



THE GULLAH KALEIDOSCOPE

Daughters of the Dust (1991)

by African American film director and writer Julie Dash

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Julie Dash's visually hypnotic film *Daughters of the Dust* opens with a close up of a young African American woman's indigo-stained hands holding Sea Island soil blowing through her fingers like dust. In the next scene the same eighty-eight-year-old Nana Peazant rises out of the water fully dressed at Ibo Landing, the main drop-off point of African captives. In two shots and a cut, the diasporic story of the Ibos brought over from West Africa on slave ships and the family story of the Peazants start unfolding. The poisonous blue indigo dye, the damaged hands that farmed it and the thick cotton of the Gullah Islands often dyed dark bridge the gap between slavery time and 1902, the year some Peazant family members decide to cross over to mainland America.

When the film finally came out in 1991, Julie Dash had been doing extensive research on the Sea Islands' history and trying to get some financing for quite a few years. Very early on, and partly because stories from her own family sparked the idea of *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash proved determined to fight the construction of stereotypes in mainstream films. First conceived of as a short silent movie about the migration of Afro-American relatives from the Gullah Islands off the coast of South Carolina to the continent and then North, the movie became much more than just a kind of "Last Supper" before migration and the separation of the family."¹ Possibly for the first time ever for a female film director, black people became subjects of a (rather unconventional) narrative development geared toward spectators who would take special interest in black peoples' perspectives on American culture. And hence, of course, the problem of the audience arose: how many people would actually be interested in stories that had *not* been told about African American women?

Erasing the line of demarcation

Hollywood producers refused to get involved, even after the film got support from PBS, and it was eventually distributed in 1991 by New York

¹ Julie Dash. *The Making of an African American Woman's Film: Daughters of the Dust*, 4.

company Kino International, specialized in foreign movies. Ironically, in the early 1990s, *Daughters of the Dust* was perceived as a foreign film, even after it received the 1991 Sundance Film Festival Award, mainly because it fully and frontally exhibited its signs of difference. And watching it now on tape or DVD available worldwide still leads us to confront the peculiarity and centrality of the African American experience. Black men and women occupy virtually every frame from the opening onward, literally taking center-stage and connecting their black identity with the historical and mythologized entrance point to the New World called Ibo Landing.

A symbolic Middle Passage is thus being reenacted for the benefit of the spectator as well. The entire film allegedly takes place within the scope of one single day, on August 18th, 1902, but the viewer is plunged into the complex structure of time cross-sections whose pace is paradoxically leisurely and stately. To the eye thus captured, the journey is fascinating—and disorientating. For even when the threshold has been successfully crossed, the narrative is to be perpetually reconstructed, reordered, somehow reformatted to find one's own personal path.

From the very first scenes, Dash's is a style of narrative which doesn't articulate time and space through erasing the black presence or pushing it to the margins. Her organization of space depends on the manifest positioning of the black body and, more specifically, on the centrality of the black woman's body.

I want to show black families, particularly black women as we have never seen them before. [...] The story would just kind of unravel. This very important day would unravel through a series of vignettes, if you want to call them that. [...] So it's all from the point of view of a woman—about the women—and the men are kind of just on the periphery.²

Young Nana's blue-stained hands are first shot in close-up, before a dissolve on her old and fully-dressed figure shows her slowly emerging from salt water, thus enacting the temporal ellipsis. The framing of a decaying signpost reading "Ibo Landing" and the simultaneous rise of the enthralling litany of an off-screen woman's voice—speaking in the de-familiarizing Gullah language³ and shortly to be identified as Nana's—instantly construct this space into a highly symbolic and feminine one:

I am the first and the last.

I am the honored one and the scorned. [Cut to Eli and Eula Peasant's shanty. Day]

² Ibid., 32-33.

³ In *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, William Pollitzer makes this insightful comment:

The Gullah language, marked by unique intonation and rhythm as well as syntax and lexicon, remains the most characteristic feature of the sea islanders. The people took words and phrases from African languages, blended them with English and molded them into distinctive patterns of speech; many in time enriched the American language. [196]

I am the whore and the holy one.

I am the wife and the virgin.

I am the barren one and many are my daughters.

The mystic resonance of these verse from the *Nag Hammadi* gnostic gospels «Thunder, Perfect Mind», while already heralding Toni Morrison's 1992 *Jazz* epigraph, successfully formulates the unutterable rift between Africa and America and reasserts the reversal of black women's marginality or invisibility in mainstream Western representation. In such a mythic dimension, the color line dissolves. As critic Manthia Diawara argues in his seminal essay on black American cinema,

Ibo Landing is a symbolic space in which African Americans can articulate their relation to Africa, the Middle Passage, and the survival of black people and their ways of life in America. Crucially, the themes of survival, the memories of African religions and ways of life which enter into conflict with Christianity and European ways of life, and the film's proposal of syncretism as a way out, are narrativized from black women's points of view.⁴

As a peculiar cinematographic space, Ibo Landing materializes the great divide between two continents while constituting a space of resistance of African folkways and magic rituals. Division and reunion structure a narrative hinging on the variations on these two contrasting strains within the group. Two parties confront each other until the final scenes of the family portrait, the ultimate rite of reconciliation. It eventually smoothes over the deeply-engrained dissensions between those who choose to migrate North and those who decide to stay behind. At some point, late in the film narrative, Nana expresses the necessity of bonding in those terms:

There must be a bond...a connection, between those that go up North, and those who across the sea. A connection! We as two people in one body. The last of the old, and the first of the new. We will always live this double life, you know, because we are from the sea.

Dash's filming conveys the various shades of the split between Grandma Nana's followers and younger Viola's. Within the scope of this one day on August 18th, 1902, the camera chronicles the subtle nuances of and variations on the family members' positions and beliefs. Actually the entire film functions as a variation on the notions of representation and show. Mr. Snead, a city photographer commissioned by Viola to document the Peazants' crossing over, also captures facts and illusions recreating fragments of reality in his own viewfinder. His crossing over and registering of Dawtuh⁵ Island somehow constitute a parallel narrative offering yet another angle on the whole story. His intradiegetic photographic report provides limited visual illustrations of Nana's family history and of the recollections of her great-great-granddaughter, the elusive figure of the

⁴ Manthia Diawara, «Black American Cinema. The New Realism », ed. Michael Martin, *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora*: 416-17.

⁵ A name which Dash claims to be the Gullah language translation of Daughter Island.

Unborn Child yet to arrive into the Peazant family. Snead's innocent, uninitiated but arrogant eye frontally, then more subtly, discovers the "distinct, imaginative and original African American culture"⁶ the Gullahs created and maintained because of their isolation. But the photographs registering on screen seem to have a life of their own and sometimes transcend the capacity of his individual restricted mode of perception. When shooting the Peazant men assembled on the beach, Snead suddenly hallucinates the appearance of the Child as a five year old in his camera eye. And his confused double-take somehow parallels the spectator's own disorientation and wonder at the entire filmic spectacle. While taking in the various layers of a reality new to him, the photographer learns to experiment with depth of field. The constantly mutating shapes and colors of the kaleidoscope he brought over from the continent exhibit the necessary reframing and re-composition of the island's ancient story. As the epitome of the early 20th century learned and professional "Philadelphia Negro" who represents one of the "Talented Tenth" discussed by W.E.B. Du Bois in the 1920s, he feels it his duty to track down the minute transitions unfolding throughout this day of celebration. While being carried on a barge up river to the family picnic site on the beach, Snead explains Yellow Mary Peazant and her friend Trula how it works:

Kalos: mutable. *Eidos*: form. *Skopein*: to view. If an object is placed between two mirrors, inclined at right angles, an image is formed in each mirror. [...] Then, these mirror images are in turn reflected in the other mirrors, forming the appearance of four symmetrically shaped objects.

The close-ups of these colorful combinations already function as an index of change. Like Snead's photographic magic performed before a captive audience, they visually evoke the "scraps of memory," charms and memorabilia Nana carries around in an old tin canister. Her strange archetypal collection of remnants of the past actualizes the signs of Africanity that constantly resurface in the narrative.

Both in the script and on screen, Dash pays extreme attention to these miscellaneous fragments of history telling each time a different story. As the central figure of the surviving Ancestor, Nana presides over them all and is able to tell tales that reach all the way back to the religious systems of beliefs and folkways of the old continent. In one of the movie's most striking scenes, she's sitting by her husband's gravestone in the family cemetery, talking to him and literally connecting with him through the seashell, bottles, pots, old dishes and other personal belongings of the deceased. Temporal telescoping here mirrors the spatial one between Africa and America. In her eyes, the only valid strategy of survival is that of a re-inscription of the black past and the black body within an uninterrupted history. Beyond the temporal and spatial dividing line, it's the very continuity of history the camera tracks down through the celebration of this final day together. Against the backdrop of these daytime revels, this sumptuous visual reconstitution of what Jean Toomer calls

⁶ As Dash specifies at the end of the opening credits.

“race memories”⁷ literally charts an elusive and painful territory. As Julie Dash’s friend and fellow writer bell hooks underlines, “...you were giving us a mythic memory.”⁸

“Something more like music–jazz. It’s complex, quickly changing and it takes you places.”⁹

Technically, the numerous close-ups of Nana’s furrowed face enact this passage from one time dimension to another. The depth of her gaze bridges the gap between past and present in such a way that during those intense sequences, the great ontological categories of time and space actually merge. Mythic time and historical time fuse into some alternate space which is most often represented either as voice-over or off-screen narration and in various flashbacks.

In her 1992 book on the *Making of an African American Woman’s Film*, Dash insists on the introspective filmic and narrative process she uses. There are two main narrative voices breaking the traditional realistic cinematic codes and imposing very early on a non-linear storytelling and visual structure: almost from the outset, the Unborn Child speaks for her parents and relatives and Nana Peazant speaks for all of the above and more because she senses the presence of the child to come as well as of the family ancestors. In some eerie duet and loose form of call-and-response pattern across the time barrier, the female voice of the Unborn Child connects with her great-grandmother’s, “the last of the old and the first of the new,” as Nana’s voice later on claims:

My story begins on the eve of my family’s migration North. My story begins before I was born. My great-great-grand mother, Nana Peazant saw my family coming apart. Her flowers to bloom in a distant frontier. Nana prayed and the old souls guarded me into the new world.

Dash’s unconventional figures function then as mediators in a moment and ritual of transition. The two strangely echoing monologues call for other comments and fragments of narration by off-screen voices of characters who are not physically in the frame—like Eula’s when she watches her husband Eli being overwhelmed by the benevolent spirits of his ancestors at Ibo Landing. In one of her interviews, Dash ironically underlines her manifold subversion:

I have two people narrating in the same film. That’s a cardinal sin. I have Memory as a character. I have voice-over and flashbacks.¹⁰

Despite and probably because of dual narration and multiple-point-of-view camerawork, the form of space registering on screen becomes clear and legitimized through each recurring articulation of it. Somehow shared space and narration expand into the alternate dimension of tales and rituals

⁷ Jean Toomer, *Cane*, “Georgia Dusk,” 15.

⁸ Julie Dash, 30.

⁹ Julie Dash, in George Alexander, *Why We Make Movies*, 242.

¹⁰ Erich Leon Harris, *African American Screenwriters Now*, 112.

framed outside Hollywood protocol because of fragmentation and juxtaposition. Just like Snead's audience, once the spectator is *in*, he is literally taken captive. He is caught unaware by the displacement of the entire structure of his own topology of the familiar as Dahtaw Island's "edenic" surface splits into a multiplicity of visual and narrative fragments unraveling in a radically different way. The constant confrontation of all these tracks paradoxically heightens the impression of fluidity and traveling through time and space. With its collection of styles and instruments from the Middle Eastern *santour* to the African talking drums, John Barnes' musical score unfolds on the same fluid mode. As Dash specifies in the *The Making of*

We wanted to depict various religions—including traditional West African worship rituals—Santeria, Islam, Catholicism and Baptist beliefs—through musical expression.

John drew from his own spiritual beliefs, which include a respect for astrology, in composing the music. For instance, he wrote the Unborn Child's theme in the key of B, the key of Libra, representing balance and justice. "This character was coming into the world to impart justice, a healing upon her father and her mother and her family." Similarly, he wrote "Nana's theme" in the key of A representing the Age of Aquarius, or the new age that was imminent for Nana's family.¹¹

The closeness of the camera makes the viewer feel he is inside the group, rather than looking in from the outside. Its harmonious movements drifting from one event to another, often in slow motion, and its forays into the realm of the imaginative become like an extension of Nana's memory, subversively substituting for any form of conventional master narrative. At some point in the second half of the movie, the Unborn Child momentarily reincarnated under the guise of a young girl, looks into the kaleidoscope's eyepiece and is suddenly projected into the world of the overcrowded and fast-pace cities of the North. With this flash-forward to the larger framework of the African Diaspora, the de-familiarization process works both ways. This radical mode of montage seems to be the exact visual expression of what Julie Dash tries to create, "something new, something original, something authentic [...] something more like music-jazz."¹² So that the sudden introduction of analeptic sequences of slaves working over the poisonous indigo vats with emblematically blue-stained hands at once conjures up Nana's ancestry in some sort of haunting group portrait, and constructs her as the resilient teacher/*griot* reaching over to the new generations. A later and similar flashback to the slaves dancing on the plantation unfolds as Nana's voice-over specifically refers to the *griot's* pivotal role:

They didn't keep good records of our births, our deaths or the selling of the slaves back then. A male child might be taken from his mother and sold at birth. Then, years later, this same person might have to mate with his own mother or sister, if they were brought back together

¹¹ Dash, 16.

¹² Alexander, 242.

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Comment: Manque-t-il un morceau de phrase ou est-ce un problème de ponctuation ?

again. So it was important for the slaves [...] to keep the family stories just like the African griot who would hold these records in head.

The next cut to the family circle praying picks up on this central notion of memory retention and sharing through a spiritual guide and the transmission of an ancient system of signs. The narrative implication here seems to be that both the family members and the spectators are part of the audience of this teaching, in "a long long line of creation" as older Daddy Mac emphasizes. In the epigraph to his critical book, *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. quotes Ralph Ellison on jazz composition:

There is a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself. For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment [...] represents [...] a definition of his identity: as member of the collectivity and as link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional material, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it.¹³

It may be Eli's subplot in the film which best illustrates this necessary reinsertion within a comprehensive social and spiritual structure. As he puts into question the entire system of beliefs he grew up with because Eula is carrying a child he doesn't consider his, he is often shot standing apart, desperately trying to come to terms with his personal and family histories. His blasphemous questioning of Nana's religious beliefs in the cemetery scene foreshadows two sacrilegious scenes. While he is working iron in the shed, he abruptly smashes a fetish tree covered with glass jars and bottles protecting his house from evil. As he falls to the ground, music drowns the sound of his voice and the camera frames his desperate wife inside the house, plugging her ears and falling to her knees. Later on, after a mock fight with his cousin involving hand signals and movements derived from some ancient African secret society and martial art, he suddenly dissociates himself from the group:

Newly-wed man: We're working on the anti-lynching law again.
Maybe you want to be with us?
Eli: I got no more dreams, cousin!

Eli's disengagement somehow prefigures what may happen to his relatives on their trip over to the mainland. It also directly harks back to Nana's protective magic and the amulets she creates from scraps of the ancestral past. The call for help she addresses the old souls to send the Unborn Child as spirit mediator turns Eli's secession into a ritual of restoration. Eula's pregnant belly, first a clear reference to the condition of black women raped in slavery and denied motherhood rights, starts functioning as a figure of re-appropriation and, visually, as a *locus* of reintegration. Mostly represented in slow motion, the Child-spirit's journey immediately imposes a peculiar rhythmic pattern on the entire movie. Whenever she appears on screen running after her forebears and trying to reunite them, the alteration of normal motion connotes the upsurge of the supernatural. Before the

¹³ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, VII.

reconciliation scene between her parents at Ibo Landing, the Unborn Child comments off-screen:

I was travelling on a spiritual mission, but sometimes I would get distracted. [...] My ma said she could feel me by her side. I remember the call of my great-great-grandmother. I remember the journey home [...] the long walk to the graveyard...to the house I would be born in... [...] To the picnic site. I remember and I recall.

After an angle on the graveyard, the camera sweeps in slow motion to the family members assembling at the picnic location. The reunion is thus socially enacted before being visually inscribed on screen in special effects. As the Child nears Eula in the wood by the landing, movement is extended, and "her spirit enters the billowing folds of Eula's voluminous skirt and fades back into her mother."¹⁴ Her stepping from one world into another heralds Daddy Mac's speech in honor of the family ancestors and the symbolic re-enactment of the Ibos' miracle. In a solemn and mystical scene shot in deep, golden tones, Eli starts walking on the water at the sound of Eula's solitary voice telling her coming baby about Ibo Landing's legend.

And they saw things that day that you and I don't have the power to see [...]. And seeing what was to come, my grandmother said they turned, all of them, and walked back into the water. They just kept walking like water was solid ground. And when they got to where the ship was, they didn't so much as give it a look. They just walked right past it, because they were going home.

Dash's careful composition of russet-like colors and alternate shots frames Eula standing on the bank and Eli kneeling by the African figurehead, fallen off years ago from some slave ship prow, bobbing in the shallows. Nana's great-grand child walks back out of the water soaking wet to embrace the fullness of his wife's belly. What the camera captures on screen in slow motion closely resembles what Julie Dash calls "a moment of grace from within that you share with your audience."¹⁵

Small but unforgettable epiphanies

In this particular sequence articulating some other temporal and spatial system, the camera literally reveals "things that you and I don't have the power to see." In some sumptuous semiotics of colors, a spectacular perspective opens out before the viewer's eye. Eula, in the lower left hand corner of the frame and in a white cotton dress, is shot from behind watching Eli, dressed in dark clothes, looking in turn at the carved icon in the upper right corner which *becomes* his own ancestral spirit-rider and leads him back into the heart of the community. Somehow his private vision turns into a healing revelation which brings the entire family together one last time. The baby he just claimed as his own is then truly returned to the group as "[o]ur child of the future," as Daddy Mac says. Eli's doubts and crises chronicled in their minutest nuances distinctly echo the community

¹⁴ Dash, 139.

¹⁵ Dash, in George Alexander, 243.

members' dissensions. Structurally, as the Unborn Child's parallel narrative track eventually fuses with Nana's, the hiatus between what was and what will be and the potential family disintegration "up North" which is "no land of milk and honey" Nana says, are momentarily held in check. The matriarch's dark silhouette (Cora Lee Day, intense and commanding as ever), clearly outlined against the brightly-lit background of this southern island and the white outfits of her younger female relatives in cotton dresses, takes center-stage once again in the final sequences, literally and figuratively "holding memories" in her hands and restoring them to some communal expanse. While she keeps on making amulets from the "old scraps of memory" she carries around in order to ensure the safe passage of her family to the other side, Nana gathers all her daughters, and finally all her children, around.

The last section of the film is a closely interwoven system of individual and group portraits eventually combining into one last essential picture. Snead's own family portraits, exposed as artificially orchestrated, are once again reformatted and reframed by Dash. In one of the film's rare occurrences of fast motion, he starts taking photographs of a group of children sitting beneath a torn Chinese umbrella on the beach. The color range (the gray-sandy beach and the yellow parasol against the perfect blue sky) is stunning but registers like a deceptive pastoral view of the Sea Island. And in the late afternoon, Snead is still frantically and comically shooting until the climactic moment of the close-up on the camera lens. An arrogant and light-skinned Snead, aware that a color caste system is at play here, pulls a culminating magic trick before the Peazants' wondering eyes. While using a flash powder he doesn't need in broad daylight, he shouts excitedly: "Look! Look up! ...And remember...Ibo Landing!".

This is, literally speaking, a moment of illumination, a kaleidoscopic combination of images selected by a photographer whose perception is heavily restricted. His slightly skeptical remark to Viola illustrates his distanced viewpoint on the Gullah heritage: "Wish books..., Salt Water Negroes..., Gold earrings, to sharpen your vision?" But the spectacle he creates is a piece of frozen eternity and rearranged reality whose artificiality and limitation are ironically highlighted by director of photography Arthur Jaffa Fielder's burn-out when the flash goes off.

What comes next truly functions as revision. The film enters its final movement and by revising or, as Henry Louis Gates suggests, "signifying," Julie Dash reassembles both Snead's photographic fragments and scraps of the African American history and Gullah memory. The concluding episode of the celebration opens with a ritual foot washing session. The last daughter "of those who chose to survive," as the pre-born ghost-figure's voice-over specifies earlier on, launches into a final syncretic rite of protection and reunion. In this ceremony Dash refers to in her script as "A Root Revival of Love" and as "Nana's root working,"¹⁶ the sense of connectedness of past, present and future and spirit awareness are resonant of the Yoruba deities

¹⁶ Dash, 158-59.

and system of beliefs and interpretation by way of Nigeria,¹⁷ Brazil, the West Indies and the American South. And yet visually, the last family scene truly functions as a synthesis of the Afro-American various religious traditions. It draws on the Christian imagery of the Last Supper, on Yellow Mary's St Christopher's charm and on the Bible, as well as on Nana's own African-derived religion (she ties an ancestral charm to the Bible cover) and Bilal's faithfulness to a form of Islam he brought over from the French West African colonies. The general frame is all-inclusive, just as the vision is comprehensive—precisely because this communion taken from the ancestor is highly transgressive from the point of view of mainstream Western religion and philosophy:

Angle on – Charm bag

Nana Peazant holds up the "Hand" she has made, the St. Christopher's charm is wrapped around it. She takes Viola's Bible and lays the "Hand" on top of it. Then, with a firm grip, Nana takes a hold of Bilal's shoulder. [...] (holding up her "Hand")

We've taken old gods and given them new names. They saw it all here that day, those Ibo. [...] (indicating contents of her "Hand")

This "Hand," it's from me, from us, from them (the Ibo)... Just like all of you... Come children, kiss this hand full of me.¹⁸

Nana literally conjures up spirits, the living and the dead, memories and images. Much more than a rite of conjuration of the break-up of the family through migration, hers is a ritual of spirit regeneration "to become a being who is beyond death, beyond aging, beyond time."¹⁹ And the camera eye alternately intrudes upon the semi-circle of women and men closing in around Nana and frames some expressive female faces in close-up, concluding with a wide angle on the entire clan. This shuttle movement inscribes on screen Nana's ultimate but necessary form of self-division between her spirit carried over to the mainland by her children for protection, and her flesh left behind in the island dust, like a sentinel. The same close shot of Nana's hands holding the soil blowing through her fingers like dust is picked up twice in the film, in the opening, and then in the last flashback before the passage. Somehow, the extreme close-up of the sacred "Hand" which follows operates a metaphorical transfer from her brown, scarred hands as a young woman holding some Dawtuh dust to

¹⁷ As the film director told me in some remarks she graciously made on the Internet in May 2004, her intent was not to suggest that the Sea Islands were mostly inhabited by descendants of peoples from Nigeria, but that when she grew up in the 1960s, there was a lot of information around about Yoruba culture, as there is now in the United States.

In the film however, she provides no commentary other than those appearing in handwritten notes in the margins of her script about her coded use of women's specific roles in Yoruba culture and about a network of orisha, Yoruba god/character pairs which includes Nana/Obatala as the voice of the past and the keeper of the oral tradition, Eli/Ogun as the god of iron, the Unborn Child/Esu-Elegba as the messenger and god of wind, and Yellow Mary/Yemaya, Trula/Oshun, Eula/Oya as the three river goddesses.

¹⁸ Dash, 159.

¹⁹ Dash, 160.

make it blossom, to the final extension of her magical spiritual self to the whole enlightened group.

Transcending time dimensions,²⁰ Nana's post-flesh entity thus blends with her great-granddaughter's pre-born spirit. The burden of recollection, ancestor worship and warning against the risk of de-centering once on the continent is in the end no longer exclusively left these two voices. Technically, the communion sequence and the departure scene up river the next day function as visual reminders that space can be meaningfully invested and repossessed. Unlike Snead's, these shots are no longer still photographs. Other spatial narratives can now be articulated by other voices. And the claim of this sacred ground of Ibo Landing analogically extends to the entire American territory. Early in the movie, the unnamed narrator's voice-over recollects, "It was an age of beginnings, a time of promises." From some distant point in the future, her announcement connects with and already goes beyond Nana's voice, "the bridge that they crossed over on. [...] The tie between then and now. Between the past and the story that was to come."

Beyond the mere interrogation of the black American diasporic and cleft soul torn between the need to move like Haagar "into a new day" and to stay connected like Nana with its past as "the fruit of an ancient tree," *Daughters of the Dust* is also about modes of vision and revising. The kaleidoscope opening metaphor, its montage of interior shots and Julie Dash's non-conventional angles, framings, encoding of useful data about, most notably, the Yoruba deities as well as her unexpected use of flashbacks all call attention to their own limitations, but also construct this comment by Nana to her children into the film's main *modus operandi*:

The bottle tree reminds us of who was here and who's gone on. You study on the colors and shapes. You appreciate the bottle tree each day, as you appreciate your loved ones.

This then seems to be the secret path to small but intense moments of filmic revelation and some terribly alive and complex *Ibo Landing Memorial*.²¹ The last brightly-lit shots of the film evoke the previous scene on the beach when Eula and her two female friends find an old rotting umbrella that has been washed ashore and gather beneath it in the golden light. The strange vision is suggestive of the three Yoruba water deities whose emblem is a round fan. The shots also frame the Unborn Child first running on the beach in slow motion behind Nana, Eula and Yellow Mary as "each woman individually turns to dust and blows into the burning sun,"²² and eventually remaining alone, thus inviting some new composition to blossom into the screen space after the fade-out. This call for some further alternate narrative

²⁰ In her published script, Dash uses a detailed treatment specifying that *like those old Ibo, Nana Peazant calls upon the womb of time to help shatter the temporal restrictions of her own existence* [160].

²¹ This is a title that Gullah researcher Marquetta Goodwine uses on page 6 in the volume she edited, *The Legacy of Ibo Landing*.

²² Dash, 164.

and visual celebration illustrates the religious concept common to many African cultures of the perpetuity of life through kaleidoscopic time and space layers. It also definitely comes close to being some form of organizing principle, if not theoretical stance as critic Joel Brouwer aptly points out.

The end, then, seems to truly function as an erasure of closure, some unsealed memory box, as the spirit-narrator's life is still to unfold, to become incarnate, filling up the space with "the tiny specifics [...] of what it is to be a woman of the African diaspora, living, working, functioning, thriving."²³ Elizabeth Peasant will actually *be born* along the lines of a different genre and another philosophy of composition in Julie Dash's 1997 novelized sequel also entitled *Daughters of the Dust*.

²³ Dash, in George Alexander, 242.

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