



BFI LONDON FILM FESTIVAL 2022: TREASURES

The Power of Remembrance

Almost 40 years after it was first made, the Sankofa collective's *The Passion of Remembrance* remains salient. The film is a grand tapestry filled with allusions to the intersectional concerns, motives and desires of different subsections of the Black community. It comprises two concurrent narratives: the first is a story about disagreements in a Black British family; the second takes place in an abstract ideological plane created to openly express each character's political will.

Founded in 1983, amid the advent of the Workshop declaration (an active call-out by significant stakeholders to support the diversification of the independent film scene in the UK), the Sankofa (an Akan word meaning 'to retrieve') Film and Video Collective was founded by a group of creatives from across the African, Caribbean and Asian diaspora: Isaac Julien, Nadine Marsh-Edwards, Maureen Blackwood, Martina Attille and Robert Crusz. They were a group of London art school students who sought to create space for the depiction of a multitude of Black experiences in film.

In late 1984, the group was finalising a series of screenings and talks entitled 'Power/Control'. Deciding that fictional drama was a more accessible medium for making an outwardly political film, co-directors Blackwood and Julien wrote a script that blended two perspectives and influences: Blackwood addressed the history of activism and the role of Black women; while Julien explored the special relationship between the cultural spaces of gay Black men on either side of the Atlantic (a theme he would develop in 1989's *Looking for Langston*).

The late 1970s was the height of Britain's Black women's movement. The visits of Malcolm X and Stokeley Carmichael in the mid-60s had inspired young Black Britons to form the Black British Panther movement. When the Panthers disbanded in the early 70s, one of the most prominent Black feminist voices, Olive Morris, founded the Brixton Black Women's Group (BBWG). This in turn would spearhead the nationwide proliferation of Black women's groups, such as Camden Black Sisters, of which Blackwood herself became a member. As she told *Sight and Sound* in 2020: 'I wanted there to be a space within the narrative that touched on some of the Camden Black Sisters' stories and recognised that Black women were mainly absent from the narratives of the 50s and 60s.'

As bell hooks said of *The Passion of Remembrance*, it forms an 'oppositional gaze', in which Black women feature as definitive authors offering their positions of memory. In the movie, these perspectives are advocated by the powerful sardonic voice of Anni Domingo. Through her role as the female speaker, she drives the ongoing conversation on the abstract plane, which is intercut throughout the film and undergirds the conflict between Maggie and a generation of older men in her family who belittle her perspective.

As noted by Judah Attile in *British Film Black Cinema I*, the device of the abstract plane takes inspiration from Ralph Ellison’s 1952 book *Invisible Man*. It’s a metaphor for how the female speaker brings the male speaker into an open space and new possibilities by challenging his thoughts. This reflects the under-considered theoretical contribution to Black movements by Black women.

Back in Britain in the 1980s, generational differences between Maggie and her family are illustrated by a soundclash contrasting the traditional calypso in the foyer and the funk/R&B that thuds off the record player. This dissonance is further crystallised when Maggie’s father discovers a flyer for Paradise Garage. His accusatory denunciation of ‘gayness’ and ‘nastiness’ is casually dismissed by Maggie, who says they go sometimes.

The transplantation of the landmark New York gay club into the film’s London setting powerfully relates to the influence of American subcultures on Britain’s nightlife. The influence of Larry Levan, house and disco highlights the interconnectedness of Black cultural life, even as the film grounds the characters’ lived experiences in distinctly Black British areas. The nightlife scenes capture the spots frequented by second and third-generation Black Britons, including the famous Dougie’s, a central spot for Black Londoners.

Also featuring references to African American art and textual extracts by Malcolm X and June Jordan, ultimately *The Passion of Remembrance* advocates for transatlantic cultural exchange. Suitably, the BFI National Archive’s new 4K remastering of this landmark film, undertaken with the directors and cinematographer Nina Kellgren from the original 16mm negative and magnetic soundtrack, will premiere concurrently in London and New York.

Xavier Alexandre Pillai, [bfi.org.uk](https://www.bfi.org.uk), 4 October 2022

THE PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE

Directed by: Maureen Blackwood, Isaac Julien
©: Sankofa Film and Video
Financially Assisted by: Channel Four, The GLC Police Support Committee
Producer: Martina Attile
Production Managers: Martina Attile, Nadine Marsh-Edwards
Continuity: Noeleen Grattan
Written by: Maureen Blackwood, Isaac Julien
Photography (Speakers’ Drama): Steven Bernstein
Photography (Maggie’s Drama): Nina Kellgren
Focus Puller (Speaker’s Drama): Derek Little
Focus Puller (Maggie’s Drama): Maggie Gormley
Gaffer (Maggie’s Drama): Nuala Campbell
Grip (Speakers Drama): Jimmy Goom
Grips (Maggie’s Drama): Mick Duffield, Martin McCullagh
Editor: Nadine Marsh-Edwards
Assistant Editors: Maureen Blackwood, Stella Franceskides
Visualiser: Laurence Dorman
Titles: Les Latimer Film & Video
Camera Equipment: Oculus
Lighting Equipment: Film & TV Services
Laboratory: Technicolor
Music Written and Arranged by: Tony Rémy
Sound Recordist (Speakers/Maggie’s Drama): Diana Ruston
Boom Operator (Speakers/Maggie’s Drama): Ronald Bailey
Dubbing Mixer: David Old
Sound Editor: Virginia Heath

Cast

Speakers Drama
Anni Domingo (*female speaker*)
Joseph Charles (*male speaker*)
Maggie’s Drama
Antonia Thomas (*Maggie Baptiste*)
Carlton Chance (*Gary*)
Jim Findley (*Tony Baptiste*)
Ram John Holder (*Benjy Baptiste*)
Shiela Mitchell (*Glory Baptiste*)
Tania Morgan (*Tonia*)
Gary McDonald (*Michael*)
Janet Palmer (*Louise*)
Kelvin Omard (*boy in youth club*)
Christopher Tajah (*boy in youth club*)
Michael Hughes (*senior officer*)
Simon Binns (*younger officer*)
Andrew Powell, David Doyle, Tim Brennan (*youths*)
Marcelle Williams (*Mrs Campbell*)
Derek Blackwood, Maureen Blackwood, Osaze Ehibor (*voices off screen*)

UK 1986
82 mins

BFI Distribution