

# The New York Black Independents

The recent history of African American film studies has been devoted to the twin goals of critiquing dominant representations and presenting the work of independent black filmmakers. Black independent filmmaking has a long history stretching back to the silent era when “race” films were popular. It is salutary to note that the work of independent filmmakers, including that of pioneering silent movie director, Oscar Micheaux, who had produced and exhibited a huge corpus, did not begin to receive scholarly attention until the 1970s. Early responses found Micheaux’s films wanting by Hollywood studio standards (Bogle 1973). The 80s and 90s challenged this view of Micheaux, and “race films,” arguing that the techniques used presented rhetorical statements relevant to African American audiences (Cripps 1993; Gaines 1993; Bowser et al. 2001). Interest in these films was widespread among these audiences, who were avid moviegoers but were confined to specific areas of the movie theatre. However, between 1910 and 1925 they could avail of the 425 black-owned theatres that were indicative of African American investment in the motion picture business (Streible 1993). Interest in recording the history of black participation in the industry is unflagging, and film scholars have been sustained in their efforts to recover the history of black independent filmmaking, particularly to retrieve and restore the films of the silent era. There were about 125 independent companies producing hundreds of films in the hope of “[countering] prevailing caricatures of African-Americans on

film” (Pearl Bowser qtd in Reed [1980] 2018). The coming of sound slowly put these companies out of business, but materials pertaining to their history, insofar as they have come to light, have been preserved by archivist Pearl Bowser in a collection called “African Diaspora Images.”

While there are significant aesthetic differences in approach between black independent filmmakers of the earlier part of the century and the Los Angeles School in the 1960s, the imperative to challenge illusionistic Hollywood projections of black subjects remains a constant. The work of Kathleen Collins belongs to this capacious genre, more specifically to the group called New York Black Independents. Not only did Collins play a central role in this group in the 1970s, she also helped shape its aesthetic vision.

When asked if she considered herself a black filmmaker, Collins said that she thought of herself as a person who had an instinctive understanding of what it meant to belong to a minority (Franklin 1981).<sup>1</sup> As with many black independent filmmakers, the significance of Kathleen Collins’s work for African American, world, and feminist film has only recently been recognized by the larger public. Programmed by Michelle Materre and Jake Perlin, the Lincoln Center’s film screenings “Tell It Like It Is: Black Independents in New York, 1968–1986” brought her work to a wider audience. Among the films that were shown at the retrospective were Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986), Charles Lane’s *Sidewalk Stories* (1989), and an impressive series of documentaries, including *Will* (dir. Maple, 1981) and *I Remember Harlem* (dir. Miles, 1981). Collins’s *Losing Ground* headlined the series.

Since then, the New York Black Independents have also received significant scholarly attention as part of a focused academic venture “toward recovery as a prioritized practice” (Forster 2015: 64). In a discussion on the larger implications of such research, Forster (2015) notes that the continued investment of black audiences in sociologically verifiable representations might tempt audiences to see past the repertoires

of performance in buried material to locate true, or singular, records of a black time past. He credits the curators of the series with offering a wide enough range of films to counteract notions of an unmediated back access to a definitive black past. The inclusion of diverse genres helped to draw attention to the role that genre and performance plays in representation. Further, documentaries refrained from singling any one film out as “the” black film. Hence, to gain a more nuanced understanding of Collins’s films, it is important to locate them in the range of films available at that time. Forster’s comments on the films makes a bold claim for them: “Understated in form, the series’ selections present the revolutionary possibilities of ordinary black life in an anti-black world” (Forster 2015: 64). The “understated” form is a little enigmatic; the Collins films are almost excessively careful about form. The understatement perhaps refers to a sustained attention to the story as distinct from an emphasis on visual imagery and effects. The series also featured television shows that were compilations of news stories—for example, *Inside Bedford Stuyvesant (1968–71)*—thereby presenting the black subject’s daily reality. As discussed through the following chapters, the placement of the black subject in film as antagonist to the white subject and white America has been destructive, and even where the films were resistant, black subjects themselves were unidimensional—defined with reference to white subjects. The “revolutionary” potential in these films then refers to the everyday difficulties and small transcendences that mark black subjects as both black and human, the visible attrition because of the constant friction in the most mundane of activities, and the momentary richness in the enjoyment of human connections. Collins’s films fall into this broad category. The screening of *Losing Ground* in the series excited the most press attention, partly because twenty years after it has been made, audiences are willing to accept its parameters, not necessarily with reference to class—the *Cosby Show* had done that—but because of its feminist and intellectual dimensions. And notwithstanding the release of Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) to widespread

critical acclamation, Collins's film and its philosophical edge emerges as "original" and "new." The Lincoln Center screenings do Collins a service in securing her place among the New York Black Independents: firstly, because the films are no longer "buried," and secondly, because their originality can be appreciated without their being relegated as curiosities. Forster concludes his piece on the screenings:

What makes *Tell It Like It Is* so insightful is not merely that it features *Losing Ground* but that it contextualizes its screening within a specific era when a community of black filmmakers working in New York established a sort of underground production studio. (Forster 2015: 69)

During the 80s the New York Black Independents were able to secure funding from some government sources, and television distribution was considered worth trying and securing, but for real support, the artists turned to each other.



Figure 1.1 *Ganja and Hess*: Inhabiting the landscape

Efforts to establish the New York Black Independents is ongoing. *Black Camera* of Spring 2018 posted a call for papers for a special issue on the New York Black Independents with Collins featuring prominently. The effort is in part restitutive, to credit black filmmakers on the east coast of the US, to understand their institutional positions, and to recognize their aesthetics as distinct from those of the Los Angeles Independents. *Black Camera's* description is worth quoting in full for an understanding of the differences between the cinematic practices of the New York Black Independents, and the Los Angeles “rebels,” and for the place Collins has in the New York group, fast being recognized as a “school”:

Figures like Gunn and Collins, who were once pejoratively characterized as “belonging to the Hudson River school of cinematography” turned to both the stage and page as writers, sculpting worlds of middle-class black life that cut across time and prescribed notions of legible blackness. (*Black Camera* 2018: 6)

The key word “legible” bears expansion. The suggestion is that the New York Black Independents do not represent blackness in highly readable ways, the inference here being that other filmmakers take recourse to recognizable signifiers of blackness that reify dominant notions implicitly, if not explicitly. Feminist filmmakers such as Gurinder Chadha were later to rely on a strategy of “layering” cultural imagery to bolster the context of subaltern subjects without making them stereotypically readable.

Landscape provides the context for the characters in *The Cruz Brothers*, presenting viewers with a familiar context in mainstream high culture but less so in the African American cultural context. The “Hudson River School of cinematography” carries derogatory values; the filmmakers were summarily dismissed for their ostensible romanticization of nature and their escape from reality to a pre-industrial Romantic past. The special issue seeks to redress this grievance. The interest in the landscape that Collins’s *Cruz Brothers* and Bill Gunn’s *Ganja and Hess* (1973) show flies in

the face of a strictly representational, overtly politicized program for black filmmakers.

Even as there are elements of the Romance genre in Collins's two films and in *Ganja and Hess*, they are deeply philosophical and offer a world view cognizant of race. Their investment in the other arts, whether theatre or writing, carried over to film, and in that sense the films, particularly Collins's, are indebted to the larger African/African American literary tradition at least as much as they are to African American film history. The LA School is not to be viewed as a total oppositional point, however, for as she mentions, the New York Black Independents are their "analog" (*Black Camera* 2018: 6).

The LA rebellion implicitly followed Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's call for a "Third Cinema" that forcefully established the "essential integrity of black and so-called Third World film cultures" (Willemsen 1994: viii). Seeking to change reactionary forces, filmmakers used anti-illusionist techniques to foreground the educational mission. Aspects of its aesthetic are derived from the Latin American Espinosa's notion of "imperfect cinema," one that is hard hitting, and avoids high production values. Both Third Cinema and imperfect cinema were open to endless revision of aesthetic strategies, and multiplication in other parts of the world, as long as the films were an "expression of a new culture and of social changes" (Willemsen 1994: 8). Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1974) is an example of the core values of the LA School, revealing as it does the grinding oppression of poverty, compounded with race, and gender that the protagonist undergoes. Coming to UCLA after the Watts riots of 1965, Gerima also brought a consciousness of anti-colonial struggles that inflected the thinking of the group that studied writers such as Kenya's Ngugi and Martinique's Fanon (Masilela 1993). Gerima's film is grainy and has the quality of newsreel footage, arresting in producing the look of a "New Wave" of African American film. Charles Burnett's film *Killer of Sheep* (1977) is quite different in quality, and has neither the pace nor the almost panicked feeling of *Bush Mama*. The film opens with footage

that is reminiscent of the Italian neo-realists, long tracking shots establishing the city, the train tracks and the children playing in odd, beaten-down neighborhoods. The film is almost authentically realist in the Lukácsian sense of the term, describing social conditions completely, and the alienation of the working-class protagonist from his working conditions. It shows working-class consciousness but not the working class rising. Instead, despite the resistance to the conditions expressed in symbols, there is almost a sense of despair, the montage of the heads of sheep intruding on the protagonist's interiority. The use of blues music as an aesthetic further marks the difference of this film from others that used realism. *Bush Mama* and *Killer of Sheep* together offered models of realism in African American film that were a departure from previous films, and that were to remain largely anomalous even as the mainstream New Realism city films were released.

Several differences can be discerned when comparing these two films with Bill Gunn's *Ganja and Hess* and Collins's two films. Firstly, while some of the New York filmmakers knew each other, they were not part of a collective in the way the LA Independents were. For instance, under the aegis of the film scholar Teshome Gabriel, the UCLA students studied with Glauber Rocha, who had theorized the Cinema of Hunger (Masilela 1993). Secondly, both New York filmmakers turned to a range of genres and devices to impart philosophical ideas. Thirdly, they were invested in writing, and as is apparent in their films, bringing writing to film. Fourthly, neither of them appears committed only to cityscapes but feature landscapes outside the city. Finally, their protagonists seek a rich personal understanding of their place in the world. Both film directors lend a lot of credence to art, literature, and philosophy as topics for films, and deploy them as discursive tools in the film to get their ideas across, or to flesh out their ideas in narrative. None of the three films insists on the purely realistic, but they use realism, more so in the case of *Losing Ground* than in the other two.

Bill Gunn of *Ganja and Hess* played the role of the artist husband of Sara in *Losing Ground*, Duane Williams of *The Night*

of *the Living Dead* played Duke, and Seret Scott, a stage actor for whom Collins had written plays, was cast as Sara Rogers, the philosophy professor. At first glance, *Ganja and Hess* could not be further from Collins's films. A vampire/horror/parody of Blaxploitation film, it is free of all vestiges of cinematic realism. Yet, if one were to apply Collins's own idea that the difficulty for the filmmaker was to find "narrative solutions" to tell the story or convey philosophical ideas, Gunn had hit upon an unusual cinematic cocktail to offer a grounded view of race on the United States (Collins [1980] 2015).

*Ganja and Hess* is allegorical and has a Christian overlay, reminiscent of Spencer Williams's *The Blood of Jesus* (1941). Yet, Christianity is not the only component of the African American protagonist's identity; he is also influenced by his African past, visually depicted in the various African artefacts that contrast the European art work in the settings of the film. Dr. Hess Green's "blood" connection to Africa is also explored: he has been infected by a dagger of the ancient black Myrthian people. He was stabbed by a stranger with the dagger three times, "Once for the Father, once for the Son, and once for the Holy Ghost." Hess is a student of this ancient African tribe that is extinguished because of a blood disease. Plot expedients aside, the premise of the film reveals the horror of race in the US: blacks are bled for their work, and never allowed to die. Slaking the rage that this inspires with blood is an incomplete solution but one that very temporarily offers the rest that endless work denies. The film's setting offers a Romance palette: long and wide shots of beautiful natural settings, an equally grand house replete with African works of art, owned by an anthropologist and archivist, served by a butler. The butler's subservience is closer to obeisance; yet, the role is played straight. Diawara and Klotman believe that Hess's wealth shows him up for the materialist he is, and further that the film critiques this materialism; rather, the set-up appears to be an imagining of an atavistic regal African past with Hess playing that role (Diawara and Klotman 1990). James E. Hinton's cinematography is lush and at times threatens to abandon the story.

The shots are lengthy and, because each sequence is introduced slowly, add to the density of the allegorical. One critic argues that Hinton's hapticity draws the viewer in to appreciate the texture of film itself; however, the blood spatters and the different hues of red after each vampire episode could equally distance the viewer, and alienate him or her in the Brechtian sense, and compel him or her to shift from the visual to a deeper consideration of the allegory (Jackson 2018). While Ganja, the female, is a dominant character, she is not exactly folded into the philosophical frame that seems to legitimize both Hess's vampirism and his lack of ethics. A long interlude focuses on Hess's assistant, played by Bill Gunn, reading and writing before he commits suicide, adding to the film's philosophical and inter-arts perspective an important aspect of the aesthetic of the New York Black Independents.

When *Ganja and Hess* is placed side by side with *Losing Ground*, the versatility of the New York Black Independents is made apparent. Collins does venture into the territory of spirit possession, a theme culled from Africa and its diaspora, but her film has a realistic overlay that falls short of the allegorical. As Gunn's protagonist is an institutional academic, so is her protagonist, a professor of philosophy. Reading and writing, its centrality to human thinking, is overtly foregrounded in *Losing Ground*, texts and philosophers explicitly referenced: Africa is symbolized by the book in both films, *Afrique Noir* in *Ganja and Hess* and Louis Mars's *The Crisis of Possession in Voodoo* in *Losing Ground*. In both films, art and philosophy are intertwined, with art being preponderant in *Ganja and Hess*, philosophy underlying the film, while art and philosophy enjoy equal prominence in *Losing Ground*, philosophy theorizing art. Both Collins and Gunn use nature as a trope in their films—Gunn in *Ganja and Hess* and Collins in both of hers—distinguishing them from many of the other New York Black Independents.

Collins is, however, very different from the male New York Black Independents in her deep awareness of the exclusion of black women as full human beings in film. She was sensitive to what she regarded as the "potent male imagery" in the trope of "adventure"

films in the mainstream industry, including the slough of Blaxploitation films such as *Shaft*<sup>2</sup> (dir. Parks, 1971). She commends the turn to the interior journey in some black independent films but finds it disappointing that even the films that she thinks are radical in their expression of the complex humanity of black people posit “a kind of stagnant female impotence that is made poignantly clear” (Collins 1984b: 6). Singling out Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* and Lane’s *A Place in Time* (1977) as films that delicately evoke “true pathos,” and avoid the ignominious Stepin Fetchit archetype, she nevertheless finds that the female characters are “symbolic” (Collins 1984b: 6), and concludes that even these two rare films view women as stepping stones in the male adventure: “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 [sic] can only comfort” (Collins 1984b: 17). Spike Lee’s Nola Darling in *She’s Gotta Have It* could definitely be regarded as a female adventurer; yet, not one who voyages into the interior landscape when compared with Burnett’s and Lane’s male heroes.

Among the New York Black Independents, Spike Lee is probably the best known not merely for his enormous output since *She’s Gotta Have It* but also for having expressed his affiliation with New York in his films. One of the chief mise-en-scènes of the film, the protagonist’s apartment carries the inter-arts theme discussed earlier. A large, aesthetic space, with Nola’s collages or her newspaper cuttings pasted on the walls, the apartment is metonymic of Nola’s attractiveness. Nola works as a paste-up artist and is an independent woman. As in *Ganja and Hess*, *She’s Gotta Have It* begins with the written word, a literary epigraph from Zora Neale Hurston, one that frames the female in sympathetic terms but also one that distinguishes quite clearly between male and female desire. Lee’s film is about a black female and her life, inviting comparison with Collins’s *Losing Ground*. Shot in black and white film, *She’s Gotta Have It* is innovative in using a narrative scheme to assemble a group portrait of a woman, Nola Darling, who lives on her own and has multiple male sexual

partners. Lee uses direct cinema techniques to characterize Nola as fresh, engaging, and a woman living on her own terms; she is not anyone's "girl." The film is wry and mocks the men slyly, deflecting their narrative authority, as they are among the primary narrators of Nola Darling's story. The tension in the film is between Nola's refusal to cede sole proprietorship of her body to one of her three sexual partners, and their insistence that she should. The assumptions of the film, the philosophy that Nola starts and ends by espousing, are enjoying new life as a Netflix show. However, the philosophy is subsumed by the dominance of the male presence in the film. The men themselves reductively believe Nola is just greedy—her punishment, rape. The film slips out of the philosophical mode with the attack on Nola. Further, over the course of the film, Nola's autonomy that secured her sexuality is now reversed when her autonomy is challenged by her sexuality.

National Public Radio's reviewer offers a comparison on how the two films have withstood the passage of time: "Lee's and Collins's films are both about female liberation, but it's *Losing Ground* that's truly grounded in the struggle of achieving it, a crucial element that makes it no less revelatory now, 30 years after it was made" (Hachard 2015). That the film is still considered a revelation is a sign of how unthinkable Collins's treatment of the themes was in the 1980s and its consequent relative obscurity, while Lee's, perhaps more obviously fitting the notion of "female liberation," was widely hailed. Notwithstanding Lee's innovative film techniques, and the ideas Nola in *She's Gotta Have It* forwards, feminist critics of the time have uniformly been extremely critical of Lee's representation of the female figure. Jacquie Jones, for instance, considers Nola, played by Tracy Camilla Johns, a "fantasy." Comparing this role with one she plays in Mario Van Peebles's *New Jack City* (1991) as a mob boss's girlfriend, Wallace notes that "Johns's roles best represent the ambiguity between and the narrowness of the two categories that Black women are allowed to occupy in this cinema—that of the bitch and that of the 'ho" (Jones 1992: 96).

Although *New Jack City* is a mainstream film, *She's Gotta Have It* was not, underscoring the dearth of complex black female characterization, whether in independent film or mainstream. Collins herself wrote a "manifesto" about the lack of female figures in the films made by black independents at large (Williams 1994; Collins 1984b). Perhaps this is why Nola Darling is dubbed "the mother of the black female character" in the 1990s (Jones 1992); further, as recently as 2017 a blogger says that "[she admires] Nola Darling's characteristics of being a woke black woman" (Colclough 2017). Granted, some of the ideas Nola expresses are "woke," and the director tries to demystify the male gaze through postmodern techniques, but the male narrative in the text excludes female narrative. Collins's *Losing Ground* made five years earlier deals with female desire in a register that questioned its conflation with sexual desire, but links it to many other pleasures, some sensory, some intellectual, but clearly connected to something extraordinary outside of carnal sex: "ecstasy" in one or all its variants. The sequences in *Losing Ground* that are most associated with experiencing rapt pleasure are not unmixed with other sensations, of doubt, of anguish. The trope of female pleasure, embedded in the erotic, is not a topic explored by mainstream films, invested as they are in the pursuit of male pleasure and adventure. Although there are instances of female pleasure and satisfaction in some feminist films, such as *Hour of the Star* by Suzana Amaral (1985), these are usually only fleeting within the diegesis of the film. Collins's film is perhaps more expansive in including more than one sequence showing female pleasure in a concerted unified way, a pleasure that has rarely been given voice even in women's literature. A notable exception is Marguerite Duras in both *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964) and *L'Amant* (1984). The Jean-Jacques Annaud film of the same name (1992) is hard put to translate that female desire and pleasure to film, the very visual qualities of the novel being hyper-exaggerated by the film to no good effect. Curiously, although the theme of female pleasure was not touched upon, one of the very few commentaries on Collins refers to Duras and the genre and techniques of the

New Novel as analogous to Collins's approach in *Losing Ground* (Williams 1994). Among feminist philosophers, Luce Irigaray's and Monique Wittig's writings on female desire and pleasure resonate with Collins's approach, particularly the notion that the language to express such female desire and passion has yet to be found (Irigaray 1985b; Wittig 1976).

Lee's 1989 *Do the Right Thing*, like *She's Gotta Have It*, also, to some extent, casts the city itself as a character, almost anthropomorphizing it. The opening sequence of *She's Gotta Have It* is a series of sepia-tinted shots of people, particularly children, on the streets of New York. Lee's more extensive use of the city in *Do the Right Thing* places him in that group of great urban filmmakers: Lang for Berlin, Rossellini for Rome, Truffaut for Paris, among others. His love affair with the city, specifically what he calls "The Republic of Brooklyn," emerges in almost all of his films (Sterritt 2007). Collins's *Losing Ground* is set partly in New York City, but the city is only a background, not a central element as it is in Lee's films, exhibiting the different strands followed by the Independents.

Where *She's Gotta Have It* shows a Nola occupying spaces in the city with the freedom of an independent woman, *Do the Right Thing* focuses on Mookie, played by Lee, walking up and down the streets of Brooklyn delivering pizzas. A comparison of *Do the Right Thing* with *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy* indicates very different philosophies of race, and equally different approaches to filmmaking. *Do the Right Thing* features a "sympathetic racist," Sal, the owner of the pizzeria whose impatience with a young black man's blaring radio incites a violent confrontation that ends with the young man, Radio Raheem, being killed by the police (Flory 2006). The conclusion is open to interpretation: Mookie throws a trash can into the pizzeria's window, either in hoping to appease the crowd's thirst for revenge, or in a feeble effort to show that he stands with the community although he works for the pizzeria. The film is intricate in showing communities in New York other than the African American: the Puerto Ricans are a part of the group, if not completely integrated; a vignette of the

Korean American store accentuates the different positionalities of minorities in the community. Lee shows the fault-lines in the community, particularly the sense of the black community becoming “woke” over issues of representation. The black clients of the pizzeria are beginning to question the complete absence of African Americans in Sal’s photographic displays of Italian Americans. The film is organized around some binaries—love/hate, MLK Jr/Malcolm—but the cleverness of the film is in not getting into the binary of black/white, and rather showing the institutional power of white authority aligning itself with the light-skinned migrant, the Italian. Realistic, the film is rooted very much in the local, and although not dated, it is very much of its time. Any statement on race is made through the action of the film itself, organized around the unities of time, place, and action, and complete with a Brooklyn Mayors Chorus of old men commenting on the action, overseen by a Sister Mother from a second floor embrasure, a being from on high.

Both *The Cruz Brothers* and *Losing Ground* depict a multi-ethnic community in and around New York City, and in Rockland and Westchester Counties. Collins routes race through the personal stories of her characters, not the other way around. The city itself seems less inhabitable than Lee’s Brooklyn with its houses, its steps, and its streets that the residents claim as their “own,” however erroneously. A Puerto Rican in New York City, Celia, in *Losing Ground*, leaves the city after two years to come to Rockland County. She claims that she hates New York and that it smells. In *The Cruz Brothers*, the three young Puerto Rican men move to a place outside the city, their refrain: “At least it’s not the Bronx.” The Bronx is something they have left behind, and while they do not elaborate on the difficulties of the urban, they remember those experiences. In their new place, José says, “That’s still amazing, living in this sweet little town, not the Bronx . . .” Collins emphasizes their joy in the house that brings them a feeling of inclusion, their pleasure in basic living conditions not possible for them in the city. In some senses, this new place outside the city affords them a chance at life; unlike the city that, we are to

believe, both separated the brothers and swallowed them. Details of the debris in their house are contrasted with the setting. From their living quarters, the brothers can see pale greenery, some of it artfully landscaped, with a view towards the distant hills. The many shots of the landscape are effected with an eye to creating an artistic palette, nature itself symbolically representing the unspoken aspirations of the brothers. As an element in the film, nature functions ideologically and, in the best traditions of the Romance genre, is beneficent. At the narrative level, the satisfaction of the brothers with this new town outside the city throws a glare on the absent narrative of the city, suggesting an abyss in contrast to the plenitude of nature. That unspoken abyss is race. Collins's philosophical premise that the ordinary life story needs to be narrated without constant reference to race, although race is ever-present, sometimes determining, sometimes flexible, results in films that insist on connections between the internal—self—and the external—race (Collins 1984a).

New York figures prominently again in Charles Lane's *A Place in Time* and his later *Sidewalk Stories* (1989). Both titles signal the centrality of place to the films. The opening epigraph of *A Place in Time* accepts the inevitability of the city as an agonist, evoking the "empty streets," the "loneliness," "the coldness" as a "part of our place in time." In a street corner on a sidewalk by Astor Place in Broadway, an artist and a dancer try to eke a living. Both films are shot in an extremely realistic style in black and white and recall the crispness of Walter Ruttmann's city images in *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927). The anonymity of the city, its indifference to its inhabitants, is a chilling factor in the films that reveal the human cost of this ethos; however, in paying homage to the silent cinema, particularly Charlie Chaplin, the films also produce "humanistic" comedy (Mast and Kawin 2011). Their philosophy folds race into the other qualities that make the protagonist an artist and an outsider: his poverty, his homelessness, his kindness, his humor. *Sidewalk Stories* follows a street artist as he tries to survive in the city. Witnessing a murder, the artist takes the victim's young child to safety and lives in

various abandoned sites, becoming more and more involved with taking care of the child. That human contact in the isolation of the city suffuses the film with joy, and even when race rears its ugly head, as it does when the artist takes the child to public facilities, he takes it in his stride. Ultimately, it is the loss of companionship that beats him down. Lane's philosophical premises are closer to Collins than they are to Lee. Of the risk *A Place in Time* took with its inept, tramp protagonist, Collins said, "It took my breath away" (Collins 1984b: 17). Both *The Cruz Brothers* and the Lane films celebrate the kind of alliances that can be forged across groups, whether of class or race. The male, single, homeless artist taking care of a child in *Sidewalk Stories* appears little short of completely unexpected as is the friendship in *The Cruz Brothers* between the wealthy, european american, octogenarian woman and the three hapless, Puerto Rican young men.

The history of the New York Black Independents makes it clear that filmmaking was not an isolated activity; indeed, what distinguished the New York Black Independents was the range of inter-arts alliances in projects including drama, literature, painting, and photography. They were also proficient in the use of diverse formats such as video camera and alternate distribution channels, WNET New York Public Television being a primary outlet. Several of their films had been made on shoestring budgets and had received some federal funding. "Translations" from literature to film were also important, especially if the literary piece had resonated with audiences and touched on relevant topics. One such example of using dramatic or literary material is of Steve Carter's play, "One Last Look," a resource for Charles Hobson's film of the same name made in 1969. The play and film, when set side by side with Collins's plays and films, show the commonalities across the New York Black Independents.

*One Last Look* is about a family returning home for the funeral of their father to get some answers, to express their disappointment, and to take stock of their lives. The father appears as a ghost and engages in continuous dialogue with them. Collins also uses the funereal gathering as a setting for her play, "The Brothers,"

about a family coming together for the funeral of a family member, a world-famous athlete; the atmosphere and the conversation are quite similar to Carter's play, speaking to the commonality of the theme. Both address the difficulties of identity in the context of family history and ethnic community.

The appeal of presenting Carter's material from "One Last Look" on film involves a move away from realism, and the director, Hobson, chances it. Similarly, Collins, almost ten years later, settles on a non-realistic tale but goes further away for her source material—to a Jewish American writer, Henry Roth, for her film on three Puerto Rican young men and their ghost father for *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy*. As in the Carter play and the Hobson film, "Poppa" interrupts continuously and refuses to die. The search for modes other than the realistic, then, was vital to these filmmakers in their desire to narrate the complexity of the lives of black subjects.

The connections between artists is patent in the "meta-soap opera" *Personal Problems* (1980–1) directed by Bill Gunn but with freewheeling license for all to collaborate. This openness to suggestions and lack of emphasis on the sole authority of the director was shared by Collins, who encouraged the participation of her cast and crew in the filming process. Ishmael Reed, the African American writer, was one of the producers, and in his notes on the Kino-Lorber release, he mentions that he traveled to DC to show it to staff members of PBS. Apparently, one staff member "disparaged" Bill Gunn and Kathleen Collins. Clearly, some of the New York Black Independents were associated with similar philosophies and aesthetics. The premise of Reed's project was open-ended in that the producers wished to respond to the black community's sense of itself, something that they were hungry to see. Reed's questions were: "What happens when a group of unbankable individuals tell their stories? Actors who have final say over their speaking parts? A director, who was found 'too difficult' for Hollywood?" The director that Reed is referring to is Bill Gunn (Reed [1980] 2018). Baldwin too had been expelled from Hollywood so there was some sense of urgency

about countering Hollywood. Robert Polidori used  $\frac{3}{4}$ " U-matic tapes, and allowed the film to run after the scene was shot, using improvisation as a key aesthetic feature. The production history of *Personal Problems* is also illustrative of the links across media and artists among the New York Black Independents. Originally a radio soap opera, it had been funded by various local arts organizations and was recorded in producer Steve Cannon's apartment (Reed [1980] 2018).

The key features of the New York Black Independents can be summed up by (a) the diversity of formats and genres, (b) the richness of collaborations across artists of different media, and (c) the depth of support among filmmakers and artists. Kathleen Collins's films illustrate the kind of arrangements Independents had to make. Stage actor Seret Scott played the female lead role in *Losing Ground*, Bill Gunn and Duane Jones, professional actors, played the two male roles. Other organizational elements were equally makeshift, and each production a war waged against huge budgetary constraints. Collins had considerable experience in commercial editing, and had also worked on Larry Neal's 1969 *May Be the Last Time* (O'Malley 2019). Indeed, Kathleen Collins exemplified the mixture of talent that comprised the New York Black Independents who were actors, directors, editors, musicians, camera-persons, sometimes all at the same time. An academic, a writer of short fiction, a playwright with many plays behind her, author of film criticism, skilled film editor, Collins emerges as one of the central figures of the New York Black Independents.

## Notes

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- 1 Translation mine.
- 2 The series continues: a 2000 remake (dir. Singleton) and a 2019 film with the same title (dir. Story).