

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Black Women Filmmakers Challenge Media System

Adrienne M. Anderson · Wednesday, February 7th, 2018

Curated by Kathleen Antonia Tarr, “Woman’s Work: Setting the Agenda for Gender Equity” is a new series highlighting proactive efforts by women to benefit the social, political, and economic status of women and girls. Focusing on contributions through the arts, the purpose of this series is to serve as a forum and inspiration for all who seek gender equity across intersections.

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I created the International Black Women’s Film Festival in 2001 to use the cinematic narrative to normalize the presence of women of color as equitable partners in creative visual storytelling. In 1991, I was mesmerized by Julie Dash’s masterpiece *Daughters of the Dust*. Her film not only had a Black female lead, but *all* the leads were Black women in every size, shape, hue, hair texture, and age. These were complex, beautifully filmed Black women who I recognized! They weren’t caricatures of Black women that Hollywood loved. Stereotypical Black women seemed to dominate screenwriters’ imaginations. Lazy directors repeatedly used the same template for portraying Black women on screen. It made me seek out more of Julie Dash’s films and films like hers.

I discovered a whole new world of Black female independent filmmakers! I watched their films and cried at their beauty and artistry ...and then I became furious that I had never heard or seen these films or filmmakers. (Granted, I’d seen such classic films as *Nothing But a Man*, *Sounder*, *Black Orpheus*, or *The Harder They Come*, but I thought it was singular to my household because my neighborhood school friends hadn’t seen or heard of those films.)

By 2001, I had enough of the dearth of Black female filmmakers or characters. I thought back on those amazing films by independent Black women filmmakers like Julie Dash, Kathleen Collins, Ayoka Chenzira, Maya Angelou, and others. I took the bold step to start the first independent film festival on the west coast dedicated to films by or featuring women in the African Diaspora. I had no idea of the reception it would receive, and it was purely a labor of love.

Now, rebranded as Black Laurel Films, my festival is in its seventeenth year and I now understand it was one of many early disruptors and how creating an alternative path sparks a disruption in a “business-as-usual” industry like the Hollywood machine. The film industry made \$38 billion in 2016 and is projected to make \$50 billion by 2020. When that much money is being discussed, the relationship between powerful and the disempowered becomes very apparent.

In 2017, the Annenberg Foundation at the University of Southern California conducted an in-depth study called the Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative. It quantified how Hollywood has systematically excluded people of color, women, and the LGBTQ communities for decades. From their study, it's glaringly apparent that Hollywood still suppresses Black women in film and filmmaking. Out of 900 films and 1,006 film directors, only 3 were directed by a Black/African American woman, compared to 56 (5.3%) for Black/African American men.

In 2016, a series of events highlighted more systemic problems in Hollywood and society, namely, persistent sexual harassment in the workplace by powerful individuals who are overwhelmingly men, resulting in the #MeToo and #TimesUp movement and the 2017 Women's March on Washington. (Ironically, the #MeToo movement was started by a Tarana Burke, a civil rights activist who worked with girls and women recovering from sexual assault, a visual opposite of the white Hollywood actresses being spotlighted by the media.)

Black Laurel Films continues to be an alternative milieu to the Hollywood machine with a focus on programming, screening, distribution, and Equity Film Market.

My festival has had films by and featuring Academy Award®-winners Octavia Spencer and Viola Davis, local filmmakers like Shy Pacheco Hamilton, Melissa James, Carolina Moraes-Liu, and others, and featuring emerging and established films and filmmakers like *Girlhood*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and international films from Greenland, Ireland, Puerto Rico, Brazil, United Kingdom, Canada, France, Ethiopia, South Africa, and elsewhere.

Niche festivals like mine will always be a safe place for women of color who are still not receiving equitable representation in the film industry. With an expansion into an Equity Film Market, now all people-of-color, women and under-represented groups will have a equitable and supportive environment to showcase and sell their films without suppressing their vision to fit into a system that is obviously broken and no longer sustainable.

Black Laurel Films currently has a call for entries (<https://www.filmfreeway.com/blacklaurelfilms>) and the Equity Film Market is scheduled for a soft launch in the Fall (<https://equityfilmmarket.launchrock.com>).

[Annenberg Foundation study: Smith, Dr. S. L., Choueiti, M., & Pieper, Dr. K (2017, July). *Inequality in 900 Popular Films*. Retrieved from https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/Dr_Stacy_L_Smith-Inequality_in_900_Popular_Films.pdf Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative – Annenberg Foundation & USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism]

Top image: Participants at the 2015 International Black Women's Film Festival.

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