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Exiled at Home: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Many Post-Colonial Conditions

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Red-haired, light-skinned African American Trula emerges as a striking image of an exiled and marginalized lesbian woman in Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*. This film tells the story of an African American family's migration from the Georgia Sea Islands to the US mainland in the early 1900s. Some members of the family already live on the mainland and return to the Sea Islands to celebrate the formal migration. Trula, a "friend," accompanies family member Yellow Mary Peazant. Trula's abundant and flamboyant hair and her excessive "whiteness" place her exterior to the predominantly dark-skinned female community of Ibo Landing in the Georgia Sea Islands. Trula's position as outsider emanates not only from these markers of difference or excess, but astonishingly, also from the Ibo belief that "[o]n the day of the blood relatives, friends go" (qtd. in Pendit and McGuire 6). This belief forges and legitimates her ostracism. Thus at the moment of migration and leave-taking, the women of the Peazant family, the "blood relatives," enact an unapologetic exile on Trula while simultaneously confronting varying degrees of self-exile.

Trula's overt silence and her refulgent presence signify a gaping wound in the text of the film, a laceration deliberately inflicted by Dash to warn that no unified moment or place of safety exists for all post-colonial African American female figures. Trula, perpetually in exile, is not safe on the Sea Island; she is not welcome; she is not at home. And yet, we argue, so too are all the other women depicted in the film. Dash risks projecting black women as divisive, and in particular, as homophobic when she portrays the variety of womanhoods occupied by individual black women. Making

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this choice, however, frees Dash to depict a more multifaceted site of exile on the Sea Islands.

Julie Dash begins *Daughters of the Dust* with written text on-screen that introduces the film as one about isolation: "At the turn of the century, Sea Island Gullahs, descendants of African Captives, remained isolated from the mainland of South Carolina and Georgia." This language subtly controls the way we perceive the lives we are about to meet and contextualizes Sea Island Gullahs as removed, detached, and set apart from others. They are exiles. The fact that Dash begins the film in words rather than in images allows her the opportunity to employ cinema as archival resource. The words prepare us for the particular images of post-colonial exile that the film explores.

Exile has a long history. Paul Tabori locates the earliest exile "in the flight of the Egyptian Sinuhe about 2000 BC" (qtd. in Edwards 17). Since that historic exile, the humanities has defined the term in many ways. "Exile" bears connotations ranging from chosen separation to coerced banishment. The overt pathos of exile is loss, sorrow, and nostalgia. Scholars remain divided about whether the pain of exile stems from the act of separation or from the longing for the actual lost geography (Edwards 16). Exile literature exposes the layers of pain experienced by the exile at the time of separation as well as the pain experienced in an ongoing way. By many accounts, the exile experience remains irresolvable, recurrent, and aggravated.

Although many writers discuss loss in the same breath as exile, scholars also point out that ironically "[b]anishment and withdrawal lead to adventure and discovery" (Edwards 20). In other words, exile creates story. If characters stay home, no story occupies or frames them. Thus, it can be vitalizing to be exiled, and yet Chelva Kanaganayakam reminds us that that to be exiled is to understand disconnection and "not belonging" (203). The literature of exile then becomes one of vital disconnection but not necessarily one of emptiness or absence. Exiles want us to understand the complexity and the vitality of the exile position. Bruce King identifies a "special insight" that an outsider status grants an expatriate or exile. This unique vision comes from "occupying a cusp," a notion important to exile literature because the cusp "establishes its own centrality while locating itself on the margins of two cultures"

(King 205). In other words, the exile position establishes an exciting distance both from the "home" and from the present landscape. The Georgia Sea Islands of *Daughters of the Dust* demonstrate the consummate cusp: geographically situated peripheral to the South, the marked terrain of slavery, neither Africa nor mainland United States. The slaves and their descendants on the Sea Islands were always at a distance from Africa and from the mainland United States.

The distance and loss inherent in exile intersects with the adventure, change, vitality, and insight afforded the position in multiple and intriguing ways in Dash's *Daughters of the Dust.* This film thwarts any idea of a unified home for the post-colonial African American woman. In fact, many of the women experience particular and exhilarating exiles while "at home" on the Sea Island. Nana Peazant, in her determination to stay on the island with the ancestors, exiles herself from her family moving North. Yellow Mary left her Sea Island home of her own accord years before we meet her in the film. Her travels in the film take her back to this home where she recognizes her chosen leave-taking as an exile experience. Trula, her companion, moves from a position of being seemingly "at home" in her lesbian relationship with Yellow Mary to one of being exiled from the other women on the island as well as from Yellow Mary. Viola, by virtue of having chosen Christianity over the spiritual practices of her ancestors, has exiled herself from religious connections to her family members. Iona refuses to leave the island at the moment the boat leaves because she wants to stay with her American Indian lover. Thus miscegenation and geography exile her from her family, and yet she embraces this exile because she loves. Eula, who refuses to name her rapist to her husband, exiles herself from him and no longer feels "at home" in her marriage. However, Eula ultimately lives "at home" with herself.

No collective "home"—whether geographical, familial, sexual, marital, religious, or racial—exists for the women characters in *Daughters of the Dust.* They constantly occupy the many varied post-colonial positions of exile while negotiating moves between "homes" old and new. Thus in the film, each woman's movement signifies her vitality. This signification also points to the multiple and fluid post-colonial conditions in *Daughters* as well as complicating the very notion of post-colonial. The Sea Islands' southern

ruralness as supplementary to "the North" suggests Homi Bhabha's notion of the "postcolonial space [as] 'supplementary' to the metropolitan centre" (qtd. in George 187). Simultaneously, however, the Sea Islanders exemplify Francoise Lionnet's notion of postcontact, a condition that circulates within the colonial moment rather than acting as supplement to it. Lionnet perceives postcontact as contesting and resisting the colonial moment (4). The Sea Islanders as contumacious slaves never did assimilate to mainland slave conditions. In fact, these islanders never learned English, thus forcing the mainland white slave owners in the vicinity to learn Gullah in order to do business. Caren Kaplan rightly notes that "post" in post-colonialism "privilege[s] a temporal agenda over a spatial one," and that "post" mystifies history" (21). Dash's camera, however, demystifies, remystifies, and vitalizes the Sea Islands' postcolonial history.

The tensions and paradoxes that mark post-coloniality open a space in which to extend and widen post-colonial studies. This move allows discussions regarding the colonial or post-colonial subject within the geographical borders of first world countries. Rosemary Marangoly George, in arguing for the inclusion of immigrant literature in the post-colonial rubric, writes that "[t]he immigrant is only one of the many manifestations of [the colonialism shared by the globe]" (172). The possibility of addressing the literatures regarding the immigrant within the United States, specifically the inhabitants of the Georgia Sea Islands, emerges in George's call to expand "the category of 'postcolonial literature'" (197). In *Daughters of the Dust*, the Peazant family's migration North enacts the post-colonial moment of leave-taking and exile.

This film is the first feature-length film in distribution directed by an African American woman. The crucial question thus becomes why Dash films these women in degrees of exile not only from the Sea Islands and their selves (politically understandable) but from each other. An aesthetic ecology, argues bell hooks, is at stake when a black filmmaker aims her camera. Hooks finds that the desire to produce cinematic images that resist those presented in a white supremacist culture can lead to an overdetermination that places limitations on black filmmakers: "It is this overdetermination that disrupts the possibility of an aesthetic ecology, for it upsets the balance" (70). *Daughters* suggests Dash's understanding

of the limitations imposed by an overdetermined use of resisting images. This film, as well as her earlier ones, demonstrates the subtle complexities of Dash's filmmaking as she constructs an "aesthetics of ecology" by balancing the positive and resisting images of black womanhood with a rejection of a monolithic black femaleness.

While Toni Cade Bambara notes a sisterhood as well as a nicey-nicey family in *Daughters of the Dust*, she ignores the bold ostracization of Trula (120). Bambara describes the family as "a liberated zone," and the women as a "source of value" (121), but she fails to address Trula's value. Bambara even describes the motivation for the film's action with language that excludes Trula: "The Peazant family gather for a picnic reunion at Ibo Landing" (121). Trula is a friend; she is not family, and by the end of the film, she is not even a valued friend. Bambara wants the film to depict a unified Africanism, and it does not. Dash's exact point is to portray black women in cinema as multifaceted and to portray family as significant but not unidimensional or fixed. Thus, Dash's film dismantles our understanding of an essential and monolithic black woman. For Dash, designing cinematic space safe from whiteness/normalcy, and centering African American women's experiences, arguments, laughter, ethics, and behavior as the sole motivation for the film (Curry 341), does not mean that the framed space will be safe for all African American women in all shots.

NANA

The first image of the film is that of a wind blowing through a young Nana Peazant's hands. The screenplay describes the scene in diasporic metaphor: "The soil, like dust, blows from her hands and through her fingers" (75).[1] This opening metaphor resonates throughout the film as the "free Negroes" of the Sea Islands slip through Nana Peazant's matriarchal hands and move North, affirming that an exile situation is not resolvable, only recurrent and aggravated. Nana Peazant's post-colonial condition is one of pre-slavery restoration. She wants the young Peazant family members to participate in the ancestral spiritualism of the African Ibo. However, Nana's refusal to recognize that enslavement on the Sea Islands tainted the landscape for the younger people keeps her steeped in denial of the present and the future.

Carolyn Martin Shaw critiques the role of ancestral spiritualism, a belief and practice highly regarded by Nana Peazant, in African American women as a significant part of a patriarchal agenda. She argues that to elevate Africanity and spiritualism is to maintain a patrilineal hegemony (358). This information is particularly enlightening as it regards Nana. It casts Nana as the enforcer of the patrilineal agenda, an agenda that causes her exile from the younger members of the family. What Shaw claims, and what Nana fails to entertain, is that "The message of the ancestor is not always salubrious for women; much depends on the social system in which the descendants live and the particular values they want to reinforce" (360). Dash's film does not reify Nana's position as one sadly disregarded by younger, disrespectful, and unwise family members. This director presents Nana as one exiled member of a multifaceted post-colonial site. She is right and she is wrong, but, always, she is vitally embarked on her own meaningful life.

Nana struggles to believe in unity and to deny exile. In the graveyard scene, Nana explains ancestral spiritualism to Eli: "Man's power doesn't end with death. We just move on to a new place, a place where we watch over our living family" (93). Dash positions Nana so far right on the screen that often she threatens to slip out of the frame. Her face, especially her mouth, is sometimes all that remains visible on screen. Dash implies that the voice of Nana is slipping away into a complicated place, an unframed and unimaginable place. Nana tells Eli that a unity exists across place: "Those in this grave, like those who're across the sea, they're with us. They're all the same" (94), while her face and her voice continuously slip in and out of view.

Trinh T. Minh-ha might describe Nana's issue as one of *authenticity.* According to Minh-ha, "*Authenticity* as a need to rely on an 'undisputed origin,' is prey to an obsessive *fear*: that of *losing a connection*" (94). Nana views the soil of the Sea Islands as the soil of the Ibo people and as the land of the ancestors. Her refusal to see the Sea Islands as symbolic of slavery or as backward, uncultured, and peripheral to the vital mainland enforces her own exile from her community. Nana will not see the Islands as symbolic of slavery because she fears losing a connection with the past more than she fears losing her connection to the present and the future. In the screenplay, Dash writes, Nana "looks over at her family pre-

paring a last supper before leaving the island. Nana turns away from them, she turns back to the past" (105). Nana is exiled from her family because she has chosen to stay connected to the past and what it represents.

Haagar understands Nana's exile as self-imposed. She says to the Hairbraider: "I don't see why Nana Peazant won't come sit herself down, over here, where we can watch over her. . . snakes back off in that high grass" (128). Dash's camera cuts from Haagar to a shot of Nana sitting in a throne-like chair off in the grass. Haagar's reference to the snakes is intriguing as it relates to the warring religiosities also at play in the film. Haagar metaphorically suggests that Nana puts herself at risk to the Christian devil by keeping herself apart from her community just as Eve did by insisting on working alone in Eden. Haagar plays Adam to Nana's Eve in this scene. And yet, like Adam, Haagar can do nothing to keep Nana from exiling herself. Nana does not fear snakes, Christian or otherwise; she fears losing the connection with her ancestors. Staying with Haagar and the family members would threaten Nana with disconnection from the past.

At certain times, Nana comforts herself with knowledge that she is a "cusp" figure to the past and the present: "Eula said I was the bridge that they crossed over on. I was the tie between then and now. Between the past and the story that was to come" (107). But when the time comes for the story (and her family members) to move on, the cusp figure no longer has a dominant role, and she becomes disconnected from the future part of the story. Robert Edwards analyzes this type of dilemma in terms of creating an imaginary home. Nana's failure to realize the Sea Islands as a place of exile results in further exile for her. A language, a world, and a life created as dependent on the past makes the present seem less golden, less livable, less valuable (Edwards 20). By continuously glorifying and romanticizing their connection to the African ancestors and to Africa, Nana has unknowingly participated in exiling herself from her family and her family from the Sea Islands. The Sea Islands are not Africa. The glorified Africa is unreachable. Therefore, the family wants to move to a new place. They do not want to participate in glorification of memories they do not even possess.

Toward the end of the film, it becomes increasingly apparent to Nana that to avoid literal exile and to maintain the desired unification, she must hold the connections in her head. She likens this life to the role of the African griot in storytelling: "it was important for the slave himself to keep the family ties. Just like the African griot, who would hold these records in his head, the old souls in each family could recollect all the births, deaths, marriages, and sales" (147). For Nana, to remember is to avoid exile and to retain connections in her head and in her language. The significant difference between her and the African griot, however, is that the Africans respected the storytelling elder. Nana cannot claim the respect of all her relatives. Recollecting and living a connection of the mind is not enough for many of the younger Sea Islanders.

Nana Peazant, however, never resorts to self-pity. When she cannot persuade her family members to stay, she makes one last fleeting attempt to persuade them to accept an amalgamation of Christianity and ancestral spiritualism as they move into the new world. She is emphatic about the bond that she wants her family members to remember: "There must be a bond. . . a connection, between those that go up North, and those who across the sea. A connection!" (151). Nana's nature is to prescribe and possess. Close to the time that the family will part, Nana exclaims: "I can't understand how me and Peazant put you children here on earth to fight among yourselves. How you can leave this soil. . . this soil. The sweat of our love, it's here in this soil. I love you 'cause your mine" (154). Nana mistakes a biological connection and a connection to the land that she cherishes as something that all cherish.

Like Nana, Bambara reads the Peazant family unit as a monolith: the Peazants "are bound to the land because it is an ancestral home. They tend the graves of relatives. Family memorabilia is the treasure they carry in their pockets and store in tins, not coins. They are accountable to the orishas, the ancestors, and each other, not to employers" (Bambara 123). But not all the Peazants feel bound or accountable to the ancestors. This unifying and monolithic perception is a mistake that leads Nana Peazant to exile and leads Bambara to universalizing readings. Dash's characters are not all "sisters," and they do not "see-eye-to-eye" as Bambara wishes us to believe (140). Instead, Dash's film depicts a multifaceted post-colonial world. Dash does not generalize toward reso-

lution or unity among the sisterhood, nor does she demonstrate a comfortable binary split between those who stay and those who go. Her film hosts "multiple worlds and syncretic phenomena existing side by side: the old and the new. . . the mother tongue and the 'stepmother tongue'; along a continuum" (Zabus 29).

YELLOW MARY and TRULA

Daughters of the Dust frustrates the concepts of sisterhood among black women and of any authentic black female subject as it simultaneously complicates the notions of exile, loss, and home. Rosemary George reminds us that "[h]ome is a place to escape to and a place to escape from. Its importance lies in the fact that it is not equally available to all" (9). Yellow Mary and Trula each negotiate this "escape to" and this "escape from" which George describes. Yellow Mary returns home, and while Trula expresses a longing for a "home," she ultimately finds nothing like a home on the Sea Island. The film opens with Yellow Mary as returning prodigal granddaughter and Trula as a stranger first encountering her lover's family. Yellow Mary and Trula as liberated and culturally encoded racial texts cannot escape the gaze and speculation of all others, and the film characterizes their post-colonial conditions through contradictory embodiments.

As the film introduces the two women, the camera presents a shot of a boatman looking over his shoulder at the boat's passengers: Yellow Mary, Trula, Viola, and Mr. Snead. The shot clearly shows the boatman looking, and enjoying what he sees. The camera does not, however, show us the object or objects of the boatman's gaze. The camera then moves to a medium shot of Viola and Mr. Snead, and the boatman stands behind them with his back to the camera. The next close up presents Trula gazing not at the camera but somewhere beyond it and establishes Trula as the object of the boatman's approving and desiring gaze. In that moment Trula becomes the objectified and sexualized object of the "gaze."

The notion of woman as the sexualized object of the gaze is hardly a new one. Laura Mulvey identifies the dual function of the woman in traditional cinema as an "erotic object for the [male] characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator," whom Mulvey identifies as a male (62). Dash,

however, complicates this dual function of the female image as the erotic object of the male gaze within the film. Within Dash's film both men and women look at Trula. In the scene in the boat, Mr. Snead, with both discomfort and confusion, and with a degree of appreciation, also looks at Trula. Viola's gaze registers disapproval as well as a certain amount of curiosity and fascination. Yellow Mary's gaze suggests intimacy. Trula returns each of the looks with varying degrees of defiance, amusement, acknowledgment, and desire.

Dash's film foregrounds its own awareness of seeing, and it makes clear that new and multiple perspectives, as well as multiple stories, will emerge. The film's self-consciousness regarding the camera emerges from a kaleidoscope, a toy that depends on changing perspectives. The first interaction between Trula and Yellow Mary takes place in relation to the kaleidoscope. While Mr. Snead, a photographer, explains the concept behind the toy, Yellow Mary looks into it as Trula playfully peers through the other end. The two women laugh, and an intimate moment between Yellow Mary and Trula emerges. Thus the camera begins the subtle delineation of the lesbian relationship between them. While the camera captures this playfulness and intimacy, it also registers the disapproval and discomfort of Yellow Mary's cousin Viola. Viola's censure begins the process of exclusion that denies Trula a place within the community of Peazant women and culminates in her separation from Yellow Mary.

The scenes in the boat, as it approaches the island, depict Yellow Mary and Trula side by side, playing and exchanging glances that clearly exclude Viola and Mr. Snead. As the film progresses, however, Trula becomes the "thing" that facilitates both Yellow Mary's self-definition and her repositioning among the Peazant women. Trula becomes the marker of Yellow Mary's blackness and the "scapegoat" of Yellow Mary's sexuality.

As the boat makes its way to Ibo Landing, Viola introduces Mr. Snead to Yellow Mary:

Viola: Praise, the Lord, Mr. Snead. My dear cousin, Mary Peazant.
Yellow Mary: Viola.
Mr. Snead: Pleasure to meet you, Mary Peazant.
Yellow Mary: Yellow. . . They call me "Yellow Mary."
Viola: Our fathers were brothers. Of course, compared to some

> people, Yellow Mary isn't all that light skinned, but. . . Yellow Mary I'd like you to meet my photographer, Mr. Snead.

No one speaks Trula's name, yet Viola's reference to light skin seems to suggest both a tacit acknowledgment of Trula's presence and a comparison between Yellow Mary and Trula. Thus, the conversation about skin color "darkens" Yellow Mary and complicates Trula's racial identity. Although Trula remains on the periphery of the narrative, her presence proves necessary to Yellow Mary's return "home." In addition, Trula's peripheral location reinforces Dash's call for critical perspectives that resist implication in hierarchical ideology, and it acknowledges Dash's awareness that any "recentering" often enacts marginalization and exile.

The visual representation of Trula as occupying a liminal space between "Yellow" Mary and whiteness and "Yellow" Mary and blackness marks the threshold between inclusion and exclusion. George argues that "[o]ne distinguishing feature of places called home is that they are built on select inclusions. . . [and] whose every reinvention seems to a follow the basic pattern of inclusions/exclusions" (9). While Trula remains excluded from the family of Peazant women, Yellow Mary crosses the boundary between exclusion and inclusion. As Yellow Mary enacts this move home, she distances herself from Trula. The closer Yellow Mary moves toward the center and to recuperation into the community of women on the island, the farther Trula moves toward the margins. As Yellow Mary's return erases her own exile from the Ibo landing community, it precipitates an exile both from her lover and herself. In other words, for Yellow Mary to claim her ultimate place by Nana Peazant's side (which she will do), she must sacrifice her choice to remain outside the expectations of heterosexual patriarchy. On the day of the leave-taking, Yellow Mary replaces the flowing white dress that she wears throughout most of the film with a beige calico work dress. This reconfigured and recuperated Yellow Mary stands against the trunk of a tree. The image suggests the cost of Yellow Mary's choice. Devoid of excess dress, veil, and lace, Yellow Mary takes up a place that involves loss of both Trula and her own individuality.

Trula and Yellow Mary's relationship extends the film's look at intra-racial relationships by adding the issue of sexuality. Specifically, the relationship between the women initiates a recognition of homosexuality within the narrative. As discussed above, the incident with the kaleidoscope begins the subtle delineation of Trula and Yellow Mary as lesbians. The film continues this depiction by insisting on the "coupleness" of the two women. In scene after scene, Trula and Yellow Mary comprise a dyad. When Yellow Mary expresses her anticipation for gumbo at the family picnic, she gives a series of sidelong glances at Trula which imply an intimacy between the two women as well as indicate a subtext to her words: "It's been a long time since I've had some good gumbo. I had some in Savannah, you know, but they didn't put everything in it." Yellow Mary directs the "you know" to Trula along with a look weighted with an alternate and intimate meaning. Although Eula participates in these early scenes, she does not disrupt the camera's insistence on Trula and Yellow Mary as a couple. In another scene, the camera shows Trula and Yellow Mary as dark silhouettes with the ocean providing the background. The women face each other, then leaning their foreheads against one another's, they embrace. Dash tells hooks, "[Yellow Mary and Trula] were very clearly lovers" (67), but hooks finds it "crucial that the film does not identify them directly as lesbians any more than it identifies them directly as prostitutes" (qtd. in Dash 67). Hooks does not analyze why such identification is crucial, but we argue that Trula's and Yellow Mary's positions as lesbians and prostitutes prove critical to Trula's exile within the film and as an explanation for Yellow Mary's reception by the Peazant women.

The remarks that meet Yellow Mary and Trula when they first arrive on the island and encounter the Peazant women focus on skin color and on the prostitutes' very humanness. After sending her daughter off to tell Nana of Yellow Mary's return, Haagar says, "It'll most likely kill her to see this heifer has returned!" and Viola comments, "All that yellow, wasted." Haagar directs "heifer" to Yellow Mary; Viola's remark, however, addresses both Yellow Mary and Trula. "Heifer" places Yellow Mary in the position of breeding stock. Haagar's only acknowledgement of Trula denies her an existence, human or animal, and it situates Trula in

relation to Yellow Mary: "What that she got with her?" Viola's use of "wasted," as an adjective denotes "superfluous," "worthless," and interestingly "excessive,' and "needless." Although Viola does not clarify in what sense the women waste their yellow, her remark works in reference both to Trula and Yellow Mary's lesbianism and to their status as prostitutes. In other words, the "yellow" fails to carry the value it would in a heterosexual paradigm. It buys neither woman the status of prized possession, wife. In language steeped in heterosexual and patriarchal allusions, Viola implies that had Yellow Mary or Trula been with a man the lightness of their skin would have been better valued. The reactions of the women on the island clearly mark both Yellow Mary and Trula as disruptive and unwanted forces, and at this initial meeting both women suffer exile and exclusion.

This suggestion of a lesbian relationship between Yellow Mary and Trula invites lesbian discourse into the community of African American women. This move acknowledges the challenge that African American lesbians have issued to heterosexual African American feminists. Patricia Hill Collins argues that historically the black lesbian "become the standard by which other groups measure their own so-called normality" (195).[2] While we do not argue that Dash's film utilizes Trula's or Yellow Mary's lesbianism in opposition to the other women on the island or that *Daughters* exhibits any homophobic perspective, we do propose that Trula as both a lesbian and light-skinned African American woman opens a space of warning within the film. The cinematic caress of Trula within *Daughters* functions to relegate her to the periphery of the film and to position her outside of the community of Peazant women. Because Yellow Mary claims her position at the side of Nana Peazant by sacrificing Trula, any effort at reconfiguring a center entails both sacrifice and silence.

Throughout the film Yellow Mary's story unfolds, yet this unfolding does not explain Trula's presence. Early in the film, Viola asks Yellow Mary for her story: "Lord, girl, where have you been all these years, what happened to you?" From behind her hat and veiling, Yellow Mary replies, "Pick a story." Clearly, the suggestion, or warning, emerges that Yellow Mary's "story" will enter the narrative through a filter and will represent only one version or one possibility of her "reality." Thus Yellow Mary may

choose what to reveal and what to withhold, and she chooses to remain silent regarding Trula. This silence further marginalizes Trula and moves her outside of communal rituals, and it mutes her story. Although Trula never articulates her story, her presence does fall within the digressive paradigm of cinemas that utilize the oral tradition. The visual depiction of her connection to Yellow Mary keeps Trula in the viewer's eye, and it reminds the audience that untold stories exist even within the film's insistence on multiple storytelling.

In the film, Haagar comes closest to asking for an accounting of Trula's presence on the island. When Yellow Mary first arrives and confronts the Peazant women, she presents Haagar with a tin canister of Uneeda Biscuits. Haagar holds the canister, but she looks at Trula: "What is this?" Grammatically, "this" lacks a clear reference; "this" may be the tin of biscuits, or "this" may be Trula. Haagar's demeanor and her gaze indicate that the inquiry refers to Trula. Yellow Mary fully understands Haagar's question. She smiles at Trula: "Store-bought biscuits, Haagar." Haagar still eyeing Trula asks, "Bread from a store?" Within this exchange of double talk between Haagar and Yellow Mary, Trula becomes both objectified and commodified, the store-bought biscuit. Yellow Mary, as giver of the gift, implicates herself in this economy of exchange, and she "trades" her relationship with Trula for the right to remain on the island.

For all her onscreen presence, Trula speaks only three times in the film: twice in a scene with the Peazant children and once with Eula and Yellow Mary. In the first instance, Trula pores over a Sears Roebuck catalogue, a "wish book." Trula joins the children in their wishing game: "I wish I had this doll. I wish I had this doll. I wish I had this bed to go inside my house." Myown teases Trula: "You don't have a house!" Trula continues, "I wish I did. If I did, I'd put this bed inside my house. Then I wish I had a rabbit." Trula's first articulation in the film occurs with the children and within the context of desire for commodities. Again the narrative aligns Trula with objects of exchange and consumption. She speaks twice in this scene, but she does not engage in conversation. Neither the viewers nor the characters move closer to "knowing" Trula. Her little girl wishes and her little girl voice destabilize any

attempt to "read" her. Trula becomes "a site [that] invites interrogation" (Curry 341).

The third time Trula speaks she merely echoes Yellow Mary and Eula: "No-va Scotia." This utterance further marks Trula as a site of ambiguity. Just as the store-bought biscuits and the Sears Roebuck catalogue function to place Trula in the discourse of exchange, the talk of Nova Scotia places Trula far outside of the Sea Island community and far outside of the anticipated migration North. Trula's utterance of "Nova Scotia" while not suggesting a point of origin for her does offer the possibility of a destination. The film further frustrates attempts to make meaning of Trula's voice. The film relegates her words to the margins, to a child's game or to an echo.

The camera does not disembody Trula, but it does fragment her. Throughout *Daughters of the Dust*, the camera focuses on the women's hands. One of the film's opening shots shows young Nana holding Sea Island soil. The camera depicts female hands braiding hair, preparing food, working the "scraps of memories" in Nana's tin, stirring vats of indigo dye. These shots, however, do not fragment the female body, instead they extend that body and ground it in activity, in ritual, and in work. The camera does, however, fragment Trula. In the screenplay Dash directs the camera: "After this we only see fragments of Trula's body" (118). These directions refer to a scene with Yellow Mary and Trula sitting in a tree, laughing and smoking cigarettes. Reminiscent of the playful intimacy with the kaleidoscope, Yellow Mary and Trula's laughter excludes Eula standing on the ground. The scene begins with Yellow Mary and Trula and then shifts to Yellow Mary and Eula. Trula remains peripheral throughout the scene; however, her fragmented body, as well as her laughter, interrupts, or disrupts, this focus on the two Peazant women. The camera offers quick glimpses of Trula's body, legs or arms dangling, her face and torso blocked by a tree limb. Her body proves marginalized and fragmented.

Dash utilizes trees as significant aids in representing both the fragmentation of Trula's body and the wholeness necessary for Yellow Mary's reintegration into the female community of Ebo Landing. At the end of the film, Yellow Mary plasters herself against a phallic monolith of a tree while she watches Trula depart

with the migrating Peazant family. Trula, although exiled, has embarked on another adventure, thus embodying the vitalizing aspect of exile. Yellow Mary, in contrast, remains stationary.

Yellow Mary's return "home" becomes a retreat into an exile from self, an exile from, what Trinh calls, "the limitless process of interactions and changes that nothing will stop, not even death" (94). As *Daughters of the Dust* centers black womanhood, it reminds us that all centering is unnatural, a construction that involves marginalization (Trula). The film argues for the continuity of family and for the importance of home, as place and as imagined, yet *Daughters* explicitly details the risks of staying as well as leaving. Either decision invokes some degree of exile and loss.

VIOLA

We meet Viola Peazant as she journeys to the Sea Islands for the leave-taking event. She is dressed in a navy blue suit. Her hair is "up" and tidy in contrast to Yellow Mary's and Trula's long flowing locks and dresses. In addition, Viola's hairstyle reveals her cameo earrings, and, like most cameos, Viola's display a white top layer carved against a lower dark layer as background. These earrings serve as a characterizing metaphor for who Viola has become: a "white": Christian layer has glossed over the black, African background of Viola. Viola will not fully accept an African spiritual past, particularly not one with a matriarchal spokesperson. She wants a Christian patriarchal future. Viola Peazant, a Christian missionary, no longer lives on the island, and she is not interested in the past. To her mind, the past (and the present) represents exile from Jesus Christ, her God. In describing the upcoming migration North, Viola claims, "What's past is prologue. . . I see this day as their first steps toward progress, an engraved invitation, you might say, to the culture, education and wealth of the mainland" (79). Viola views the leave-taking as a beginning, and her post-colonial condition is one of utter assimilation.

When with the children of the island, Viola discusses the heaven that awaits them and thereby offers an interpretation of why she does not feel exiled from the Sea Islands. Viola sees her occupation of earth as a huge exile from God and her earthly existence as prologue to her real home which awaits her in Christ's

heaven. She says, "[N]ot today, and not tomorrow shall come the true reaping of the deeds we do, but in some far-veiled and mighty harvest" (114). Ironically, as Viola gazes dreamily off toward the ocean into her "far-veiled and mighty harvest," Dash captures Yellow Mary onscreen, facing the ocean, with her back to Viola. Yellow Mary stands between Viola and her view. Through the power of cinema, Dash makes it clear that ill-treatment of Yellow Mary is one of the deeds to be accounted for before Viola recognizes her heaven. When people question Viola about what is out there on the mainland, she answers, "Life, child, the beginning of a new life" (115). Viola cannot experience exile from an existence that she has erased. Her life began on the mainland with her savior.

However, after spending time on the island, Viola experiences confusion. When Haagar mocks Nana's African spiritualism, Viola takes offense even though she feels great religious conflict about the religion of ancestors. Viola defends her grandmother from Haagar's accusation while she simultaneously diminishes the power of Nana's beliefs: "Haagar Peazant, . . . that's an old woman you're laughing at. Just like Eula, you married into this family, but she's our grandmother. There is nothing wrong or harmful in that tin can she carries" (128). Viola reduces the emblem of Nana Peazant's ancestral connection to a mere tin container, and she further argues that Nana is uneducated. Viola's defense accumulates into a masked gesture of respect, but a gesture that disguises the pity she feels for Nana's ignorance.

Near the end of the film, when Eula directly attacks Viola's God, and Viola reels with the recognition of a truth in Eula's proclamation, Eula says, "Deep inside we believe that even God can't heal the wounds of our past or protect us from the world that put shackles on our feet" (156). Viola would prefer not to deal with the past, and she does not even respond to Eula's statement about their enslaved past: "My God loves me and protects me and watches over me" (156). To Viola, all that past was introductory to the now, in time and in place, that she so fully occupies. She refuses to look back at slavery or to life on the Sea Islands, and she only exists in the now of the mainland where she says Jesus Christ lives.

When the two religious communities begin to combine, when the family members receive a pseudo-communion from Nana Peazant, Viola screams. The actual scream occurs as Viola's own

mother leaves Viola to go take communion from Nana Peazant, an offering of a combined Bible with the ancestral charms. Dash writes that "Viola wants her shot at heaven, she is out of control and screaming" (160). Viola cannot make sense of this amalgamation of spiritual beliefs. She exclaims that Nana cannot live on in them, that she must die and go on to heaven. Not until Mr. Snead soothes her with kisses, can Viola calm down. She needs a male savior to guide her. Viola's stability is threatened when women are in control. Her stability is only reestablished when a man rescues her from her confusion.

IONA

Iona, Haagar's daughter, faces a struggle between remaining and leaving, between exile and home, as well as a choice between mother and self-definition. Because she continuously silences her daughter, Haagar has no inkling of the struggle that her decision to migrate initiates for Iona, nor does Haagar realize that leaving Ibo Landing also means leaving a daughter behind. Iona exiles herself because she has secretly fallen in love with an American Indian on the Sea Island. Thus, Iona's exile becomes a self-exile based on her desire for romantic love, and her post-colonial condition emerges as miscegenetic.

Iona enters the film through the written words of her Native American lover, St. Julian Last Child. A voice-over of Iona reading his letter presents his appeal to her to stay on the island. Last Child utilizes the language of nature, innocence, and childhood, thus tinging Iona's ultimate exile with the romantic longings of a return to nature: "Consider the memories that we share of growing up together. . . Our love is a very precious, very fragile flowering of our most innocent childhood association." As we hear the words of Last Child's letter, the screen images depict the preparations of leave-taking. The juxtaposition of words and images places Iona on the border between dutiful daughter and willing exile.

In her reading of Annie John's departure from Antigua in Jamaica Kincaid's novel *Annie John*, George suggests that "[f]ollowing the trajectory of a successful colonial education means leaving" (174). Although not in a "purely" colonial situa-

tion, Iona, as an inhabitant of the Georgia Sea Islands does "live in" a post-colonial economy. Just as Annie John's mother "wants the best that a colonial education can offer her daughter" (George 174), Iona's mother passionately declares, "My children ain't gonna be like those old Africans. . . I want my daughters to grow up to be decent somebodies. I don't even want my girls to hear about all [those old beliefs]." While Haagar can insist on a better life for her daughters up North away from Ibo landing, and although she can exile Iona to a silent struggle, she cannot deny Iona's belief in St. Julian Last Child's words. The daughter looks to love grounded in "childhood associations"; the mother perceives decency in a break from old beliefs, old associations. The conflict between mother and daughter arises from Iona's desire to self-define, to claim ownership of her decision to stay or to go. Ultimately, however, Haagar can only cry Iona's name as she watches her daughter ride away with St. Julian Last Child. Haagar's cry expresses her grief, and it exposes her anguish over losing possession of her daughter: "Iona! Iona! I. . . Own. . . Her!"

Throughout the film Iona moves from her mother's side to her lover's arms to the circle of young women on the island until she finally takes her place behind Last Child. Her onscreen presence emerges as "flitting," as if looking for someplace to alight: near her mother, with her sister, by Yellow Mary, next to Last Child. Iona remains silent and watchful and thoughtful. Although introduced against the visual symbol of language, a written letter, Iona does not "speak" her desire. Much like Trula, we read Iona's story of exile through visual representation rather than extensive dialogue.

Iona's story closes with motion. She climbs on St. Julian Last Child's horse and rides into the interior of the island. Iona rides past Yellow Mary, past Nana Peazant, and out of the range of her mother's wail: "I. . . Own. . . Her!" Clearly the film depicts Iona's exile as adventure and as a rejection of a community of women. Iona rejects migration, and she refuses a life with Nana Peazant and Yellow Mary. Iona's decision to stay on the island does not entail a return home or even a staying; rather, her decision involves a remaking of home.

EULA

The first hint we get of Eula's exile from her husband comes in an early scene that portrays Eula lying next to him. As Eula turns toward him, Eli keeps his back to her. Eula was raped and has refused to identify the rapist to her husband because she fears that Eli will confront the man and be harmed. Eli feels that his wife has been irreparably damaged. In contrast to Eli's turning away, when Eula runs to greet Yellow Mary's arrival, they "rock in each other's arms" (111). From this moment on in the film, Eula, Trula, and Yellow Mary form an intimate trio. Although the initial scenes of the three women focus on Yellow Mary and Trula and then gradually shift to Yellow Mary and Eula, thus marginalizing Trula, the three women relax together, walk the beach, and talk. Like Nana Peazant, Eula remembers the past and is not afraid to revive it in her conversations with the two women: "That's the spot where the slave girl got drowned by her owner" (118). Yellow Mary snidely remarks that she thought slaves walked on water in Ibo Landing, alluding to a prominent Ibo Landing legend. Eula does not understand the sarcasm, and she responds innocently: "That doesn't mean you can't drown here" (119). Eula's innocent remark proves more meaningful than she knows. In other words, people both walk on water and drown in Ibo Landing, and metaphorically speaking, some people are drowning on the island.

Eula empathetically relates to the contradictory losses and desires of each family member. She knows that some must leave and some must stay. She knows that some are torn. She knows that Eli desires information about the rape but that he cannot live with that information. She knows the cost of Haagar's judgments. However, Dash does not design Eula as the monolithic heroine, as the matriarch for the new world. Eula too, has a demonstrable flaw; she also never acknowledges Trula: her relationship with Yellow Mary depends on erasing Trula. Eula's post-colonial condition is syncretic.

Part of Eula's syncretism emerges from her onscreen relationship with Yellow Mary and (initially with) Trula, and she makes it clear to these modern figures that she enacts and believes in African ancestral spiritualism. Eula tells Yellow Mary and Trula that she conjured her dead mother the previous evening to help with her exile from Eli and her ensuing labor. Yellow Mary immediately mocks her superstitions and denigrates Ibo Landing as a desolate

place, causing Eula to interrupt with a declaration regarding the beauty of the place. Eula asserts a connection (albeit imperfect) with the Sea Islands, with Nana Peazant's teachings, and with Yellow Mary and Trula. The exile she alludes to but cannot quite discuss is that from her husband. Yellow Mary does soften when Eula talks about Eli, and the modern woman encourages Eula to stay with him and to keep the name of the rapist silent.

In a flashback, Eula remembers a time when she and Eli ran freely and lovingly about the beach. Eula remembers and recalls that relationship even as she suffers the current disconnection with her husband. Eula struggles with reestablishing this connection, and throughout the film, the decision regarding whether and when to break silence emerges as her difficulty. Although Eula will articulate the dilemmas that ensue from post-colonial conditions, Eula will still hold back certain pieces of information. Her syncretic understanding does not give birth to a verbalized perfect coherence. Eula understands that certain consequences, such as losing her husband to lynching, are not worth the catharsis of utterance.

Dash's screenplay supports Eula's cinematic silences. The director tells us that as the cinematic image of Eula rubbing her pregnant belly occurs, Eula is "in silent agony": "She has been holding so much in for so many months" (123). Eula's Unborn Child is restless in the womb. The Child's spirit runs freely on the beach. At one point, as Eula watches Eli in the water, the Unborn Child's "spirit enters the billowing folds of Eula's voluminous skirt. . . Eula throws back her head and unleashes a verbal 'ululation' that stirs the soul and stills the waters of Ibo Landing" (139). Eula's exile is so profound that language cannot express it, and yet the pressure of it causes her to want to make sound.

When Eula does speak, she speaks about Sea Island history to her Unborn Child. The history makes an interesting association between Eula's silence and the silence of her ancestors: "The minute those Ibo were brought ashore, they just stopped, and took a look around. . . not saying a word, just studying the place real good" (141). The camera emblazons Eula from her foot to her head and beyond up into the trees and the sky. As she tells the story of hers and her ancestors' past, she makes it clear that she has also moved on from the past. Eula is the person who reveals the history in the

most non-fragmented, linear way. She is not exiled from her past. She knows it, and she speaks it to her child, but, unlike Nana, Eula also knows that the past does not tell the whole story.

Not until the final supper does Eula's condition explode into a non-linear sense of the family's problems. She cuts to the quick and states that the issues to deal with do not all have to do with remembering the ancestors and migrating North. She claims that deeper issues exist that have to do with the acceptance of the sexuality, sexual identity, and sexual experiences of the Peazant women. She exclaims that the divisiveness among the family members is equally exiling as any disconnection from history and place. She screams out the unspeakable to the shock of the family: "If you're so ashamed of Yellow Mary 'cause she got ruined. . . . Well, what do say about me?" (155). When Eula speaks of this situation, the family feels shame for Eli. Eula's point is that the women in the family need to start valuing each other if there is to be any future. Eli agrees with her, and he sidesteps the shame and redirects the gazes of the women by prodding Eula to say more.

As Eula continues in her monologue, the camera positions her on the left of the screen. The moment that Eula says, "As far as this placed [sic] is concerned, we never enjoyed our womanhood," the camera jolts her onto the right of the screen. Throughout the rest of her delivery, the camera moves her from left to right. This movement "unfixes" her position, further reinforcing the syncretic aspect of Eula's post-colonial condition. In fact, Dash's cinematic delivery enables Eula to say that the Peazant women need to become unfixed from the past and unfixed from the future in order to enjoy themselves and their various life paths. Eula continues, "Deep inside, we believed that they ruined our mothers before them. And we live our lives always expecting the worst because we feel we don't deserve any better" (156). Eula identifies the women as exiled from themselves and from the men in the family and insists that changing geography will not change any of that.

Eula has syncretized the past, and she understands that people need to make multiple moves into the future. Unlike Nana, who still lives in the past, and unlike Viola, who has erased the past, Eula can narrate the past and can, therefore, call for precise and particular migrations:

> We're the daughters of those old dusty things Nana carries in her tin can. . . . We carry too many scars from the past. Our past owns us. We wear our scars like armor, . . . for protection. Our mother's scars, our sister's scars, our daughter's scars. . . . Thick, hard, ugly scars that no one can pass through to ever hurt us again. Let's live our lives without living in the fold of old wounds. (157)

Eula and Eli decide to stay on the Sea Island, and according to the Unborn Child, they raise their daughter there.

The "speaking" that Eula performs at the end of the film appears to mitigate the exile in her marriage and also erases the need to migrate to another place. As she had pointed out, scars and rifts travel with us to other places. At the end of the film, the Unborn Child reports that "Mama was always peculiar" (164). In *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash contends that the ultimate post-colonial condition, that of syncretism, will always be deemed peculiar—eccentric in its excesses and strange in its lacks. Eula displays and acts on an understanding of the past, the present, and the future more fully than anyone else in the film. However, even Eula never honors Trula's existence.

Dash's film argues that even as communities determinedly name and claim their own histories, fracturing, fissures, and emblematic ostracisms will inevitably occur. The Trulas of our communities will float off the screen (and into the periphery of our imaginations) with nothing but a demure wave to signify that such leave-taking involves motivation and action. Trula does not, however, disappear. She is not and was not invisible. The African American women's "community" of the Georgia Sea Islands exiled Trula in body and in language. Dash's film is progressive and risk-taking in its revelations about the insidious presence of exclusionary practices in any community or home.

Notes

1. References to the published screenplay will be given parenthetically. Quotations without page references come from the film

2. According to Collins, "For Black lesbians homophobia represents a form of oppression that affects their lives with the same intensity as does race, class, and

gender oppression. . . . Within a system of interlocking race, gender, class, and sexual oppression, there are few pure oppressors or victims" (194-95).

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