

MILESTONE PRESENTS



# LOSING GROUND

A FILM BY KATHLEEN COLLINS

A MILESTONE FILM RELEASE DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY KATHLEEN COLLINS. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS KATHLEEN COLLINS AND RONALD K. GRAY  
STARRING SERET SCOTT BILL GUNN DUANE JONES BILLIE ALLEN GARY BOLLING NORBERTO KERNER MARITZA RIVERA CINEMATOGRAPHY BY RONALD K. GRAY  
MUSIC BY MICHAEL D. MINARD EDITED BY RONALD K. GRAY AND KATHLEEN COLLINS CHOREOGRAPHY BY PEPSI BETHEL FILM RESTORED BY NINA LOREZ COLLINS  
PRODUCTION GRANT FROM THE AMERICAN FILM INSTITUTE IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS POSTER DESIGNED BY ADRIAN ROTHSCHILD

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MILESTONE  
film & video

## Crew

Directed by ..... Kathleen Collins  
Script by ..... Kathleen Collins  
Cinematography by ..... Ronald K. Gray  
Music by ..... Michael Minard  
Editing ..... Ronald K. Gray, Kathleen Collins  
Choreography ..... Pepsi Bethel  
Producer ..... Eleanor Charles

## Cast

Sara ..... Seret Scott  
Victor ..... Bill Gunn  
Duke ..... Duane Jones  
Mother (Leila) ..... Billie Allen  
George ..... Gary Bolling  
Carlos ..... Norberto Kerner  
Celia ..... Maritza Rivera  
Male student in class ..... Zachary Minor  
Other students in class ..... Anthony McGowan, Darryl Reilly, Joe Garcia  
Man on radio ..... Clarence Branch, Jr.  
Female student in office ..... Maureen Grady  
Real estate agent ..... Deborah Tirilli  
Librarian ..... Marjorie Spring  
Celia's mother ..... Hilda Vargas  
Gypsy ..... Rose Zito  
Student cameraman ..... Joseph B. Vasquez  
Nelly Bly ..... Michelle Mais

### Students in class:

David Bryan, Aaron Burks, Antonio E. deCaballero-Marrero, Joseph Chan, Al Fletchman, Reginald S. Gant, Ray Ray Gonzales, Milton Emanuel Grier, Gregory Covan, Maben Hugues, Joe Hunt, Julius Johnson, Chauncey Jones, Percell Knight, Marc G. Manigault, Jr., Patrick Mathieu, Cornell McGrue, Rodney Nugent, Russell K. Parker, Janus Adams Roach, Stephen M. Rooks, Robert Smith, Karma Omowale Stanley, Rodney Thompson, Andre J. Washington, Cedric J. Washington, Len Winfield.

Village women ..... June Corey, Maureen Kocot, Nellie Nieves, Alivia Wardlaw  
Girl in library ..... Stella Hughes  
Man on porch ..... Mike Prestipino  
Student Crew ..... Radar Long III, Andre Martin

“Love Does Her Thing.” Music and lyrics by Michael D. Minard. Sung by Frankie Diaz.  
“Sabor a Conga” by Los Patinas.

## First Week's Crew

Production manager ..... Cheryl Hill  
Unit managers ..... Audreen Ballard, David Ticotin  
Director's assistant ..... Janus Adams Roach  
Costumes ..... Lamont Foreman  
Dresser..... Rodney Nugent  
Camera assistant ..... Margot Peters  
Head gaffer ..... Vicente Galindez  
Gaffers ..... Joseph Chan, Joseph Zulkowsky, Edward Rodriguez  
Continuity/Stills ..... Lou Draper  
Sound..... Shi Sun  
Props/Set dresser ..... Radar Long III  
Production assistants..... Kim Gaskins, Lonzo Green, Anthony McGown,  
Joseph B. Vasquez, Francisco Villar, Rebecca Williams  
Production secretary ..... Kathe Sandler

## Last Three Weeks

Production Coordinator ..... Radar Long III  
Sound..... Shi Sun, Radar Long III, Billie Jackson  
Camera assistants ..... Kathleen Collins, Adrian Best  
Gaffers ..... Gary Bolling, Radar Long III, Joseph Zulkowsky  
Production assistant ..... Anthony McGowan  
Victor's paintings ..... Robert E. Kane, George Norris  
Carlos' paintings ..... Jack Witten  
Installations ..... Jorge Rodriguez, Charles Abramson  
Musicians..... John Ballestros, James Byars, Chris Berg, Jack DiPietro  
James McLoryd, Michael Minard  
Solo Saxophone ..... Lee Graphics  
Titles designed by ..... Dan Wilensky  
Music recorded at..... Nyack Sound Recording, Nyack, NY  
Engineers ..... Red Naxela, Frank Coker  
Production grant from The American Film Institute in association with The National Endowment for the Arts

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Billie Allen, City College of New York Picker Film Institute, Daniel Dawson, The Studio Museum of Harlem, Rose and Al Zito, Doug Harris, Dr. Martha MacGuffie, Marc Prendergast, Mr. and Mrs. Maitland Griggs, Katherine McQuarrie, King's Daughters Library (Haverstraw), Robert E. Kane, Mr. and Mrs. Milton Bondurant, Marie Resman, Rosalind Schneider, The Film and Video Workshop, Wesley Brown, Pearl Bowser, Foster Henry, Jeanette Adams, Mrs. Laurette A. Conwell.

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DCP by DI Factory, Warsaw

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## Background

At the time of her death from breast cancer in 1988, Kathleen Collins was just 46 years old but was already a seasoned activist who had traveled to the Congo and worked as civil rights organizer in the South, an internationally renowned playwright, an esteemed professor at New York's City College, and a fiercely independent filmmaker.

Her first film, *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy* was a 50-minute film based on the work of Henry H. Roth. Although the spritely comedy was a charming and beautifully crafted first-time effort from an indie filmmaker, she was accused of deserting her African-American roots to tell the story of three Puerto Rican brothers scraping by while contending with the ghost of their dead father.

Collins's brilliant second film, the 1982 comic drama *Losing Ground*, centers on the experiences of Sara (Seret Scott), a university professor whose artist husband Victor (Bill Gunn) rents a country house for a month to celebrate a recent museum sale. The couple's summer idyll becomes complicated as Sara struggles to research the philosophical and religious meaning of ecstatic experience... and to discover it for herself.

When she agrees to appear in a short directed by one of her one of her students, Sara's search for the "ecstatic moment" and her struggles with Victor's indiscretions are reflected in the plot of the student film. Performing with Duke (Duane Jones), her charismatic co-star, Sara acts the part of the jealous lover in a film version of the song "Frankie and Johnny." By the end of shooting, she experiences a moment of profound and shattering emotion that calls her ordered intellectual existence into question. One of the very first fictional features by an African-American woman *Losing Ground* remains brilliant, stunning, and a powerful work of art.

At a time when black professionals were rarely portrayed in mainstream media, *Losing Ground* was not released theatrically and only screened once on WNET's *Independent Focus* in 1987. Because she was not interested in portraying minorities as victims or thugs, the press and the film industry ignored Collins's work. The first substantial coverage that Collins received in the *New York Times* was her obituary.

Accomplished actors Seret Scott (who appeared in Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby* and Ntozake Shange's play "for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf"), Bill Gunn (*Ganja and Hess*) and Duane Jones (*Night of the Living Dead*) star in this story of the emotional awakening of a woman in a troubled marriage. ***Losing Ground*** was shot in New York City and in nearby Rockland County, with locations in Nyack, Piermont and Haverstraw.

*While I'm interested in external reality, I am much more concerned with how people resolve their inner dilemma in the face of external reality. How do you resolve it? How do you deal with it? So that's Sara's quest for ecstasy is on the external level. But the internal part to her is still a woman raised by a mother who was a little bit libertine and living with a husband who is a little bit too spontaneous... If I favor anything, I probably always favor the internal resolution before the external resolution. Because for me the internal resolution is the most potent in the psyche... You don't get the resolution, but you get the explosive moment... the final resolution is private choice, even of a character. It's really none of my business. All I do is take the character to the point where I can see him through the dilemma to the dilemma's climactic moment. After that, it's free choice. And not everyone will choose the redemptive path...*

— Interview with David Nicholson, *Black Film Review*, Winter 1988/89

Among the first fictional features by an African-American woman, ***Losing Ground*** was altogether a stunning work by any director. Many who saw it fell in love with the film and its charismatic director. Like Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, a film Collins had greatly admired, ***Losing Ground***'s plot revolved around the lives and relationships of black characters, based on her own experiences, but had universal meaning. In a 1987 interview, Collins spoke about her characters' evolution:

*Essentially it's that change is a rather volatile process in the human psyche; and, that real change usually requires some release of fantasy energy. This is why it has an element of violence... This is less a feminist statement than it is a statement that any kind of real change or disruption involves some kind of change in the psyche; some kind of fantasy or imagine release before one can actually initiate the change.*

— Interview with James Briggs Murray, *Black Visions*

***Losing Ground*** was first shown in June 1982 at Irvington, NY's Town Hall Theater, presumably as a "local" premiere. The film's only New York City screening was on a Monday night on January 24, 1983 as part of the Museum of Modern Art's Cineprobe series. The *New York Times* noted the showing with three sentences in their "Going Out Guide." After that, like many other fine black films — such as *Killer of Sheep*, *Bless There Little Hearts* and *Bush Mama* — there was no interest from the distributors and Collins could only get nontheatrical screenings at a few colleges and film societies. Although greatly admired by her fellow black filmmakers, ***Losing Ground*** gained very little notice. And even in the budding age of cable television and the huge hunger for programs, it wasn't until 1987 that ***The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy*** showed on the Learning Channel (when it was a much smaller cable station owned by Appalachian Community Service Network) and ***Losing Ground*** screened once on WNET New York's Independent Focus. One 16mm print of each have been preserved at Indiana University's Black Film Archive — studied and revered by academics but unseen by the public.

Nina Collins was a teenager when her mother died. Almost 25 years later, she rescued her mother's original negatives and created beautiful new digital masters so that they now stand as monuments to African-American and women's cinema as well as testament to Kathleen Collins' incredible talent.

## Kathleen Collins



*Film is, in this culture, and especially for black people, the last solid white bastion of society...It's the one area where we have an inferiority complex. The whole myth of Hollywood, the way film functions in this culture, has succeeded artistically in brainwashing all of us . . . Film is the largest, most powerful myth (of a technological society). Hollywood is the one mythical world that America created. The gods and goddesses of America are film stars . . . and we don't know who we are in that mythology.*

—Kathleen Collins, 1980

Kathleen Conwell Collins  
Prettyman (March 18, 1942–  
September 18, 1988) was born  
to Frank and Loretta Conwell  
and lived at 357 Pacific Avenue

(right, as seen today) in Jersey City, NJ. Her father worked first as a mortician and later became the principal of a Jersey City K-8 school (now named after him). He later went on to become the first New Jersey African-American state legislator. Her maternal family (her mother's maiden name was Pierce) came from Gouldtown, NJ, a 300-year-old settlement — still in existence — that started with an interracial marriage and remained a haven for mixed-race marriages through the 20th century.



At fifteen, Conwell won first prize at an annual poetry reading contest at Rutgers Newark College of Arts and Sciences for her rendition of Walt Whitman's "A Child Goes Forth" and "I Learned My Lesson Complete." An article in the March 3, 1958 *Jersey Journal* reported that in addition to working as assistant editor of the Lincoln High School's publication the *Leader*, Conwell was on the editorial staff of the school yearbook, the *Quill*; a member of the National Honors Society; and a past secretary of the Student Council.

After graduating in 1959, she went to the all-women Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, NY where a few weeks after arrival, Conwell became the class president. Her major was French and she listed her loves as New York City and theater. In the summer of 1961, she spent seven weeks in the République du Congo with the Operation-Crossroads Africa Project—helping to build a youth center in the small village of Mouyundzi.

A watershed in her life occurred in the spring of 1962 when two leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Charles Sherrod and Charles Jones, visited her campus. Arriving on campus with Sherrod and Jones was Peggy Dammond (now Preacely) from Harlem.

*Kathy and I were examining ourselves in the light of the Movement, as were many of our friends. Imagine two African-American college girls — one at Hunter College, the other at Skidmore — talking late into the night on the phone about justice, freedom, and risk taking and asking, “If not now, when, and if not me, then who?” Oh sure, we had our boyfriends and our loves and passions for swimming in the ocean and writing poetry and dreaming of visiting Paris, France! But the subtext of our lives was the MOVEMENT... Each one of us had a family tale of racism, of being denied fair treatment. Those southern students, our peers, were standing tall, and Kathy and I felt compelled to join them.*

—Peggy Trotter Dammond Preacely, *It Was Simply in My Blood*



That summer the two friends traveled with other college students to work as field workers to register black voters in Lee County as part of SNCC’s Southwest Georgia Project. They were lucky to be staying with Mama Dolly Raines (left), who was considered the mother of the Albany Movement and worked closely with Charles Sherrod.

Collins, along with Dammond, Penny Patch and Prathia Hall canvassed door-to-door in Terrell County, urging black residents to register to vote and taking them to the county courthouse to help them do so. They also spoke at the county churches to urge others to do the same. As part of the Albany Movement, Conwell was arrested twice—once for refusing to stop praying with six others on the steps of City Hall. The day after she and others spoke at the Mount Olive Church in Terrell County in Georgia, white supremacists burned the church to the ground.

*Kathleen’s first two days under arrest were spent in the Albany jail. ‘The women’s cell overlooked an open latrine. It was hot, ventilation was poor and there were 10 of us in a cell meant to hold four. The place was crawling with vermin.’ Kathleen was transferred to the Leesburg Stockade, about 11 miles from Albany. Kathleen said that in Leesburg 59 women were crowded in a cell 25 feet long and 10 feet wide and given two meals a day. Breakfast consisted of chicory and cold grits. Supper consisted of one fried egg, black-eye peas, corn bread and water. They were allowed no books. Their time was spent singing freedom songs and hymns, praying and playing cards with a smuggled-in deck... They used part of the time to teach other prisoners about civil rights and voting registration.*

—The Jersey Journal, September 1962

Conwell returned to Jersey City in September of 1962 and spoke to an overflowing crowd of 700 at the Mt. Pisgah A.M.E. Church, urging the congregation (according to the September 25, 1962 *Hudson Dispatch*) “to spurn ‘hatred...and learn to love’ those who oppress them, both in the south as well as the north because ‘we believe in God...who will open the doors and break down the walls of segregation.’”

She told the congregation about a white student who was arrested with them and offered a deal by the deputy sheriff to be let out on bail. When he refused to desert his friends the town sheriff threw the young man into a cell with some of the town’s “riff-raff,” shouting: “Here’s a ni--er-lover—let him have

it!" The boy sustained a broken jaw and three broken ribs, but later simply told Conwell that it was just "one of our occupational hazards." She spoke about a second boy who had been chased by a truck and across a field before he was being beaten unmercifully.

The *Jersey Journal* praised Conwell's eloquence and oratory, and reported that the congregation was brought to tears by "a slip of a girl whose vocation is not the pulpit, but maybe it should be." Conwell "tearfully appealed for justice for her race, appealed to the heart of humanity for the recognition of the Negro as a child of God, as a man with a bleeding heart in a world that hasn't cared."

In 2002, civil rights activist Ralph Allen recalled hearing Collins use the words "I have a dream" in the prayer service that day. Although there is no established origin for the phrase made famous by Reverend Martin Luther King — he first used it in a speech in November of that year — historians cite three possible sources. One of them is Kathleen Collins.

During her college years, Conwell wrote thoughtful editorials for the school paper (*The Skidmore News*), including a history of SNCC and think pieces on Africa, Red China, discrimination, freedom of the press and the United Nations. They were all about creating a better world — one that she was already trying to change with little regard for her personal safety. Conwell graduated from Skidmore in 1963 with a BA in Philosophy and Religion.

After graduating Skidmore, Kathleen taught high school French in Newton, MA and attended graduate school at Harvard at night. In 1965, she won a John Whitney Hay scholarship, enabling her to pursue her masters in French literature through the Middlebury program at the Sorbonne in Paris. She took a course at there on the adaptation of literature into film, which ignited her interest in cinema.

In 1966, after getting her degree, she returned to the US and joined NET, the New York City public broadcasting network, working on such programs as *American Dream Machine*, *The Fifty-First State* and *Black Journal*. She trained under John Carter, one of the first black editors to join the union. He thought Kathleen had real talent and he helped her get her union card in an astonishing three years. After NET, she worked as an editor for the BBC, Craven Films, Belafonte Enterprises, Bill Jersey Productions, William Greaves Productions, and the United States Information Agency.

On her own, Kathleen began writing stories. She wrote her first screenplay in 1971, but later remembered, "Nobody would give any money to a black woman to direct a film. It was probably the most discouraging time of my life."

By 1974, she had married and divorced Douglas Collins; had two children, Nina and Emilio; and was working as a professor of film history and screenwriting at the City College of New York. In the following two years she also worked as assistant director for the Broadway musicals "1600 Pennsylvania Avenue" (Gilbert Moses directing) and "The Wiz" (Geoffrey Holder) as well as on Lincoln Center's "Black Picture Show," which was written and directed by Bill Gunn. In the fall of 1976, Joseph Papp directed a workshop of Collins's and composer Michael D. Minard's musical "Portrait of Katherine" at the Public Theatre. This play was later performed as "Almost Music."

One of her City College students, Ronald K. Gray, encouraged her to direct her own films. Collins was now living now in Piermont, NY (besides her work at CCNY, she was also teaching French at the Green Meadow School in Spring Valley), and she chose to adapt a short story collection, *The Cruz Chronicles* by her friend and nearby South Nyack resident, Henry H. Roth, for her first film. It was very much a local affair. The composer for the film who worked with her on "Almost Music," Michael D. Minard, was



sharing Roth's house at the time and associate producer Eleanor Charles came from Spring Valley. Charles also scouted locations for the shoot in nearby areas of Rockland County.

***The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy*** started with an initial investment of a mere \$5,000 from friends plus a line of credit from DuArt Labs. The 1980 film, which chronicled the adventures of three Puerto Rican brothers scraping by while contending with the ghost of their dead father, eventually won First Prize at the prestigious Sinking Creek Film Festival. Collins's decision to make a film on a Latino subject bothered some critics, but she felt she needed some distance from her own world for her first film. When asked later in life if she thought that black and women filmmakers had an obligation to address issues relating to race and gender, she replied, "I think you have an even greater obligation to deal with your own obsessions." Talking about the experience of making ***The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy***, she recalled, "It was a terribly hard film. It was awful doing a movie for \$5,000. It was like going down a terribly long tunnel... But we did it. And we did it because Ronald [Gray] and I were really very good partners and have remained very good partners. We both have an incredible tenacity."

The film was shot in 1979 in Rockland County, NY, with most locations centered in the riverside town of Piermont. The brothers' run-down house still stands (now in much better condition) on the dead-end part of Paradise Avenue, a quiet lane that runs parallel to the winding Sparkhill Creek, which also appears in the film. Collins wasn't the only one who found her hometown of Piermont cinematically interesting — in 1983 Woody Allen used it as his Depression-era backdrop for *The Purple Rose of Cairo*.

The cast was comprised of local New York actors known mostly for their theater work. The Cruz brothers were played by Randy Ruiz, who had been in Elizabeth Swados's Broadway musical, "Runaways;" Lionel Pina, who had previously appeared in *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Marathon Man* and a PBS series, *Watch Your Mouth*; and Jose Machado, who was in *The Goodbye Girl* and Robert Young's movie *Short Eyes*. Jose Aybar, of nearby Haverstraw, sang the film's theme song, "Somos Hermanos." The only non-local exception was Californian Sylvia Field, who portrayed Miss Malloy. Even Field had a local connection — her son-in-law Mike Kellin was Henry H. Roth's South Nyack neighbor. Although Field's long film career dated back to 1928, audiences knew her best as Mrs. Wilson on the *Dennis the Menace* television series.

Collins, who was the recipient of writing fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and in 1982 and 1983 a finalist for the Susan Blackburn International Prize for Playwriting, always considered herself a writer first. But it was a filmmaker, Haile Gerima, who introduced Collins to the author who most influenced her work — Lorraine Hansberry, the playwright of "A Raisin in the Sun."

*A lot of her preoccupations are my preoccupations. She had a really incredible sense of life that fascinates me; anything in life was accessible for her to write about, instead of feeling the black experience was the only experience she could write about. And it was that breadth of vision that I have always sensed was ultimately my vision...*

*My first commitment is actually to writing and the form that that takes is really largely dependent on what's on my mind. I've been writing now for almost 20 years... So when I first start something, I always go to the typewriter... The older I get, I have this feeling of being very connected with Lorraine Hansberry. I've never found another black writer who I felt was asking the same questions I was asking until I started reading her work... And the fact that she was able to encompass this wide range of experience, from Jewish intellectuals to black middle class to Africa—she had a really incredible sense of life that fascinates me. That anything in life was accessible for her to write about... The thing that interests me about her, probably more than anyone else, is her illness. She died very young, and she died basically eaten up. My theory is that*

*she was not only way ahead of her time, but that success came at a time when she was not able to absorb it without its destructive elements eating her body up.*

— Interview with David Nicholson, *Black Film Review*, Winter 1988/89

Hansberry must have been very much on Collins's mind because the filmmaker fell ill after completing ***The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy***.

*My basic premise is that illness is psychic disconnection of some kind. And I had a period of time when I was ill. I still have to struggle with it. The nature of illness and female success and the capacity of the female to acknowledge its own intelligence is a subject that interests me a lot... I had just finished a first movie, and knew that I had it, knew that I had the talent. Knew that my own creative power was finally surfacing, that all the years of working quietly, and quite alone, were beginning to pay off. It was basically a four-year cycle, which I'm just coming out of. When I did *The Cruz Brothers*, I knew I had something. It was 1979 and I was 37. It probably takes that long to mature...*

— Interview with David Nicholson, *Black Film Review*, Winter 1988/89

Collins's next film, ***Losing Ground***, followed in 1982 and starred Seret Scott, Bill Gunn, and Duane Jones. (Her screenplay, which differs in some significant ways from the film, is included in *Screenplays of the African-American Experience*, 1991, edited by Phyllis Rauch Klotman.) Collins began filming having initially raised \$25,000 of the final production cost of \$125,000.

A comedic drama, ***Losing Ground*** was one of the very first fictional features by an African-American woman filmmaker. It tells the story of Sara Rogers, a brilliant and beautiful black philosophy professor (played by Collins's close friend Seret Scott), and Victor, her outgoing artist husband, at a marital crossroad. When Victor rents a summer country house to celebrate a museum sale, the couple's summer idyll quickly goes awry. While Victor woos and paints Celia, a lovely local Hispanic girl, Sara pursues her research into the religious and philosophical meaning of ecstatic abandon, and her search to find it in her own life. When she agrees to perform in a student's thesis film, Sara is charmed by her costar, the charming uncle of the filmmaker. The plot of the student film, a retelling of the song "Frankie and Johnny" mirrors the troubles in Sara's own marriage. When the crisis in her marriage erupts, Sara's submerged anger and resentment come out realistically, honestly, and explosively. The film ends with no easy resolutions.

*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.*

— Interview with David Nicholson, *Black Film Review*, Winter 1988/89

***Losing Ground*** won First Prize at the Figueroa International Film Festival in Portugal and garnered some international acclaim but received little notice in the United States.

During those years of activity in the early 1980s, Collins also produced equally remarkable dramas. Her two most famous plays were part of The Women's Project. "In the Midnight Hour" (1980) portrayed a middle-class black family at the outset of the civil rights movement, and was directed by Billie Allen, who played the mother in ***Losing Ground***. "The Brothers" (1982) was published in Margaret B. Wilkerson's *Nine Plays by Black Women* (1986) and named one of the twelve outstanding plays of the season by the Theatre Communications Group. It delineates the impact of racism and sexism on a middle-class black family from 1948 to 1968 as articulated by six intelligent, witty, and strikingly different women. The brothers themselves, though never seen, are vibrant presences through the women's remarks. "The

*Brothers*” was produced at the American Place Theater and featured many familiar faces from ***Losing Ground***. Billie Allen directed, the music was once again by Michael D. Minard, Duane Jones performed three roles (he was also Assistant Stage Manager), and Seret Scott was also in the cast.

Themes frequently explored in Collins’s work are issues of marital malaise, male dominance and impotence, and freedom of expression and intellectual pursuit. Her protagonists are cited as “typically self-reflective women who move from a state of subjugation to empowerment.”

In 1983, Collins reconnected with Alfred Prettyman, whom she had known twenty years earlier in her SNCC days. They married four years later at her home in Nyack, NY with family in attendance. Prettyman, a philosopher and publisher, was also the head of the Society for the Study of Africana Philosophy (SSAP), based in New York City. SSAP is a forum for the discussion of philosophical ideas. It was established to provide a network of support for young African American philosophers and other intellectuals and to bring alternative voices to re-center the predominantly Eurocentric focus of and lack of diversity in most academic philosophy departments.

One week after their marriage, she learned that she had metastasized breast cancer. Collins kept this information to herself over the next year. She did not even tell her children of her illness until it was impossible to conceal it any longer.

At the time of her death in 1988, Collins left behind many projects including the screenplay, “Conversations with Julie;” a film musical she wrote with Michael D. Minard entitled “A Summer Diary;” her sixth stage play, “Waiting for Jane;” and a final draft of her novel, *Lollie: A Suburban Tale*. She was just 46 years old. One of the first black American women to produce a feature-length film, she is considered to have “changed the face and content of the black womanist film.” Collins’s work is significant in that it conveys images of people of color, particularly women, in ways that even now are rarely seen in popular culture. She challenged stereotypes and explored the interlocking oppressions of gender, race, and class.



Collins was survived by her husband, Alfred Prettyman; her daughter; Nina Lorez Collins (left), who is responsible for the rebirth of her mother’s two films; her son, Emilio Collins (right), an executive vice president for the NBA; her step-mother, Loretta Conwell, now 108 years old; and a sister, Francine Conwell Brown, of Rochester, NY. Nina is currently working on a memoir of her mother.



*We were close. My mother raised my brother Emilio and I alone, and what we may have lost to her bouts of depression... we gained in strength, passion and a straightforward kind of no-bullshit approach to life.*

— Nina Lorez Collins on her mother, Kathleen Collins

Collins’s untimely death robbed not only her family of her presence, but also the American cinema and theatre of one of its most innovative talents. In the 1970s Collins wrote a series of short stories she called “Losing Ground.” They were never published but she loved the title and kept it for her

first feature film. That story collection, now titled *“Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?”* will be published by Ecco Press, an imprint of HarperCollins, in the Fall of 2016.

## The Call

And what is the real reason we are here,  
If not to remember  
And in remembering regain our faith  
That what was  
Is the same  
And what will be.

But we forget  
And begin to think of ourselves as separate fragments  
Distinct from each other,  
Worlds apart,  
Alone inside our solitude  
We forget to remember.  
We forget that the question is always the same.  
Faith or doubt  
Love or fear  
Truth or indifference.

We forget to remember that the breath that unites us  
Is everywhere the same,  
That the air between the spaces of our living unites all things,  
That the sound of love rings constantly.

—Kathleen Collins Prettyman, 1987



**“My friend and sister, Kathleen Conwell Collins Prettyman”  
from Peggy Dammond Preacely**

In the spring of 1962 I met one of my best friends; Kathleen Conwell. We were both college students seeking to find a way to support the Southern student sit-in movement that had captured the nation’s attention. Kathy was a student at Skidmore College and I was barely hanging on as an erstwhile Hunter College drop-out, Freedom Rider and sit-in veteran fresh from a week in jail in Crisfield Maryland after a Christmas Eve sit in during the winter of 1961.

Somehow Kathy and I connected during that spring and remained spiritually and literally part of each other’s lives until her untimely death in 1988.

I was raised in Harlem and Kathy was from Jersey City, New Jersey and when we met up at a New York civil rights meeting we recognized we were kindred spirits seeking to bear witness to the movement with our bodies and souls. Our intellectual curiosities had led us as high school students to read Sartre, Fanon, Paolo Freire, Martin Buber, Teilhard de Chardin, and Wole Soyinka among others, and they had stirred our minds and passions and made us seekers of truth. Our lives were intense and diverse and we held an adventurous and exploratory world view. During that period Kathy and my younger brother Hank fell for each other and spent many warm nights on Harlem rooftops or walking the bridges of New York City reciting poetry and arguing philosophy.

In the spring of 1962 when Charles Sherrod and Charles Jones of The Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) came North to recruit Black and White college students to join the SNCC Voter Registration campaign in the deep South, we both knew we just had to go!

After some non-violent training and orientation both in New York and later in the Atlanta offices of SNCC, Kathy and I were assigned to live and work in rural Southwest Georgia as SNCC Field Workers. Our job was to win the confidence of disenfranchised Black sharecroppers and encourage them that they had the right to vote.

We spent blistering hot days knocking on doors of back country shacks, singing long-meter African American church hymns and Negro spirituals and teaching late night literacy classes in isolated rural

churches that had been burned down by the Klan. Many nights Kathy and I were afraid as we heard shots and shouts from the cotton and soy bean fields that surrounded the small house we lived in with Mama Dolly Raines the courageous Black woman who had opened her home to us SNCC workers despite the risk it meant to her and her family. Although Mama Dolly knew we had pledged to be non-violent, she let us know that she was gonna keep her trusty shot gun at the ready anyway! Whenever we were arrested and jailed that summer Kathy's strident voice could be heard singing hymns and Freedom Songs as she clapped and moved her lithe body in time to the rhythms and the beat. Music was entrenched in Kathy's soul and part of her very being.

Once we returned to the North, Kathy and I remained close friends regardless of where either of us lived; Boston, San Francisco, Piermont, Nyack, New York City or Los Angeles. Eventually our four children became friends and even our various husbands met occasionally trying to keep up with the many changes in our two lives.

Kathy and I both had a deep yearning for spiritual answers and continued our search for truth and meaning and shared our seeking in letters and long late night phone calls. Over the years Kathy became a second daughter to my parents in New York, especially after my brother Hank's untimely death in 1972, and she even wrote a play/short story based on my family's early life entitled "In the Midnight Hour." As we continued on our separate life journeys I deeply admired Kathy's creative writing and editing talents as she developed her craft and became well known for her unique ability to capture the lives of her characters in her plays and novels and films. I had the opportunity to screen ***Losing Ground*** with her here in Los Angeles in its early cut.

I miss Kathy every day, but am sustained by knowing that we bonded forever in those scorching cotton fields of the deep South. I am forever enriched by our friendship and love.

— Peggy Dammond Preacely, MPH – Long Beach, California 2015  
(the writer was an organizer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and is a recipient of the 2015 Rosa Parks Award from the California chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference)

### **From Julie Dash, director**

"I began making films in the Studio Museum of Harlem's cinematography workshop, and later as a film student at CCNY. Jessie Maple, Madeline Anderson and Kathleen Collins-Prettyman came along before me, and there's no doubt about it, at that time I was inspired by the work these women were producing. I followed their lead and a desire to make longer films, dramatic, narrative films. At UCLA I became a part of what they now call the LA Rebellion."



## “Kathleen Collins: Quiet Genius, Out of Time and Place” from L.H. Stallings

Sometimes creative and artistic individuals provide the world with artifacts that may exceed the limited cultural and political aims of a particular moment. But if she and her art are really good, though we are not quite ready, they will wait for us to catch up and discover their beauty, truth, and meaning: Even if it means doing so from the afterlife. Such is the case with Kathleen Collins and the films she left us with: ***The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy*** (1980) and ***Losing Ground*** (1982).

Kathleen Collins’s films are indelibly shaped by the sovereignty of quiet and an aesthetic of quiet. In his tremendously powerful book, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, Kevin Quashie explains that “[q]uiet...is a metaphor for the full range of one’s inner life—one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears. The inner life is not apolitical or without social value, but neither is it determined by publicness. In fact, the interior—dynamic and ravishing—is a stay against the dominance of the social world; it has its own sovereignty....no less potent in its ineffability. Quiet.”

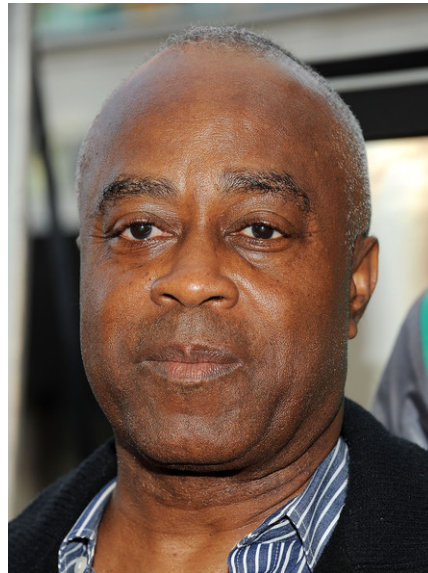
Quiet, then, perfectly describes what Collins brought to the screen through her stories and characters heralding the richness and complexity of black life—their interior lives and world. She did so in an era directly following tremendous racialized political upheaval in the U.S. and before a cultural revival and revision of black independent filmmaking too often credited to so many others. Hence, Kathleen Collins might be described as a filmmaker out of time and out of place. Not simply because she was one of the few black women filmmakers and film professors in the 1980s editing, producing, writing, and directing work outside of the Hollywood studio system. No. Collins was out of time and place because she made films that questioned notions of realism and forms of humanism that insisted on particularly oppressive arrangements of race, gender, class and nation. She made films that highlighted why external cultural and political circumstances or conditions should not contain and influence an interior self.

For Collins, this disjointment of timing between the external world and interior sense of self would become her trademark vision on film. From *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy*, her first film about three Puerto Rican brothers as they try to make their way in the world guided by the consistent presence of their father's ghost, to her second film—*Losing Ground*—about a black woman philosophy professor in search of ecstasy that will not come via the domesticity of marriage.

Being the first of a few, however, is not the reason for this revival of her work. Rather, it is a reflection of her gift as a filmmaker and evidence that her cinematic vision of quiet resonates with a new generation of black, women, and queer filmmakers and audiences hungry for new ways of being and representing themselves. Collins's refusal to exist in one political or cultural arrangement of time comes with evidence that she is having as active an afterlife as the ghost in her first film. Everyday new generations of filmmakers, film scholars, and film critics are rediscovering her genius. Discovering, as Collins taught, that their imaginations do not have to be limited and confined to particular scripts of race, gender, class, or nation.

—*LaMonda Horton Stallings*

(the writer is Associate Professor of Gender Studies and African American Literature and Culture at Indiana University-Bloomington and author of *Mutha is Half a Word!: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (2007) and *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (2015).



## Charles Burnett on Kathleen Collins

I met Katherine Collins in the 1980s in New York City at a gathering of black independent filmmakers. It was sort of a “who’s who” of black independent filmmakers; in fact a few of the filmmakers whose works are showing in this series at the Lincoln Center were there. I believe Bill Gunn, Bill Greaves and Ronald Grey, Robert Gardner, and Warrington Hudlin and Jacqueline Shearer—to name a few—were there.

I haven't seen Kathleen's films in a while but I clearly remember them. It was obvious that she was very talented and more than qualified to cross over to the studio system if given the opportunity. She made two feature films when most of us only had one. She was a talented writer, director, producer and teacher. She was a pioneer in many respects.



The time I spent with Kathleen the most was when we all were in Paris together. A number of black independent filmmakers were invited to present their films in Paris. Bill Gunn, Bill Greaves, Haile Gerima. Charles Lane and Ayoka Chenzira to name a few were there and it felt like an historical event echoed the past. Bill Greaves put the tour in perspective by making an analogy of black artists and intellectuals that found recognition in Europe during the 30's. It was an inspiring experience for us. Though Kathleen was bravely struggling with health issues, the great reception she received in Paris and the subsequent support and respect from those that came into contact with her confirm her legacy of being a spirit of inspiration.

—Charles Burnett, Los Angeles, CA December 2014  
(the writer is the award-winning director of *Killer of Sheep*, *My Brother's Wedding*, *To Sleep with Anger* and *The Glass Shield* and a past recipient of the MacArthur Genius Award)



## **“My mother, Kathleen Collins, her films, and me” by Nina Lorez Collins**

My mother, Kathleen Collins's film career began back in 1972, when I was three. She was working at Channel Thirteen as an editor and there she met an aspiring young black cinematographer named Ronald Gray. The son of Jamaican immigrants, Ronald had fallen in love with movies as a teenager and somehow had the temerity to see film as a means to change cultural stereotypes of black people. Rejected by the WNET filmmaker-training program, he crashed and sat in on the course anyway, and that's where they first crossed paths. A couple years later Ronald heard that Mom was teaching at City College and there was buzz about her courses. “She was a single young black woman in the early 70s, and she'd been in the Civil Rights Movement, and at the Sorbonne, and she knew all this intimidating European film theory, specifically French New Wave Cinema; she was quickly becoming an icon.” She “literally had people following her down the halls.” The first class he took with her was in the Speech department, where the assignment was to analyze how three speeches by Malcolm X changed over time. He was blown away. “From a black woman? At the time this was revolutionary.”

They became close friends and by the late 1970s, after Ronald had made an award-winning short called *Transmorgification*, he and Mom partnered up with the intention of making movies together, a black duo, the likes of which the black film world, small as it was, had really not seen. Of his first few visits to

our house up in Piermont, New York, which felt like the boondocks to Bronx-born Ronald, he said, “your white chick neighbor Sylvia drove a big Cadillac and your mom was clearly involved with her husband. I’d never met people like this before.” Ronald was slightly younger than Mom, tall and skinny with an Afro and a cocky attitude about what he could and wanted to do with a camera, but essentially from an unsophisticated background. He was an incredible character – angry and charismatic with a hunger you could feel -- and over the next few years, as they made two movies out of our house, *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy* in 1980, and *Losing Ground* in 1982, struggling brutally with artistic disagreements and the extreme stress of never having enough funds, he basically lived with us.

Many a night Ronald spent in a sleeping bag on the floor of my bedroom, telling me stories about his childhood in the projects and about making movies. He tickled and teased me and nicknamed me and my girlfriends “The Piermont Pussycats.” There’s a photograph of me at thirteen sitting on Ronald’s shoulders. I have what will hopefully be the worst hairdo of my life, and am wearing a *Flashdance* cut-off sweatshirt and an extra fifteen lbs. He’s got on jeans and a tight-fitting green polyester short-sleeved button-down shirt, patterned with color headshots of Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe, a cast-off from my father I later learned. Emotionally, for me, Ronald was an older brother type, but never a father figure. With my mother and Emilio he could be explosive, but with me he was always jokey, and offered what felt like a safe affection, neither giving advice nor asserting authority.

In contrast, his relationship with [my younger brother] Emilio was awful. They were like oil and water and fought constantly. A tarot reader once told Mom that in another lifetime Ronald and Emilio had been Egyptian slave and master, and that was then taken for family gospel as the explanation for the frequent heated battles that took place between the six-, seven-year-old boy and the grown man. Ronald thought Emilio was a spoiled brat and even now, looking back, he justifies his roughness by saying “it was male shit. There were big men around, profane men, and he was just a boy.” I think what actually went on was that Ronald came from a place of great need, and he adored my mother and the haven she offered: artistically, aesthetically, culturally, and eventually sexually. He wanted all of it, us included. And Emilio, whether by dint of personality or really an issue of male competition, made the road hard. And Ronald didn’t have the emotional tools to deal with it.

Until I interviewed Ronald a few years ago, I’d never been aware that he and Mom were also romantically involved for a period, maybe for as long as a year. Ronald said “I never knew the details of her break up with Henry [Roth] (his predecessor and the author the stories on which *Cruz Brothers* was based), but one night I was asleep in the second floor back guestroom and she came naked into my bed saying ‘don’t talk. Make love to me.’” It was short-lived though and I don’t think it was any great passion. Mom valued Ronald tremendously as a colleague, but my sense is that romantically she very much had the upper hand here and considered him more of a dalliance than a partner. After her fortieth birthday party in 1982, a wild night of dancing and loud music, they wound up sleeping on the living room floor.

My best neighborhood friend Laurie Smith and I stayed up ‘til 4:00 am that night, smoking our first filched cigarettes and Ronald remembers me up early the next morning, tip-toeing through the room, over empty bottles and ashtrays. Mom was upset about “Nina seeing something” and Ronald got angry and yelled “why do I have to be a secret?” She told him that she “needed to keep her sexuality private from the kids.” He felt belittled, never important enough, and the romance soon soured. She moved on to Radar Long, a handsome young (like 21, young) gaffer/volunteer from the University of Pittsburgh, who came up to work on the set of *Losing Ground*.

Their first film together, her first ever, was *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy*, adapted from a short story written by Henry Roth. Not the *Call it Sleep* Henry Roth, a different one. This Henry Roth, married to the Cadillac-driving Sylvia, was the author of *The Cruz Chronicles*, a novel of loosely connected stories about a trio of Puerto Rican brothers and their dead father. The movie tells the story of a summer during which the three young men take a job renovating the crumbling estate of a dying old woman. They made the film with \$5,000 over fourteen sixteen-hour shoot days. Her students worked for free and for the duration of the shoot everyone lived in our house in Piermont, on floors, couches, in hallways, wherever they could lay their heads.

Ronald described one of the producers as a “friend with juice who knew people with homes,” which was useful because they didn’t have a location budget. The whole experience “was groundbreaking because everyone was black,” but it was also enormously stressful – no money, no sleep, huge fights. When Ronald talks about the *Cruz Brothers* shoot, he refers more than once to how hungry he was all the time, and how his pants were hanging off his frame. They had to shoot a week at a time without seeing dailies and he recalled a moment when he and Mom had such a big fight that he threw her to the ground. Ultimately, they managed to feed everyone on rice and beans; they begged and borrowed whatever money they could get their hands on, and by the end of 1979 they had made and cut the movie and felt like they were truly professionals.

In an interview for the book *Reel Women of Color*, Mom is quoted saying “it was awful doing a movie for \$5,000. It was like going down a terribly long tunnel. It was frightening. I was thirty-seven, not old, but it wasn’t like I was twenty-one. And I had children and all that stuff. But we did it because Ronald and I were really good partners...We both have an incredible tenacity.”

The movie was well received and at that point Mom started to feel her voice falling into place. Grants became easier and invitations started to roll in. In 1980 they were invited to an “Advantages through Adversity” conference. She was featured alongside acclaimed director Charles Burnett (“Killer of Sheep”), and it was then that she realized she had made the leap from editing documentaries to making fiction films. Art. Next came an American Film Institute grant of \$10,000 in 1981, and that same year a theater company in Pittsburgh mounted her play “The Brothers” and it was a success. They felt like they were on their way, and Mom decided she was ready to try and shoot her own material. In 1981 she wrote the script for *Losing Ground* and started raising money for what would be her biggest accomplishment.

I take the old VHS copies of her movies out of trunk and the cardboard covers are moldy. I go online to see if the movies are distributed anywhere and find that they aren’t any longer, although the Donnell Library at the New York Public Library screened them both a few years back, so the reels must be floating around somewhere. After a dozen phone calls I track down the original films at DuArt film lab on West 55<sup>th</sup> Street, and I start the process of having high quality masters made of the originals. A few weeks later I sit down to watch.

*Losing Ground*, starring Seret Scott and Bill Gunn as a married couple, he an artist and she a philosophy professor, is essentially the story of a woman’s emotional awakening within a troubled marriage. A loftier description, which is also apt, is that it’s about a woman in search of ecstasy in all its realms, the intellectual, physical, artistic, even religious. Like all of Mom’s best work, what’s groundbreaking about it is that at the time, most “black” art, particularly film, was ghettoized. She was writing about normal, everyday life, about black people who get up in the morning and think about whether or not they are in love, about their kids or their parents or whether they have enough money, about the life and death concerns of daily life.

By *not* focusing on race, or even feminism, Mom managed to shed a new perspective on both those issues. Sara Rogers, the heroine of ***Losing Ground***, is a kind of black woman who had never before been seen in film. We know her *now*, thirty years later, in the roles sometimes played by actresses like Halle Berry or Felicia Rashad or Angela Bassett, but in 1980, these women still didn't have a voice. White viewers didn't know these women existed. And even in 2010, Yale University professor Terri Francis told me that when she screens the film, her black female students are incredulous: *a black female philosophy professor as the star in a film?*

Sara (Seret), in her late twenties, is a successful scholar and teacher of philosophy. Her research focuses on the subject of ecstatic experience, on the work of Jean Genet and the Existentialists. For her flamboyant artist husband, Victor (Bill), who is just beginning to have some success selling his paintings, Sara's strength and confidence have been a supportive rock of stability. A smooth, seemingly easy-going extrovert with a warm and infectious manner, Victor is something of a philanderer, disappearing sometimes for days at a time. Sara's response in the past has been to more or less accept this aspect of her marriage with resignation and quiet resentment. But now, after seven years together, her patience is wearing thin, particularly when he criticizes her long hours spent in the library. It's clear that his unspoken expectation of her as a woman is that she be there for him at all times when he is not painting.

To ease the tension between them, Victor suggests they rent a house for the summer in an old upstate New York community known for its picturesque Victorian mansions. Swept along by his enthusiasm, Sara agrees to this plan, but is annoyed by his lack of concern that the library there will be inadequate for her research.

The scene is set with measured patience and in a gorgeous, vibrant color, an almost painterly style of cinematography. We get the feel of the characters and their situation and when crisis erupts in their relationship, in the form of Celia, a gorgeous young Puerto Rican portrait study, played with an innocent yet saucy eroticism by Maritza Rivera, the deep-seated roots of Sara and Victor's unhappiness are clearly visible. The emotional awakening that Sara embarks on, carried by a shock of recognition at her fierce anger and resentment, is even deeper than the more surface realization that she has not fully confronted her sexual emotions. It's a movie about how women come to understand their desires, and how these desires might be over determined by both race and gender.

It's also a film about art. Every character surrounding Sarah is an artist; her mother is an actor; husband a painter; Celia a dancer and portrait subject. Her student is an aspiring filmmaker and the man she meets in the library an actor. There's a moment in the film when Sara watches Victor climb into a sleeping bag with a reluctant Celia and she, Sara, cries out "*Don't take that giant 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 artsy-craftsy paintbrush...I got nothing to take out, damn it...that's what's uneven, that I got nothing to take out!*" Sara understands here that Victor's art is sexualized, and visible, and part of her process in the film is coming to terms for herself with her own relationship to art and sexuality.

Among Sara's intellectual projects is a paper she's writing on ecstasy. The research for the paper makes her question her own lack of intimate knowledge of ecstasy and ultimately compels her to find it, which she does through agreeing to act in a student film with a man named Duke (Duane Jones), a former theologian who is now an out-of-work actor. Duke plays the role of Johnny to Sarah's Frankie, two vaudevillian actors (more artists) whose love is imperiled by the arrival of Another Woman. So we have a film within a film, and when Frankie shoots and kills the other woman, Sara feels her power and comes

to life in a way she has never before experienced. Empowerment through violence? Was this a message from my childhood? To some extent, yes.

When Ronald talks about the stress of getting ***Losing Ground*** completed, he gets most heated remembering the weeks when they were waiting for a hoped-upon grant from ADR, West German Television. Mom had applied for an NEA grant independently, and didn't get it. They were talking about collateralizing the house; Ronald got evicted from his apartment; was using safety pins to hold up his pants he was so skinny; they had absolutely no money. He says that at that point, "the only thing in life that mattered to me was that movie" and he recalls gargantuan fights with Mom while they were editing on the Steenbeck in our dining room. Arguments about direction, about who was better at cutting; he remembers her spitting at him, him "whacking her in the face," her "hitting him with a tape dispenser." One day he left on his bicycle in a fury and when he came back ADR had called saying they wanted the movie and were going to wire \$50,000 so that they could finish it! Her response, after whooping with joy, was "Can we stop fighting now? For the children's sake?"

What I remember of the making of these films is chaos, and us being sent away for weeks during the actual shooting. They were both made in the summer: ***Cruz Bothers*** the summer I turned eleven, and we went to Grandma's in Bradley Beach; ***Losing Ground*** the summer I turned thirteen and we were sent out West to be with Granny Collins, who took us to their extremely rustic Idaho ranch, Slate Creek.

Impressions: the calm presence of Seret, who had been in Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby* and Ntozake Shange's "for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf," (one of the first plays on Broadway by a black woman), won a Drama Desk Award for her performance in the Broadway play *My Sister Eileen* and is now a successful theatre director; the astounding beauty of Maritza Rivera; the studly coolness of Bill Gunn and Duane Jones, both actually gay, and now dead. Bill was an actor, playwright, and filmmaker most known for his film *Ganja and Hess*, the only film selected for the American Critics Week at the 1973 Cannes Film Festival, and his play *Black Picture Show*, which was produced at Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theatre. He was an incredibly sexy man, who smoked a lot of pot, and Ronald said he was always extorting money from Mom for wine and gas. Duane, described everywhere on the Internet as "a cult figure who will forever be remembered as Ben in *Night of the Living Dead*" was tall and charming, and exceedingly kind.

There were also streams of students working as crew and hangers-on, and everyone stayed in our house, so it was like a giant slumber party all summer long, both summers. And after the shoot, there was post-production and editing, so the noise of the Steenbeck, the cutting, the spliced film on the floor, Mom and Ronald stressed out to the gills trying to prove themselves and achieve their vision. All that action was exhilarating, I suppose, and inspiring, but also phenomenally draining for everyone within reach.

Between the first film and the second is when Mom got sick for the first time, but she played it down. I was eleven, and it was just before Christmas, when she told us that she'd been called on an important business trip and we'd have to stay with Grandma for two weeks. We went off to Bradley Beach and I don't have any memory of what happened when we were reunited. Later there had to have been some conversation about a procedure she'd had done, because her breast had been cut into, and she was bandaged, but I know she never told us that she had cancer or that she'd been in the hospital and had a lumpectomy. We just accepted whatever it was that she said: that she'd been away for work, and that at some point around the same time she'd also had some minor procedure done to her breasts. But there was no scare that we were exposed to explicitly, of that I'm certain.

Many years later, before she died, she told me that this first time she'd gotten sick, this aforementioned December, she'd called Dad, terrified and in tears, panicked, as anyone would be, to tell him, and to ask for help—with us, and with the hospital stay. And he'd refused and told her to deal with it all herself. So she turned to Grandma for babysitting help and decided to lie to all of us. I don't know if this is true. I'm sure he'd deny it.

I discover in her trunk that she did share details of this first illness with some of her friends, although her description of it is odd, elliptical, and full of self-recrimination. From a letter she wrote to Peggy [Dammond Preacely] in the spring of 1980:

*A few weeks ago I underwent four hours of massive surgery for what they thought was lymph cancer. It turned out not to be though two small nodes were cancerous in the original biopsy prior to surgery... It has been an exceedingly nightmarish time, which I am now on the other side of. Truly. Once having said that I still don't know how to tell all the events surrounding it...the confrontation with a healer, the sessions with a family medicine man who recognized that my illness was an acting out of a family pattern of early deaths, hence his effort to treat, through me, all the family influences working upon me. The final decision to have the surgery was made with everyone in agreement and a wonderful surgeon who took a careful, conservative approach...*

*That is the overall story. It has so many tangents that I cannot easily reach...the things I discovered about my family, the return to visit aunts and uncles, the final access to my mother's letters before her death and the realization of how much her personality, her real personality (so much like mine) had been kept hidden from my sister and I...the strange abuse I realized my body had undergone in the last year, smoking, poor eating habits, a kind of physical and psychological draining that came from too much work...and Henry, the energy, my own energy and strength that I had turned over to him for several months at a terrible time in his life. All these tangents are woven in and out of weeks of anxiety, numbness, a kind of wall through which I looked at life and my children and from which I felt I would never emerge...death is there, too, the full recognition of its reality, its factual reality and the sense of fragility that it has left with me. And in the present...the return to careful habits of diet, meditation, exercise, etc, that I know now is a way of life I cannot tamper with AT ALL."*

The way she links her illness to her own childhood and loss of her own mother is powerful to me. Why does she even bring up Mommy Mildred's personality? What's the connection between the mother she lost as an infant and her own illness at age thirty-seven? I can only conclude that she's saying "my loss, my pain, made me sick." It's a way of keeping the connection alive, and of feeling safe while being afraid. She's *grasping* for her mother in her fear, and in doing so she's blurring their identities. I know, because I've done this too, or did it, for years. The thinking goes like this: if I get sick, I'm like her, somehow even *with* her. And in some twisted fundamental way, being with her is all that I crave, always. I spent my twenties in and out of therapy with various psychiatrists and psychologists who didn't make much headway, but one message got through: I realized that the years I spent fearing disease, hyperventilating every time I went to the doctor or had to get my breasts checked, was a way of staying connected to my mother. If I'm like her, I'm with her. If I'm not like her, we're separate.

When Mom lay dying many years later, she said to me "I've spent my whole life waiting to die and be with my mother," and those words haunted me for years. Now I know what she meant. Separating—giving up that romantic idea of all the ways we're alike, even in death—is yet another loss.

Kathleen also linked her illness to her creativity. In some of the professional interviews I found, all done around 1986, two years before her death, she refers to having been ill years earlier, saying: “My basic premise is that all illness is psychic disconnection of some kind...The nature of illness and female success and the capacity of the female to acknowledge its own intelligence is a subject that interests me...If there is any way in which women tend to be self-destructive it is in that area of creativity where they actually feel their own power and can't either acknowledge it or...go to the end of it. They get scared and retreat into illness or into having too many babies or destructive love affairs with men who run them ragged. Somewhere or other, they detour out of respect for their own creativity.”

Interesting theory. Is it true? I think it's safe to say that she thought it was true for herself—that she saw a connection between the power of her work and her own collapse.

The notion of illness and death as a punishment also speaks in some way to the question of why she kept her cancer a secret for so long. She was ashamed. She also really believed, for a long time, that she could heal herself, that it was a matter of her mind, and a certain emotional cleansing that would enable her to rid her body of the illness. From her journal:

*July 20, 1988*

*Call: I say out loud, oh dear, there is still a lump under my armpit and swollen lymph nodes on my neck, oh dear, I'm going to die...I have pain on the right muscle in my stomach...oh dear, I'm going to die...oh dear, I've done wrong, I must be wrong that these are tumors in my body, which mean I'm going to die...somewhere there is something false in this whole chain of reasoning. Help me to see it, that I may find a way out of this dead end into which I sink?*

*Response: Your life, your link to life comes from loving. This is the bread that feeds you, is feeding you into wellness. The bread of loving—to be chewed slowly and absorbed into the body. Death as punishment is one of your false themes (and deductions)—death as punishment and release from the despair implicit in living. Live the despair – without hiding behind death as an escape. Live the despair and leave your body out of it. It is self-healing. It is not your enemy. The notion of punishment, of holding-in, these notions of yours are life-draining.*

So there are a lot of theories, and they all hold some weight: she wanted to manage it by herself because she didn't want the burden of other people's grief and emotion around her illness; she was ashamed; she thought for a long time that she could heal herself. Finally, there's the sociological perspective. This was the late 1980s, and as Barbara Ehrenreich points out in her 2009 book *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*: “Luckily, no one has to go through breast cancer alone anymore. Forty years ago, before Betty Ford and other pioneer patients spoke out, the disease was a dread secret, endured in silence and euphemized in obituaries as a ‘long illness.’ Something about the conjecture of ‘breast,’ signifying sexuality and nurturance, and that other word, suggesting the claws of a devouring crustacean, spooked almost everyone.”

She's right, and this is relevant, and gives me yet more insight. It was indeed almost 30 years ago that Mom was a thirty-seven year old single mother of two with a diagnosis of breast cancer. It was a terrifying and shameful disease, not anywhere near the public, political issue it has become now, with pink ribbons and marathons and an entire month devoted to its awareness.

In any case, by August, there are signs of surrender in her journal:

August 7, 1988

*The WILL OF HE WHO GUIDES ME is gentle. Feel the thunder of change not only as a brutal awakening but as a softer and softer cushioning. Only under the delusion of separation does life seem harsh and unrelenting. To turn inwards is to feel change as the soft cushion of timely action. I REJOICE IN MY PROBLEMS, FOR THEY STIMULATE MY CONSCIOUSNESS TO OVERCOME ERROR THAT I MAY SEE THE BEAUTY OF THE DIVINE PERFECTION.*

“For Once in My Life I won’t let Sorrow Hurt Me.” These words are written in hand-painted white letters on a burnt umber watercolor background, hung in a simple 8 x 10 frame. It was always on a wall somewhere in the house I grew up in—in Mom’s bedroom, in the bathroom, sometimes in the hallway.

When a boyfriend pointed out that these are famous lyrics that have been sung by everyone from Frank Sinatra to Stevie Wonder to Harry Connick, Jr., I was dumbfounded. How had I lived with the weight of this sampler my whole life and never made the pop music connection? It had always struck me as a poignant reminder of the pain in my mother’s life, of her struggle, and then, after it became mine, of my own. I don’t know where she got it, or who made it, or why, but now it rests on the wainscot ledge in my bathroom, where it faces me when I’m in the tub, and I can also see the triumph in it. Did she make it? I doubt it; I never knew her to be particularly crafty in that way. But forget Stevie. The sentiment is all her: genuinely in pain, dramatic, poetic, and resolute.

—Nina Lorez Collins

(The writer was 19 when her mother Kathleen Collins died of metastasized breast cancer. She worked for many years as a book agent in New York before returning to Columbia University to study narrative medicine, sparked in part by her interest in writing about her mother’s experience of illness.)

## ***Losing Ground* “Mythbusters” Milestone Style**

The fact checkers at Milestone Films have found that an Internet search for “Kathleen Collins” is likely to yield a plethora of factual errors. So in the interest of clarity, we are providing this list of “busted myths.” Here’s the facts...

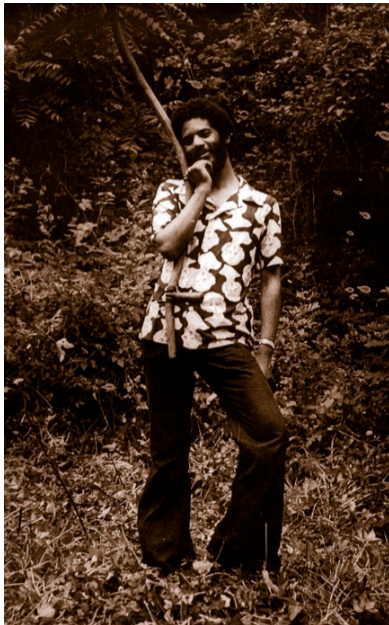
1. ***Losing Ground*** never showed on American Playhouse. This myth was published in Kathleen Collins’s *New York Times* obituary and may have originated there. Co-producer Ronald K. Gray confirms that the film showed on PBS in 1987, but only locally on WNET New York’s *Independent Focus*. (Not to be confused with the current series, *Independent Lens*.) There was never an American Playhouse screening.
2. For many years, *Gouldtown* has been listed as part of Collins’s filmography. In a 1986 interview with David Nicholson, the filmmaker is quoted saying: “we just finished this *Gouldtown* film, about my family. It’s a short, 40-minute film.” We don’t know if the quote was recorded accurately — or if it is, why she said it — but this film is another myth. Her daughter Nina writes: “Which brings me to the *Gouldtown* question, an odd one. My mother planned/hoped to make a film about *Gouldtown*, but she never did. Of that I’m certain. I was nine when she made ***The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy*** and twelve when she made ***Losing Ground***. She was then sick on and off and writing mostly screenplays until she died just after I turned 19. I would have known if she shot another film. That said, somehow the myth that *Gouldtown* actually exists as a film seems to have been promulgated. What I can tell you is that I have amassed a trove of all my mother’s work — short stories, plays, screenplays, diaries, notes — and all that I have found on the *Gouldtown* project is a two-page treatment and a long-ago published book on the



fascinating history of the settlement. There's definitely no film." Collins's co-producer Ronald K. Gray confirms the film was never shot.

3. There are many sources that state definitively that Kathleen Collins directed the first feature film by an African-American woman. This assertion is based on the notion that her film released in 1980, *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy*, is a feature. However, at just under 50 minutes, the film cannot truly be defined as a feature. In 1981, Jessie Maple directed the wonderful feature film *Will* which most historians have given the honor. And yet, even the honor bestowed up Maple comes into question according to research by the Women Film Pioneers project. Their website claims that according to contemporary newspaper accounts, in Kansas City, MO two African-American women directed silent films. Tressie Souders was credited with the 1922 film *A Woman's Error*. And the next year, Maria P. Williams produced and acted in her film *The Flames of Wrath*. But as neither film exists today, it is hard to say whether they were feature films or if the women received credit for directing. None of this really matters. There were many African-American women directing short dramas and both short and feature documentaries before Kathleen Collins. We can clearly state that at the time of her death in 1988,  *Losing Ground* was seen as an extremely important landmark in African American film history even though it was getting impossible to view. (There never was a home video release.) Just as she followed in the footsteps of friends and mentors, many careers were influenced by the work and charismatic personality of Kathleen Collins.

## Ronald K. Gray



*Ronald is probably more responsible for my becoming a filmmaker than anybody. He was a student of mine at City College and he would get angry at me for all the work I did on other people's films, saying that if we just got a little bit of money we could make a movie. That's how THE CRUZ BROTHERS got made.*

— Kathleen Collins

Ronald Gray is a filmmaker, musician and photographer. Working in film, he has been a producer, director, cinematographer and editor. His first film was the multi-award-winning *Transmagnifican Dambamuality* (1976), which also received two Creative Arts Program grants and one American Film Institute grant.

Gray collaborated with Kathleen Collins as co-producer, cinematographer and co-editor on *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy* and *Losing Ground*. He was the cinematographer on D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus' classics, *Dance Black America* (1983) and *Branford Marsalis: The Music Tells You* as well as Jeffrey

Wisotsky's Emmy Award nominee *The Blue Devils Come Home*, Rebecca Williams's *Sugar on the Floor*, and Ayoka Chenzira's *Alma's Rainbow, Pull Your Head to the Moon* and *Williamswood*. Gray was a cameraman and editor on Doug Harris's *Speaking in Tongues*. One of his more interesting creations was 1997's "Shadows Tearing," a collaboration between Sham Mosher, David Pleasant and Gray. The *New York Times* reviewed it this way:

*Mr. Mosher joined earth, air, fire and water with dance, music and architecture when Hybridium, his company, performed in the courtyard of what is now known as the Old American Can Factory, a cluster of 19th-century brick buildings near the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn. As spectators entered just before nightfall, they could stare into water-filled containers at the bottom of which films by Ronald K. Gray were projected showing newspaper headlines about lynchings and images of lynching victims. The dance itself was seldom thematically explicit. Nevertheless, as day departed and spotlights pierced nocturnal shadows, "Shadows Tearing" seemed a ceremonial acknowledgment of human suffering.*

"Shadows Tearing" went on to win the prestigious Bessie Award. Gray's most recent work as cinematographer was on Allan Roth's 2013 documentary *The Breath Courses Through Us*, about the 1960s avant-garde jazz group, the New York Art Quartet.

Gray taught cinematography for New York University's Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Film Program for fifteen years. He has also shot video and film for various organizations including the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Lincoln Center Performing Arts Library, and the Franklin Williams Caribbean Culture Center. He currently lives in New Jersey and is available for interviews on *Losing Ground* and *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy*.

## Seret Scott



*As a black actress, I'm aware that I'd be unemployed 95% of the time if all I did was theatre, but film and TV are just as difficult in terms of roles available and the work is for a shorter span of time. As a black playwright, I write with a political awareness that is decidedly unpopular and uncommercial. As a black director, I'm open to it all.*

—Seret Scott

Seret Scott was born on September 1, 1949 in Washington, DC. She is best known for her film role as Flora in Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby* (1978), while on television she appeared on *Miami Vice* and *The Cosby Show*. In the theater she is known best as a talented director of long standing.

Scott entered New York University in 1966 and spent three years exploring her interest in theater. But after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., she went south to join the Free Southern Theater and do her part to help African-Americans in their struggle for freedom and justice. "I found it difficult to reconcile what I was doing in the theater department at NYU with what was going on in the world." Scott toured Mississippi and Louisiana for nearly a year. According to an article in PrincetonInfo.com,

*They set up a makeshift stage and performed scripted plays as well as improvisational work, all relating to the events that were going on all around them. "Everywhere there were marches and sit-ins," says Scott. "We told the stories dramatically to help the people understand what was happening. They were part of it but often didn't always understand what they were doing or*

*what was going on.” This was the first time these itinerant farmers, migrant workers, and day laborers had ever seen a play... One of the troupe’s major goals was to improve voter registration among the black population.*

In the early 1970s, she landed her first leading role, in Ray Aranha’s “My Sister, My Sister,” a show that eventually made it to Broadway and gained her a Drama Desk Award for her role as SueBelle.

The transition from actor to director came unexpectedly for Scott. Her friend, Nancy Fales Garrett, had written a play, “Some Sweet Day,” which was to be performed in Connecticut and for which a director was needed. Garrett recommended Scott for the job. A positive review in the *New York Times* gave her the recognition she needed to find work directing plays in regional theaters around the country. Scott has also served as artistic associate at the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven, CT and an associate artist at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego. More recently, Scott has demonstrated her skill as a playwright with works such as “Safe House” and “Second Line.”



*“Actually, the earliest interest of mine was writing. I just never thought about it as something that would be of interest to anyone else. I was doing it because I loved doing it.”*

“Second Line” was autobiographical in parts and she actually wrote the main female role for herself — but by the time it was produced, she had outgrown the age of the character. Based on two African-American students given scholarships to college and trying to figure how best to affect change in society. Her one-woman play *The Owl Attacks Chronicles* is about her life in the theater while *Funnytime* is a one-act comedy about a married man who makes a fulltime commitment to his girlfriend. Her other plays include *Safehouse*, *No You Didn’t* and *Wine and Cheese*.

Scott currently lives in Teaneck, New Jersey and is available for interviews regarding the Kathleen Collins’s films.

## Bill Gunn



*“The attempt to bury Bill Gunn began in his life.” —  
Greg Tate, Village Voice*

William Harrison Gunn (July 15, 1929–April 5, 1989) was a playwright, novelist, actor and film director. A native of Philadelphia, Bill Gunn began his theatrical career as an actor. He made his Broadway debut in 1954 in “The Immoralist,” performed in the Off-Broadway drama “Take a Giant Step” in 1956 and then made his film debut in Martin Ritt’s feature *The Sound and the Fury* in 1959. Gunn appeared on *Look Up and Live* on CBS and wrote plays for live television anthology series.

Gunn's screenplays for *The Landlord* and *The Angel Levine* are considered classics, but the one feature film he wrote and directed in 1970 for Warner Brothers, *Stop*, was pulled shortly after its release. Since then, *Stop* has screened only for a Whitney Museum retrospective shortly after his death and at the BAM Cinematheque as part of a more recent career overview. Starring Marlene Clark, it dealt with two married couples on a vacation in Puerto Rico and their sexual experimentations. Although it was X-rated, it appears that the critical reception might have caused the film to first be re-cut and then shelved. It is unavailable now due to the lack of clearance information for the film's soundtrack.

Gunn's 1973 horror film *Ganja and Hess* (starring Duane Jones, Marlene Clark and Gunn) failed in its original run and was re-cut many times over the years before the original version was restored. It is now considered a classic. His drama *Johnnas* won an Emmy award in 1972. In 1980, Gunn directed a video production, *Personal Problems*, from a script by Ishmael Reed.

Gunn wrote more than 29 plays, two novels (*All the Rest Have Died* and *Rhinestone Sharecropping*), and several produced screenplays. A resident of Tappan, NY, he died from encephalitis at the Helen Hayes Hospital in West Haverstraw the day before his play, "The Forbidden City," opened at the Public Theater in New York. Joseph Papp, who oversaw the production of several of Gunn's plays, said, "He understood the kind of psychological relationship of blacks to whites more than anybody. He sort of knew both sides of the story in an emotional way." Gunn left his plays and manuscripts to the New York Shakespeare Festival. Spike Lee's remake of *Ganja and Hess*, now retitled *Da Sweet Blood of Jesus* is due out in 2015 and should create renewed interest in this talented filmmaker, actor, and writer.



Photo courtesy of Mark A. Reid ©1983



## Bill Gunn's letter to the *New York Times*, 1973

To the Editor,

*There are times when the white critic must sit down and listen. If he cannot listen and learn, then he must not concern himself with black creativity.*

*A children's story I wrote speaks of a black male child that dreamed of a strong white golden haired prince who would come and save him from being black. He came, and as time passed and the relationship moved forward, it was discovered that indeed the black child was the prince and he had saved himself from being white. That, too, is possible.*

*I have always tried to imagine the producers waiting anxiously for the black reviewers' opinions of "The Sound of Music" or "A Clockwork Orange."*

*I want to say that it is a terrible thing to be a black artist in this country—for reasons too private to expose to the arrogance of white criticism.*

*One white critic left my film "Ganja and Hess," after 20 minutes and reviewed the entire film. Another was to see three films in one day and review them all. This is a crime.*

*Three years of three different people's lives grades in one afternoon by a complete stranger to the artist and to the culture. A.H. Weiler states in his review of "Ganja and Hess" that a doctor of anthropology killed his assistant and is infected by a blood disease and becomes immortal. But this is not so, Mr. Weiler, the assistant committed suicide. I know this film does not address you, but in that auditorium you might have heard more than you were able to over the sounds of your own voice. Another critic wondered where was the race problem. If he looks closely, he will find it in his own review.*

*If I were white, I would probably be called "fresh and different. If I were European, "Ganja and Hess" might be "that little film you must see." Because I am black, do not even deserve the pride that one American feels for another when he discovers that a fellow countryman's film has been selected as the only American film to be shown during "Critic's Week" at the Cannes Film Festival, May 1973. Not one white critic from any of the major newspapers even mentioned it.*

*I am very proud of my ancestors in "Ganja and Hess." They worked hard, with a dedication to their art*

and race that is obviously foreign to the critics. I want to thank them and my black sisters and brothers who have expressed only gratitude and love for my effort.

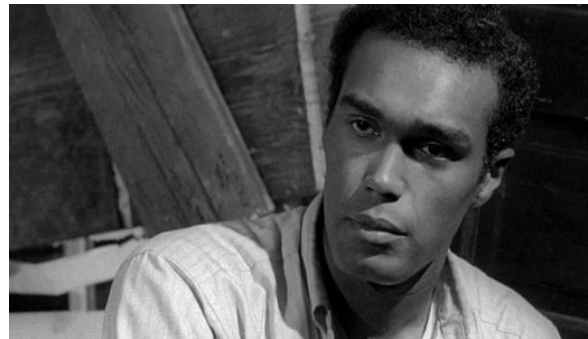
When I first came into the “theatre,” black women who were actresses were referred to as “great gals” by white directors and critics. Marlene Clark, one of the most beautiful women and actresses I have ever known, was referred to as a “brown-skinned looker” (*New York Post*). That kind of disrespect could not have been cultivated in 110 minutes. It must have taken a good 250 years.

Your newspapers and critics must realize that they are controlling black theater and film creativity with white criticism. Maybe if the black film craze continues, the white press might even find it necessary to employ black criticism. But if you can stop the craze in its tracks, maybe that won’t be necessary.

—Bill Gunn  
Author and director of “*Ganja and Hess*”  
New York, 1973

## Duane Jones

Duane Jones (February 2, 1937–July 22, 1988) acted in Kathleen Collins’s “The Brothers” for stage director Billie Allen the same year he appeared in *Losing Ground*. He is best remembered for his lead roles in two legendary genre films: George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968, selected for the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry in 1999) and Bill Gunn’s *Ganja and Hess*. His role as Ben in *Night of the Living Dead* — a black actor playing the lead in a zombie horror film — was seen



as a radical statement at the height of the civil rights movement and has spawned (pun intended) numerous dissertations. George Romero denies the political intent, saying simply that Jones was the best actor from all of his friends. In a 2010 *New York Times* interview, Romero said, the assassination of Martin Luther King before the film opened changed all that. “So all of a sudden the idea that Duane was black gave the film much more weight. But we certainly weren’t consciously thinking about that. So a lot of the analysis that I have seen written about the film is, I think, a bit overblown.” Jones himself once said, “It never occurred to me that I was hired because I was black. But it did occur to me that because I was black it would give a different historic element to the film.”

Theater, however, was Jones’s true love. He directed dozens of plays around the country over the course of many years. He was executive director of the Black Theater Alliance, a federation of theater companies, from 1976 to 1981, taught acting at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and was the executive director of the Richard Allen Center for Culture and Art. Jones also taught and lectured in Africa and the Caribbean. He was nominated for an Emmy for his performance in Bill Hansard’s docudrama *Good Luck Mr. Robinson* and was Executive Director of the Black Theater Alliance, Chairman of the Literature Department at Antioch College, and editor of *Caribe* magazine. Like Collins and Gunn, he too died young, due to cardiopulmonary arrest at the age of 51.

The character Duane L. Jones in *The Walking Dead* is a tribute to the actor.

## Billie Allen

*"I'm not a snob, you know... I'm not longing to do Macbeth, but I'd love to play a real 60-year-old Negro lady who thinks more about men than God." — Leila (Billie Allen) in **Losing Ground***

Wilhelmina Louise Allen was born on January 13, 1925 in Richmond, Virginia. She wrote in 2014:

*I was born to an activist mother in Richmond, Virginia. By the age of five I was attending rallies to organize the tobacco workers. That same year I sacrificed my Easter outfit to raise money for the Scottsboro Boys' defense. I kept my eyes on them everyday because, you see, I was seeing what it was like to have your world defined for you and what it is like to be liberated...*

*At the same time my mother brought me to New York to see the ballet, opera, and watch Uta Hagen and Paul Robeson perform on Broadway... My mother, the granddaughter of a slave, stood by my side as Marion Anderson sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee" at the Lincoln Memorial when she was denied the right to perform at Constitution Hall because of her color.*



Billie Allen came to New York after attending Hampton Institute (now Hampton University). She studied dance at the American School of Ballet and her first Broadway appearance was as a dancer for Jerome Robbins in the musical "On the Town" — with many other musicals to follow. In 1949, she appeared in the film *Souls of Sin* with William Greaves. The New York-based African-American filmmaker William D. Alexander produced the film.

Around 1953, Elia Kazan saw Allen dance and auditioned her for the role of Esmeralda in Tennessee Williams's "Camino Real." He became interested in her work and arranged for her to receive a scholarship to study with Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio. Allen also went on to study acting and directing with Lloyd Richards and Harold Clurman. The first play she appeared in was "Mamba's Daughter" with Ethel Waters. Some of her Broadway credits as an actor include the original stage versions of James Baldwin's "Blues for Mr. Charlie" and Ira Levin's "Critic's Choice." She later appeared in such classics as Adrienne Kennedy's "Funnyhouse of a Negro," and Robert L. Unger and Frederick Lights' "Bohikee Creek." Her performance in "Every Night When the Sun Goes Down" at the American Place Theatre earned her a Lucille Lortel nomination. As a co-founder of The Women's Project and Productions, Billie Allen directed Kathleen Collins' "In the Midnight Hour" and "The Brothers."

In television, she was one of the first African American performers with a recurring role on a network series, as a member of the Women's Army Corps on "The Phil Silvers Show" and later appeared in "Car 54, Where Are You?" in the early 1960s and "Law & Order." Her work in film included *Black Like Me* (1964) and *The Wiz* (1978).

In 2014, Allen was honored by Breaking Walls as a mentor, an artist, and an activist. For that event, she wrote "each of these steps on my life's journey has led me to a clear understanding of these young men and women of breaking walls, these young roots reaching out for water, and discovering their place in our society, our culture and the wide-wide world — and why that discovery is invaluable to their future and ours."

Billie Allen died on December 29, 2015.

## Gary Bolling

Gary Bolling has performed both in theater and in film. As part of the Negro Ensemble in 1974, he starred in J. E. Gaines's "Heaven and Hell's Agreement." In film, Bolling is known for his roles in Shirley Clarke's *The Cool World* (1963), *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974), and *Amazing Grace* (1974). In the theater, he was known for Ed Bullin's "In the Wine Time."

## The History of *Losing Ground*



From Left: Ronald K. Gray, producer Eleanor Charles, Kathleen Collins

In the 1970s, Kathleen Collins wrote a series of short stories she called "Losing Ground." They were never published but Collins loved the title and kept it for her first feature film. The initial \$25,000 to make *Losing Ground* came with a grant from The American Film Institute in association with The National Endowment for the Arts. Her crew numbered twenty-two and they were virtually a United Nations — made up mostly of her African-American, Latino, Chinese and Polish students from City College. At that time, German television was backing minority film directors. (Charles Burnett's *My Brother's Wedding* is one such example.) Collins and Gray submitted their script to the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (otherwise known as ARD). One day during their shoot, ARD notified Collins and Gray that the programmers had interest in their film and representatives would like to see a rough cut.

It was their big chance and Gray worked long hours over the next ten days to create a 30-minute sample. But after viewing it, the ARD reps responded that they wanted a much longer cut and that they were leaving in a week. Gray went back to work and by the time they left, the ARD reps were able to screen and approve a one-hour version. The total budget for *Losing Ground* was \$125,000 and for their investment, ARD received the rights to show the film in Germany and Austria for three years.

Ironically, this was to be the film's biggest audience. Distributors in the US and overseas apparently couldn't figure out an audience for the film. The indie scene was largely oddball films like *Eating Raoul* or star-driven romance comedies like *Moonlighting*. It wasn't until two years later that *The Cosby Show* premiered on television and four years before Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*. *Losing Ground* didn't feature poverty, gangs, or as Gray put it, "poor suffering black folk." There seems to have been no reviews of Collins's films by any major paper — in fact, the first instance of the *New York Times* covering her work in more than three sentences was her obituary.

One of Collins's influences for *Losing Ground* was the work of French filmmaker Eric Rohmer. In the *Black Film Review* interview she said, "That's the only person who's ever influenced me cinematically... because of his respect for language. And because he's very literary.... He's not the least bit afraid of language in film. *My Night at Maud's* probably influenced me more than any other movie. All of the *Moral Tales* were very important to me." — Interview with David Nicholson, *Black Film Review*, Winter 1988/89



## Kathleen Collins in Conversation With Oliver Franklin

OF: There has been a lot of discussion about definitions, especially the definition of a “Black film.” You have made a film without any Afro-Americans in it, yet it is a Black film perhaps because you directed it.

KC: That’s your answer. There can’t be a monopoly on form or content. I’m interested in solving certain questions such as: How do you do an interesting narrative film? So, I simply wanted a story that would be sufficiently difficult for me to want to solve some problems in narrative filmmaking.

OF: Let’s talk about some of these problems. “The Cruz Brothers” is part of a larger book, *The Cruz Chronicle: A Novel of Adventure and Close Calls* by Henry A. Roth.

KC: Yes, it is. I read the novel a few years ago. It’s the closest thing to a full American version of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by the Latin-American writer Marquez. What Roth had done was to translate into American language, style and content the kind of mythical figures that populate *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I was impressed with that as an achievement, because I’m interested in doing movies about minority people who are larger than life. They’re not real people but rather people who are mythical and whose solution to life’s problems are big, bold solutions, so the novel spoke to me personally.

OF: Since you are a writer, why didn’t you use one of your own works?

KC: I would like to do my own work, but I thought it was dangerous, before understanding the distance one needs from one’s works, to translate literature into film. So, I started with another work I admired with similar themes and problems, and yet by instinct I would have some distance because it wasn’t my work. The project started out as a small half hour film—although it turned out to be an hour long — so I took the easiest story, which is “The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy.”

OF: What specific problems came up when you started to translate the story into film?

KC: Three main problems. First, the presence of the father who is a ghost. In the story it’s easy for the writer to make the ghost’s presence real. In the film I had to ask myself if you see him or not. You could have the convention where the camera was swinging around and nobody was there, or one could use special effects and make him appear as a disembodied person. We finally decided to handle him through the cameras — the ghost is the camera with a slightly traditional disembodied voice-over. The second problem is the personality of Miss Malloy. In the story her personality is less evident. However, I wanted the audience to get a real sense of her. Then the third problem was who tells the story. In some parts the ghost tells the story, and Victor, the oldest brother, and his tape recorder also handle some of the narrative. In fact, if I’d really known it was going to be an hour-long story, I would have increased Victor’s narrative. In the novel the perspective is constantly changing.

OF: What aesthetically are you doing with the narrative style in film?

KC: I’m trying to find a cinematic language with real literary merit. A style that doesn’t ignore what words mean, and may, in fact, end up being very wordy. The filmmaker I love the best is Eric Rohmer, especially *My Night at Maude’s* and *The Marquise of O* because it’s so literary, people talk so much, and yet it’s not uncinematic.

OF: Rohmer’s characters are also constantly working through moral dilemmas.

KC: That's right. I'm certainly interested in moral questions— in a certain kindness of life— and the possibility that without violating who they are or what the culture demands of them, people can still extend themselves into being kind. That is, of course, part of a unique ability not to take oneself too seriously. That's what I like about the Cruz boys. They don't take themselves, their plight, or deliverance too seriously. They can allow themselves an experience that is basically very alien to them and not be threatened by it in conventional ways.

OF: That's interesting. What one finds in minority cultures, our culture, is this desire to take oneself extremely seriously because of being rendered invisible by the larger society.

KC: Yes, this movie is not political in the capital "P" sense of politics, but rather in the small sense of my own personal politics.

OF: Let's talk about politics. You have such an individualistic approach to what a film should say. Do you think of yourself as a Black filmmaker?

KC: I think of myself as someone who has an instinctual understanding of what it is to be a minority person. That is someone whose existence is highly marginal in the society and understands it in the gut but will not be dominated by it. Therefore, I refuse all of those labels, such as "Black Woman Filmmaker," because I believe in my work as something that can be looked at without labels. For instance, in *The Cruz Brothers* . . . politics and ethnic sensibility would all have to be analyzed with small letters, not capitals, because that's my sensibility. Also, insofar as my sensibility is intuitively "Black," or intuitively "Feminine," or intuitively "this, that or the other," then those labels apply with small letters.

OF: How do you see politics functioning within your cinematic creations? Many filmmakers who believe in the dominance of "external social reality" would disagree with your intensely personal aesthetics.

KC: There has to be a respect for different psychological and political types. As Carl Jung, the eminent psychologist, said so well, there are the extroverted and introverted personalities and the varieties in between. The introverted personalities are more interested in personal rather than external symbols. But that's only one reality ... introverted personalities may receive influence and information from someone who is extroverted and vice versa, but there must be room for dialogue. If Black or Third World filmmakers only accept extroverted art as reality, then they're denying that there are as many psychological types among Black people as among other races of people. Based on the type of personality one naturally has... that's where one's art has to come from.

OF: You have an articulated intellectual approach to film which is really lacking among filmmakers in general. For instance, if you attend a writers' conference there is a common intellectual base of knowledge... they will have read the same works, etc. ... but this is not so in cinema conferences. Most of us haven't seen the complete works of Oscar Micheaux, Ousmane Sembene, Haile Gerima, or Ben Caldwell.

KC: That's one question that history and politics answer better than art because film is, in this culture — especially for Black people — the last solid white bastion of the society. It's the one area where we have an inferiority complex. The whole myth of Hollywood, the way film functions in this culture, has succeeded, artistically, in brainwashing all of us. The one area artistically in which we have really been brainwashed! It is hard for us to become artists in it because the high degree of technical competence intimidates us. That is probably why we have tended to do documentary films. It is much easier to pick

up a camera and shoot than to understand everything about lighting, color, film stock, editing, sound, narrative convention, narrative structure, actors, and so forth. This is intimidating. It is not that difficult to pick up a pen and write, to stay within a tradition and pick up an instrument, or to deal with painting. It is very hard to face the gigantic technological achievement — which can be painted white — of this society which is film, video, the computerized technologies that come out of the handling of image and sound. We as Black people have a reluctance to come to terms with true technology — technophobia. To do good movies you have to solve the technological problems. It is a tough industry. As a race of people we have been intimidated by the “technicalism.” For instance, to do a documentary can be an easy thing. You excuse all of your technological inefficiencies by making a philosophical statement about the nature of reality, like that’s a part of the reality of the situation. Film looms as the nemesis and we have not faced it for what it means. We cannot make bad films... better to write a bad short story. However, we must get over this unconscious fear of technology.

OF: Do you mean that we, as a group, have a psychological block against technology and film?

KC: Film is the largest, most powerful, most potent myth. And we have not thought about how that myth applies to us. We don’t believe it applies to us. So, we can’t believe ourselves as filmmakers when we talk about John Ford, Huston, Betty Davis, John Wayne, and so forth. Hollywood is the one mythical world that America created! The Gods and Goddesses of America are film stars! They’re the Greek mythology of America, and we don’t know who we are in that mythology. How can we talk about picking up a camera when there is a sacred imaginary mythology around film, around Hollywood, around movies, and we would be breaking sacred ground!

OF: This psychological block is probably a legacy of captivity, when we were the technology. However, we must deal with the medium. How do we do that?

KC: It’s a case where politics with a capital “P” won’t help us. It ‘s a confrontation with one’s own unconscious assimilation of the myth and a freeing of oneself of the myth so that we can come to some instructive attitude toward film that is not conditioned by this sacred framework. You have to approach it from inside of yourself. For Black people to think documentary can be, in some instances, to think non-film, because it may not have a confrontation with the medium. It only poses a confrontation with the medium as content for information— it doesn’t have a stylistic or aesthetic, or formal confrontation with what color is, sound is, framing is, light is, or with what the language of film is.

OF: I understand what you’re saying about the unconscious confrontation with the Hollywood myth, and about the extreme technophobia which may be an unconscious reaction to captivity, but still what would be your advice to filmmakers?

KC: Black filmmakers should go back and work in 8mm format for a while. We have to be willing to deal with limited resources, but with a great deal of technical exposure. We need to know how to deal with the technical aspects of the medium. For instance, to do a good narrative film, one needs to know what aesthetic, not economic, questions to ask. The answers to these questions may enable one to make a film at a more reasonable cost. It all depends on what one wants. When I first started, my attitude was ‘give me \$500,000 and I’ll make a film.’ That was the wrong approach. However, after I had asked myself the right questions, I said let me get \$5,000, and when we got it, we got started. You need to figure out what you want to understand and the answers to that will often solve the economic problems for you.

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## Milestone Film & Video's 2015 Silver Anniversary

*"They care and they love movies." —Martin Scorsese*

Amy Heller and Dennis Doros launched Milestone in 1990 out of their one-bedroom Manhattan apartment. Since then, the company has gained an international reputation for releasing restored classic cinema and films made by artists frequently under-represented in mainstream media. Thanks to the company's work in rediscovering and releasing important films such as Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles*, Lionel Rogosin's *On the Bowery*, Mikhail Kalatozov's *I Am Cuba*, Marcel Ophuls's *The Sorrow and the Pity*, the Mariposa Film Group's *Word is Out*, Edward S. Curtis's *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, and most recently, the films of Shirley Clarke, Milestone has long occupied a position as one of the country's most influential independent distributors.

In 1995, Milestone received the first Special Archival Award from the National Society of Film Critics for its restoration and release of *I Am Cuba*. Manohla Dargis, then at the *LA Weekly*, chose Milestone as the 1999 "Indie Distributor of the Year" for its distribution of Takeshi Kitano's *Hana-Bi*. In 2005, the National Society of Film Critics again awarded Milestone with a Film Heritage award, the International Film Seminars presented the company its prestigious Leo Award, and the New York Film Critics Circle voted a Special Award "in honor of 15 years of restoring classic films." In November 2007, Milestone was awarded the Fort Lee Film Commission's first Lewis Selznick Award for contributions to film history. Milestone and its sister label Milliarium Zero won Best Rediscovery from the Il Cinema Ritrovato DVD Awards for the release of *Winter Soldier* in 2006 and *The Exiles* in 2010.

In 2008, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association gave its first Legacy of Cinema Award to Doros and Heller "for their tireless efforts on behalf of film restoration and preservation" and the Anthology Film Archive made them Film Preservation honorees. In 2009, Doros was elected as one of the Directors of the Board of the Association of the Moving Image Archivists (the first distributor so honored). He established the organization's press office in 2010. In 2011, Milestone was the first distributor ever chosen for two Film Heritage Awards in the same year by the National Society of Film Critics for their release of *On the Bowery* and *Word is Out*. The American Library Association also selected *Word is Out* for its Notable Videos for Adult, the first classic film ever so chosen.

In December 2012, Milestone became the first-ever two-time winner of the prestigious New York Film Critics' Circle's Special Award as well as recipient another National Society of Film Critics Film Heritage Award — both in honor of "Project Shirley," the work in restoring, preserving and distributing the films of iconoclast director Shirley Clarke. Important contemporary artists who have co-presented Milestone restorations include Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Woody Allen, Steven Soderbergh, Thelma Schoonmaker, Jonathan Demme, Dustin Hoffman, Charles Burnett and Sherman Alexie.

*"Milestone Film & Video is an art-film distributor that has released some of the most distinguished new movies (along with seldom-seen vintage movie classics) of the past decade."*

—Stephen Holden, New York Times