

of history, specifically American history, through artistic expression must be supported. Employing oral histories as well as these artistic practices may eliminate the overpowering interpretative approach that seeks weakness and pathology in the exploration of communities of color. Moving away from the "tradition-laden effort to document failure" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis 1997, 9), these stories fill in the missing gaps of the "self motivated activities of peoples of African descent to remake themselves and their worlds" (Dodson and Diof, 1). Encouraging individuals to tell their own stories without interpretation is a relevant method for inquiry, analysis, and understanding. The stories of those who lived the experience of migration or who can tell of this experience are essential in the understanding of African American life and the ongoing social and cultural shifts that resulted from this mass movement.

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CHAPTER TEN

Motherlands as Gendered Spaces

Cultural Identity, Mythic Memory, and Wholeness in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*

SILVIA CASTRO-BORREGO

This paper will analyze post-colonial and Black feminist points of view the project of historical reconstruction and revision that deeply affect the thematic and formal features of the work of African American filmmaker Julie Dash, and her 1991 award-winning film *Daughters of the Dust*. My paper will demonstrate how Julie Dash consciously created her characters to challenge the icons of the dominant Western culture. My critical study departs from the post-colonial condition of the contemporary United States, since for African Americans there is a situation that critic Michelle Wallace describes as "internal colonization". The paper will also refer to Julie Dash's eponymous novel *Daughters of the Dust* published in 1997, since in both the film and the novel, the Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands—off the U.S. mainland—become *motherlands* where identity and family history can be traced through memory, storytelling, ancestry and myth. The presence of these elements in the film and the novel allow the characters to enter into spiritual journeys towards empowerment and wholeness.

Ancestry, a deep sense of spirituality, a style that establishes symbiotic bonds with both the past and the present, reveals a mastery in a figurative use of visual language that enlarges the initial project of historical reconstruction towards the connecting and healing understanding of wholeness as spiritual return. Claiming the space know as Ibo Landing in the Sea Islands as a sacred one, a place where the archetypal African memory is secured, *Daughters of the Dust* follows the project depicted by Paule Marshall in her 1983 novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, because both the novels and the film emphasize the diasporic identities of their

characters who seek history within themselves, defining the links among Black women worldwide. The diasporic identities these works of art delineate, enable them to experience distinct but related cultures—the North and the South of the United States, while retaining a special sense of home—Africa, as the locus of self-definition and power. They develop the capacity to survive whole, to embrace contradictions, and to affirm self across continents and generations.

[...] When they realized there wasn't nothing between them and home [...] they got so tickled they started in to singing [...]

Paule Marshall

Both Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* have at the core of their thematic and narrative/technical structures the myth of the Ibo Landing. It is obvious that the presence of African American myths in contemporary literature is strong for they provide a system of knowledge that allows contemporary African Americans to connect with their common roots. Furthermore, it presents a possible channel for achieving wholeness and a strong sense of identity. Both the novel and the film strongly emphasize the importance of the re-telling of African American myths that exist in the African survivals in the southern Sea Islands where the first slaves "fresh off the boat," the Ibos, landed. The main character in *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey Johnson, goes through a process of acculturation, guided by her great-aunt Cuney. Cuney demands that as a child, Avey be sent to her on the Sea Island of Tatem. There, every summer, Cuney tells Avey the story of the Ibos implicit in the myth of Ibo Landing.

In *Daughters of the Dust*, the Peazant family goes for a picnic to Ibo Landing on the Sea Island where they live, on the symbolic day the Peazant family leaves for the North. In both cases, by explicitly choosing the piece of land known as Ibo Landing as the setting to tell their mythical story, both authors reinforce the cultural connections between the Sea Islands and Africa. They present the Gullah and Geechee cultures from the Sea Islands as distinctive and original, with imaginative settings.

Both Marshall and Dash assume the position of storytellers in an effort to develop a sense of the collective history that, as African Americans, they feel has been denied to people of African descent in the Western hemisphere. Each begins with the observation that the history of people of African descent in the United States and the diaspora is fragmented and interrupted, and that history must be reconstructed in a way to be a resource for the present. In pursuing the idea of *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash investigated her family history in South Carolina and their migration to New York. Also, writer Paule Marshall, born from Bajan parents, spent her childhood between Barbados and Brooklyn, thus her emphasis on the African diaspora. Such writers and artists consider as their mission the

creation of texts and the construction of images that pass on stories. The stories then enable readers to recognize and meet the challenge of reconstructing their own history. Marshall, however, not only refers to the project of historical reconstruction, but she also highlights a spiritual reconstruction, a connection and ultimately, a return.

Interestingly, although Marshall and Dash embrace the same project of re-integration and regeneration, Marshall begins with the historical fragmentation and interruption experienced by the people of African descent in the United States and the rest of the African diaspora, and Dash situates her story at the turn of the century, a time of fearful anticipation of the fragmentation that it is to come. Thus, the argument of wholeness is conceived and developed as a strategic point in both Marshall and Dash's work. Spiritual wholeness for African Americans, as explained by Professor Johnnella E. Butler, consists of an understanding and embracing of the African American past that interacts with the present in order to give sustenance for living and understanding the present and to remain hopeful towards the future.

Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* enter into the dynamics of what Edward Kamau Braithwaite calls the "literature of Reconnection." Kamau Braithwaite sets the beginning of this type of literature in the mid-sixties during the Black Power Revolution and defines it as "a recognition of the African presence in our society not as a static quality, but as root—living, creative, and still part of the main" (1974, 99). Indeed, contemporary African American writers and artists of the eighties and nineties do find the African presence in their culture as a powerful source of inspiration in order to draw valid connections that reinforce their cultural identity as a recognizable and viable ethnic group. Through the interaction of myth, history and fiction, these authors create imaginary settings that, with the help of southern locations—the Sea Islands of the Georgia and South Carolina coast—enable them to construct and present situations where the characters are inevitably compelled to return to their African roots in what has been called the reversal of the Middle Passage.

Ancestral spirituality is linked to the process of re-memory in the novel and translates in flashbacks in the film. In other words, it is comprehending the present by looking into the past and gathering the "scraps of memories" that could be either mental or psychological. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Avey's remembrances of her Aunt Cuney and Ibo Landing come strongly to her through dreams and in unconscious ways. In *Daughters of the Dust*, Nana, the Peazant's great-grandmother carries her tin can full of her "hands," talismans for protection that contain a lock of her mother's hair. Here this ancestral spirituality is reflected in deliberately conscious and simultaneously psychological ways. It is usually by the influence that the figure of the ancestor has on the characters and through his/her memory that contains the whole African tradition, that the ancestral spiritualism is evoked in

these works. Ancestral spiritualism transforms the materialistic North American setting into a place of meaningful connection to African Americans with ancestral Africa, thus revealing to the African American individual a sense of belonging to a spiritual homeland. As Paule Marshall points out, “a spiritual return to Africa is absolutely necessary for the reintegration of that which was lost in our collective historical past and the many national pasts which comprise it” (Williams 1986, 53). She emphasizes the role that Africa plays in determining African American historical identity, an aspect of their personality that she feels has been “systematically de-emphasized.” Therefore, Marshall points out that it is the task of African Americans, as people of African descent, to “reinvent” their own image, a process in which the role of Africa is essential.

While Marshall emphasizes the need for a spiritual return to Africa by means of ritual and remembrance, with *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash emphasizes the southern Sea Islands as a place where African ways and beliefs survived, sustaining the slaves, and later the African Americans living in that region. The myth of Ibo Landing at the core of both stories, tells us how African captives of the Ibo tribe refused to live in slavery when they were brought to the new world. They walked onto the water, and then on top of it, returning in this way to Africa.

The structures of myths function as devices for these women writers to think with, ways of organizing their reality. The more we know about our myths, the more we will be able to assess the function of spirituality. As Julie Dash points out, “myth is very important in the struggle to maintain a sense of self and to move forward into the future” (Dash 1992, 30). The presence of mythopoetics in both the novel and the film allows the writers to present historical events recognized in traditional historiography, and to enlarge them by infusing them with an imaginative construction. Thus, the message is very strong, powerful, and sustaining to the tradition of resistance. This is shown in the fact that every Gullah community embraces this myth of the Ibo Landing, and every Gullah community has a part of the island considered Ibo Landing. Therefore, the construction of a mythic memory, one that insists on a balanced interaction among reality, accuracy, and authenticity, utilizing as well the realm of the spiritual, is of great importance in the healing process in which these texts are engaged. The way in which important concepts such as memory, space and time are conceived in these texts and images recalls spiral circularity. The specific time and location, the chronotopes that for Bakhtin are the basis of all representation combine in Dash’s movie to orchestrate complex interactions, linking the threshold of change at the turn of the century, with the symbolic threshold of Ibo Landing—“between the land and the sea, island and mainland, between the world of the living and that of the spirits” (Finke 2003, 130).

Underlying this rhetorical strategy is the need for modern African American artists to redefine history, and redefine mythic history as well in a project that

revives African American’s collective history, ultimately healing the fragmented identities and psyches in the effort to achieve wholeness. Therefore, history is redefined and reconstructed within the frame of memory. The chronotope emerges from a structure of memory, simultaneously sensual and visceral, and encourages the writer to reconstruct a logic of repetitive spiral complexity rather than a binary linear polarity. The chronotope of the threshold mediates, according to Finke, between two other chronotopes: the linearity of everyday life interacts with the chronotope of the spirits representing the traditional African concept of time as a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. The linear concept of time in western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking (Mbiti, 16–17). Thus, the “African belief system that survives in this Gullah culture is in dialogue with the beliefs and values of European Christianity” (Finke 2003, 130).

Through the project of spiritual reconstruction, the nature of the text is redefined, insisting on a theoretical articulation that recognizes the energy of the community formed by writer, reader, viewer and text. As Karla Holloway suggests, there is an important and noticeable difference between an African thesis of mythologies as literature (the presence of myth in the text or story), and a western thesis of mythology as an aspect of literature. Holloway encourages the critics of African American literature to use this distinction as a point of genesis, in understanding the literary trajectories of Black women’s texts (Holloway 1992, 85–100). The presence of mythology in the African American text becomes a very important element within the text and within the story because of its proximity to what Morrison understands as “re-memory” in her novel *Beloved* (1987).

Such a synchronic view of time definitely alters our western understanding of history. Time from the African perspective must be experienced in order for it to become a reality, and experience suggests a generative action between the past and the present. As Denniston points out, through their oral traditions, Africans look back to their origins, using various myths to explain the existence of deities, the creation, and other aspects of their universe (1995, x–xxii). The immediate and remembered past, which goes back several generations, affirms that the rhythms of life remain continuous and intact. By choosing the Ibo Landing myth and through the use of ritual, Marshall and Dash confront questions of geographical and cultural alienation and conflict within a hostile society. They incorporate African uses of myths into African American life and spirituality, preserving links to the past and reassuring African American cultural history.

I approach the film *Daughters of the Dust* as being part of what Vèvè Clark calls “Diaspora literacy” from an Afrocentric perspective as an alternative interpretative mode for literary analysis. Cheryl A. Wall and Avena P. Busia both argue that we readers must develop diaspora literacy “and learn to read the various cultural signs and performances that signify an underlying bond” (Busia 1988, 1–43; Wall 2005,

183). The past, for people of the African diaspora and for African Americans, remains fragmentary, since they live in a world where cultural knowledge must be retrieved and negotiated between the demands of material well-being and the pursuit of spiritual wholeness. Vévé Clark approaches “Diaspora literacy” from an Afrocentric perspective as an alternative interpretative mode for literary analysis. She uses this term to refer to “the reader’s ability to comprehend the literatures of Africa, Afro-America and the Caribbean from an informed, indigenous perspective” (Clark 1991, 41). Vévé Clark urges readers of African American literature to think beyond linear Hegelian dualities. These frame the world in eternal irreconcilable positive and negative axioms, in order to cope with the complexities, the differences, the borders, the fragmentation, and multiplicities inherent in the realities and shared experiences of the African Diaspora. To comprehend the African Diasporic sphere, one needs to reclaim the cultural differences and to redefine unity in transnational terms. In order to do this, we need to acknowledge and to understand the dynamics of wholeness, or rather the search for it, as a theoretical tool to read African American texts. The search for wholeness stands as a key theoretical concept for African American literature and culture, together with double-consciousness, re-memory, and ancestral spiritualism. Re-memory and ancestral spiritualism are two intimately related concepts. Ancestral spiritualism consists of the connection among past, present and future, and the life force that makes it possible for the physical and the spiritual worlds to be one. Johnella E. Butler develops this idea in her essay “African American Literature and Realist Theory: Seeking the ‘true-true’ where she states that “rememory and double consciousness hold the key to understanding the dynamics of wholeness” (Butler 2006, 171). As the concept of re-memory connects with the past through the ancestor figure, they both establish a vital link with myth since the ancestors are “timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (Morrison 1984, 343). They function as bridges between history and myth because they join present experiences with those of the past, affirming cultural continuity and “instructing new generations in survival techniques” (Pettis 1995, 117) which are vital for the achievement of wholeness and for spiritual and moral growth. Ancestors, according to African views, are a “collective repository of wisdom rather than a group of heroic individuals.” They provide guidance and inspiration because they establish moral and ethical standards (Woods 2007, 190).

Those 18th century Africans [...] the watchers [...] the keepers [...] the ancestors.

Nana Peazant

Nana Peazant is a central figure in the film *Daughters of the Dust* whose name is one of the many African derived words in the Gullah dialect. It means “elderly

woman” or “grandmother.” The first images of the film *Daughters of the Dust*, introduced by Nana Peazant’s words, draw on complexity, on opposition and contradiction, carrying Nana’s introductory incantation reveals what it means to be an African American woman in America, creating a space for many meanings to emerge. They allow us to enter the complex psyche of the Black woman. Along with the words, the images on the screen introduce us into the Gullah world of the Sea Islands where the film *Daughters of the Dust* takes place. Images significant to the content of the movie are presented: the blue stained hands of the ancestor, Nana Peazant, the oldest woman in the Peazant family, the great-grandmother; Nana and the sandy dust of the island’s soil, running through her indigo-blue stained fingers. Following this, we are introduced to Ibo Landing, an emblematic place in the island, a space where African American mythmaking reflects “the muddy waters of history” in an effort to explain the slavery origins of the Peazant family. Nana Peazant, carrying the spirit of those drowned Ibos, rises from the water, fully dressed and wearing two belts—just like Aunt Cuney from *Praisesong of the Widow*—on her walks into Ibo Landing. Ibo Landing symbolizes “rebirth and the integral connection of the old with the new” (Bobo 1995, 136).

The story is set in 1902, on the day on which the Peazant family meets for their “last supper,” since all of its members will leave the next day in search for a new life in the mainland. According to Viola, the missionary who comes to visit the island accompanied by Mr. Snead, the photographer, to see and document her family’s passing, the mainland represents “progress, culture, education and wealth” (Dash 1992, 79). However, for Nana Peazant the family’s elder, the passing to the North means the loss of the family’s roots, traditions, and beliefs rooted in their African heritage. The matriarchal Nana uses her spiritual means to “keep the family together up North” (Dash 1992, 96), to give them strength and cultural identity, and to solve Eli and Eula’s problem. Nana calls on the ancestors, by daily visiting their graves, and by carrying a tin can full of her magic “hands” and bits and fragments of small objects that connect her with the past. By praying to the ancestors for help, she beckons the “unborn” child into this world. The Unborn Child represents the ancestral spiritualism which connects the “otherworld” of the ancestors, those who have lived before and are now dead, and life in the present. This five year-old girl, dynamically represents the “sacred belief that those who reside in the realm of the spiritual are vitally connected to the people in the present” (Bobo 1995, 147). With the creation of this character who literally remembers and recalls, a return to certain parts of the past is mandatory for the understanding of the present and the knowledge to be gained by the ancestors, because in the movie the “first and the last,” the Unborn Child and Nana, are one, and they both have the same purpose: to help those travelling up North to preserve cultural memory and retain a sense of identity rooted in the Gullah and Geechee communities of the Sea Islands.

Nana Peazant's granddaughter by marriage, Eula, is pregnant after being raped by a white landowner. Eula's husband, Eli, is alienated from his wife because he believes that the child that she is carrying is fathered by the white rapist. In fact, the word rape is only used once in the movie to describe what has happened to Eula, and the action itself is deliberately concealed. This is because Dash considered that "the sexual carnage" of Black women at the hands of white men has been referred to so many times in the history of slavery, that Dash feels "it has lost its potency and its ability to enrage." The movie then, focuses mainly on the post-trauma of rape, "to show how the couple and the family handle it; therein lies their demonstration of the strength needed to survive" (Bobo 1995, 137).

Nana's spiritual power is affirmed when Eula and Eli's Unborn Child comes to the family reunion through a ritual of communion with the family's ancestors. Through the presence of the Unborn Child, Eli is reassured of his paternity because the Unborn Child is in fact, his daughter.

Nana's spiritualism, however, is in contest with that of Haagar, a member of the Peazants by marriage, who is leading the move North and who refers to Nana's beliefs as "hoodoo mess." She names both her girls Myown and Iona, and claims that her children "ain't gonna be like those old Africans, fresh off the boat" suggesting that anyone determined to buck progress and stay on Ibo's Landing is old-fashioned and ignorant. However, Iona will never go to the mainland; she remains in the island with her Native American lover. And Myown, much at her mother's dismay, remains connected to the realm of the spiritual and to Nana (as we know from Dash's novel of the same title as the film) passing on her spiritual knowledge to her daughter Amelia, who through the lenses of her camera, her intellect and her commitment to her academic research as an anthropologist vindicates her right to reconnect with the cultural roots of the island, and her own historical and spiritual inheritance. Amelia eventually returns to Datwuh island, 22 years after her mother left, and guided by her cousin Elizabeth—the Unborn Child, who grows to be the teacher there—will recover her severed ties to her own people and to ancestral Africa. In fact, Myown's resistance to the sense of disconnection and fragmentation instilled in her by her mother, allows her to pass her true feelings to her daughter who is charged with the mission of becoming the carrier of cultural memory, claiming those people in the island and its traditions as part of her own heritage, just as her cousin Elizabeth had done 22 years before in the island as the Unborn Child.

Viola is not the only member of the family who lives in the mainland, for Yellow Mary, accompanied by her girlfriend Trula, also comes to visit Nana in this time of mixed tribulations. Yellow Mary had gone to Cuba as wet nurse for a white family, but after being raped by her white master, resolved to achieve economic independence by becoming a prostitute. Yellow Mary visits Nana and the island to stake a claim for inclusion in the family history, providing "shrewd snubs" to the

family's dreams of crossing to the mainland (Jones 1993, 21). The film concludes with a ritual of spiritual regeneration designed by Nana to preserve the family ties and as means for protection from the dangers they will face in the cities of the North. Nana is to remain on the island where all her ancestors are buried. Eli and Eula, and Yellow Mary also choose to stay behind with Nana.

This special day in which the whole family gets together is a day of celebration of the old days, the days in which Nana and her husband started a new life upon North American shores. As such, traditional culture, the distinct ways of the Gullah with their African message of resistance is celebrated.

I came up with the idea of structuring the story in much the same way that an African griot would recount a family's history.

Julie Dash

Daughters of the Dust is a groundbreaking film within the history of Black filmography in the United States. Categorized by the late writer Toni Cade Bambara as "oppositional cinema," (Dash 1992, xiii). The film presents, the story under dual narrators. The story unfolds, led by the voices of Nana Peazant, and the Unborn Child, simultaneously both characters and ancestors. Thus, the film's story has two points of view: that of a child who has not yet been born, and that of a great-grandmother who has seen it all, and who can see the coming of the child in the future. Ancestry evolves in the film as a narrative structure that claims that the story needs to be told in a non-western way. This is reflected in the multiple-point-of view camerawork that reveals a non-linear, multilayered presentation. The story unfolds then within a non-linear structure that resembles the storytelling traditions which inform African American literature and cinema. Within such tradition, many voices intertwine, emerging from both memories from the past and from other worlds and the present, in a fashion which folds in the old with the new, and that functions as evidence of an Afrocentric grounding. As Bambara points out, the film *Daughters of the Dust* is claiming its place within the progressive world film culture movements that "bolster socially responsible cinema" (Dash 1992, 13). This is represented in the innovative techniques that Dash displays in *Daughters of the Dust* such as shared space (wide-angled and deep-focus shots in which no one becomes backdrop to anyone else's drama) as opposed to dominated space which foregrounds the hero in sharp focus while the rest are "othered" in a background blur. Bambara further points out that Dash uses socialized space rather than idealized space. This delineated space encourages a contiguous-reality reading and suggests the resolution of a situation or episode through societal transformation rather than through masked space in which, through close-ups and framing, the spectator is encouraged to believe that conflicts are solely psychological, not systemic and thus can only be resolved by a gunshot, "a lawyer or a shrink" (Dash 1992, 13).

Another distinctive feature of the film is its post-colonial nature. *Daughters of the Dust* sets out to revoke the colonial history that has obscured the past of African Americans through that of the Peasant family. One of the few first images that we see following the credits is a light-skinned, well dressed woman wearing a hat with veiling, standing up near the front of an open barge. This image strongly reminds us of dominant cinema's colonialism; however, we notice that the woman does not pose as a sitting down, well-mannered lady might have done. Rather, she stands hip shot, chin cocked, one arm akimbo. The viewer perceives a message of freedom, an attitude that breaks with the rules and we clearly see "a new kind of woman" (Dash 1992, 123). Toni Cade Bambara describes Yellow Mary's gestures as "ebonics," and in doing so she suggests that Dash has "appropriated the image from reactionary cinema for an emancipatory purpose" with the intention to heal our "imperialized eyes" (Dash 1992, 12).

As such, *Daughters of the Dust* aims to show a Black family, and especially the women of this family in a way never done before. This is achieved by presenting a narrative construction that evokes the concept of defamiliarization by redefining the history of Black people. This means in the film, not only maintaining historical events and issues concerning the people and Sea Island region, but also inscribing their mythic history in their story. Describing how the film defamiliarizes our western conventions, filmmaker Julie Dash affirms that it is not only how the scenes are set up, but also the places where the camera is placed—the closeness that allows the viewer to belong inside the group, to listen to intimate conversations between the women, who are placed at the center. In fact, this sense of closeness that recalls a sense of community among the women in the movie, and between characters and audience, is informed by the principles of Afro-American ritual drama—together with a call for authenticity—being formalism the main stylistic concern. Formalism, according to Carlton Molette, intends to project and ideal form, so the actors do not need to pretend to be somebody other than themselves. This effect is reached in *Daughters of the Dust* by using a stepped camera, as when shooting the Unborn Child. The smooth effect of slow motion "produces a sense of manipulation other than the conventions of realism, implying a subjective or psychological dimension of time and reality" (Allen 1992, 44). The stepped camera effect takes "the viewer from the chronotope of the everyday to the chronotope of the spirits" implying not only a subjective apprehension of time and space but as Finke points out, suggesting "a mythic one that is designed to replicate the storytelling of the African griot in dialogue with the western technology of vision that constitutes Dash's medium of film" (2003, 131).

Afro-American ritual drama also calls for "soulful behavior" which consists of the building of emotional intensity through rhythm, creating a total spiritual involvement with a proper purgation of emotions. Viewers are invited to witness

the building of a community, its survival strategies, their crisis, losses and changes, and the productive interaction between cultures without losing sight of the power dynamics between them (Finke 2003, 132). Thus, the purpose of being functional, validating and strengthening those values that although existing among African Americans need to be revised and expanded so that they make sense in contemporary U.S. society.

The movie is told from the point of view of a woman, and relegates the men to the periphery. The decolonized context of *Daughters of the Dust* and its commitment to "de-center the white patriarchal gaze" brings the Black woman, arguably the most "othered" and the "object" to full view. The focus is on restoring images of Black women who, as bell hooks points out, are "truly on the bottom of this society's race-sex hierarchy" (Dash 1992, 40).

We are all good women.

Eula Peasant

Remembering the history of Black women in 19th century North America, Julie Dash explains how "African American women never had the luxury of being a woman. She had to always be so much more: the keeper of secrets, the provider, the nurturer, all of this" (Dash 1992, 50). Therefore, women are represented with great variety in the movie, suggesting images that Dash feels are more in tune with their real culture because the film explored the ways Black women "responded to images of themselves as sexually immoral" (Bobo 1995, 158). At the center remains the great-grandmother, Nana Peasant, emerging from the soil as a powerful omen, as a mythic totem pole. She shows that even in the midst of the denigration of Black womanhood, there was the veneration of the Black woman as elder. In the scene when Nana and Eli are talking on the grave of Nana's husband, Eli says to her, "I really believe you were a goddess" (Dash 1992, 95).

Surrounding Nana are the rest of the women of the Peasant family whose strength, beliefs, circumstances, and sense of self and community are as varied as the colors of a shiny rainbow, arguing for new standards for judging womanhood and selfhood. As Eula pleads to the rest of the Peasant women: "If you love yourself, love Yellow Mary" (Dash 1992, 157). Eula, has become "ruined" just as Yellow Mary was before her. However, Eula's powerful and moving soliloquy, almost at the end of the movie, makes a case for all women whose honor and dignity have been plundered. She wonders:

Am I ruined too? As far as this placed is concerned, we never enjoyed our womanhood [...] Deep inside, we believed that they ruined our mothers, and their mothers before them. And we live our lives always expecting the worst because we feel we don't deserve any better. (Dash 1992, 156)

The validation ritual that Eula begins evolves around Yellow Mary, who is despised by some women of the Peasant family, Hagaar, and the hair braider among them. Eula recalls the traumatic experiences of Black women in the Sea Islands and elsewhere under slavery. Eula recounts: “we couldn’t think of ourselves as pure women, knowing how our mothers were ruined. And maybe we think we don’t deserve better, but we’ve got to change our way of thinking” (Dash 1992, 156). In this way, Eula joins the elder Nana in reaffirming the family need for connection, first of all among themselves, secondly to their ancestral African roots, not letting “their inheritance from enslavement rob them of their heritage of resistance and survival” (Bobo 1995, 161). As Nana exclaimed: “You’re the fruit of an ancient tree” (Dash 1992, 154).

I am trying to teach you how to touch your own spirit.

Nana Peasant.

Nana Peasant fears that with the new will come the loss of memory and the disappearance of the strength that family provides, particularly necessary for Black people. The migration that the Peasant family is about to undertake will be both a physical and spiritual project in which they will have to reconcile simultaneous forms of retention and integration in order to maintain their cultural sustenance. In the film *Nana*, representing African American women, deliberately takes on the role of oral historian—the one who remembers.

Situating the Unborn Child as co-narrator, Dash clarifies her perspective as Afrocentric instead of deriving theme and action from European, Western ways. For instance, the Unborn Child is Elegba: one foot on this world, one foot on the other. Dash affirms that although Elegba is usually male, she made it female because he has the power to be anyone in his role as mediator between the sacred and the secular worlds: “the one we appeal to overcome indecision” (1992, 25). The Unborn Child then, connects Eli and Eula to an African world view. Esu-Elegba, the mythical West African trickster figure makes possible that connection. In Marshall’s novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, the elder man who guides Avey towards Carriacou island and the “Beg Pardon” dance, Lebert Joseph, is also Esu Elegba.

Take my “hand.” I am the one that can give you strength.

Nana Peasant.

Nana, Eula, the Unborn Child, and later on Eli, link their identities to the space of Ibo Landing, placing it against the North, which is a place that represents the fragmentation of the family, disconnection from the ancestors, and the loss of identity for the children. As Manthia Diawara points out, “Ibo Landing is Africa in America.” As the place where the slaves landed and remained isolated from

mainland America, the film argues that the members of the Peasant family “must learn the terms of their belonging” because this place will be an example of African Americans associating with Africa, and must use the space known as Ibo Landing to validate their identities as Americans emerging from a distinct culture (Diawara 1992, 15).

Daughters of the Dust negotiates the spaces of colonized terrain and family as liberated zone, the themes of women as a source of value, and history, as interpreted by Black people, led by their experiences and memories. As Toni Cade Bambara observes, *Daughters of the Dust* asks that the viewers enter a triple process of recollecting the dismembered past, recognizing and acknowledging cultural icons and codes, and recentering and revalidating the self, demanding our recognition of Black complexity (Bambara 1993).

The spiritual basis of the film *Daughters of the Dust* allows us to enter what Diawara calls “a Black structure of feeling” (quoted in Mellencamp 1994, 96). Spirituality, the powerful character of Nana, together with the Unborn Child, the wind, the music—all of *Daughters of the Dust* images carry with them a unifying effect that draws the viewer to experience the spiritual dimension of African American culture, which is strong, enduring, and sustaining.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Making *Daughters of the Dust*

(Revised)

JULIE DASH

It has been over 26 years since the release of *Daughters of the Dust*, but it some ways, it feels like just yesterday. The world—people and the technology that keeps our lives in perpetual progress—have evolved in what sometimes feels like light speed. So too, has the film industry. In some ways, it is now easier than ever to make a film. The accessibility of fairly inexpensive camera equipment and easy to use programs like iMovie puts the magic of filmmaking in just about everyone's hands. Seeing my film students' creativity and innovation come to life in their final film projects gives me hope about what's on the horizon.

And while film technology continues to advance, until very recently, Hollywood has been reticent to change, to become more inclusive of people and projects that fall outside of the dominant culture. Throughout the years, this has been a painful reality to see and, of course to experience.

More recently, however, with the critical acclaim of talented filmmakers such as Dee Rees, Justin Simien, Nate Parker, and of course, Ava DuVernay, there has been a long-awaited shift. Changes won't happen in some distant future any longer. Change is here.

I never planned a career as a filmmaker. As a child growing up in the Queensbridge Housing Projects in Long Island City, New York, I dreamed of some typical and not-so-typical career choices. None of the images I saw of African American people, especially the women, suggested that we could actually make movies. We were rarely even in them. No, I never dreamed of filmmaking when I was little. At that time, I wanted to be in the secretarial pool, typing away and having fun like