

CREATING A DIFFERENT IMAGE: BLACK WOMEN'S FILMMAKING OF THE 1970s-90s

THE SOJOURNER TRUTH FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS

In 1976, an extraordinary group of Black feminist artists and activists—Faith Ringgold, Margo Jefferson, Patricia Jones, Michele Wallace, and Monica Freeman—co-organized the first ever Black women's film festival: the Sojourner Truth Festival of the Arts. The festival, held at the Women's Interart Center in New York City, situated films by Black women within a broader Black feminist arts ecosystem. The festival was simultaneously a celebration of the emergence of a Black women's film culture as well as a radical call for the kinds of socio-political and institutional changes necessary for it to thrive.

Four decades later, **The Sojourner Truth Festival of the Arts, 2023** commemorates the 1976 festival with a nine-week screening series—*Creating a Different Image: Black Women's Filmmaking of the 1970s-90s*—and a closing symposium March 3-4 celebrating the original festival and the tradition of Black feminist filmmaking with over 50 Black women filmmakers, artists, writers, and scholars participating.

PROGRAM 4: A SENSE OF PLACE

The films in this program explore negotiations of space and place, mobility and impasse. More than existing at the whim of shifting local and global contexts, the Black women in these films, and the filmmakers that produced them, assert themselves as active agents in their own lives and in their communities. At the heart of these films lie the multilayered experiences of being a Black woman.

A Sense of Pride—Hamilton Heights (Dir. Monica J. Freeman, 1977, 15 min, DCP)

Courtesy of Black Film Center & Archive, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

Monica J. Freeman's 1977 film *A Sense of Pride—Hamilton Heights* is a documentary which explores the lives of the people in the neighborhood of Hamilton Heights in Harlem. Through interviews with several long term residents and visuals of the neighborhood, its people, and architecture, the film explores the relationship between the community and their role in making the location the landmark area that it is today. This film also featured an all-women crew, now established filmmakers themselves, including Ayoka Chenzira. Freeman was a curator of the film program of the Sojourner Truth Festival of the Arts 1976 and is a co-organizer of the 2023 festival.



***A Minor Altercation* (Dir. Jackie Shearer, 1977, 30 min, 16mm)**

Courtesy of the Reserve Film and video Collection of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Set during the height of the Boston desegregation busing crisis of the mid-1970s, Jackie Shearer's 1977 short film *A Minor Altercation* explores the racial tensions of the post-civil rights era through the microcosm of one Boston high school and a fight between two girls, one Black and one white. A Boston native, Shearer tragically died of cancer at age 46, but not before she was able to make her presence known in her community as both a filmmaker and social activist. She was a founding member of the Boston chapter of The Newsreel, a filmmaking collective that produced and distributed leftist media designed to encourage individuals to engage in larger political movements. Fittingly, the central conflict in *A Minor Altercation* reverberates beyond the walls of the Boston high school, putting the girls' families and communities into focus.



***Losing Ground* (Dir. Kathleen Collins, 1982, 86 min, DCP)**

Courtesy of Milestone Films and Kino Lorber

While attending Skidmore College in 1962 Collins became involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and traveled to Albany, Georgia to help register Black voters as part of the committee's Southwest Georgia Project. As a civil rights activist Collins spoke to crowds, led prayers, and was even arrested twice. After graduating from university Collins went on to become a filmmaker, playwright, poet, novelist, and professor of film history and philosophy at CUNY's City College. *Losing Ground* was Collins's only completed feature film before her tragic passing of breast cancer at age 46, six years after making the film. It follows a university philosophy professor (Seret Scott) spending a summer away from the city with her artist husband (Bill Gunn), as the two of them reconcile with the marital crossroads they find themselves in. Despite having a very limited release, critics have since regarded the film as a masterwork of American cinema. It was restored and reissued in 2015 by the filmmaker's daughter, Nina Collins, and was named to the National Film Registry in 2020.



Program notes by Hannah Holmes, Dipanwita Mazumder, and Cyrus Westerlund.

Creating a Different Image: Black Women's Filmmaking of the 1970s-90s was programmed by Monica Freeman, Yvonne Welbon, Michael Phillips, Hayley O'Malley, and Allyson Nadia Field.