

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

THE SOJOURNER TRUTH FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS

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

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

PROGRAM 5: ADAPTATION AND BEYOND

Many of the filmmakers we are highlighting in this series worked across various forms of adaptation. This program considers what it means to refashion, transform, and interpret existing work, from Black women writers like Alice Walker and Gail Jones, to classics of the western canon like William Shakespeare.

Diary of an African Nun (Dir. Julie Dash, 1977, 13 min, 16mm)

16mm Preservation Print Courtesy of the UCLA Film & Television Archive

Julie Dash's 1977 short film *Diary of an African Nun* was made while she was a film student at UCLA. Adapted from Alice Walker's short story of the same name, the film follows a young nun (Barbara O. Jones) in Uganda who is riddled with emptiness and doubt as she ponders her vows and union with Christ. As the nights wear on, the rhythmic beating of drums in the village intensifies her anguish and worsens her anxieties. The graphic simplicity within *Diary of an African Nun* coupled with Dash's poetic and political style won her a Director's Guild Award for student filmmaking at the Los Angeles Film Exposition. *Diary of an African Nun* is equipped with a certain intensity that foreshadows Dash's later works such as her celebrated feature *Daughters of the Dust*.



***Eva's Man* (Dir. Anita W. Addison, 1976, 11 min, digital video)**

Digital preservation courtesy of the UCLA Film & Television Archive.

Anita W. Addison's 1976 student short film *Eva's Man* is a partial adaptation of Gayl Jones's novel of the same name. The film follows Eva, a Black woman who murders and castrates her lover and refuses to tell a white psychiatrist why. Experimental and surreal, the film's jarring cinematography and dreamlike sound design create an intense, oppressive atmosphere to mirror Eva's own memories of trauma. A graduate of UCLA's film school, Addison became one of the few Black women executives in Hollywood during the 1990s. While much of her work centered around producing and directing for commercial television, Addison's first film shows her roots in the L.A. Rebellion, a loose collective of filmmakers that came together at UCLA throughout the 70s and 80s who sought to portray African Americans in new and radical ways. In addition to depicting a unique, haunting narrative, *Eva's Man* gives us a glimpse at some of the earliest intersections of Black women's writing and filmmaking.



***Othello* (Dir. Elizabeth "Liz" Shearer White, 1966/1980, 115 min, 16mm)**

Courtesy of the Reserve Film and Video Collection of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Othello has been preserved with funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Liz White's *Othello*, filmed between 1962 and 1966, is an adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy. White's *Othello* is the first version of the play to star a Black man, Yaphet Kotto, and was the first film adaption of a Shakespeare work directed by a Black woman. Originally, White's *Othello* started as a performance in Harlem in 1960 and at Shearer Summer Theatre at Shearer Estate, originally owned by White's grandfather, in the historic Black community of Oak Bluffs on the Massachusetts island of Martha's Vineyard. The film was shot in Oak Bluffs and at Cobbleclose Farm, New Jersey. While filming *Othello*, many of the cast and crew were either students or had other part-time or full-time jobs. It wasn't until 1980 when the film was finally shown (at a screening at Howard University). White, who appears as Bianca in the film, adapts Shakespeare's tragedy to the 1960s with an all-Black cast and crew, including music by Hugh Masekela, in order to reimagine the play in a way that addresses the role of women in the contemporary civil rights and Black Power movements, colorism in the Black community, and Afrocentrism.



In the program notes for the film's premiere, White wrote: "My slave grandfather Shearer, who was whipped and chained by his master because he attempted to run away to join the oncoming northern army to be free, left his mark on me, I am sure. He was one of the first graduate students from Hampton University soon after the Civil War, remained ten years teaching others coming after him, then resettled in Massachusetts.

I am the first Black filmmaker to mount a film of this genre.

Like Grandpa Shearer, I am looking for true freedom... true artistic freedom."

Program notes by Nathan Cook, Darian Huffman, and LaBronida Martin.

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