

# TRUST

*Special Collector's Issue*

# Black Girls Rule

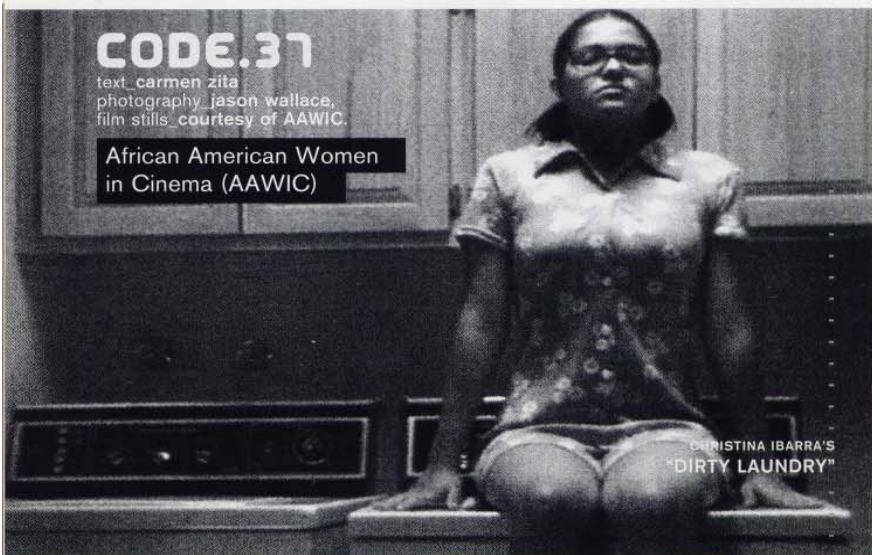
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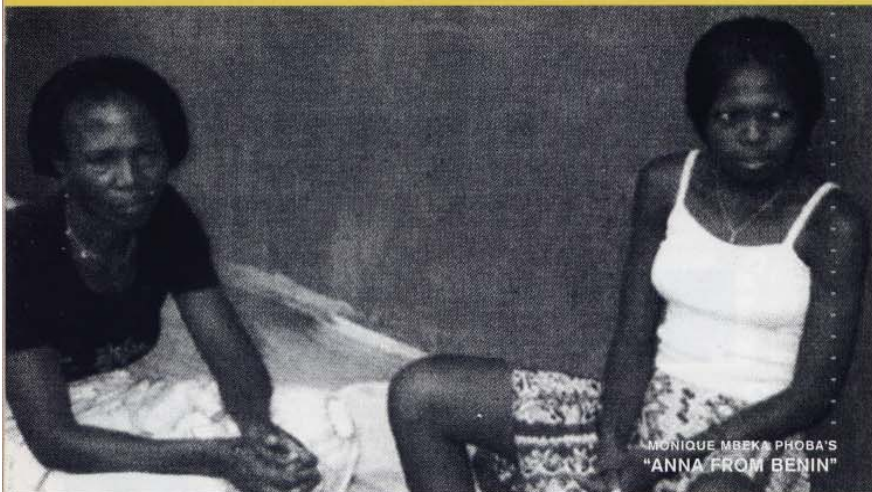
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African American Women  
 in Cinema (AAWIC)



CHRISTINA IBARRA'S  
 "DIRTY LAUNDRY"

# The Power of Purpose



MONIQUE MBEK & PHOBA'S  
 "ANNA FROM BENIN"

This year's annual African American Women in Cinema festival opened to much anticipation with "Sisters in Cinema," a documentary in progress on black women filmmakers, directed by Yvonne Welbon. Reaching back as far as 1922, Welbon's work traces a "pioneering group of women," and ultimately brings her subject full circle with interviews of contemporary filmmakers, including Julie Dash, Euzhan Palcy, Kasi Lemmons, and Neema Barnette. "Sisters in Cinema" set an optimistic tone for what would prove to be an enlightening festival.

Following the viewing, the extremely talented and elegant Dash was joined by the charismatic Barnette for a panel discussion, mediated by Michelle Materre, who is a founding partner of Creative Affairs of KJM3 Entertainment Group, Inc., and teaches at the New School University, Department of Communications. Barnette and Dash spoke candidly about their struggles as female directors. Both described the movie making business as a predominantly male dominated "political tool," controlled by studios and financiers, whose main objective is to make money and maintain the "status quo," thereby dismissing films offering an alternate view.

Referring to the Independent film industry as a "co-opted genre," Barnette called for the redefinition and remarketing of Independent films. It has become increasingly difficult to make films that portray less stereotypical African American characters, she submitted. For her, the key to honest filmmaking is to have African American directors relay their stories first hand. Barnette went on to say that in directing some black actors, they were often surprised to see so many close ups of themselves in her films or television programs. She admitted that even she was a bit taken aback by these comments. Barnette concluded by saying, "If you don't see us for awhile (or see many films by us) it doesn't mean that we are not busy." This statement initiated a new perspective on the event. The reality of the creative struggle against the current money system in place, combined with issues of sexism and racism, defined these directors' specific and significant struggle, a struggle that makes the end product much more interesting and fulfilling to watch than box office blockbusters aimed to remove the viewer from the quotidian reality via fantasy and violence.

I was stirred and thrilled by the presence of these directors, whose individual visions went beyond the aesthetic norm and challenged the very root of the persistence of racism. It is always important to be reminded of the power of an image. Although filmmaking is more and more inundated and compromised by glamour and celebrity, it does remain one of the most powerful "political tools" of the age. I would even go so far as to say that most racism today is intuited and defined by "images" (or the lack of them).

Day two of the festival began with a panel discussion made up of directors Barnette, Dash, Lemmons, Vanessa Middleton, Michele Stephenson, Welbon and Roni Wheeler. (This panel was co-organized and co-sponsored by New York Women in Film & TV.) The panel gave special tribute to Dash, noting that her triumphant film "Daughters of the Dust" (1991) remains one of the few works that illustrates "black emotions," though it was considered a fluke upon release.

The films screened that day were shorts by young directors, including Shari Lynn Himes ("A Song for



NEEMA BARNETTE



MICHELLE MATERRE

Jade"), Olufunmilayo Gittens ("Lucky"), Evelyn Badia ("The Box"), Natalia Almada ("All Water Has A Perfect Memory"), and Cristina Ibarra, who directed my personal favorite, "Dirty Laundry", a coming-of-age story about a Mexican girl who deals with issues of sexuality, religion, and a generation gap, complicated by a difference in cultural upbringing (i.e., Mexican vs. American). All of the above mentioned directors won awards for their work.

The final day was devoted to documentaries about life in Africa. "Anna From Benin", by director Monique Mbeka Phoba, part of the "Girls Around the World Series", was perhaps the finest selection. In her film, Mbeka Phoba weaves the intricate tale of a young African singer who returns to her homeland—with lightened hair—after studying abroad in Paris. Stricken by sudden isolation, she seeks solace in her extended family (she is one of many daughters of a polygamous and kindhearted father) and country. Mbeka Phoba guides the viewer through Anna's life and burgeoning career as a singer and entertainer. Although there is the implication that Anna will return to Paris and further distance herself from her rich native culture, the director concludes with the thought that blood is thicker than water, and that one does not lose sight of this

spirit—it just needs to be ignited.

The climactic moment came when Barnette screened a portion of her feature length film "Civil Brand", which is still pending release. Starring Lisa Raye and Da Brat, the film documents the hardships of life for women in prison. Immediately following an excerpted screening, it was revealed that sixty percent of inmates in the U.S. prison system are African American, and that African Americans make up seventeen percent of the country's population. There are parallels in the movie drawn between a correctional facility and a southern plantation. We witness some of the sexual and mental abuses female inmates suffer, including laboring as sweatshop workers for corporate fashion designers. Barnette, herself was reflected in the film by a character played by Renaissance man, Mos Def. Some of the other actors from "Civil Brand" showed up and encouraged, as I encourage you now, to write to Lion's Gates Films to urge the release of this powerful work. (These requests can be sent to: Jon Feltheimer, CEO Lion's Gates Films—feedback@lgecorp.com. For more information about this film and Neema Barnette, visit [www.livetheatregang.com](http://www.livetheatregang.com).)

For more information on this festival go to [www.aawic.org](http://www.aawic.org).



KASI LEMMONS



JULIE DASH

# ® TRACE

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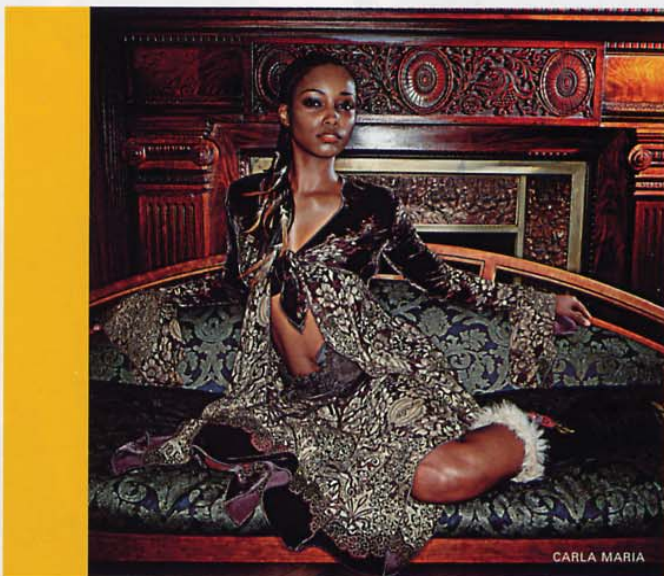
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### BLACK GIRLS RULE!

OUR ANNUAL PORTFOLIO FEATURING THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BLACK WOMEN  
WORKING AT THE HIGHER END OF THE FASHION ARENA TODAY.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATRICK IBANEZ

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