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“Redemptive Softness”: Interiority, Intellect, and Black Women’s Ecstasy in Kathleen Collins’s *Losing Ground*

L.H. STALLINGS

Abstract

*This essay examines the importance of Kathleen Collins’s film *Losing Ground* as a ground-breaking representation of black women’s sexuality on screen. I deconstruct the way that Collins incorporates intellect and consciousness into her representations of black women’s eroticism and ecstasy, writing away from typical cinematic narratives that position sexuality as disconnected from the mind and intellectual labor.*

To deemphasize the importance of male dominance and to reconstruct Black sexuality in cinema, one must begin to look to Black independent cinema models of “normalcy” which include self-directed sexuality.

—JACQUIE JONES, “THE CONSTRUCTION OF BLACK SEXUALITY” (1993)

Actually, the only hope of any sort of feminine salvation in this country...the only residual softness that is possible in this culture as far as I am concerned is in the hands of Black women.

—KATHLEEN COLLINS (1988)

Representing sexuality, eroticism, and desire on screen requires a certain reverence and awe of each, as well as for visibly translating those experiences. Hollywood cinema bombards viewers with fearful, horrific, and traumatic representations of sexuality, no matter the color or gender. It is clear that none of these forces are to be trusted. We must instead turn to examples of redemptive softness that situate sexuality, eroticism, and desire away from using each as a form of sexual economy or power. Jacquie Jones asserts that the key to overcoming the violence done to the black image on screen comes from black independent models of normalcy,¹ but it

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is important to note that sometimes these self-directed queries of sexuality are far from what constitutes normalcy in U.S. society and films. Hence, Kathleen Collins's solution to the violence done to black women and their image insists that such redemption come from those who have been positioned as the most abnormal and dysfunctional in society, black women. Redemptive softness is a concept Collins used to describe the way in which filmmaker Ayoka Chenzira's *Hairpiece* reclaimed and reaffirmed black women's sense of self and beauty.² However, redemptive softness best expresses the work that Collins, as writer and director of *Losing Ground* (1982), does in countering Hollywood depictions of black women on screen. For if, as Toni Cade Bambara once prophesized, the issue is salvation, then *Losing Ground* should be required viewing for any black woman, especially if she is a professor, academic, writer, filmmaker, feminist theorist, or artist, because of what the film teaches about intellect, creativity, desire, ecstasy, and black women's agency.

This essay examines how Collins's film softly redeems black women's images and experiences, that is, successfully explores issues of agency, sexuality, and desire of black women without reproducing stereotypes or needing to produce normative representations. Collins accomplishes redemptive softness by creating a black woman character who, to save herself, must feel and experience the desires of her own mind and body as opposed to solely thinking too much about external realities, expectations, and proscriptions in regard to gender or race. *Losing Ground* is about Sara (played by Seret Scott), a professor of philosophy, and her husband Victor (played by Bill Gunn), a painter. Victor has won a fellowship that will enable them to leave their home and travel to another city while he works. While there is much to occupy Victor, Sara would be isolated and away from her family and work. As Victor pursues his artistic dreams, Sara contemplates her life, the role intellect plays in it, and the divide between her intellect and body. Thus, Collins sends Sara on a quest for ecstasy. Sara receives assistance with her quest from her mother Leila, an actress who provides sage advice, and from George, a former student who asks Sara to act in his student film based on the black folk ballad "Frankie and Johnny."

There are many assessments of black women's representation on screen, but very few pieces explore how the continued tradition of seeking to manufacture normative representations of gender, as well as authentic or essential blackness, limits discussions of black women's representations. With the rise of queer-of-color cinema and critiques, we have only recently initiated how black filmmakers' nonheteronormative representations and less traditional gazes provide a much needed and ignored commentary about black women in all types of films. Because Collins's black female imagery and its meaning are determined by the self, there remains little to no

room for conventions toward normalcy. Sara is a paradox, and paradoxes exist where new foundations in black cinema are erected. As Michelle Parkerson once noted of Collins, "I believe Kathleen enjoyed paradoxes. They tested and strengthened her capabilities. They were the natural order of things. They were what her films were all about."³ Collins utilizes a cultural depth of field to present a black woman's search for ecstasy and self. In filmmaking, depth of field is an important consideration in terms of what we see on screen. While a lens focuses on a single plane of depth, there is usually an additional area in focus behind and in front of that plane. This is the depth of field. Stereotypes and misrepresentations of black women in movies typically are manifestations of single-plane viewing, ignoring what is behind (the past) and in front (future possibilities) of black women's lives. Normative representations produce this same single plane of subjectivity. When black filmmakers practice strategic moments of nonheteronormativity, their lenses provide a depth of field to black women's sexuality, eroticism, and sensuality on screen. I suggest *Losing Ground* as more invested in nonheteronormativity, and not queerness, as well as invested in a narrative about sexuality as opposed to gender, because the main character's rejection of traditional gender dynamics of marriage and career intersects with a process of redefining ecstasy that challenges the Western history and uses of sexuality. As a result, the rejection and search create a unique subjectivity that resists canonical ordering of sexuality and desire as a bodily experience alone. 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. Black independent filmmaking (be it documentary, cinematic fiction, or pornography) continues to be the only space in which black filmmakers can explore and represent various sexualities and subjectivities.

When Meda in Bill Gunn's *Ganja and Hess* proclaims, "I suppose if I believed in desire...it wouldn't frighten me so much," viewers are introduced to a non-Western conceit of desire as a thing worth having faith or belief in that is on par with religion. Similarly, in his spiritually inspired film treatise, *The Devil Finds Work*, James Baldwin wrote of the ways in which bodies on screen become a frightening religious rite or ceremony: "It is not accidental that I was carrying around the plot of a play in my head, and looking, with a new wonder... Flesh and blood had proved to be too much for flesh and blood."⁴ The fear that Baldwin invokes concerns not necessarily a disbelief in desire, but more likely a disbelief in the camera to capture the dimensions and interiority of the complex human subject. If filmmakers are fearful of bodies and sexualities, then they will inevitably produce monstrous bodies and othered sexualities on screen. Thus, filmmakers whose faith or belief system resides in the nonheteronormative

may create representations very different from those who believe and have faith in normalcy since their point of origin is an unranked reading of difference, rather than an erasure or silencing of it. Sexuality serves as an important theme for reorienting conversations about spectatorship, gazes, bodies, and representations because of the way it situates the existence of chaos as a physical and emotional fact. However, in order to move beyond the fears of desire, flesh, and blood alluded to by Meda and Baldwin, black filmmakers have to conceptualize sexuality and eroticism away from the designs and deployment of power that white supremacist structures have allocated for it. For Collins's film heroine Sara, this means producing an expression of sexuality and eroticism that would evolve from the interior of female individuality, which would then determine the use value. In one scene, Sara sits in the library researching and reading about her subject, ecstasy. As she reads from a book, her voice-over indicates that

It does not come then exactly from without. Yet our consciousness, delving downwards, reveals to us, the deeper we go, an ever more original personality, capable of private ecstatic experience that is often undefinable in words. To call it ecstasy forces us to borrow from the theologians who have used the word in terms of man's immediate connectedness and/or apprehension of the Divine....⁵

Various definitions of ecstasy connote it as a state of bliss often associated with sexual pleasure and the orgasm, but by situating ecstasy in a philosophical debate tied to stepping outside of one's self to know that self, Collins challenges us to reimagine the realm of black women's sexualities and sexual representations. In the scene above, Collins and Seret Scott, the actress who plays Sara, visually represent the connection between intellect, sensuality, and ecstasy by conveying physical and sensory intensity around these moments of intellectual engagement. Sara's voice in the voice-over is breathy, excitable, and without pause, while her body language exudes a level of excitability so great that another character, Duke (played by Duane Jones), notes "I have rarely seen anyone read with such intense concentration." Collins forces viewers to change the way that they desire. As Gunn and Collins theorized with their existential "I" reflections, being more concerned with the interiority of individuals may yield an entirely new viewpoint and perspective so that we no longer think of sexuality as something to be feared or filmmaking as the devil finding work. Collins uses considerations of ecstasy and eroticism to produce a depth of field that transforms and layers the flesh and blood of black women's bodies and experiences on screen, and produces cinematic language, in line with Sara's thoughts, that helps us all uncover an original, shifting self invested in a

private experience of connecting to the divine (ourselves) until we are joyously *Losing Ground*.

"Nothing I do leads to ecstasy," Sara says to Victor. Such introspective aplomb seems grounded in an unacknowledged perspective that black women have a right to pursue ecstasy in their lives, alone or with someone. *Losing Ground's* exploration of ecstasy comes some two years before Audre Lorde's powerful reconsideration of the erotic—"Uses of the Erotic."⁶ The piece has become a staple for conversations on creativity and sexuality in feminist and women's studies, as well as black studies. However, Collins's cinematic theorization of ecstasy is just as useful, and perhaps even more powerful, because it is visual. *Losing Ground* has no scenes of nudity. Victor is the primary active participant and instigator of anything sexual within the film. Nevertheless, the character of Sara deserves to be included in more conversations about representations of black women as asexual or hypersexual primarily because she represents neither. Sara views herself as too orderly and logical with no connection to her feelings and emotions. She longs to connect to her body in spite of rhetoric that might make her feel less womanly or respectable for doing so. Collins manages to keep Sara from being asexual or sexless primarily because Sara's quest for ecstasy inevitably compels her and viewers to see how intellect and passion figure into the journey.

Losing Ground opens with Sara lecturing on Camus, Sartre, and the existential movement to a class comprised mostly of men. 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. Further, Collins dismisses the idea that her film should engage conversations about acceptable black women and representations of black women not simply because Sara is one of the few representations of black female intellectuals onscreen in the 1980s, as well as now, but because Sara's lecture is about the rebuking of normalcy. She convincingly explains in her lecture that "'the natural order'...if there is such a thing...has been violated. Chaos exists. Not as a mental possibility—in the way that, say, Descartes might experience it, but as a physical and emotional fact." Sara, and by extension Collins, explores the schism produced in Western metaphysics of dualities as a forced and false division. There is no normal or natural. Sara's interest in chaos, however, contradicts the visual togetherness and orderly way in which Sara is presented. Conservatively dressed, her hair is pulled up in a bun and glasses mask her eyes and face. Sara's exterior does not reflect her interior as displayed by her passion in the lecture and her choice of topic for her lecture, or her rapport with her students.

When one of Sara's students reveals that he is reading the work of another, Genet, Sara exclaims: "Good! It's the finest analysis of being an outsider I've ever read, and it applies to race as much as it does homosexuality." Collins, like Lorde after her, begins with nonheteronormative subjectivity and a way of reading difference that does not arrange it hierarchically. She sees the benefits of chaos and disorder because they provide a space for the nonheteronormative. The beauty and genius of Collins's work lies in her courage as a filmmaker to look beyond what most of white America and black America of the prior decade wished to see of black women. White America may have wanted to position black women as strictly the jezebel, mammy, or bitch archetype, but black America's cinematic craving for superbad and sexy blaxploitation icons like Foxy Brown, Coffy, or Cleopatra Jones; the clothed and respectable figures of Claudine, Martha Frazier, and Vivianne Perry; tragic biopic figures like Miss Jane Pittman or Billie Holiday; or the urban diva Mahogany, did not necessarily include the representation of Collins's cinematic protagonist, Sara, a philosophy professor at odds with herself and her black artist husband—Victor. She is not a black woman in search of a good man, but one who is at odds with her man. As David Nicholson revealed in a write-up of Collins's work, not everyone appreciated this element of the film:

After the screening, a man asked Kathleen Collins-Prettyman if she had made the film. When she said yes, he replied, "You're a traitor to the race," and stalked away. And still later...talking to one of our better known filmmakers...this director...told me he did not like *Losing Ground* because it was a negative portrait of a black marriage.⁷

Despite the concerns that *Losing Ground* produces negative representations of black families and black people, redemptive softness is made possible by the ways in which Collins delivers the interiority of Sara and her search for ecstasy. Black women as intellectuals, specifically black female intellectuals in search of ecstasy, operate outside of heteronormative spaces of normalcy since institutional, domestic, and nationalist rhetoric insists that their roles and purposes are to fulfill the needs of a nation, family, or an institute before their own. Even as Sara seeks to feel and experience more, her career as a philosophy professor, one who thinks for a living, emphasizes that whatever she feels will not be divorced from consciousness. As mentioned earlier, throughout the film Collins and Seret Scott do a magnificent job of visually ensuring that the intensity and passion erupting from Sara are produced cerebrally, but expressed corporeally.

Again, in the opening scene, Collins demonstrates that in front of the classroom Sara is not simply admired as an "intellectual authority," as

critic Geetha Ramanathan has suggested of the scene in *Feminist Auteurs*.⁸ Sara's students respectfully address her as "Professor" and "Dr. Rogers," but when one male student says to her, "You're terrific...always so alive and terrific...and your husband appreciates you," he isn't talking about her intellect. Later the same student continues, "You're so full of life." In a later scene, we see Sara during her office hours, and a white woman student echoes the male student's sentiments until Sara asks herself, "...a husband... what...What's this thing they've got about my having a husband." In one of the few existing works of criticism on *Losing Ground*, Ramanathan provides an underreading of such scenes and Sara's position as a teacher and presence in the classroom. Ramanathan focuses too much on the external conflicts of marriage disputes between husband and wife in the film, rather than the interior conflicts of Sara and her own ecstasy that Collins highlights. Ramanathan suggests that "in privileging 'the husband and his appreciation' of her the students replicate fairly stereotypical norms in implying, however vaguely, that the splendor of Sara's achievements would somehow not be complete without the husband's valuation of her. Equally subtly, their gratitude for her enthusiasm also conspires to devalue her intellectually."⁹ Ramanathan's reading seems all too simplistic and fails to acknowledge that the students' comments are not necessarily a devaluation of Sara's intellect through a gendered privileging of her husband's opinion of Sara, but a recognition of Sara's erotic presence in the classroom and how that presence has contributed to both their valuation of her and her effectiveness in the classroom. bell hooks provides us with another framework in which to read this scene when she explains, "Understanding that eros is a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that it can provide an epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know, enables both students and professor to use such energy in a classroom setting in ways that invigorate discussion and excite the critical imagination."¹⁰ It is this early scene that again allows viewers to desire black female subjectivity differently than they ever have before. The viewer of the film shares a position similar to that of the students in the film, learning and being educated in a manner mindful of eroticism that pays as much attention to the mind as it does the body.

Positioning Sara as the intellectual subject and the object of student desire rewrites narratives about black female sexuality. The basis of this student affection then is not rooted in the typical ways in which we see black female sexualities and representations presented on screen. While the students' gazes take in Sara, they are responding to her eruptions of passion as they intersect with the depth of her knowledge that comes from within. The students' responses might be different if Sara were passionate without being knowledgeable or vice versa. These gazes are important to

the viewer's observation of Sara's search for ecstasy because they demonstrate what Sara has not yet understood about her intellect and ecstasy. Collins's representation of Sara introduces a much-needed conversation into the tiresome debates about jezebels, hookers, and mummies. Are women on television and in rap videos the only representations of black women to which American society has access? Collins's film draws our attention to how black feminist thought has failed to acknowledge the performativity and presence of black women in any classroom from kindergarten to college, and how they might also contribute to conversations about representations of black women's images. Clearly, Collins's experience as a teacher has shaped the film here. Too often we argue that external representations in videos, television, and movies are the sole dominating influences on the ways in which students see black women in the classroom, but this is only half of the truth. The other half is much more complicated. Students desire and are inspired by teachers not necessarily because they embody some sign seen outside the class, but because they seem to be the very opposite of such representation. I state this not to objectify the black female body in the classroom, but to insist that the body, eros, and the mind work together. As hooks declares, "to restore passion to the classroom or to excite it in the classrooms where it has never been[,] professors must find again the place of eros within ourselves and together allow the mind and body to feel and know desire."¹¹ That Sara has no problem eliciting excitement and passion from her students means that she is linked to a form of eros that she cannot yet acknowledge until she loses herself to her self.

Collins's film is deeply layered, and though the first layer is the search for ecstasy, another layer concerns why Sara does not comprehend that her mind can be a vital part of creating ecstatic experiences for herself and her students. Sara's students testify that they hope her husband appreciates her, but they also say that "you're so bright, and lively, a real inspiration." Sara is equally respected and desired by the black male students as by the white male and female students. Their queries about her husband, then, also suggest that all the life and passion displayed by Sara does not belong to her but to her husband, and that its sole purpose is for his use and not hers. Sara's final contestation of the students' attention to her husband allows Collins to begin a vital line of questioning in regard to black women's ecstasy and eroticism. What does black women's ecstasy look like? How is it used? Who is it for?

Collins forges new paths in demonstrating what Sara's quest for ecstasy looks like. In addition to visually signifying an eroticization of thought process and consciousness with physicality of voice and body, Collins presents the need for such interior depth with striking film techniques and shot an-

gles that position Sara as always looking inside and out and then back inside of herself again. The camera shot in the opening classroom scene primarily zooms in on Sara so that we understand that she is the dominating center of attention from any angle, a subject rather than an object. Collins then pans out the camera from Sara's position to the rows of black male students and two white students listening intently and rapturously to Sara lecture. The camera privileges Sara's gaze and Sara's perception of her students before moving onto the students and their gaze of Sara. Collins forces viewers to confront that each gaze brings an individual context that shapes the depiction of the black woman in the lecture hall and on screen. In addition, once Sara begins acting in the student film, *Losing Ground* becomes a film within a film, and thus viewers are always reminded to stay awake and conscious of the camera. On numerous occasions, Collins uses voice-over dialogue to further convey this attention to interiority. She also uses structures and shots of Sara in windows or doorways deep in thought to signify the parallel between Sara's body as a house for her mind. Institutional spaces are then juxtaposed as external realities that incorrectly assume that Sara has to go outside of herself to find what she seeks. Yet, as Sara continues to search for ecstasy, we see her go into buildings such as a church, library, school, or a telephone booth to obtain information that will fulfill her quest only to leave as empty inside as she was when she arrived.

As Collins continues to show us what a black woman in search of ecstasy looks like, she also remains mindful of defining that ecstasy and by whom it might be used or misused. Instead of shying away from any mention of eroticism, ecstasy, and sexuality for fear of being seen as not respectable, Collins shows Sara seeking out ecstasy in unconventional places. In the library Sara reads a book on Haitian voodoo in which possession and being mounted by a god can place one into a trance, yet "the ecstatic moment is, so to speak, after the fact," that is, after coming out of the trance. Sara's thought process focuses on the interior experience of possession, rather than external commentary that might see possession as performance or spectacle. Collins's narrative even considers how the gaze affects such interiority when Sara, seeking further evidence or knowledge on how to experience ecstasy, visits a psychic and asks, "When you read someone...for instance, now looking at me. What happens inside you?" Sara needs to know not only what the woman sees but also what she experiences inside when she sees it. Collins refuses to allow the external gaze to dominate her representation of black female experience, privileging the interior in everything Sara does throughout the film. Collins asks viewers to be like Sara with the psychic, to remain aware and ask what is happening inside when seeing black female images on screen.

Thus, these other moments were mere preludes to Sara accepting the

invitation of George, a former student, to act in his student film of “Frankie and Johnny” with a mysterious and dark actor named Duke. Before Sara knows Duke will be her co-lead in the film, she meets him in the library while researching ecstasy. Upon seeing Sara deeply engaged in her reading, he begins talking to her, eventually asking her “What’s the thesis of your paper?” Sara replies, “That the religious boundaries around ecstasy are too narrow.” Sara and Duke continue to discuss the topic, highlighting the various ways ecstasy could be expressed outside of Christianity, since as Duke notes “Christianity has had a devastating effect on man as an intuitive creature.” Their entire debate provides a context for us to understand one of the reasons why Sara thinks her performance as a character in a blues ballad, a secular expression, might lead her toward the ecstatic experience she seeks. “Frankie and Johnny” is a song about a passionate love affair between a man and a woman destroyed by the man’s infidelity and the woman’s violent and deadly response to the infidelity: “Frankie and Johnny were lovers. Lordy how they could love...He was her man, but he done her wrong...She shot her man, who was doing her wrong.”¹² The ballad serves as a reflection on the lack of passion in Sara and Victor’s marriage. It is the passion of the two that draws them together, and such passion when disappointed turns to anger. In taking up the role of Frankie, Sara risks stepping outside of her scholarly comfort zone and into the chaos of her female body. Her acting within the film could potentially allow her to experience the examples of possession Sara discovers through her academic research, in addition to bringing her closer to, as Sara claims of Victor’s artistic identity, “all that private ecstasy...so detached and free.” Collins, time and again, uses Victor’s behavior to showcase the kind of freedom that comes with masculine privilege and identity and allows Sara to uncover ways in which she, or her ecstasy, does not have to be fashioned, as Victor proposes at one point, from the rib, body, and needs of a man.

Sara’s mother, Leila, understands Sara’s envy and anger of Victor’s ecstasy, but she also pushes Sara to move past her anger about such privilege. During conversations with her mother, we understand why Sara believes that her acceptance of the Frankie role will bring her closer to ecstasy. Like Victor, Leila is an artistic individual, an actress who Sara asks, “How did someone like you produce a child who thinks so much?” Notably, Leila and Sara’s conversations are matrilineal explorations of ecstasy that often turn to gender and sex, especially since Leila uses sexuality to outrage her daughter’s repressed nature. In one scene meant to convey the importance of female intimacy in black women’s search for ecstasy, Collins chooses low, soft lighting and close-ups of the two women at a table sitting closely together talking. They discuss the existence of woman and man in a manner that moves beyond Victor’s noticing that woman is fashioned from the body of man,

Adam. Leila's perspective provides a vantage point of woman, as she psychologically deconstructs the sexual act of men penetrating women, when she says to her daughter, "What does that do to you....that he lifts himself up, then puts himself down into someone else?" Leila turns to the act of sexual intercourse to embody the pursuit of ecstasy, self-creation, and subjectivity. Within this act, penetration allows men pleasure and power. It becomes, like the Haitian voodoo ceremony, an act of possession. Hence, men enjoy a god-like status in society. Woman cannot ever possess another body as men can, they can only be possessed. Leila challenges Sara to reflect first and foremost on herself in that moment so that she can understand that her ecstasy must be fashioned from her own female body and not Victor's (man). Since she does not have a penis, Sara must find a way to reconsider ecstasy outside of penetration and being possessed, that is, owned by another person, even if such attempts will contradict or upset the natural order. The experience of being Leila's child provides her with one method, acting.

But ecstasy is a private and personal thing, and is not universal for all black women. While Sara idealizes her mother's freedom in performance, Leila notes that her history of playing asexual mamas and mammies contradicts her own desire to portray a woman character with sexual agency. Her comments mirror Sara's desire to get outside of external expectations and find an even greater ecstatic experience. Yet Leila has enjoyed moments of ecstasy when performing, telling Sara, "When I'm actually acting really well it's like that...I'm gone...I'm in complete control, yet gone...the gods have me, or Satan...somebody does...once after a show I couldn't seem to come back. I was perspiring and in a kind of trance." Ironically, Leila reveals that her male partner's observance of such possession led to him no longer coming backstage since the sight of her so enthralled in her own self proved to be too much for his male ego and sense of ownership of her body. Leila's ecstatic moment, similar to the ecstatic moment Sara reads about with regards to possession in voodoo, happens after the possession—performance. Hence, Sara inherits performance as a means to locating ecstasy and turns to it during her particular existential crisis.

Again, *Losing Ground* is not solely about Sara's sexuality, but sexuality and desire continue to play a key role in Sara's search for ecstasy. While shooting a scene with Duke, Sara becomes so lost in her performance of the character that when George asks her to kiss him, she does not hesitate in kissing a man who is not her husband. Is this why black women's ecstasy must be suppressed or possessed? After filming is done for the day, Sara invites Duke back to her house to party with Victor, Carlos (Victor's friend), and Celia, a woman who has been sitting as a model for Victor. When Victor begins flirting with Celia in front of everyone, including Sara, it is clear that inhabiting

the role of Frankie has moved her into an emotional space instead of the logical plane that she usually inhabits. She angrily responds in frustration:

Don't fuck around then...don't take that dick of yours out and fling it willy-nilly here and there like it was artistic...pointing it at trees, and lakes, and women...like it was some artistic paintbrush...I got nothing to take out goddammit, that's what's uneven, that I got nothing to take out.

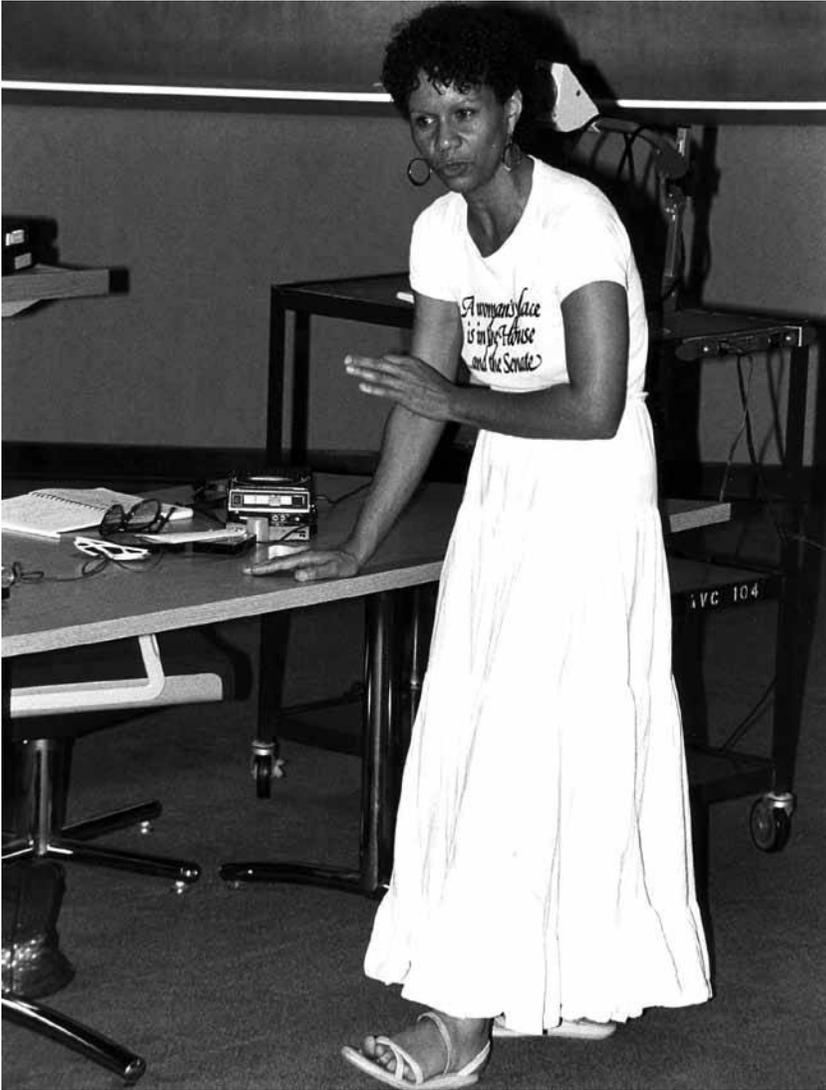
Yet, Collins's film-within-a-film approach presents us with polyinteriority and consciousness that reveals that Sara has redemptive softness at her disposal. Sara's movement to performance provides one method for the ecstatic experience. However, as the film unfolds and viewers learn more about Sara, they also learn that she does not understand that she already has other means to ecstasy, and it is a position endured by the black female viewer as well. Sara's second method to ecstasy had already and always been her intellect, but society, via religion or commerce, does not value women's intellect, especially black women's intellect. Black women have been taught to devalue the connection between intellect and their bodies.

After Leila reveals how acting places her in a trance, Sara exclaims, "the only thing I've ever known like that is sometimes in the middle of writing a paper my mind suddenly takes this tremendous leap into a new interpretation of the material...I know I'm right." Sara's writing and her teaching are just as powerful as Victor's paintbrush, or Leila's performance, but they are not valued as such by society. The interior gaze of Sara reveals the truth to viewers in the film, even if Sara within the film does not yet see it. Again, this is what the opening scene of the students' gaze and Sara's lecture exemplifies. She does indeed have something to take out, and she does so unconsciously in ways that others, her students, see very clearly.

Collins's redemptive softness is not a one-size-fits-all final solution. On the contrary, the film's exploration of ecstasy is rather complex. Sara, Victor, and Leila all position ecstasy as tied into creative endeavors and spiritual institutions and doctrines. Somehow these models allow for an accessible connection between body and eros. However, because Collins ends the film so ambivalently, we understand that Sara's journey is not finished and may lie in the spectator's hand. George's film ends with Frankie shooting Johnny, but Collins's closing shot in *Losing Ground* ends with Sara, however much in character, pointing the gun at Victor and pulling the trigger. Gloria H. Gibson-Hudson reads the symbolism of the final scene as a psychic transition, stating "As the bullet explodes[,] it is Sara's previous psychological state which is shattered to reveal a new person,"¹³ and while I agree with Gibson's theory of Sara's new subjectivity, I argue against what she writes as the basis of that new subjectivity: "the blues

structure provides the ideal cultural context for Sara's examination of self and transforming consciousness because the blues in many instances represents a cultural icon communicating sexual empowerment.¹⁴ Collins's film surpasses visually recouping the blues woman as a way to theorize about radical sexuality and black women. During the 1980s, impressed with blues women's autonomy, agency, life on the road, open sexuality, and economic independence, black women writers such as Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, and Ann Allen Shockley, as well as black female critics like Angela Davis, Hazel Carby, and Daphne Duval Harrison, elevated this cultural outcast of the past to icon and heroine. Many of the critics, however, like Sara within Kathleen Collins's film, ignored the potential of modern performative spaces. Collins, the filmmaker and teacher, does not. Her depiction of Sara suggests that the blues woman and the female academic are one and the same. Whether consciously created to do so or not, *Losing Ground*, in asking us to take the journey with Sara and believe that it is a valid journey, asks that we remember that the body and mind are one, that the ecstasy of each depends on the validation of the other.

If Collins were simply interested in the blues woman trope as a symbol for black female freedom, she might have simply made Sara a blues singer rather than linger on interiority that reflects consciousness. I move now from Collins's intention as a filmmaker onto thinking about the ways in which black female spectators must engage with how Collins's film submits to delving deeper and deeper into the black female psyche, and not just Sara's. Just because Sara gets lost in her film performance of "Frankie and Johnny" does not mean that we as viewers should. When Collins initially theorizes "redemptive softness," she speaks of it in terms of black women forgiving black men, stating, "They (black women) must have the capacity to forgive black men... We absolutely must forgive them. It is the only possibility of love left in this culture."¹⁵ *Losing Ground* presents us then with a paradox to Collins's statement. Based on the ending of the movie, Sara, or female viewers, does not necessarily forgive Victor. We do, however, as a result of watching Sara, give ourselves permission to forgive ourselves. As Sara demonstrates, black women must forgive themselves for the times that they choose their own paths, rather than serving as a reflection of some man's ecstasy. Collins provides us with an intellectual female character invested in the experiences of her body. She visualizes that black women have to be conscious and critical in experiencing their bodies. She uses ecstasy to show us how to create Toni Cade Bambara's "afrofeminist gaze," bell hooks's "oppositional gaze," or to become Manthia Diawara's resisting spectator. She insists that we find a balance between intellect, spirit, and body: that we can get lost in the pleasures of our bodies and be critical of how we receive and experience those pleasures, and how they might be valued by ourselves and others. Collins's solu-



Kathleen Collins (1983). Courtesy Black Film Center/Archive, Indiana University, Bloomington

tion of redemptive softness fails if we accept a simple resolution that via the blues woman performance Sara finds the ecstasy she'd been seeking throughout the film. Sara is a locus of contradictions since she on the one hand is deeply invested in Western philosophy of the mind, and on the other hand is taught to devalue her mind and its importance in expressions of desire and ecstasy. Time and again, the film emphasizes the tensions between mind and body that bell hooks writes about: "Entering the classroom determined to

erase the body and give ourselves over more fully to the mind, we show by our beings how deeply we have accepted the assumption that passion has no place in the classroom."¹⁶

Collins the filmmaker morphs into Collins the educator and writer, and in doing so, she clarifies for viewers something still important and unacknowledged today: black women in the academy have the potential to be the new blues women if they stay focused on the interiority of themselves rather than the external noise and misrepresentations. Black female intellectuals in the academy share many similarities with the blues women, buttressed by intellectual genius and labor rather than musical talents. Their stage is the classroom and the lecture hall. We hit the road, do conferences, and give voice to black women. Sara's position as a professor affords her the opportunity to pursue this search for ecstasy. However, because she upholds Western metaphysics that disconnect intellect from desire and the body, she does not recognize the liberating space in which she operates. Like Sara, too many black women intellectuals misread the spaces in which they work. The difference is that their efforts consistently demonstrate a longing for respectability while Sara's efforts suggested the pursuit of freedom and ecstasy. Even as their work becomes evidence of how brilliant they are, some still fear nonheteronormative ways of existing whereas blues women embraced them. Black women in the academy are the new blues women; why don't we act like it and encourage the pursuit of ecstasy until we are like Sara, *Losing Ground*?

Notes

1. Jacquie Jones, "The Construction of Black Sexuality: Towards Normalizing the Black Cinematic Experience," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge 1993), 248.

2. David Nicholson, "A Commitment to Writing: A Conversation with Kathleen Collins Prettyman," *Black Film Review* 5, no.1 (Winter 1988/1989): 14.

3. Michelle Parkerson, "Remembering Kathleen Collins," *Black Film Review* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1988/1989): 5.

4. James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work: An Essay* (New York: Dial Press, 1976), 34.

5. *Losing Ground*, 16mm, directed by Kathleen Collins (Piermont, NY, 1982); all references to this version.

6. Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 53–60.

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

8. Geetha Ramanathan, *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women's Film* (London: Wallflower, 2006), 160.

9. *Ibid.*, 160.

10. bell hooks, *Teaching To Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 195.
11. *Ibid.*, 199.
12. "Frankie and Johnny" in *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry L. Gates and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 34.
13. 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): 52.
14. *Ibid.*, 53.
15. Nicholson, "A Commitment to Writing," 14.
16. hooks, *Teaching To Transgress*, 192.