the  
National Lottery

The screening on Sat 3 May will include a  
pre-recorded introduction by Nina Lorez Collins

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Among the first of a small number of Black women to explore narrative filmmaking in the 1970s and 80s – no small feat in what was then, as now, a predominantly white male arena – Kathleen Collins was also a playwright, philosopher, teacher and activist. Her innovative film *Losing Ground* should be regarded as one of the great films of 1980s US independent cinema, but it never gained theatrical distribution and soon slipped into obscurity. Only now is it beginning to receive its due with a new restoration, 27 years after Collins's death from cancer at the age of 46. With *Losing Ground* Collins led the way for many Black female independent filmmakers, such as Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*, 1991), Kasi Lemmons (*Eve's Bayou*, 1997), Dee Rees (*Pariah*, 2011), Frances Bodomo (*Boneshaker*, 2013; *Afronauts*, 2014) and Ja'Tovia Gary (*An Ecstatic Experience*, 2015).

The film industry's confusion about how to treat Collins's first film [*The Cruz Brothers and Mrs. Malloy*] surely reinforced her conviction that race was something to explore obliquely – by examining the interiority of her characters. This was complex and fertile ground for Collins, who regarded Black female oppression as something that germinates within, the result of absorbing various forms of racial and patriarchal oppression. It is this self-destructive tendency that leads Sara, the central protagonist of *Losing Ground*, on an existential journey of self-discovery. What makes the film so remarkable is the complex Black female subject at its heart – a figure rarely seen, or acknowledged, on screen. The film takes us into Sara's inner life, exploring class, race and gender in ways that demand a probing and empathetic engagement from the audience.

The most affecting aspect of *Losing Ground* is the way Collins and Scott craft the image of a Black woman on screen, particularly in relation to her sexuality. Sara is neither the hypersexual temptress nor the asexual 'mammie' stereotype audiences have been conditioned to expect. Instead, her search for meaning is both a mental and a sensual endeavour. Collins establishes this rejection of simplistic depictions in the film's opening scenes, in which the camera tracks through rows of predominantly male students. The shot is accompanied by the sound of her voice, which captures the intellectual interest of the students – and us – before we see Sara herself at the front, giving a lecture on chaos theory. The attention she gets from her male and female, Black and white students stems from her intellect as well as her physicality.

In her discussion of sexuality and the Black feminine in the film, the scholar L.H. Stallings explores the concept of 'redemptive softness' – the idea that the damage done to images of Black women on screen can be undone through image-making that reaffirms and reclaims Black women's beauty and sense of self. Collins achieves this by mobilising the radical aesthetic possibilities of Black independent cinema and through her love of philosophy and creative form. A scene in the middle of the film that best displays this is a dance sequence between Sara, Duke and Nelly (Michelle Mais), who are in character for the student film *Frankie and Johnny*. Sara and Duke are dancing intimately, with Nelly pitted as a rival for Duke's affection – a mirroring of the previous scene, in which Sara confronts Victor after his inappropriate advances towards Celia.

In her depiction of Sara and the other Black and Latina women in the film, Collins presents race – as with gender, sexuality and intellect – as a facet of the

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### **25 & Under: Introduction to Black Debutantes**

Thu 1 May 18:40 Blue Room

#### **Pariah**

Thu 1 May 20:50; Sun 25 May 18:20

#### **UK Premiere of 4K Restoration: Will**

Sat 3 May 18:10; Thu 15 May 20:30

#### **Losing Ground**

Sat 3 May 20:40 (+ pre-recorded intro by Nina Lorez Collins); Sun 11 May 15:20

#### **Sugar Cane Alley** Rue Cases-Nègres

Sun 4 May 18:10; Sat 17 May 20:40

#### **What My Mother Told Me**

Mon 5 May 14:50; Wed 21 May 20:40

#### **Welcome II the Terrordome**

Mon 5 May 18:30; Sat 17 May 12:30

#### **Naked Acts**

Thu 8 May 18:20 (+ extended season intro by Rógan Graham); Wed 14 May 18:15

#### **Special Preview of new 4K Restoration: Compensation**

Thu 8 May 20:55; Sat 24 May 18:20

#### **Drylongso**

Sun 11 May 18:45; Thu 22 May 20:30

#### **Black Debutantes Shorts Programme:**

##### **Performance Pains**

Wed 14 May 20:30; Fri 30 May 18:15

##### **A Way of Life**

Fri 16 May 18:15; Tue 27 May 20:50

##### **Exhibiting Black Cinema**

Thu 22 May 18:20

##### **UK Premiere: Test Pattern**

Fri 23 May 18:40; Sat 31 May 18:10

##### **Woman with a Movie Camera: Mountains**

Thu 29 May 18:15

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characters' experiences rather than a whole. This is not to say that she takes an apolitical stance on race in an attempt to prove the existence of Black humanity to a non-Black audience. In an interview, published as 'A Commitment to Writing', Collins explained that she produced work for a Black audience not out of a political impetus, but simply from her experience as a Black woman and a desire to converse with her community. She was also intrigued by a paradox she observed within the African-American community – the desire to attain a holistic identity, despite the highly fragmented nature of their history in the US. Collins also highlighted another key motivation: 'I'm much more concerned with how people resolve their inner dilemma in the face of their external reality.'

These dilemmas played themselves out in what Collins called the 'slight moral issue[s]' confronted in everyday life – akin to the ones found in Eric Rohmer's 'Moral Tales' (during her years in Paris Collins had worked as a translator for *Cahiers du cinéma*) or Charles Burnett's portrait of a Black slaughterhouse worker in Los Angeles, *Killer of Sheep* (1978). Setting *Losing Ground* in a Black middle-class milieu enabled an enquiry into these issues from the perspective of a social group rarely presented on screen. As a family of artists, Sara, Victor and her mother Leila explore the restrictions of the seemingly holistic racial identity. Sara and Victor grapple with ways of seeing and being themselves that manifest as tensions beneath the surface of daily marital interactions.

As an actress, Leila is vocal about the impact of narrow visions of blackness. Describing her role as the mother in a play about Black people, she exposes other clichés of Black womanhood: 'I stand before god, the family's guiding light, a beacon of strength and humility... it's a thoroughly coloured play.' Her irreverence is refreshing, and functions – along with the casts' navigation of the traps associated with their race – as a way of combating such reductive assumptions; the impetus to live entirely within racial boundaries simply doesn't occur to them.

Yet the experience of the characters in *Losing Ground* is still framed by race. Underneath the playful chatter of mulatto crises, negro traps and racial karmic debt is a political message. When we are introduced to Victor in his studio, a radio voice, murmuring low, says: 'The Black artist must have absolute freedom to interpret his experience stylistically – as with any other thoughts, he interprets what is real for him in a meaningful way.'

The *New Yorker* critic Richard Brody has described the film's framing of race as an encounter with history's 'private scars'. In this story springing entirely from the interior life of a Black woman – for whom prescriptions on race and gender inevitably continue to produce trauma – the political is always profoundly personal. For Collins the political impulse is subtle, complex but essentially clear: to be valid, Black expression must come from within. If chaos in the exterior world exists – as Sara describes it in her lecture in the opening scene – as a 'physical and emotional fact', then the categories used to define us aren't to be trusted. The only anchor we have is our ability to self-determine.

With lightness, humour and artistry *Losing Ground* created a space to celebrate and interrogate images of Black women and possible routes towards their empowerment. Sadly, Kathleen Collins died just as she began to lay the foundations for a fascinating and distinctive approach to cinema. Collins left viewers and Black cinema just as her character Sara did – in an enviable position on the brink of inspiration, fear and ecstasy.

Tega Okiti, *Sight and Sound*, June 2016