

The United States copyright law (Title 17 of the US Code) governs the making of copies of copyrighted material. A person making a copy in violation of the law is liable for any copyright infringement. Copying includes electronic distribution of the reserve materials by the user. The user should assume that any works in the reserve items are copyrighted.

Preface

BY TONI CADE BAMBARA

“Call on the ancestors”—NANA PEAZANT

DOWN IN THE Georgia and Carolina Sea Islands they still tell the story of the Ibos. They say that when the boat brought the Africans in from the big slaving ships, the Ibos stepped onto shore in their chains, took a look around, and, seeing what the Europeans further had in store for them, turned right around and walked all the way home to the Motherland.

Take 1: Eldersay, 1948. Great grandmama, encouraging the mind to leap, taught that we can indeed walk on the water, so long as we know where we’re going and why. “Course, fear of sinking stops many folk from taking necessary steps,” she’d say. “And too, we’re trained in this land to distrust the journey entirely.”

Take 2: Literature, 1984. Paule Marshall opens her diasporic novel *Praise Song for the Widow* with her protagonist, Avey Johnson preparing for a journey whose outcome hinges on the tale of the Ibos. Avey, who has bargained away the wealth of her cultural heritage in exchange for a “respectable” life, takes a Caribbean cruise with equally deracinated friends. At sea, a disturbing dream awakes her.

She senses her carefully planned life unravelling. She leaves the ship and embarks on a journey into the past.

*Daughters of
the Dust*

The historical, persistent past unleashes its power through an ancient ritual that the women of the island reenact for the ailing Avey. The immediate past, Avey's girlhood in Tatum, South Carolina, unleashes its power through the memory of Great Aunt Cluny telling the tale of the Ibos, which was handed down by Cluny's grandmother, who'd add, "My body may be here, but my mind's long gone with the Ibos."

Through the strength Avey draws from the tale, she learns to read again the cultural codes and signs of her heritage. She reclaims her original name, Avatara—rebirth through memory and revelation. Now centered Avatara envisions a new life's work—warning the assimilated away from eccentricity. She'll haunt office buildings and confront amnesiacs. She'll return to Tatum and conduct tours. "Here," she'll say, indicating a spot near shore. "Here's where the Ibos landed."

Take 3: Cinema, 1991. Julie Dash announces early in *Daughters of the Dust* her stance regarding the great American afflictions, amnesia and disconnectedness. The film begins with three injunctions to remember the past: the *Black Gnostic* is quoted, the Ibo phrase for "remember" is chanted, an elder's hand sculling the waters of time is repeated. It is not long before the Ibo tale is recited and begins to function as both evidence of, and argument for, cultural continuity.

Following the credits, a boat glides down a thick, green river. Standing near the front of the boat is a woman in a long white dress and a large veiled hat. The image is familiar from dominant cinema's colonialism-as-entertainment genre. But we notice that this woman stands hipshot, chin cocked, one arm akimbo. These ebonics signify that filmmaker Dash has appropriated the image from reactionary cinema for an emancipatory purpose. She intends to heal our imperialized eyes.

The boat pulls into shore where a statue—a male African figure, once affixed to the prow of a European slaving ship—bobs in the shallows. The boat docks at Ibo Landing. The year is 1902. We meet a family, the Peazants, at a critical moment: several members have elected to migrate north for better jobs and schooling. Nana, the head of the family has called the Peazants together for a reunion picnic. She performs a ritual of protections against the hazards of "crossing over." She creates an amulet from scraps of the ancestral past: her most potent gris-gris is a

clump of her mother's hair, a last minute keepsake the mother yanked from her scalp before she was snatched from Nana, the child, and sold down river.

Rituals and tales are regarded by Haagar, one of the daughters-in-law, as the "hoodoo mess" she wishes to rescue her family from by migrating north. Bilal, a Muslim relation on the island, rejects not the tale but its mythic interpretation. His is a literal reading: the weighted-down Ibos chose death over captivity. But Eula, mother of the Unborn Child, who conarrates the film's story with Nana, draws strength from the tale. And through Eula, the relatives are drawn into a healing circle and mend their rifts.

"I'm trying to give you something to track your spirit with"—NANA PEAZANT

What Dash does with the colonialism is our first signal that *Daughters* is oppositional cinema. The use of dual narration and multiple point-of-view camerawork, rather than a hero-dominated perspective, is our second clue that *Daughters* was conceived outside of Hollywood protocol. Dash's eschewing of a master narrative in favor of a nonlinear, multilayered unfolding—one more in keeping with the storytelling traditions that inform African cinema—is further evidence of *Daughters* Africentric grounding. Dash's demystified and democratic treatment of space positions *Daughters* in progressive world film culture movements that bolster socially responsible cinema—Cuban, Caribbean, African, Philipino/Philopina, Cine Nuova, USA Multicultural Independent. In *Daughters*, the emphasis is on shared space (wide-angled and deep-focus shots in which no one becomes backdrop to anyone else's drama) rather than dominated space (foregrounded hero in sharp focus, others Othered in background blur); on social space rather than idealized space (as in westerns); on delineated space that encourages a contiguous-reality reading rather than on masked space in which, through close-ups and framing, the spectator is encouraged to believe that conflicts are solely psychological not, say systemic, hence, can be resolved by a shrink, a lawyer, or a gun, but not say, through societal transformation.

Dash's decision to cast her film with performers associated with the USA Independent Black Cinema Movement calls our attention to her capsulization of film practices developed since the late 1960s. *Daughters*, then, is a historical marker,

independent Black cinema come of age.

*Daughters of
the Dust*

A declaration of independence was drafted in 1967 with the overturning of the European/Euro-American, industry-oriented film school curriculum at UCLA by a first wave of students and TAs who were more interested in serving their communities as cultural workers than in training for an industry that maligns and invisibilizes those communities. The UCLA insurrection, dubbed “the L.A. rebellion” by film critic Clyde Taylor, sparked Chicana/o, Native American, Asian American, and Pacific Islander American film movements. And it ushered in as well a new phase of one of the oldest independent filmmaking traditions, the African American.

Within the next decade, several insurgents who participated in an off-campus, student-generated study group produced major works: *Bush Mama* by Hailie Gerima (with Barbara O. Jones—now Barbara O—and Cora Lee Day, who play Yellow Mary and Nana, respectively in *Daughters*), *Passing Through* by Larry Clark, *Four Women* by Julie Dash, *Killer of Sheep* by Charles Burnett (with Kaycee Moore, who plays Haagar in *Daughters*). Thanks to such people as film historian, critic, producer, distributor, curator, and programmer, Pearl Bowser, a minicircuit of nontheatrical venues was developed for the screening of new films coming from the West Coast, the East Coast, Chicago, and for “race films” of previous eras. Equally important, an audience was developing.

In 1980, several UCLA insurgents who participated in both the aforementioned study group and a student-generated women of color collective were at work: Barbara McCullough, on her first, *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite Purification*; Sharon Alile Larkin, on a feature, *A Different Image* with Adisa Anderson, who plays Eli in *Daughters*; Julie Dash, on her third short, *Illusions*. By the time *Illusions* was screened, certain traits were recognizable Dash signatures: virtuosa camerawork—most especially in *Four Women*; communal rather than dominated space—most discernible in *Illusions*; experimental narrative; the privileging of black women characters and their perspectives; an attention to the glamour (in the ancient sense of the word) and sheer gorgeousness of black women; and texts drawn from black women writers—Nina Simone for *Four Women* and Alice Walker for *The Diary of an African Nun* (with Barbara O. Jones). As Dash has remarked in various interviews, it was in this period that she committed herself to

producing films about black women at various times in history and first began to think about the project that eventually became *Daughters*.

The power of *Daughters* owes much to both Dash's writing ability and her choice of Arthur Jafa (A.J.) as director of cinematography. A.J. not only questions most generic film conventions, but he questions as well whether the standard of twenty-four-frames-per-second rate is kinesthetically the best for rendering the black experience. A particularly breathtaking moment begins with a deep-focus shot of the beach. In the foreground are men in swallowtail coats and homburgs. Some are standing, others sitting. Two or three move across the picture plane, coattails buffeted by the breeze. They speak of the necessity of making right decisions for the sake of the children. Across a stretch of sand glinting in midground, the children play on the shore in the farground. Several men turn to look at the children. In turning, their shoulders, hips, arms, form an open "door" through which the camera moves; maintaining a crisp focus as we approach the children. The frame rate changes just enough to underscore the children as the future. For a split second we seem to travel through time to a realm where children are eternally valid and are eternally the reason for right action. Then the camera pulls back, still maintaining crisp focus as we cross the sands again and reenter the present, the grownups' conversation reclaiming our attention.

"We all good Women"—EULA PEAZANT

Currently *Daughters* is enjoying cult status. It is not unreasonable to predict that it will shortly achieve the status it deserves—classic. What draws black women in particular to the lengthy movie theater lines again and again is the respectful attention Dash gives to our iconography—hair, cloth, jewelry, skin tones, body language. As though in response to the call made by Abbey Lincoln in the September 1966 issue of *Negro Digest*—in "Who Will Revere the Black Woman?"—Dash composes a woman validation ceremony within a film that has already assured the black woman spectator that we are not, as usual, going to be mugged in the dark.

The ceremony revolves around Yellow Mary. She is financially independent, mobile, sassy, wise, favored by Nana, and able to negotiate her life without having

to consider children and husband. What's more, she has a female companion and a "past"—grounds enough to be despised, as she is by several relatives. Eula also "ruint," makes a case for all women whose honor and dignity have been plundered. Eula pulls the mutterers and shaded-eye whisperers into a circle and argues for new standards for judging womanhood and selfhood. "If you love yourself, love Yellow Mary," she pleads.

Perhaps, finally with the breakthrough of *Daughters* into the theatrical circuit, new audiences are developing for the culturally-specific works of filmmakers, producers, directors, and videographers within community media, public television, the independent sector, and the commercial industry.

Partial roll call: Nadine Patterson, Teresa Jackson, Cheryl Dunye, Camille Billops, Juanita Anderson, Claire Andrade Watkins, Pearl Bowser, Monica Freeman, Ada Mae Griffin, Pam Jones.

Julie Dash, Alile Sharon Larkin, Barbara McCullough, O. Funmilayo Makarah, Daresha Kyi, Malaika Adero, Neema Barnett, Rommell Foster, Audrey King Lewis, Beverly Fray, Portia Cobb

Ayoka Chenzira, Jackie Frazier, Louisa Fleming, Elena Featherstone, Zeinabu Irene Davis, Ellen Sumter, Carmen Ashurst, Jean Facey, Fronza Woods, Mary Ester

Francee Covington, (the late) Kathy Collins, Maya Angelou, Alexis DeVeaux, Shauneille Perry, Bess Lomax Hawes, Joanne Grant, Carole Munday Lawrence, Barbara-O, Susan Robeson

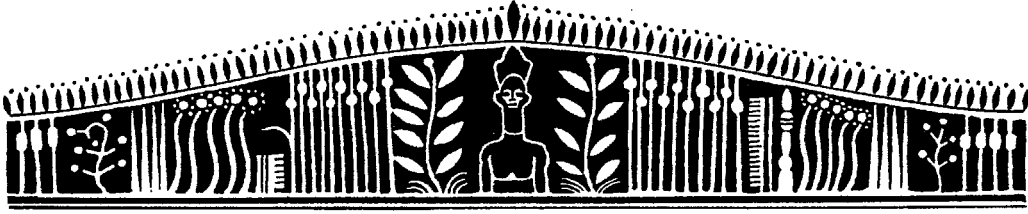
Michelle Parkerson, Carrol Parrot Blue, Jesse Maple, Debra J. Robinson, Yvonne Smith, Ruby Bell-Gram, Karma Bene Bambara, Sandra Sharp, Carmen Coustat, Pat Hilliard, Donna Suggs

Cheryl Chisholm, Omola Iyabunmi, Denise Oliver, Portia Marshall, Gay Abel-Bey, Amie Williams, Helene Head, Jean Facy, Aarin Burche, Yvette Mattern, Debbie Allen, Denise Bird, Darnell Martin, Muriel Jackson, Sonya Lynn, Anita Addison

Patricia Khayyam, Melissa Maxwell, Ruby Oliver, Melvonna Ballenger, Cynthia Ealey, Donna Mungen, Audrey Lewis, Michelle Colbert, Hattie Gossett, Linda Holmes, Iileen Sands, Edie Lynch, Lisa Jones, Madeline Anderson, Shirikiana Amia Gerima, Imama Hemeen

Special thanks to John Williams, Kharma Bene Bambara, Jackie Shaka, and Zeinabu Irene Davis for assistance in putting together the (regrettably incomplete) roster.

Toni Cade Bambara is based in Philadelphia where she conducts script workshops at the Scribes Video Center, a media-access facility that helps train community-based organizations to use video for social change.



Dialogue

BETWEEN BELL HOOKS AND JULIE DASH

APRIL 26, 1992

BELL: I'm here in Atlanta, Georgia, talking with filmmaker Julie Dash. Hi, Julie Dash girl!

JULIE: Hi, bell hooks. Howya doing?

BELL: I'm doing good. The first thing that I wanted to talk about was the whole question of ethnography in relation to *Daughters of the Dust*. When it comes on the screen, it says, "At the turn of the century, Sea Island Gullahs, descendants of African captives, remained isolated from the mainland of South Carolina and Georgia. As a result of their isolation, the Gullah created and maintained a distinct, imaginative, and original African American culture." That definite citing of history evokes the notion of documentary, and because of the film's ethnic material, I think it can be seen as having some qualities of ethnographic film.

JULIE: Right. I put that flag, or prologue, in after the film had been edited, after it was completed, because a lot of people did not know anything about the Gullah,

or Geechee culture. They did not even know anything about the Sea Islands of the South. So we did that to help them along, to give them some background history before we jumped into the story. I wasn't really thinking in terms of an ethnographic film. I was drawing upon what I had experienced watching films by Spencer Williams, films from the 1930s, like *The Blood of Jesus* and *Go Down Death*. Those are dramatic, religious kinds of stories, but they also had this "ethnographic," I guess you could call it, quality to them.

BELL: I didn't mean to suggest that I felt *Daughters* had an ethnographic quality. But I felt that one could see links between it and certain ethnographic films. It seems to me that part of what *Daughters of the Dust* does is construct for us an imaginative universe around the question of blackness and black identity—which you do, in fact, situate historically. I mean, in your interview in *Transition* with Houston Baker (November, 1992), you say that you wanted to bring "a basic integrity to the historical events."

JULIE: Yes.

BELL: And I think it is that effort on your part that creates a tension between the notion of history and a kind of mythobiography.

JULIE: Yes, I would agree with all of that. But I would just like to add that I think one of the problems that some people have with *Daughters of the Dust* is that they get a lot of new information in the film. With most films you get one or two pieces of new information. And whenever new information is being presented, I think audiences tend to put themselves in the position of "Oh, so I'm like the student here. If this is a learning-teaching situation, then this must be a documentary." They immediately revert to being children in school, rather than adults who are being offered something they hadn't known before. I also think this is something that has to do with information about black people, people of color. When there is a layering of new information, it is thought to be a documentary presentation rather than a dramatic film with a whole lot of stuff in it that a lot of people just didn't know before.

BELL: Well, that's interesting, because I like experimental fiction—like the work of the Sri Lankan Canadian writer, Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*, which is more or less about the life of Buddy Bolden; or Theresa Hak Chae, a Korean writer. And both of these people experiment with bringing certain factual information into a kind of mythopoetic context.

Part of the challenge of *Daughters of the Dust* is that it brings us what could be called ethnographic details, though in fact it's set within a much more poetic, mythic universe. I would like you to talk some about your sense of myth and history.

JULIE: It's interesting that you say mythopoetic, because *Daughters of the Dust* is like speculative fiction, like a *what if* situation on so many different levels.

Like *what if* we could have an unborn child come and visit her family-to-be and help solve the family's problems.

What if we had a great-grandmother who could not physically make the journey north but who could send her spirit with them.

What if we had a family that had such a fellowship with the ancestors that they helped guide them, and so on.

Myth, of course, plays a very important part in all of our lives, in everyone's culture. Without myth and tradition, what is there? So there is the myth of the Ibo Landing, which helped sustain the slaves, the people who were living in that region.

BELL: Tell people what that myth is.

JULIE: Okay. The Ibo Landing myth—there are two myths and one reality, I guess.

Ibo captives, African captives of the Ibo tribe, when they were brought to the New World, they refused to live in slavery. There are accounts of them having walked into the water, and then on top of the water all the way back to Africa, you know, rather than live in slavery in chains. There are also myths of them having flown from the water, flown all the way back to Africa. And then there is the story—the truth or the myth—of them walking into the water and drowning themselves in front of the captors.

I was able, in my research, to read some of the accounts from the sailors who were on the ship when supposedly it happened, and a lot of the shipmates, the

sailors or other crew members, they had nervous breakdowns watching this. Watching the Ibo men and women and children in shackles, walking into the water and holding themselves under the water until they in fact drowned.

And then interestingly enough, in my research, I found that almost every Sea Island has a little inlet, or a little area where the people say, "This is Ibo Landing. This is where it happened. This is where this thing really happened." And so, why is it that on every little island—and there are so many places—people say, "This is actually Ibo Landing"? It's because that message is so strong, so powerful, so sustaining to the tradition of resistance, by any means possible, that every Gullah community embraces this myth. So I learned that myth is very important in the struggle to maintain a sense of self and to move forward into the future.

BELL: It's interesting that whenever an artist takes a kind of mythic universe and infuses it with aspects of everyday reality, like the images of women cooking, often the cinema audience in this society just isn't prepared. So few of the articles that I've read about *Daughters of the Dust* talk about the mythic element in the film, because, in fact, there is this desire to reduce the film to some sense of historical accuracy. It is relevant for moviegoers to realize that you did ten years of research for this film—but the point was not to create some kind of documentary of the Gullah, but to take that factual information and infuse it with an imaginative construction, as you just told us.

Yesterday I interviewed a young black woman, a graduate student, and she said, "This was our paradise that we never had." And I found that exciting, because she wasn't relating to the film, as "Dash was trying to create this ethnographic memory." No, you were giving us a mythic memory.

JULIE: Right, because life on the Sea Islands was very hard. Most people didn't live very long. There are extreme changes in temperature there, and life was very harsh. But the particular day that I presented in the story was a day that every family member would never forget. And I think that even within our lives—which are also very difficult—we remember these kinds of ceremonies and family dinners as being something very special, and that's all you remember. Of course it becomes mythologized.

BELL: And there is a certain hyperbolic quality when we retell stories.

JULIE: Exactly. They become more so.

BELL: They become larger than life, and to some extent what you do is create a film where many of the images are larger than life. And the object isn't to create any kind of accuracy. I was very moved by what you said in the *Transition* interview about indigo and your sense, as an imaginative creative artist, that you wanted to have something atypical be seen as the scars of black people.

*Dialogue between
bell hooks and
Julie Dash*

JULIE: I worked with Dr. Margaret Washington Creel, who is an expert on the Gullah. She was my historical adviser on the project, and she reminded me that, of course, indigo was very poisonous and all that, but that the indigo stain, the blue stain, would not have remained on the hands of the old folks who had worked the indigo processing plant. And I explained to her, that yes, I did understand that fully, but I was using this as a symbol of slavery, to create a new kind of icon around slavery rather than the traditional showing of the whip marks or the chains. Because we've seen all those things before and we've become very calloused about them. I wanted to show it in a new way.

BELL: I think of Victor Slosky's notion of "defamiliarization," where you take what may be an everyday image and you present it in such a way that people have to think twice. As a spectator, when I saw that I immediately thought about the permanent imprinting of wounds in flesh. But I didn't have to pause and ask, "But is this real?" because that isn't the point.

I think one of the major problems facing black filmmakers is the way both spectators and, often, the dominant culture want to reduce us to some narrow notion of "real" or "accurate." And it seems to me that one of the groundbreaking aspects of *Daughters of the Dust*, because it truly is a groundbreaking film, is its insistence on a movement away from dependence on "reality," "accuracy," "authenticity," into a realm of the imaginative.

Could you say more about your sense of memory? What does it mean, if you're not going to work in a documentary form, to emphasize so much the idea of memory and time?

JULIE: After I concluded my research on *Daughters*, I sat back and digested all of that information and said, okay, I want to maintain historical events and issues and the integrity of this region, of these people. But I also want to do something very different, and that's where we get into the poetic thing. I want to show black families, particularly black women, as we have never seen them before. I want to touch something inside of each black person that sees it, some part of them that's never been touched before. So I said, let me take all of this information that I have gathered and try to show this family leaving a great-grandmother in a very different way. And that was when I realized that I could not structure it as a normal, Western drama. It had to go beyond that. And that's when 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. 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. The story would come out and come in and go out and come in, very much the way in Toni Cade Bambara's work one character would be speaking to another and then it goes off on a tangent for several pages and then she brings it back and goes out and back again.

I remember learning about poetry in school; the teacher said, "Well, what makes poetry good is that poets will say things using words that you use every day but they say them in a way that you have never heard it said before. And then it means so much more."

BELL: And that's like the concept of defamiliarization. I think that it's precisely because we are not familiar with this form that the criticisms people have brought to bear on this film have been severely limited. I mean, very few people have seen this as a political film. Looking at it for the fifth or sixth time—I was thinking about Barbara Harlow's book on resistance literature, where she looks at literature from North Africa, Palestine, and many other Third World countries that are struggling for liberation—it struck me that in our efforts to decolonize and liberate ourselves as black people, or any oppressed group globally, we have to redefine our history, and our mythic history as well. Because *Daughters* does this in such an incredible way, it creates a new kind of art film because it clearly can be seen as an art film, but also as a progressive political intervention. There are images of black

people in this film, images of us as we've never seen ourselves on the screen before.

JULIE: But it's not just how the scenes are set up. We could get more specific and say it's the way the cameras are placed. Where the camera is placed, the closeness. Being inside the group rather than outside, as a spectator, outside looking in. We're inside; we're right in there. We're listening to intimate conversation between the women, while usually it's the men we hear talking and the women kind of walk by in the background. This time we overhear the women. 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.

But I want to get back to what we were discussing about showing, depicting historical moments in a very different way, in a way that has more meaning. One of the scenes that did not, unfortunately, make it into the film because of time—and there are so many of them—is a flashback to a period of slavery when Nana Peazant's mother cuts off a lock of her hair and puts it inside of a small baby quilt for the young baby Nana, who has been taken away from her and sold into slavery. 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 our husbands and wives. They would send hair by messenger from plantation to plantation. And you know, during my research, I was brought to tears many times. I mean, if all you ever saw of your mother was a lock of her hair, that's all you had, and that's what you had to hang on to for the rest of your life...

I wanted to show that, but it had to be something more than just cutting the hair off or opening up an old package and finding a piece of ancient hair in there. I wanted to show what it really meant to lose a child. And I didn't really fully understand this until after I had a child—since it took so long to write *Daughters of the Dust*, I'd had a child in that ten-year period.

Anyway, I wrote a scene in which you see a woman who cuts off a lock of hair and places it within the baby blanket, but instead of seeing the traditional tears flow from her eyes, we had milk tears flowing from her engorged breasts. Because when you take a baby from a mother, a newborn, the mother continues to produce milk. That doesn't stop for two or three weeks, and the milk leaks. And if she thinks

*Dialogue between
bell hooks and
Julie Dash*

about her baby, the milk leaks even faster. So we had a special-effects gadget rigged up, and we panned down from the woman's face and you see droplets of milk seeping through her dress and falling onto the ground. She is weeping milk tears for the child that has been taken from her rather than just boo-hooing and crying salt-water tears. I really hated not being able to include that in the film because for me, no matter how much I read about it or heard about it, I really could not fully understand what it meant to have a child or an infant taken from you.

BELL: But your point is to evoke that emotionality, that emotional psychic universe, and not necessarily the historical universe. I think historians, people who have written about the Gullah, look at your film and think, "She read me. She took that from me." Can you just talk a little bit about that process of research?

JULIE: Well, the research was a combination of oral histories that I gathered from families, from friends of my family, as well as oral histories that had been taken a long time ago, by the WPA before World War II. There were also letters and lots of other written sources.

But I think when you're talking about folklore—about names, poetry, myths, traditions, notions—when you're dealing with the culture of a people, you're going to find a lot of overlap. A lot of people had this work in their books because they either researched it, heard it. . .

BELL: And so it's repeated?

JULIE: Exactly, yeah.

BELL: So people may think they're seeing their work when it may not be *their* particular work.

JULIE: Right. It might be something that my father said to me over and over again, like the name "Peazant." He used to always talk about Peazant, Peazant, and so I name the family Peazant because it was a very interesting name. And it also sounded like 'peasant.'

BELL: It's sort of like my grandmother's favorite saying—she'd say, "Play with a



*Alva Rogers and
Barbara-O in demo reel,
shot in 1987.*

puppy, he'll lick you in the mouth." And I always figured that was hers, that it belonged to her. And that was where I learned it. And then, later, when I used it a lot, people would say to me, "Oh, did you get that from so-and-so's book?" when I hadn't even read so-and-so's book.

JULIE: Right. A lot of people, they remember Toni Morrison's *Beloved* when they see *Daughters*. We shot the demo reel for it in '87 and then we went back and shot the rest of the film in '89. So we were shooting in the summer of '87. I believe we began shooting before *Beloved* went to press.

BELL: And then, for example, the film's focus on Islam reminds us that, indeed, African Americans draw upon numerous religious traditions. It just so happens that the focus on Islam in the film coincides with the rebirth of nationalism and a renewed focus on Black Muslim identity in America. Some people may see you as drawing on trends in the culture right now, but in fact your thinking about those things predates the resurgence of that interest.

JULIE: Oh, absolutely.

BELL: Somebody recently raised the question with me—were you a black nationalist, or were you an Afrocentric? And I myself wasn't sure why they were gleaning that from the film. I suppose for them it was your focus on Islam. So, could you talk a little bit about that question? What you wanted to show in terms of religion in the film.

JULIE: Well, when I came to the project, I assumed that I already knew a lot about it from my family and from the little research I had done early on. But as I got deeper and deeper into it, I learned a hell of a lot. For instance, I learned about Bilal Muhammed. Actually, he lived earlier than the time of my story. He was in the Sea Islands during slavery, but by the turn of the century, his five daughters who were also Muslim, were still carrying on the tradition of Islam. He was an actual person, a Muslim, and his diaries and his papers are on permanent exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. He had been a boy of twelve when he was taken from the Sudan, which shows that the African slave trade was more widespread than we thought—because he had memories of growing up in

Sudan. He was also fluent in French, having worked as a slave in the West Indies before being brought to the Sea Islands. And he never stopped practicing his faith. As a slave in the Sea Islands he prayed five times a day. People thought he was just an odd fellow, but it really goes to show the persistence of tradition.

*Dialogue between
bell hooks and
Julie Dash*

BELL: Wow!

JULIE: So it was very important for me to include this man in the story, even though I knew *actually* that he was living and practicing his faith in the 1800s. I wanted him to be a part of this day too, to include him because he meant so much to me. No one else has dealt with him to this point. Strange...

BELL: Yes. I was also interested in Viola's sense of Christianity in the film, as a kind of counterpoint to Islam. History for her begins not with what has happened in the slave past or what is happening on the islands, but at that moment of crossover. And in that sense, she represents a kind of premodern figure for me, because she's the one that says, essentially, "When we cross over to the mainland we are going to have Culture." That's capital-C culture.

JULIE: Exactly. Viola is someone who hides within Christianity. She hides her fears, her lack of self-esteem, her womanhood, within the cloak of the Christian missionary. But it's interesting that this particular character chooses to be a Baptist, because Baptist worship is so close to the ecstatic seizures evoked in lots of West African religions. So a lot of African American people will hide within this Baptist religion, but they're really practicing the same thing. They're just hiding their gods, hiding their rituals within Christianity, which for them was modern.

BELL: I think she definitely stands—as does Haagar—for a force of denial, denial of the primal memory. I keep thinking about violation when I think about Viola because it seems to me that if she had her way, she would strip the past of all memory and would replace it only with markers of what she takes to be the new civilization. In this way Christianity becomes a hidden force of colonialism.

JULIE: Uh-huh, exactly.

BELL: The film really touched upon the question of domestic colonization and how black people, like Haagar and like Viola internalized a sense of what culture is.

*Daughters of
the Dust*

JULIE: Right. And she brought her photographer with her to document “them.” She pays the photographer to come document her family. He being a part of the “talented tenth,” a scientist. But I see the character of Mr. Snead as having a secret mission. He has another agenda. He’s going to take pictures of these very, very primitive people and go back and have a showing of what he’s photographed, you know. For me, he also represents the viewing audience.

BELL: In that sense, *Daughters of the Dust* becomes a kind of critical commentary on the ethnographic film, because one might talk about Viola as a kind of contemporary anthropologist—the ethnographer, and Mr. Snead as the ethnographic filmmaker, and the film explodes that. It disrupts their vision and it says that, in fact, she can’t really give up on those traditions of the past, and still be a whole self. That’s so explicit in the film.



*Julie Dash and with Unborn Child
in between scenes.*

It seems to me that we’re touching upon aspects of the film that have so far gone unacknowledged by the critics, so I want us to talk a little bit about why it is that there is no fully developed, critical entity that can address a film like *Daughters of the Dust*? Let’s go back to the first white male critic’s response. I forget his name; it was after the Sundance Festival.

JULIE: Oh, the *Daily Variety* article, by Todd Carr.

BELL: And what was his point?

JULIE: He wrote that the film didn’t explain enough about the Gullah people, their culture, their religious traditions. Responding to this kind of concern, I’ve trained myself not to go too deep into explaining things about *Daughters*. I’ll often cloak things, because a lot of people will just never understand, and sometimes if you give people just a little bit of information it’s worse than giving them the whole

thing. So I have been cutting short my responses.

BELL: So I hear you saying that part of the danger of being a ground-breaker, in some sense, is that you don't have the time or the energy to educate every critic as to how they might approach this film. I often read your interviews, and I sense that you are repressing a lot because you don't want to have to go through that education process. But, in fact, a lot of the time the result is a critique like Carr's where he says, "But for a work so heavily into its own ethnicity, one is left with any number of unanswered questions relating to Gullah history. . . . Regardless of the extent of research, [the film] refuses to satisfy on a documentary level."

Now this is the type of review that really shows to me a complete misunderstanding of the critical project in *Daughters of the Dust*, because he's simply imposing on you a documentary mission that you yourself did not take on.

What I want to ask you, then, is: Should there have been greater discussion of the need for a different kind of critical spectatorship before the film appeared?

JULIE: Right after *Daughters* screened at the Sundance Film Festival, we had a screening in New York for cultural critics, writers, filmmakers, theorists. We had a screening at the Anthology Film Archives. We provided a press kit that was very thorough in terms of my intent, the intent of the production designer, et cetera. It also included character descriptions and symbols and everything that's in the film in order to acquaint the uninitiated, so to speak, to what the story is about and what it really means. Beyond that, I don't know any other process, any other way of making it clear to reviewers.

BELL: One of the major ways in which *Daughters of the Dust* intervenes powerfully in the history of feature-length filmmaking about black people is by requiring people to interrogate the Eurocentric biases that have informed our understanding of the African American experience. I mean, we've never been taught, most of us, in any history class that black people had different languages, had different religious practices, et cetera. So, to some extent, the film does represent that challenge to the critic of any race. When you said earlier that you wanted black people to see themselves, ourselves, in a new way, my understanding was that for any other spectator the challenge is to see blackness in a new way. I don't think you

*Dialogue between
bell hooks and
Julie Dash*

meant to suggest that you conceive of the audience of this film as being solely black people, or, for that matter, solely black women.

*Daughters of
the Dust*

JULIE: No, I didn't. I wanted black women first, the black community second, white women third. That's who I was trying to privilege with this film. And everyone else after that.

BELL: To de-center the white patriarchal gaze, we indeed have to focus on someone else for a change. And in this sense, again, the film takes up that group that is truly on the bottom of this society's race-sex hierarchy. Black women tend not to be seen, or to be seen solely as stereotypes. And part of what *Daughters* does is de-center the usual subject—and that includes white women—and place at the center of our gaze a group that has not been at the center. To quote Malcolm X, from *The Ballot and the Bullet*, "Let's see them with new eyes." And I think the challenge of *Daughters of the Dust*, for any spectator, is to be able to look at blackness with a new eye.

JULIE: And for about two hours too, and then to be comfortable with that. And I've said, often, that I think a lot of people are severely disturbed by the film because they're not used to spending two hours as a black person, as a black woman...

BELL: Girlfriend, talk about it.

JULIE: Film is hypnotic. When you go into a cinema you extend your belief for hours and you become who or what's up on the screen. And I think that for a lot for white males, and black males too, they love to see films that are about what they don't want to be, have never been, are afraid to be, or could only be for two hours. The "New Jack" type of film. They get to go there and assume the personality of the characters on the screen for two hours, then get up and go back to their normal safe lives. A lot of people couldn't do that for *Daughters of the Dust*. Some people just go flying out of the audience. I mean, I've seen men run out of the theater.

BELL: The film requires that we be empathetic with a group in our society that even black women have been taught not to be empathetic with. And we can think

about that in terms of the spectacle of the Thomas hearings when, whether one is pro-Anita Hill politically or not, you can still feel that she demands some degree of justice if she was sexually harassed. But the idea that so many black women disassociated from her image. . . ,

JULIE: And went on to him, yeah, because “he had to be right because he’s a black male,” or “it’s about unity and we have to stick behind him.”

BELL: I mean, the fact is, we’re never going to see a break with the stereotype if someone does not intervene and challenge us to think and feel differently about the black female image. I mean, as long as people are comfortable with the black woman as prostitute, mammy, or slut, and those are the only images people can embrace, what has to take place before they can embrace alternative images?

JULIE: Or a black person being addicted to something. In this country, every black person is addicted to something. Otherwise, they don’t have a story.

BELL: But what has to take place? What conditions? I interviewed a black woman yesterday who summed up what so many black women I’ve interviewed feel when she said, “All my life I have experienced my absence on the screen. Nothing that I could relate to.” So I think that psychically, a lot of black women viewers were prepared for the radical visual and aesthetic intervention that *Daughters* makes. Because so many of them said to me again and again, in almost the same words, “I was so starved for those images.” And I think that, to some extent, we have to ask, why aren’t white women and white men and black men and other groups equally starved for those images? I think part of it is because they passively accept the devaluation and denigration of black womanhood.

JULIE: And they’re fed from the first time they lock their eyes onto a television



Scene from 1987 demo reel.

screen, their desires are fully fed. They're satisfied. They see no absence of their presence on the screen. I mean, I'm always asking people, when was the last time you saw a film about a black woman who is a trapeze artist? It's out of the question. When was the last time you saw a film about a black woman flying to the moon, on a rocket ship to the moon? It's like, "What?" And then not have it be something about race or being raped or being addicted or being drunk, or, you know—all of that has to go with it too. Forget about black women having a zest for life, a productive life, successful in whatever they want to accomplish. That's too much.

BELL: I would say that the challenge for the audience is to be able to see and see and see again this film until they acquire the apparatus to embrace it. Because the film is so subversive in its requirement that we look at the black female and the image of black people in general. I don't want to keep emphasizing solely black females, because I do believe that there are also a lot of innovations in the portrayal of black masculinity in *Daughters of the Dust*.

But before we go on to that, it seems to me that another aspect of black psychohistory that you capture in the film that hasn't been captured many other places is the struggle between the agrarian life and the migration to the city. And it seems that part of what the film tries to do is remind us that there indeed was some richness to that agrarian life. I feel that one of the major gaps in our narrative as black people is that no one talks about the psychic loss that black people experienced when we left the agrarian South to move to the industrialized North. The point is, you can't talk about the psychic loss if you don't acknowledge that there was something rich there in that rural, agrarian experience. And it seems to me that a lot of people were deeply moved by *Daughters* precisely because it addressed the agrarian experience of black folk.

I mean, how many films do we see where the black folk are holding dirt in their hands and the dirt is not seen as another gesture of our burden? The fact is that most images of black folk working the land that we see on television, or in traditional cinema, are of "the land as our enemy." Us as laborers, just "beasts of burden," and I think *Daughters* questions that and says, "look at this food, byproduct of the land." Can you talk a little bit about the process of shooting this scene with the food, and those jars that people keep? I keep my jars. I have my great-aunt's jars. I have my aunt Charley's, who was a hairdresser, her green jars that she used to

have grease in. The film takes those artifacts of daily life and gives them a power as signs that they have not usually been give in our experience.

*Dialogue between
bell hooks and
Julie Dash*

JULIE: The bottle trees, positioned outside of the Peazants' shanty, were for protection—protection from malevolent or evil spirits. It's my understanding that each bottle would represent a deceased family member or ancestor. The spirits would radiate goodwill, protection, and luck upon the family's house. Today, we place photos of the deceased on altars we've constructed in our home, or we keep photo albums of our family both living and deceased to find that same warmth.

I've always been fascinated by the various colored bottles black women keep. They are part of what E. Franklin Frazier describes as our "scraps of memories," where we hold and store things, our specially concocted "hair grease," our secrets, our private things.

Some of the jars in *Daughters*, on the windowsills, on the tables, et cetera, were herbal potions, to be used for medical, cosmetic, or protective purposes. Some of the mixtures were for cooking. Basically, they didn't have a drugstore or a supermarket, so they had to make whatever they needed to survive.

BELL: What about the agrarian experience?

JULIE: Early on I received criticism from people, including a lot of black folk, because they wanted to see this family, the Peazant family toiling in the soil. They wanted to see them working. If they didn't see them physically working, then they didn't understand how they lived, how they had food, how they survived. And I kept telling people, look, you don't work on a Sunday, the day that you're saying goodbye to your great-grandmother.

BELL: Girlfriend, growing up as a Southern black woman, in the 1960s, my family felt that you should not work on a Sunday, no matter how hard you had to work the rest of the week.

JULIE: We couldn't even use a pair of scissors on Sunday.

BELL: We could not wear pants, for a long time. I mean it was some serious legacy of "the day of rest."



Various scenes from the 1987 demo reel. (left and middle left) Flashback of Nana's mother in shackles. (middle right) Eula looks on as the spirit overtakes Eli. (right) Close-up of Eula.

JULIE: I know. Sunday was serious.

BELL: And you put on your nice clothes, just as people do in the film, and you sat around.

*Dialogue between
bell hooks and
Julie Dash*

JULIE: But, see, I think because audiences were not used to seeing black folk in their nice dress paying homage to their great-grandmother and not working, not being a beast of burden, they were unable to accept it. No matter what, they still wanted to see someone toiling. They could not accept the fact that this family had food because they were able to sustain themselves from what they planted and what they pulled from the sea. Now, I kept saying this in the dialogue, but still people kept saying, where did they get that food, that beautiful food? The food was there. They pulled it from the land and from the sea. This was a special day. Indeed, they didn't eat like that every day.

BELL: But the very fact that people don't have a way to understand this should remind us of how much we've lost in our understanding of black people and our agrarian past.

JULIE: I think they block it too, because—of course, I wasn't born in 1902, but on feast days, ceremonial days, whenever my Geechee family would get together, this is what our table looked like.

BELL: Well, I mean, I think too that it cuts against the grain of what we have been made to feel poverty is about. Because many of us were raised in Southern backgrounds where there was not a lot of material privilege. But when it came to food, because so much of that food was grown right there, I think of my sharecropper grandfather and all the beautiful food. We would say to Mamaa lot of times, we should take a picture of this table because it looks so beautiful.

JULIE: Right. And every Thanksgiving people would say that. I grew up in the projects. Every Thanksgiving they would say, this table is beautiful, you need to take a picture of it.

BELL: But it seems to me that—

JULIE: So in my mind I did, and I re-created it.

BELL: —that *Daughters* tries to recover the idea that, despite the material hardship that led people to go north or move into the industrialized city, black people did that at a loss. And it seems to me the figure who really addresses that sense of loss most is the Native American.

JULIE: St. Julian Last Child.

BELL: In his relationship to Iona, in the letter that he writes, he so clearly and deeply addresses the sense that something will be lost. Can you talk a little bit about the construction of that character in your imagination?

JULIE: Yes. I wanted, in this film, to speak to the condition of being African American in the Sea Islands at the turn of the century; there were very few Native Americans left in the Sea Islands at that time because, you know, they had all been marched to the reservations in Oklahoma. The Cherokees were some of the original inhabitants of the Sea Islands. So I thought it was important to have one remaining Native American there, and that's why I named him Last Child. He's the last child born of the Cherokee Nation surviving there.

I think in any type of situation where people are forced off the land, there is always some family, some group that stays back, and I see his family as having held back and him the lone survivor. Because the whole film, of course, is about retention, the saving of tradition, persistence of vision. And naturally, since there are no other Native Americans around, he would bond with the black families.

BELL: Or, as we recover our history we know that many Native peoples bonded and intermarried—

JULIE: Absolutely.

BELL: —with African Americans. And we owe books like William Katz's *Black Indians* and—

JULIE: There are certain tribes that were absorbed within the black community to the point where you couldn't distinguish Native American features. They just look African American. And, to my knowledge, that intermarrying has never

been depicted on the screen, a Native American and an African American mating, bonding, creating a life together that wasn't just built upon some lust of the moment. I wanted to show that.

*Dialogue between
bell hooks and
Julie Dash*

BELL: Still, many people have raised the question in my interviews with them about the film: Don't you in some ways reproduce a sort of stock Hollywood image of the Native? Actually, I felt that you tried to subvert the traditional image, because rather than make him a portrait of the illiterate Native American, you actually give him one of the more powerful passages in the film, which is the letter that he writes to Iona where he says things like, "If I lose you I would lose myself," and "Consider the memories." In a sense, that letter and that voice create a kind of tension, because we don't really hear him *speaking* to Iona. So could you talk about your construction of that cinematically.

JULIE: Cinematically? I was going to talk about the writing, which was very difficult, because I wanted it to be very old-sounding, because the style in which we communicate with one another now is very different. I was pulling from old old letters written during the period. We cut out a whole long passage of it, too, in order to save time, but in the beginning it's established that St. Julian Last Child hires someone to write the letter for him. Because in those times we had letter writers. Someone on the island was a good writer, and they would embellish the letter with so many flowery statements. That's why it reads so formally. It reads so, it's bigger than life. It's not just, "Hey Iona, I'll meet you down on the beach because then we could run off together." It's like "Consider the memories, my heart touching yours. . ." It goes on and on and on.

BELL: Let me interrupt you a minute to say that if one thinks for example, of the portrait of Wind in his Hair in *Dances with Wolves*, there is this one powerful scene which to me was worth seeing all that was trashy in this film, when Wind in His Hair is standing up—

JULIE: On the ledge and they are riding?

BELL: —and Kevin Costner's character has said he's going to leave. And he's standing, he's portrayed—

JULIE: On his horse.

BELL: —on his horse on that ledge, and on the one hand you have the reproduction of the idea of the “noble savage,” but on the other hand, it is one of the most powerful images in the film, of a kind of oneness with nature and the environment that can be talked about as an aspect of both African and Native American agrarian life. And I thought of St. Julian Last Child in the tree. Where we see him as though he has, in a sense, emerged out of this tree, out of nature, and exists in harmony with it. One of the real problems for those of us who write about Native culture, or African American agrarian culture, is how to break with the romantic image, but how to also speak the truth of that spirit. Spirit of unity. And it seems to me that in that one particular moment in *Dances with Wolves* and again and again in the portrait of the Native, St. Julian Last Child, in *Daughters of the Dust*, there is that attempt to restore the integrity of being to the idea of being one with nature.

JULIE: It’s interesting that you bring that up, because until the last moment I didn’t know whether I was going to use St. Julian Last Child in the tree or the character of Nana Pezant. That scene wasn’t written until I got on location, because when I saw the tree I said, this tree I have got to use, and then, this is how I’m going to use it. But I didn’t know exactly which character was going to be that one in the tree, sprouting from nature, evoking all the symbols and icons, with the roots at the bottom and the light and the fog and the sunrise and all that.

BELL: And it is really telling that you would have seen either Nana, who so much evokes a tradition of African relation to the land, or the Native American.

JULIE: And I chose not to use Nana because I didn’t want to worry about her falling out of that tree.

BELL: Well, it’s interesting to me, because in my new book, *Black Look*, I have an article that is talking about blacks, African Americans, Native Americans, and Black Indians— about what it means for us as black folk to reclaim that heritage for our history. When people say to me, “Well, it’s a black woman’s film,” I say, well, what do you do with the Native American character? Does he have a presence? Does he mean anything for the viewer of that film? We have never seen a

film by a black filmmaker that tried to portray any aspect of Native American culture. Can you name one?

JULIE: No.

BELL: I feel that there is a certain critical denial that takes place, because folks see this film and they know they're seeing stuff that they've never seen before. We know that we have never seen any black filmmaker dare to image anything about Native American culture. To some extent we have bought into the white-supremacist notion that we have no connection to Native Americans.

JULIE: Exactly.

BELL: And our own shame. Many of us were made to feel that we were denying blackness if we claimed that connection. And the film creates that sense, that there was a historical overlap between ideas about nature, divinity, and spirit in those two cultures that made convergence and contact possible. I think *Daughters* tries to show that something which, however flawed, we have no other cinematic example of.

JULIE: Where have you ever seen a Native American win in the end and ride off in glory? When have you ever seen an African American woman riding off into the sunset for love, only, and not escaping?

BELL: And the letter that says—"Our love is a very precious, very fragile flowering of our most...

JULIE: "...innocent childhood associations..."

BELL: "...innocent childhood associations." When we talk about the kinds of images and narratives that are progressive in the film, let's focus on some on the reproduction of one real old narrative of black female experience, which is the narrative of rape. One of the things you said in your interview with Houston Baker is that we have seen the physical rape so many times. So talk about why you even chose to work with the theme of rape, and how you saw yourself as doing it in some way that was different.

*Dialogue between
bell hooks and
Julie Dash*

JULIE: Okay. Sexual abuse, assault, rape is so much a part of our history that it is a historical fact. But my story revolves around the aftereffects of rape. How an individual deals with being sexually assaulted. How our families deal with this information. How you deal with a loved one—your husband, for instance—because, of course, this kind of assault affects the entire family. It affects your relationships, intimate relationships with your husband or lover.

BELL: When Eli says, “My wife, and some other man was riding her,” I just cringe every time I hear that.

JULIE: That was another thing too. I did not want to say the word *rape* ever, so a lot of people are angry because I don’t just spell it out. I wanted to say rape without saying R-A-P-E. So the dialogue goes: “She got forced.” “Some man was riding her.” “Did you tell him? Did you ever tell Eli?” It’s the way black women talk about this kind of thing. They don’t just come out and say it. Even today, lots of women just don’t come out and say it. They work around it.

BELL: One effect of Eli saying, “My wife, and someone else is riding her,” is that it allows us to see that there is a connection between his own phallogentrism, his patriarchal sense of ownership, and the mentality of the unknown rapist. And I think there is something about the ambiguity—of course, certainly there is a lot to substantiate that it’s a white person—but that ambiguity serves as a kind of critique of the phallogentrism that unites Eli with the rapist. It’s Nana Peazant who has to come in and remind him that he does not have to attach himself to this patriarchal fantasy of ownership. Because he has another tradition that he can relate to and which can give him a sense of masculinity that is not disrupted by the actions of the oppressor.

JULIE: Historically, too, African American women never had the luxury of being simply *a woman*. It had to always be so much more: the keeper of secrets, the provider, the nurturer, all of this. We just couldn’t be a woman. You’re more than that. You’re a beast of burden. Someone to breed, this and that. There were always these preconceived assignments that were put on you. You couldn’t just be sitting on a veranda sipping a mint julep.

BELL: And I think a part of what the film says is that even in the midst of the denigration of black womanhood, there was the veneration of the black woman as elder. One of the most moving scenes for me in *Daughters* is when Eli and Nana Peazant are at the grave and he says to her, "I really believe you were a goddess." I think it's very much a break with how black women have traditionally been portrayed, that she is not the plump—

JULIE: I had worked with Cora Lee Day almost fifteen years earlier, on Larry Clark's film *Passing Through*. I had to make a choice between Cora and Geraldine Dunston—she plays Viola's mother and is a fine actress—

BELL: Yes. In fact, she was one of my favorite people in the film.

JULIE: But I chose Cora Lee Day for Nana because of her physical appearance, to break with the tradition, the physical image of the "mother" who is going to carry us forward.

BELL: We talked earlier, Julie, about people meeting you or meeting me, you as Julie Dash, me as bell hooks, feminist theorist, and they say to us, "You don't look the way I imagined you would look." People actually say to me, "I thought you were going to be some big, da da da da da." I don't in any way want to denigrate the beauty and power of large black women, but that's something of a stereotype. Now, you're very soft-spoken, as I am, but I think, to some extent there is an association of black female power with size. "Well they've gotta be powerful because they're so big. Because they're so forceful," et cetera. And I think we have to focus on a different kind of power when Nana Peazant is speaking. I mean, it wasn't the power of her voice, she has that voice that just wops you in the film.

JULIE: And the face and the hair. When have we seen our great-grandmothers going to bed at night with their hair tied up looking just like that? When have we seen it on the wide screen?

BELL: How do the images of black women in the film break with stereotypes, transform the image so we are, in fact, called upon to look at black women in different ways?

*Daughters of
the Dust*

JULIE: Arthur Jafa, A.J., always says I'm on a mission to redefine how black women look on the screen and what they're doing. I think he's really right and I get teased about it.

BELL: If you would take your film and contrast it with other films you've seen with black women characters, you would see very few other films where the camera really zooms in on black women's faces.

JULIE: And lingers for a period of time. Extreme close-ups and different angles, exactly where the light is caressing them rather than assaulting them. Where the makeup is flawless. Very natural makeup, but flawless. Where the women look attractive, appealing.

BELL: And also what I like about *Daughters* is that it didn't claim one black female look, as, "This is attractive and this is not."

JULIE: Right. I wanted to show a whole range.

BELL: How many films even show us more than two black women at a time? So I think it's already a disruption for people to have to focus on that many images of black females at one time, with all those different hair-dos. And we know that a lot of people have crassly said that this is a film about hair. Let's talk about the question of hair.

What do you think about the critics and others who have said that there is too much emphasis on the aesthetic elements of appearance—the hair, the clothes?



bell hooks and A.J.

JULIE: I think I merely touched the tip of the iceberg compared with what I could have done. I merely touched upon it because we only had \$800,000 to work with. And I couldn't get all the people down there that I wanted to. Stylist Pamela Ferrell has a company in D.C. called Cornrows and Company. She pretty much

financed her own way down there to work on the film and do the hairstyles, because she had done so much research in Africa. The hairstyles we're wearing now are based upon ancient hairstyles, and there is tradition behind these hairstyles. They mean things. In any West African country, you know, if you are a pre-teen you have a certain hairstyle. If you are in puberty you have another hairstyle. Menopausal, another hairstyle. Married, single, whatever. All of this means something. There is so much meaning to our heritage that just gets overlooked. Like, there was a scene, the scene that I spoke about with Nana's mother cutting off the hair and her weeping the milk tears: her mother's face was covered with tattoos. We researched that. Her face was covered with tattoos. Another scene where the African—it's a flashback scene where I have some of the earliest African members of the Peasant family dancing, we see the scarification on their arms and faces. And another scene that we didn't get a chance to shoot was the family hair-braider braiding the map of their journey north, in the hair design, on a woman's head.

I grew up in New York. People still wrapped their hair. People wore big braids. They wore cornrows. They wore the Madagascan hairstyle that I saw—you know, that was placed upon Viola's mother's head. All of these things I grew up with in New York.

BELL: But in terms of cinematic portrayal, we have had very few images that suggest there is any beauty or pleasure to be found in our hair. And I agree with you that my experience with hair while growing up was a lot of pleasure. Even when I wrote my piece about pressing our hair, I said that that ritual was also a time of bonding, pleasure. We ate. We fried fish on Saturday. And your hair was pressed. And it was fun and it was a joy, and a lot of times I think if we define the nature of our oppression, we can focus too much on how something became a mark of shame.

I mean, if we cannot fully articulate our pain, then we're not allowed to fully articulate our pleasure either. And the film, very loudly declares that there is pleasure to be found in our hair. There is beauty there.

JULIE: And the whole experience—the ritual of dealing with hair grooming—that's pleasurable. The sitting in, everyone remembers sitting in between some

*Daughters of
the Dust*

other woman's legs, having your hair brushed and braided. The feeling of two knees on your cheek.

BELL: It's not only in relation to questions of black female beauty that the film is unique. It breaks new ground in its portrayal of darker-skinned black people. We have absolutely no cinematic tradition in which the darker-skinned black male or female body is seen as beautiful. And I thought that we were also seeing a different portrait of black men, or black male physicality there. There is none of that traditional focus on violence.

I think, for example, of the contrast between the image of a dark male body like Danny Glover's in the film *Witness* and what you do with these dark, very physical, black male bodies, which are, as we used to say in the old tradition, "much man." I mean, clearly, these black men are much man, but you give them qualities of tenderness. And I found that the scene where Eli meets his cousin on the road and they go through that process of physical bonding, there is something very tender there. Can you talk a little bit about that scene?

JULIE: Well, it's a scene where the characters are kind of misreading one another's intentions, and I'm trying to show at the same time these nonverbal methods of communicating that we have created since the time of slavery. It's all about communication and misreading, and understanding and articulating, with a little reminiscence of African martial arts thrown into it.

In this scene, Eli thinks his cousin is teasing him. His cousin is really just asking him seriously about going north. They do all this dialogue in the context of tussling around. This physical thing that men have—I wanted to have a scene that was tension-filled, but kind of loving. Bittersweet.

BELL: It seems to suggest that something else can happen within the framework of male physicality other than violence.

JULIE: Righto.

BELL: And that bonding on the physical plane can be an expression of tenderness. And I think we see that throughout the film.

JULIE: Especially with this character, the cousin. His character in the script is called the Newlywed Man, and he plays against the Newlywed Woman. Theirs is a visual subplot; all you see of them is their making love, embracing one another, caressing whispering sweet nothings.

BELL: His bride is a very Nubian-looking character.

JULIE: Yes, because as a black woman I needed to see a relationship between a black man and a black woman that was not just about lust, was not just about sex or violence or some kind of platonic, mother/grandfather type of situation. I want to see loving relationships. And every time we see the Newlywed Man and his Newlywed Wife, they are expressing their love.

BELL: They are looking into one another's eyes, so there is no sense that this is a subject/object relationship, one subordinate to the other. There is this mutual process of gazing. And I think again—

JULIE: This tenderness.

BELL: —those narratives in the film tend to go unnoticed by many critics and viewers.

JULIE: And he shows that same tenderness, but with a male physicality attached to it when he has that confrontation with Eli on the path.

BELL: And yet there is a quality of gentleness and tenderness in them. And, again, that is not often seen on the screen, either in a movie like *Witness* or in a movie like *Boyz 'n the Hood*.

But let me ask you this question, because this film is so powerful in terms of the images: Do you feel that the images at times threatened to undermine the narrative of the film or overwhelm the audiences?

JULIE: *Daughters of the Dust* is not what "Hollywood" would call a plot-driven story. I think images do tend to overwhelm the story, the plot, because, like I said earlier, we are being privileged to see so many new things, visually. We're learning new things. And we're hearing things said in a new way, in the Geechee dialect.

*Daughters of
the Dust*

There are so many different layers of the new that when some people experience this, as they process it they lose a sense of the plot, the story. All they retain is pretty much the subject and the theme, and the emotion.

BELL: Well, I know that you worked in collaboration with A.J. on this film. Can you speak a little bit about that process of collaboration, because it's so easy for people to look at a film like this, one that focuses on images, and feel that it's solely the camera work that makes the film.

JULIE: Well, I would say it was a collaborative effort between myself, A.J. and Kerry Marshall, the production designer. Together we worked to come up with the tone, the texture, the feel, the sense of place, all of that. We started working on *Daughters* two years before we went down to shoot it, and Kerry was involved at that stage too. The bringing together of so many different images that have never been shared or expressed, and wanting to have all of these images referenced by something that was real, something that had resonance to it, required a lot from each one of us in a collaborative effort.

Kerry brought photographs, drawings, etchings, sketches, whatever he could find, and he'd say, "Is this what you mean? Is this what you mean?" Or sometimes I would try to express things to him about, say, the indigo plantation, and one time I expressed it to him and he didn't really get it. He created something totally different and said, "Is this it?" And I said no, that's not it. And then, finally I was able to find a picture of the huge dome pits of swirling blue indigo they would have in a West African indigo processing plant. And then he went back and created that. And then I would go to A.J. and express to him how I wanted the scene to look in terms of the density of the smoke, the color, the movement of the unborn child. All of this. How the camera was gonna move. So we would sit around, I would come up with the theme. Kerry would come to me with ideas that would often broaden the look of the scene, and then A.J. would come up with different ways of shooting it, of lighting it. And that's how we worked together.

BELL: Well, it's a marvelous collaboration, and it's interesting to think of collaborations and traditions of affinity. When I think of you and other filmmakers, I certainly never think of you with the sorts of filmmakers you're often compared

with—Spike Lee, John Singleton. I think of them as a younger generation of filmmakers, not in terms of age but in terms of their experience. And when I think of you, I think of traditions like that of Kathleen Collins Prettyman. I think of Charles Burnett. I think of black independent filmmakers who have not always received the kind of attention that a Singleton or a Spike Lee receives.

But there are scenes in Burnett's film *To Sleep with Anger* that clearly suggest scenes in *Daughters of the Dust*. I'm not saying they're derivative, but there is a relationship in the different way of looking that is being created.

JULIE: In fact, Charles Burnett was in town for a film festival screening *To Sleep with Anger* while I was trying to cut forty minutes of *Daughters of the Dust* for a work print. And I grabbed him and I brought him over here, because I've known Charles for many many years and I've worked with him on several films. And I sat him down and I screened all of *Daughters of the Dust* for him and I said, help, help, what can I eliminate to get us down to 113 minutes? And he looked at it and he gave me some very good advice.

He said, "What you're fighting here is trying to make the men's story equal to the women's story." He said, "Go ahead and make it the women's story, because that's whose point of view it is anyway, and stop trying to give equal time to the black men." And at that point I was able to leap on it and say, yeah, I guess that's where it is. There were so many scenes eliminated. We shot so much more than what you see in the finished film.

BELL: I think some of the efforts Tinh T. Minh-ha has made in her films are akin to strategies I see in *Daughters of the Dust* and, hopefully, people will begin to place *Daughters of the Dust* critically in a world not only of black independent filmmakers, but also in the larger world of filmmaking. Because to know you as a filmmaker is to know someone who has looked at film and studied it from the angle of production as well as theory. So we're not seeing a straight line from one black filmmaker to another, a continuum from Oscar Micheaux to Julie Dash. But we're seeing a Julie Dash who is a world-class filmmaker drawing from several different traditions.

In fact, I think some people have difficulty with *Daughters of the Dust* because

they experience it as a “foreign film.” Can you say a little bit about that, because it has that aura of difference.

*Daughters of
the Dust*

JULIE: Well, I embrace that criticism. I say, great, it is a foreign film because, as I’ve been saying, it’s a film that privileges black women first, then the black community and white women. The feelings that evokes about African Americans are foreign, because what audiences have seen over the years has been very simplistic. Things that appeal to baser instincts. And now we have a film that is both complicated and complete, with a lot of different meanings. And you have to bring some of your own experiences to it to get the full meaning.

BELL: Let me give an example of that. I think of the lesbian relationship between Yellow Mary and Trula, and it’s very interesting to me that The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation awarded a prize to *Fried Green Tomatoes* for being the best Hollywood film this year that had “lesbian content.”

JULIE: But that’s the key: this is not a Hollywood film.

BELL: It seems to me that a lot of people would not see “lesbian content” in your film precisely because black filmmaking is often seen as being homophobic or misogynist or sexist. But when Nana Peazant is talking with Yellow Mary, it’s clear that Yellow Mary really is a new kind of woman. And it is obvious that her newness doesn’t just involve her historical experience of rape and exploitation, but her own sexual choices.

JULIE: I always keep going back and prefacing everything with my research. In my research I found that most prostitutes of that time were involved with other women. Their “significant others” were other women, so they were bisexual. And in developing Yellow Mary’s character I realized that she, as an independent businesswoman would not be traveling alone. In fact, she would have a significant other person. But let me backup a bit. I’m trying to be careful, because now the actress is going around saying that she was never supposed to be gay in the film. Early on, when I wrote it with an Asian American woman as Yellow Mary’s traveling companion, they were indeed lovers. I took her out of the film and then I rein-

serted her as a very light-skinned African American woman. And that is how we got the Trula character. But, yes, they were very clearly lovers.

BELL: And I think this comes across to the audience. I think that the film manages, while giving us a lot of concrete information, to maintain its aura of mystery and magic. And it seems to me that it's crucial that the film does not identify them directly as lesbians any more than it identifies them directly as prostitutes.

JULIE: It's the same with the rape.

BELL: Right. We know it through the associations, through the types of things that are being said when Yellow Mary says that she is not somebody who is gonna be working in the kitchen. We know that she disavows a certain kind of domesticity.

JULIE: She becomes just another of the many kinds of African American women who appear in the film, and in the world.

*Dialogue between
bell hooks and
Julie Dash*