

Sweeping Conversations: Julie Dash's *Daughters*

by

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Abstract

“Sweeping Conversations: Julie Dash’s *Daughters*” by Wanda Ali Batin Sabir, reframes a monologue America continues to host without its subject’s presence. Dash addresses this omission with her film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). The director says she “set out to make a foreign film about an American family rather than just tell a Southern story.”³ She wanted to share her enjoyment of sitting in a theatre and being transported. The only problem is, she says, much of her potential audience then and now do not want to do the work necessary to participate in a journey where accommodations, where present, are inadequate. *Daughters* is a 20th century migration story starring Geechee people born on Dawtuh, a small barrier island among the hundreds of Sea Islands along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. Dash’s Peasant family have no peers in the western cinematic canon. The fact that these protagonists are black women, equally beautiful and unique shatter prejudicial concepts present in a dominant discourse that is hard to silence especially when Dash allows the luscious cinematography to speak—its epic narratives stunning.

Witnessing is hard when bias blinds. Why is it important for Dash to tell this story, and why 25 years later is the film still a classic? Not only do audiences have to struggle philosophically with the linguistic resonances of this American people—without subtitles, at the same time, audiences also have to imagine beauty among a people, in a place stained by the horrors and legacy of slavery and its aftermath.

When we look at Black people in the Diaspora and trace their inspirations and continental movements, the trajectory is often ancestral –the move towards a shifting and unreliable home across multiple spaces, sometimes defiled, often unconventional, as are the stories gathered and then dispersed across landscapes. Amelia Varnes, red-boned⁴ descendant of residents of Ibo Landing, Geechee territory in Julie Dash’s novel, *Daughters of the Dust* (1997), gathers her scattered pieces and claims a heritage she could not even imagine. An anthropology student headed from New York to her ancestral country for fieldwork – to collect “lies”, she learns that what she was living was the *lie* and here with her Geechee relatives lies the truth. The reflection turned outward reveals her mother, Myown and grandmother, Haagar as silhouettes, shadows, not fully alive human beings. The irony? Her father is a mortician.

The novel, which is an extension of the iconic film by the same title, follows the Peazant family migration north and takes up the story of those Peazant family members who stayed with Nana Peazant, elder and matriarch of the family. Unborn Child is born on the island and is now a school teacher, Elizabeth (Lil Bet) who is similar age as her cousin Amelia.

In *Daughters of the Dust*, the novel, we learn more about the characters who shaped the film’s narrative: Nana Peazant, Yellow Mary, Eli and Eula, Haagar and Myown. We are introduced to the spinster sisters: Miss Genevieve and Miss Evangeline, Ol’Trent, Willis George and Woodrow McKinley Harrison or “Sugarnun,” Carrie Mae, Toady and others.

Through her character Amelia and those characters Amelia comes to know, Dash reveals the power of family and community, the collective story made from individual episodes, which whether tragic or heroic, often serve as a talisman stretching cross generations. Amelia learns along with Lil Bet why certain members of the community behave as they do and why others departed and can no longer return. We learn of *Egbe* or astral beings and ghosts who walk with Amelia and Lil Bet in Nana’s house.

Within the novel, are potions or charms mixed to dispel sadness, encourage happiness and create wonder. The recipes sweeten bitter passages or add light to darkness. Rituals and ceremonies seen in Dash’s film are more fully articulated in the novel especially regarding both the captives and the ancient ones—both Indigenous people and the Africans. The author even has the young anthropologist pack film and movie cameras to aid her research that her cousin, Ben, helps her use. The story the anthropologist tells explains why Dash chooses to film *Daughters* the way she does.

In a published conversation with bell hooks regarding her film, the two writers talk about the concept of myth and the visual and poetic lyricism present in Dash’s work, which is historic, yet fictional.¹ Dash describes a scene omitted from the final cut that shows the pain of separation between a mother and her child—something that is evocative of the slave trade. In the scene, instead of the mother crying salty tears, Dash has the mother’s breasts leak milk on the ground referencing the enslaved mother’s grief when her baby, known later as Nana Peazant, is sold.

Nana's mother sends a lock of her hair to her child, which Nana keeps in a tin all her life. According to Dash, "The mother would send the quilt on to that plantation and when the child was old enough she'd be able to look in her own baby blanket and find a lock of her mother's hair. And sometimes that was the only thing that we had to share with our children or with husbands or wives" (*Making* 33).

Faced with another separation, actress Cora Lee Day's *Nana*, interrupts her great grandson Eli (actor Adisa Anderson) as he tells her why he too has to leave the island: "Eli . . . there's a thought . . . a recollection . . . something somebody remembers. We carry these memories inside of us. Do you believe that hundreds and hundreds of Africans brought here on this other side would forget everything they once knew? We don't know where the recollections come from. Sometimes we dream them. But we carry these memories inside us.

"Eli to Nana: "What're we supposed to remember, Nana? How, at one time, we were able to protect those we loved? How, in African world, we were kings and queens and built great big cities?"

"Nana: Eli . . . I'm trying to teach you how to touch your own spirit. I'm fighting for my life, Eli, and I'm fighting for yours. Look in my face! I'm trying to give you something to take North with you, along with all your big dreams" (*Daughters*, film, 96).

This is the dilemma of the captive in exile, the freed, formerly enslaved Africans in the Diaspora—what she chooses to remember and what she forgets.

What he or she forgets often paves the road for tomorrow, so where does the path lead when it is inadequately marked? Dash's characters find clues—bits and pieces that point to larger patches of light in the celestial canopy. If Nana is gone, her buddy Miz Emma Julia remembers the lies, rituals and relationships between the people and their deities.

Cultural memories live in stories passed from generation to generation. One such story looks at a barren woman's desire for children and the troubles this brings when her children cannot get along. She names the children after the gods: Oya, Yemonja, Ogun, Osun, Eleggba. A creation story, we learn of Mother Goddess crying and her tears filling the spaces where the land broke apart where her children were exiled: deserts, mountains, woods, grasslands, and hills. Miz Emma Julia says the mother waits across the waters for her children to stop fighting, so they can be reunited with her (*Daughters*, novel, 14).

What is the lesson here?

Miz Emma Julia then shares the story of the slave ship, de Sorcerer, which runs enslaved Africans to the islands after the continental Atlantic slave trade is outlawed. There is mystery surrounding the fate of the Africans onboard until Amelia and her cousin, Lucy find de Sorcerer captives' shackles and bones buried in Lucy's plot of land one afternoon as the two women plow. Lucy takes to her bed, sick at heart. The elders are called, and the community comes together to dig up the rest of the plot, assemble the remains, and prepare to give these ancestors a proper burial.

Miz Emma Julia says to Lucy and Amelia: "Now they come back to we! Just like the captives dey throw in de water! It a sign! Us haint been livin right, an de ol ones comes back to tell we. Us got to put dem to right! Us got to move dem from de evil dat brought dem here and live in dis land. Us got to make de journey of the ancestors" (*Daughters*, novel, 237).

She then tells the townsfolk what to do to prepare the burial. They are to gather certain items: water, earth and shells. Cook particular foods: hearty stews without salt. Build a casket to hold bones. Find blue cloth to cover the altar. Everyone labors night and day for two days to prepare the altar for the ancestors: weeding, cleaning and leveling the ground near the older burial site. Finally, everything is ready for Miz Emma Julia's inspection. She returns and nods; bones and shackles placed on quilts at the frail women's feet as she raises her hands and prays for the souls of their ancestors, ancestors no one mourned.

This because at the time of the massacre when the bodies washed onto the shore, the enslaved Africans refused the master's orders to bury the dead. They went into their cabins and shut the doors. The master had to hire white men to bury the captives and pay them double. Miz Emma Julia tells Lucy, who was confined to her bed from the discovery to the ritual burial to mourn her ancestors, "Go-on gal. Let dem saltwater tears wash down an cleanse dem. Aint nobody cry for dem for years. Dey lay down in dat field for nobody know how long. Dat why the fields so rich with de earth. Our elders give dey life blood. Dey give what was took from dem" (*Daughters*, novel, 241).

"Amelia spreads out the bones as requested. She then touches a bone, and 'feels a jolt and pulls back. Miz Emma Julia just nods encouragingly. 'Dey reachin out to you. Take what dey got to offer. . . .' [Amelia] held the bone above her head with both hands and cried out when she felt the waves of fear, pain, and despair wash over her" (*Daughters*, novel, 241).

Miz Emma Julia puts a skull in Lucy's hand. "Just as she was about to let it roll off her palm, her head snapped back as the force hit her. She jerked as if her body were receiving invisible blows, her head rolling and her arms flinging in every direction. . ." (*Daughters*, novel, 241).

“It take a strong people, snatch from de cradle, de wood, de village, put on de boat, an took cross de big water to land dey never know.’ Miz Emma Julia moved back and forth in front of the altar, acting out the story. Her age fell away as he words rose. ‘It take a strong people to keep dey all about dem, to hold on de ol ways, to keep de lies true, to know who de be! It take a strong people to work from day clean to day over to clear de lan, build de house, plow de field, make de indigo, sow de rice, pick de cotton, all to de good of de buckra. Some of we forget how strong dem people was, us look past de old ways, put aside what dey was tellin we bout de right way to live. An now dey come back to we, de ancients who seed dis earth wit dey tears, sweat, an blood!” (*Daughters*, novel, 242).

She picked up a skull and a large bone and began to shake the bones as she prayed and poured libations to African gods. In response, the earth began to move as well. Miz Emma Julia laughed, “Come children, dey telling you to rise up! Free de souls! . . . We done took de pain an de sadness! All dat lef is de healin!” Then the drumming started and people began to dance (*Daughters*, novel, 243). “Amelia slipped her hand into her pocket and grasped the piece of iron shackle Miz Emma Julia insisted everyone take to remember the price the old ones paid for their freedom” (Dash 244).

Ritual is an opportunity strengthen community. The act itself reinforces memory.

Daughters of the Dust, both film and novel as well as the excellent treatment *The Making of an African American Woman’s Film*, provide a perspective previously unaddressed by black artists. A cultural insider, born of parents from the south, a father whose lineage is Geechee, one could say, Dash comes by the tradition naturally. The totems included in her work rupture a narrative, Dash states to bell hooks, where black women are seen as mummies, whores, beasts of burden, anything but beautiful women whose lives spiral away from confinement, philosophical and objective captivity.

Shot in a place that itself is still a foreign country with a flag antithetical to black sovereignty or freedom, Dash takes her audience into the swamp, rushes and dark murky plains where bottle trees light open spaces, and cabins decorated with indigo blue speak to the interchange between realms. Raised in Queensbridge Housing Projects in Long Island City, New York, the director who became interested in film by chance says, “She was tagging along with a friend to the Studio Museum in Harlem who’d heard about a cinematography workshop. [One thing led to another], and the girl who wanted to be a secretary and then a Roller Derby skater, becomes a part of a group of teens discovering the power of making and defining [their] images on screen” (*Making 2*).

Dash’s characters on screen are no ordinary Africans either. Nana Peasant represents Obatala, the wise elder who fashioned the human being. Eli is Ogun, the god of heart or courage and works iron. All the daughters are children of Oṣun, and there are also Elegba, Oya and Yemanja.

I don't remember who told me to see *Daughters of the Dust*, 25 years ago, but groups of black women were buying out screenings. I went in Oakland, California, to the Piedmont Theatre. I'd never seen a film in a black dialect or in a language born in the Diaspora, and I found just the articulation fascinating to listen to. Its musicality, especially Nana Peazant's heavier accent (loosely translated) were some of my favorite cinematic moments. I challenged myself to understand what she was saying as I tried to ignore the captions. I was the age of my younger daughter, TaSin, is now, and when the film opens December 2, 2016, nationally, I hope she will see it with me.

I recall multiple visits to the theatre. The second time I saw the film, I just let the images wash over me. I listened with my heart and opened it uncensored to the narrative—these were my sisters, my people, Ibo Landing like other landings and ports, places where so many Salt Water Africans were enslaved. More recently, October 2016, I saw an adult with five younger girls at the Mill Valley Film Festival 39 Awards screening where the filmmaker was honored, and the much-anticipated digital restoration print was screened. Dash said she never had enough money to make a print like the one opening in theatres late November, early December 2016.

The director said in answer to a question that evening about captions that she came of age watching films where she struggled to understand Irish, Chinese, Spanish and other accents, that it is time for Americans to acknowledge and struggle similarly with Gullah, a Bantu language that uses English words, she said to appreciative applause.

A love song to her father, this work is perhaps the highest accolade a daughter could offer a parent. To make a film about her dad's people, a people who are still African and American today, says a lot for the cultural retention and integrity present in Gullah Geechee society in the Sea Islands. The isolation present on Ibo Landing preserves this cultural worldview; however, once the Peazants, Dashes . . . migrated north, the dominant narrative all but silences them.

Daughters of the Dust (1991) reframes a monologue America continues host without us. The director says she “set out to make a foreign film about an American family rather than just tell a Southern story.”⁵ She wanted to share her enjoyment of sitting in a theatre and being transported. The only problem is her audience then and now does not want to do the work necessary to participate. Resistance often meets Dash's challenge to turn off the chatter and open up to the possibility that perhaps what she depicts on screen, a turn of the century migration story is not just plausible, but relatively unknown. Her Peazant family has no peers in the western canon. The fact that these protagonists are black women, who equally beautiful and unique shatter prejudicial concepts present in a dominant discourse that is hard to silence especially when Dash allows the luscious cinematography to speak its epic narratives remains stunning. Witnessing is hard when bias blinds the onlooker.

Why is it important for Dash to tell this story, and why 25 years later is the film still a classic? Not only do audiences have to struggle philosophically with the linguistic resonances of this American people—without subtitles, at the same time, audiences also have to imagine beauty among a people in a place stained by the horrors and legacy of slavery and its aftermath.

Dash's story confronts the difficulty a family faces when sexual violence intrudes its ugly head into domestic tranquility. The unborn child is a character in this unusual tale, and like trickster Esu Elegba we see her play with Mr. Snead, the photographer, who sees her in his lens and then doesn't see her. The Unborn Child is the narrator of the film. Her lens is limited by her youth, so there are aspects of the story left unanswered, aspects we read about later in Dash's novel by the same title. The novel's narrator, Amelia is a bit older than Unborn Child (Elizabeth or Lil Bet).

Dash's family maintained its cultural rituals especially those involving death and food. In the summer the director says, the family would pack up the children and head back to the islands, where Dash says the first stop would be the gravesite. There, elders would talk to the dead as if the dead were sitting beside them as they pulled weeds and cleaned the area. Nana Peazant does the same. She tells her great grandson, Eli, she visits her husband daily to chat.

Dash says when she was a child, the word "cemetery" distanced city people from the fact that their dead were buried there. "Gravesite" carried a more visceral connotation. The director grew up knowing these family members; they lived on the altars at home and in the practices she observed, which were not explained. In her preparation and writing of the screenplay, the filmmaker came to articulate for herself visually this shared Diaspora heritage. She says this was not something she could talk about with her classmates or neighborhood friends, who asked where her father was from when noticing his accent.

Similarly, Dash says no one explained to her the rituals or what the objects on the altar meant. When she developed the concept for a silent film about "the migration of an African American family from the Sea Islands off South Carolina mainland to the mainland and then North[,] [she] envisioned [her film] as a kind of 'Last Supper' before migration and separation of the family'" (*Making 4*). This was in 1975. At the same time the director was also collecting notes from family stories and phrases, while entertaining a fascination with photographer, James Van DerZee's photos of black women at the turn of the century" (*Making 4*).

Dash made a short film in 1983, *Illusions*,⁶ starring Lonette McKee, and then started to work on *Daughters of the Dust* mining her personal treasure chest, except when silence greeted her request for stories and more information.

This familial reticence did not deter her, rather she says it directed her to want to create the kind of work that was so riveting that it would touch audiences the way this migration – separation and rupture, silenced her loved ones.

Dash is one of the directors in the shapeshifting movement out of the UCLA School of Film and Television known as the LA Rebellion. It was a time when black directors, folks like Charles Burnett, Billy Woodberry, Haile Gerima, Jamaa Fanaka, Barbara McCullough, Larry Clark, Alile Sharon Larkin, Ben Caldwell, Zeinabu irene Davis and of course Julie Dash, challenged prevailing imagery with counter narratives and engaging new work. The LA lab was a shared aesthetic or creative space where black directors were free to explore and test new ideas.

How does one visualize the unspeakable when the place where melancholy lives transforms memory? If melancholia is an alternative space, just its articulation means something has shifted. A new space has opened up. This shift also changes the reality, so what is remembered is not a replica of what is now absent or unavailable.

Daughters of the Dust is a necessary opening – a discourse that frees souls to move into healing. Dash says the research process was fascinating, that she learned so much, that if she were not a filmmaker she would “be glad to spend the rest of her life digging around libraries. . . . One of her discoveries was the existence of over 60,000 West African words or phrases in use in the English language, a direct result of the slave trade” (*Making 5*). It took Dash ten years to research, then write her film. Along the way, she gave birth to her daughter N’zinga.

As a first feature, we see a lot of Dash in the work. N’zinga became the inspiration for the character, “the unborn child” who straddles both worlds – slave and free, what W.E.B Dubois, calls “double consciousness.” It is this restlessness that characterizes Lil Bet whom we meet in *Daughters*, the novel. College-educated, like Amelia, living in the rural south where she has no peers, Lil Bet (a.k.a. the unborn child) is displaced by circumstances and doesn’t know what to do about it.

With *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash interrupts the dominant narrative by giving black women agency, an agency previously denied, silenced, and certainly ignored and forgotten by those with the mic. Not only does she amplify the voices of the three generations of the Peasant women: Nana Peasant, Eula and her unborn child, the film shifts from normed patriarchal aegis to an African sensibility where women are seen as the “sweetness of life.”

Dash’s film stylistically utilizes a new form to tell the Peasant story. If D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) stands as the narrative norm for feature films in Hollywood, a film rife with images that demean and dehumanize black people, *Daughters of the Dust* is Dash’s emblematic protest. *Daughters*, the first film by a black woman director to have major distribution, shifts the American gaze perceptively into a dialogue about black humanity, black agency and the worthiness of black lives.

To use African linguistic technologies to tell the story of a people in the Diaspora is more than fitting, considering the outsider context of these characters and by extension black people inhabit (then and now). The lowcountry sits along the coast of the southeastern United States from the St. John's River in Florida to Cape Fear in North Carolina.⁷ The area includes St. Helena Island, Beaufort County, Sullivan Island, Charleston County, both in South Carolina, and St. Simons Island, in Glynn County, Georgia, where *Daughters of the Dust* "Ibo Landing" sits⁸. This is a place suspended in time, not Gregorian time, rather a time suspended as Dash says between a nether world and the present. It is not Afrofuturism, rather an alternative landscape where people actually reside, thrive and live full lives. It isn't as if the white folks on the mainland do not know of the Gullah (Geechee) tribe, rather the rural habitation is not deemed worthy of cultivation. Extreme heat, insects, and threat of yellow fever meant landowners chose to live on the mainland, even during slavery. Film notes state: "The inhabitants of Dawtuh, mainly African American, have remained isolated and insulated from the mainland since the very first African Captive was brought ashore."⁹

What Dash's *Daughters* gives her audience is an alternative legacy. The spatial openness within the work reflects the shifting time; years pass in a moment, time also drifts by on a solo cloud. We've just spent a day, must be a summer day with the Peazant clan. When they climb into the boat to sail to the mainland to travel north, it is still light. Shot over 28 days, the film was impressionistic in that it was shot without artificial lights. To highlight the different hues or skin tones, Arthur (AJ) Jafa, the director of photography, used copper and other metal to reflect the light on the skin of the subjects to increase the tone. The result is a luscious film that looks cinematically like an artist's canvas, each tableaux a portrait. Dash says, Her film comprised of "tableaux structurally similar to African icons, Ethiopian magic scrolls, Egyptian reliefs or their New World antecedents, [reflect] the work of photographer James Van DeZee."¹⁰

The director explains, "Nana Peazant and her family are composed in tableaux shots to appear suspended in time, in a magical drama. I wanted them to appear as a memory. Stylistically the film is a rich tapestry of languid movements (achieved with the use of a speed control computer) and furtive glances between the young folks and the old."¹¹

Besides the natural skin tones repeated in the red clay or soil, the only others colors are white, black and indigo blue, a motif, the director says that symbolizes the staining or mark of captivity. Color marks a person. In Zimbabwe, if you vote, your inked forefinger bears witness. No conversation is necessary. Indigo or blue is also the color of a mood, Dash says. The blues of course were born in the Delta. The director's "houses or shanties have indigo blue trim on their windows and doors for protection from evil. The Unborn Child wears an indigo blue ribbon in her hair; she propels us back into the past [where she meets Nana Peazant who wear an indigo dress] and into the future."¹²

It is the white dresses with black lace-up boots the girls wear, their hair plaited or twisted, men in suits—all looking their best for the photoshoots that balmy day – all against the backdrop of a pristine white sandy beach that gives *Daughters* such beauty. The ocean is serene in certain areas; however, still waters are deceptive, Eula tells Yellow Mary as she and Trula lie along two branches of the same large tree and smoke cigarettes. White dresses cascading down, the image is lovely.

On the beach, the women cut up onions, chop seasoning, pull feathers from chickens and clean shrimp. When the meal is completed and everyone eats . . . the scene with adults and children lying content on the sand dunes is another tableaux, as is Eula's admonition to the older women who try to shame Yellow Mary about being ruin't. This is a powerful scene. Here Eula challenges all of the family to think about where they are and the women who bore them. She says, most of the women are ruin't— Her rant causes everyone to put what happened to Eula and Yellow Mary into perspective. Both are victims of the racially motivated sexual violence that accompanies white supremacist politics and policies. John Barnes, composer, ever attuned to the cultural nuances at play within a cinematic moment, subtly and masterfully scores the methodical pacing.

The Peasant family and its Gullah or Geechee community are juxtaposed to an industrialized and ever encroaching “northern state,” the north a place absent trees, absent saltwater ancestors, absent Nana's presence—a situation devoid of genetic geography or invitation to African presence. A people, without rights,¹ now that slavery is over, the idea that freedom has a reality the government feels obligated to recognize proves dubious to Nana who states she doesn't know what freedom means to “a Negro people” in the north. Why isn't living in a land where one's ancestors once walked and whose bones lie buried in the red sandy earth, freedom enough, she asks. Is it safer away from Ibo Landing? Are black people free from lynching and other violence elsewhere? Can black men protect their wives, mothers, and daughters from racially motivated attacks and abuse more easily in the north than on the island?

In Nana Peasant (Cora Lee Day, 1914-1996), we witness an African woman who has examined then discarded European spirituality for what works, ancestral rituals. She does not mix the two or abandon what she learned so long ago from her elders. For her, Africa is very much alive. She lives within the context of an African Diaspora worldview and cosmology. She celebrates black deities. The songs of protest live within the sinew of the born and yet to be born.

Matriarch Nana Peasant, great grandmother of the Peasant family, is the link between the old and the new. Nana represents a traditional African-based, socio-cultural belief system that must come to grips with a westernized belief system in this contentious post-Civil War New World. Nana represents Obatala, a Yoruba deity, who is leader of the orisa for its great age and wisdom. Obatala rules the head, the seat of the soul or psyche. Nana is designated leader of the Peasant clan.

Her great grandson, Eli Peazant, says to her that he believed that she could protect the family from intruders and attacks. He doesn't understand how the enemy slipped through and raped his wife Eula (actress Alva Rogers). He is afraid of the potential monster growing in her belly. He sees her desecration as an affront to his manhood, yet Nana reminds him that Eula is her own person, that she doesn't lose her agency when she marries Eli. She is still free. Hidden from sight, Eli waits and watches, alternating between rage and despair. He wants to know who did this to his wife, but Eula does not tell him. To tell him could mean the end of Eli's life.

The voice of the unborn child (actress Kai-Lynn Warren) is personified in *Daughters of the Dust*. Eli sees his child running across the road; then, he blinks his eyes and she disappears. The photographer, Mr. Snead (actor Tommy Hicks), hired to document the Peazant family's last day together – composes a shot with the children and sees in his lens the unborn child; then, when he steps away from the camera, she is gone.

Juju or magic is an aspect of black culture found in *Daughters*, what one might call formal archetypal retention or practice. From the trees decorated with colored bottles (to capture wandering spirits), woven amulets on cabin doors (for protection), newsprint wallpaper (to confuse the ghosts or evil spirits), to the cemetery where the living talk to the dead – Dash externalizes internal (eternal) recollections marvelously in her work. In one scene, where Eli (Ogun) takes tobacco leaves from his pocket for his great grandmother as she sits talking to her husband at his gravesite, Nana smiles as she takes the present and shares with her grandson her deceased husband's disapproval. In another scene at the site, we see a baby bassinet made from a grave marker with the date the person attained freedom written on its side.

The link between the past and the present is a value Nana Peazant lives. She carries a tin can filled with scraps of memories she takes out and talks to frequently. Everyone knows the can, if not all the stories it contains. When she sees the family's disintegration and departure inevitable, Nana cuts a lock from her hair and adds the lock from her mother's hair that she received before her mother was sold away from her daughter forever. Nana speaks of these sales and the inadequate records the white slave masters kept. She says it was up to the enslaved to keep record of who had what child and who was sold; otherwise, the enslaved men and women might find themselves mating with their children.

This is just one reference to the atrocities inherent in the Trade. Another was the continued shipment of "Salt Water Africans" to the Lowcountry after this form of the trade was outlawed. The state sanctioned lawlessness vs. the moral law exemplified by Nana Peazant and her clan stays in dialectic tension throughout the film. Characters like Yellow Mary Peazant (actress Barbara O), who returns to the island just as Viola Peazant (actress Cheryl Lynn Bruce), arrives to facilitate the migration north, are counter narratives. Mary and Viola are first cousins, their fathers, brothers.

Viola explains to Mr. Snead, her photographer friend the nomenclature “yellow” is relative, considering the fact that many black people would not call Mary (who is brown skinned) yellow. She is yellow only in relationship to her darker skinned cousin, Viola. Yellow Mary’s girlfriend, Trula (actress Trula Hoosier), is yellow or light complexion, almost white-looking with long nappy blonde hair. At one point, Missionary Viola says, “All that yellow wasted.”

Nana’s tin that holds her treasures, gifts from her ancestors, is juxtaposed with a tin of store bought biscuits Yellow Mary brings with her from abroad to share. The youngsters want to taste the biscuits that Haagar holds. Later Yellow Mary speaks about a box she fills with memories she has disentangled herself from. She says she puts the memories in this box and pulls them out when she is ready to look at them. These three containers—Haagar’s sweet, Nana’s bitter-sweet and Mary’s bitter, perhaps best describe the new world awaiting the Peazants.

Dash allows these New World vs. Ancient worldviews to live in characters, the old world represented by Nana Peazant, Yellow Mary, Eula, Eli, the Unborn Child and Brother Bilal Muhammad while the new or modern worldview lives in the hearts of Haagar and Viola. Viola Peazant, perhaps because she is a Peazant, unlike Haagar, “who marries into the Peazant family,” walks away from a legacy Nana wishes to pass onto family for those children born away from Ibo Landing. Migrations were often one-way tickets, all left of the ancestral geographies a memory, which is why the photographs are so important to the story. These photos facilitate the Peazant family’s continued connection after the physical severance or departure. When Amelia and her Aunt Iola look at photos (in *Daughters*, the novel) the family photos fill negative space, articulate even when both women are too full to speak.

In *Daughters*, the film, Nana Peazant relives the trauma of separation – as an enslaved child separated from her mother, as a mother, as a great grandmother separated from her children. She says to the departing Peazants that she is old and might not live much longer. Nana doesn’t say it, but even had she wanted to start anew, the transition might have shortened what few years she might have left.

So Nana weaves a basket and thinks. She sews; she wades into the water to talk to ancestors and other deities. Ultimately, she reconciles herself to the separation—one more fracture or psychic break or breach beyond her control. She decides to bless her children. After all, they are free, and she does not own them. If they do not agree with her, she cannot hold them. These Peazants feel the North is a better place to raise their families.

As the women cook the last meal, Nana sews together an amulet to keep her family tightly sewn together and safe. This is medicine for them to place in their philosophical tins. Everyone except Haagar accepts the gift. Haagar walks away disgusted. Back turned to the ritual, Haagar represents disregard for the Peazant legacy Nana represents. She states before she walks away that she is leaving all the hoodoo and backward rituals and beliefs behind. She plans to do better for her three daughters. One (Iola) escapes with a native man who she loves just before the boat sets sail.

Viola Peazant (actress Cheryl Lynn Bruce) realizes before departure Nana's values are not in conflict with her own. She accepts the gift of the indigo hands wrapped around her holy book offered her to kiss. "Viola reflects a syncretism of ancient African beliefs and Christianity. Her character attempts to escape her history and the trauma of her second-class citizenship in her Baptist religious beliefs."¹³ The Yoruba and Christian syncretism is seen in the Lucumi, Santeria, Vodun, Candomblé and other aspects of Diaspora African spirituality.

Dash is not afraid to interrogate the spirituality inherent in black survival songs—we see a Kikongo symbol on a turtle's shell. Dawtuh, a small barrier island among hundreds of Sea Islands along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia is Diaspora Africa. It is an undisturbed enclave where traditions live in various characters like Nana Peazant, Bilal Muhammad,¹⁴ Viola Peazant and others. These beliefs did not contradict those African belief systems that predate colonialization by missionaries, both Christian and Muslim. Within Snead, we see a yearning for access to an internal reservoir he can no longer access. In its absence, Nana Peazant shares the Peazant legacy with him. The surrogate tapestry fits Snead (actor Tommy Hicks), as it will fit others, which is why the story *Daughters of the Dust* tells has such appeal. Dash's characters are larger than the screen that holds them; they are all of us, our mothers and grandmothers, cousins and sisters, brothers and fathers. The Peazants are a Diaspora family.

Audiences are invited to locate answers lost in their family migration stories. In the movement north, along with the physical departure, there is a psychic shuffling of the pieces that remain – assimilation a function of survival. A new narrative minus people and histories emerges – part truth and part fiction. The idea of memory, remembrance and recollection, something Nana Peazant represents is lost to subsequent generations. The ancestors live in the womb, she says. So what happens when the gravesites are inaccessible?

Parts which do not suit narrators are amputated while people and histories are dismembered, then dispersed. Along with this intentional cutting or severance, stories and culture are lost. The callous amputation or dismemberment of histories, like that embodied by Nana Peazant and her clan in 1902 is representative today, 2016, in the homogenized nature of black American culture. So much has been discarded over the past 150 years in migratory patterns that invited more terrorism from white supremacists. We have erased the markers to return to Ibo Landing. In *Daughters*—film and novel, we find a way to rebuild the bridge home.

Daughters has inspired new artistic legacies in the work of artists like Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter. Her visual album, *Lemonade* (2016) makes direct reference to Dash's work, something the director says she appreciates in a *Vanity Fair* interview just before the rerelease of her film: "I just love what she and her sister [Solange] do, what they represent. . . . They reimagine and redefine the diaspora. And it's just like, ugh—sumptuous" (Desta).

When a visibly pregnant Beyoncé performs "Love Drought" and "Sandcastles" at the 89th Academy Awards, she drapes herself in golden jewelry, gossamer gown with woven bejeweled bodice. A crown, similar to that worn by California's namesake, Amazon warrior, "Queen Califia" adorns her head. So attired, Beyoncé or Queen Bey, as she is known, evokes Oṣun, the West African goddess of love and beauty.

In Beyoncé's performance, themes of forgiveness and healing are represented. Similarly, Dash addresses the same issues in her film. Eli's inability to protect his wife Eula from harm, emasculates him, while Beyoncé's pregnancy represents, perhaps a mending of the rift between she and her husband, Shawn Corey Carter (Jay Z), discussed in *Lemonade*.

"If there was a theme," that evening, Dan Ryes, *Billboard*, states, "[I]t was rebirth, regeneration and healing, with her pregnancy as the central topic at hand. But the final words that ended the performance – a voice over of Beyoncé saying, "If we're going to heal, let it be glorious" – has meaning beyond the literal."

In both stories, the pregnancy and birth are central to familial harmony.

Nana Peazant's daughters, like Knowles-Carter, are also daughters of Oṣun, the goddess of seduction, love, enchantment and beauty. Like Oṣun, the mother of the first twins or Ìbejì, Beyoncé also carries twins. In Ifa, Ìbejì are considered "royal, sacred personages."¹⁵ These spirit children dance and play hide and seek on stage like *Lil Bet* appears playfully on the road with her father in *Daughters*. Performative work whether sacred or secular illustrates and honors the incantation or invitation to spirit to be present or to appear. Dash's work and by extension Knowles-Carter's work, straddles the peripheries of both.

Julie Dash's *Daughters*, both film (1991) and novel (1997), give black women, like Knowles-Carter, and by extension black people, room to be all of *herselves*. They are, as Nana Peazant tells Eli, free black women with agency and choice.

Notes

1. *Black Issues in Higher Education*. 21.25 (Jan. 27, 2005): p.10.
2. *The Making of An African American Woman's Film: Daughters of the Dust* (1992)
3. *Black Issues in Higher Education*. 21.25 (Jan. 27, 2005): p.10.
4. <http://www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/pages/c300.shtml>
5. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/10/141017-gullah-geechee-heritage-corridor-lowcountry-coast-sea-islands-sweetgrass/>
6. <http://themoonlitroad.com/ibo-landing/>
7. Cohenmedia.net (Synopsis)
8. <http://juliedash.tv/daughters-visual-style/>
9. Ibid.
10. The rights attached to property rights for its owner. When black people were freed, with it went the insurance that protected their lives.
11. Ibid.
12. The rights attached to property rights for its owner. When black people were freed, with it went the insurance that protected their lives.
13. <http://www.cohenmedia.net/films/daughters-of-the-dust> (press notes 9)
14. Bilali Muhammad <http://sapelobilali.blogspot.com/2013/04/sapelo-islands-bilali-muhammad.html>
15. At one time twins were killed; however, this changed and now they are revered. "They are considered divine" (Edwards and Mason 64).

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