



“I Arrived Late to This Book”
Teaching Sociology with Julie Dash’s
***Daughters of the Dust*, the ‘Novel’**

Karen M. Gagne

University of Wisconsin at Platteville

gagnek@uwplatt.edu

Abstract: Cultural productions like Julie Dash's trilogy *Daughters of the Dust* need to play a more central role in the teaching of anti-colonial sociology. Representing the human condition and rethinking the purpose of doing sociological research, these works offer an important corrective to Western social science and historiography. As non-linear Diasporic texts, they require that author and reader alike actively engage in their culture, learn its symbols and participate in the struggle for human freedom. Investigating the linked past, present and future of all Africans, including their persistent resistance and revolt against the more than 500 years of enslavement and colonization, these works represent invaluable tools for social change.

I arrived late to this book. It is more than ten years old and I feel as if I just missed a friend who had waited for me as long as they could, but had to leave.

—“Ysis,” September 2004 reviewer of *Daughters of the Dust*, at Amazon.com

I finished the book in less than three days. This book gave me a closure I never knew I needed. In reading this book I was able to give my ancestors a proper burial and set all our souls free.

—Felicity Jackson, October 2006 reviewer of *Daughters of the Dust*, at Barnesandnoble.com

Dr. Karen M. Gagne joins the sociology faculty at the University of Wisconsin at Platteville in August 2008. She recently completed her Ph.D. in sociology at Binghamton University. Her dissertation was entitled “Fiction as a Guerilla Activity: Towards a New Science of the Human.” Gagne is the author of “On the Obsolescence of the Disciplines: Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter Propose a New Mode of Being Human,” (*Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, Summer 2007); “Fighting Amnesia as a Guerilla Activity: Poetics for a New Mode of Being Human,” (*Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, Summer 2006); “Falling in Love with Indians: the Metaphysics of Becoming America” (*CR: The New Centennial Review*, Fall 2003); and co-author of “On Coloniality and Condemnation: A Roundtable Discussion” (*Proud Flesh: The New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness* <http://www.proudfleshjournal.com>, 2003). The author thanks Greg Thomas for encouraging her to write about *Daughters of the Dust* and for his editorial assistance in writing this article.

I picked up the hardcover edition in a discount bin at my university bookstore in 1998. It was on sale for \$5.00. It was a clean copy, in good shape, and had a lovely picture on the jacket. I envisioned I would enjoy reading it when I got around to reading a novel—post-Ph.D. I placed it on the shelf with others of similar classification. I'm glad I didn't wait *that* long.

When I thought I was taking a break from my "sociology" work, the cover of *Daughters of the Dust: A Novel* again caught my eye; so I took it off the shelf and read it. It was hard to read, with some language barriers, but I still couldn't put it down. Each page demanded another. I tried to learn the language and keep the names of the African gods straight. It turns out, reading *Daughters of the Dust* proved to be an unforgettable journey toward rethinking the meaning of doing sociological research in the first place.

Soon after I finished reading the book, I found a copy of the film by the same title. I was so thrilled that I would be able to see some of the scenes portrayed on the screen—especially those Saturday nights at Carrie Mae Johnson's backwoods juke joint, when Amelia and Elizabeth visit the place where Haagar (Amelia's grandmother) came from, and that most unforgettable scene when Lucy Peazant finds the human skull and leg bones with chains still on them while plowing in the field she intends to buy. Little did I know at the time that the book and the film were not one and the same; the book actually begins where the film ends. I didn't find this out until toward the end of the film when I began to recognize the characters from the book. I started over and watched the film and then reread the book.

A few years later when I was teaching a class called "Images of the Family," I assigned all three works by the same title: the film (1991), the novel (1997), and the book about the making of the film entitled *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an Afri-*

can American Women's Film (Dash 1992). What a trilogy! Dash makes an invaluable contribution toward the understanding of the lives of Africans in the New World. She makes plain the connection between the Gullah/Geechee people of the Sea Coast Islands and all Africans in the Diaspora, those who moved North and those who live in the South—in the Caribbean and the Americas. In addition to consulting her own family for their histories, Dash did over ten years of research to prepare for this cultural production at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem; at the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian, in Washington, DC; and at the Penn Center on St. Helena Island, off the Coast of South Carolina (Dash 1992: 5). Sandra Grayson, in her analysis of the film, argues that when juxtaposed with others such as Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993) and Kasi Lemmons's *Eve's Bayou* (1997) Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* functions as a "continuous narrative about enslaved Africans and their descendents in North America, vignettes that represent experiences spanning from the antebellum period through the 20th century" (Grayson 2000: 2). Grounded in historical research, Dash uses spoken word and cultural symbols to present factual information that is "infused with an imaginative construction creating a mythic memory" (2).

However, while the film *Daughters of the Dust* has received considerable attention in academic circles,¹ the novel has received *no* attention at all. Before it becomes lost to the dusty shelves of used bookstores (for at Barnesandnoble.com it is only available used) in spite of the positive praise by a handful of brief Barnes and Noble and Amazon online reviewers, I would like to call attention to the powerful role this book

¹ There are fifty-seven articles that analyze the film, as listed in "African American Filmmakers, African American Films: A Bibliography of Materials in the UC Berkeley Library" (Handman).

can play in teaching sociology, representing the human condition, in healing a community, and in "making the struggle irresistible"—as Toni Cade Bambara suggests it is the job of a writer to do.

By way of *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash makes a critical intervention against the Western social sciences and historiography. However, the novel is not *only* a continuation of the story of the Peasants, the family portrayed in the film about to move north to the mainland. It does indeed pick up the story where the film leaves off and give insight into the characters we met in the film. *Daughters of the Dust*, the novel, is further a powerful cultural history all by itself. Through its "nonlinear, multilayered unfolding" (1992: xiii), the story connects African gods (Ogun, Elegba, Oya, Osun, and Yemoja) and African ancestors to those Africans living in the present. It shows the importance of storytelling, regardless of the form or method one uses to tell stories, in carrying out the struggle of African peoples, as each new generation is connected to each other and to their ancestors by keeping collective memories alive.

Dash, like other Black women writers before her,² disrupts and rewrites "history." She offers a counter-narrative to the conventional and canonical stories of hegemonic discourse. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson argues that Black women writers have encoded oppression as a discursive dilemma. In other words, these writers have consistently raised the issue of their relationship to power and discourse, and negotiate this dilemma by "entering into both 'testimonial' and 'competitive' discourses with their readers" (Henderson, cited in Brondum 154). Regarding the film *Daughters of the Dust*, Lene Brondum argues that Dash speaks to Black women in an "intimate voice" by focusing on the stories of

the Peasant women and by "mythologizing their past and their present." Brondum adds that this is not merely a personal discussion. Dash "also enters into a public and political dialogue with the hegemonic systems" by subverting the traditional standards of historiography (154). In fact, Dash does two things. Firstly, she makes a film entirely about Black women's lives. This act alone blows up "History." Dash, in other words, rewrites the whole story (of "History") by writing Black women into the "canon" (154). Secondly, Dash writes a nonlinear "composite history" of the Sea Islands by representing this history in a non-chronological manner—in which historical facts are "selected for representation according to whether they effectively reveal something about the 'essence' of a culture or a historical period, rather than according to 'objective,' historical demands for chronological accuracy" (155).

Writing about Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Abena Busia (1989) argues that it is crucial that we not look at such texts by Black women writers as "abstractions." They must be understood as concrete aspects of the lives of Africans, "where our meaning—our story—becomes what we can read about ourselves and our lives" (198). Reading texts like these is an active exercise in self-identification whereby one recognizes both life experiences and historic transformations that lead to celebration and a coming together "attainable only through an understanding and acceptance of the demands of the past, which are transformed into a gift for the future" (98). The impact of *Praisesong for the Widow*, for example, on Busia herself was a profound one:

In many respects, the reason I am so powerfully attached to this novel is because when reading it for the first time, I experienced many powerful moments of recognition and could therefore feel the lyrical

² Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, Erna Brodber, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, and Toni Cade Bambara are but a few.

joy Avatara feels when she recognizes again elements from out of her childhood, which come also out of mine. The moment I first read the account of the Ring Shout, for instance, I recognized the outlines of the dance: I, like, Avey, had been a visitor to my home, watching on the sidelines while only the old people took part. The descriptions of the durbar in Ghana were so familiar, as were Lebert Joseph's ceremonies for absent children. Those supplications to the ancestors, performed for wandering children such as myself who seem to take a long time finding their way home again, have been done to ensure my safe return or to celebrate my safe arrival. My personal reading of this work then was in the first instance an "autobiographical" reading, which reminded me that all exiles can be transformed into homecomings. (240, n. 5)

Avatara's private history of material acquisition and cultural dispossession is also the history of all Africans as a result of the enslavement-colonization process for 500 years.

Diaspora texts always begin and end with Africa. These works carry out the symbolic reversal of that Middle Passage for the writer *and the reader*, as well as for the people in the stories. Storytelling, Busia argues, "incorporates a wealth of nonwritten cultural forms that must be reinvested with meaning." Re-validation of these cultural forms, for the individual and for the collective, happens within the text and is part of the lifelong process of "African Reconnection" (197). The writer and the reader must engage in the same active process, as the protagonists, of recognizing and reassembling cultural signs; they must also actively take this journey and thereby reverse the

Middle Passage in effect (196).

Through the journey of her protagonist Avatara, Marshall takes her readers on a journey both backwards and forward, toward a new "self-recognition and healing." This is, according to Busia, vital for the re-connecting of the scattered peoples of African trauma that is "constantly repeated anew in the lives of each new generation" (197). The trauma is reproduced by the conditions under which the people have to live, conditions which dictate that they sever from their African cultural roots. However, Marshall and Busia maintain that this is a sacrificial price much too high to pay.³ To understand the magnitude of the sacrifice, it is necessary for Marshall's readers to take the journey along with Avey Johnson. Still, Marshall requires first that her readers have some knowledge of "diaspora literacy" (Clark 1990) so that all can see again the "fragments that make up the whole." In other words, readers must have an ability to read a variety of cultural signs of the lives of "Africa's children at home and in the New World" (197).

The journey Avey/Avatara takes in *Praisesong* is the same journey that Amelia has to take in *Daughters of the Dust*. In both

³ This is suggested by both James Baldwin (1985: xiii) and Jacques Depelchin (2005: 154). Depelchin, citing Baldwin, argues that in order to understand the source of this trauma, one needs to remember. However, there are overwhelming forces against this remembering. Baldwin writes, "It has something to do with the fact that no one wishes to be plunged, head down, into the torrent of what he does not remember and does not wish to remember. It has something to do with the fact that we all came here as candidates for the slaughter of innocents. It has something to do with the fact that all survivors, however they accommodate or fail to remember it, bear the inexorable guilt of the survivor. It has something to do, in my own case, with having once been a Black child in a White Country." Depelchin adds, "The pull to conform to the views of the dominant history would be irresistible, but for the fact of having seen the evidence. The witness cannot deny its existence even if everything and everyone has conspired to claim they cannot see it" (Depelchin 154).

cases, this journey begins with a boat crossing, as I shall describe. Those who read these texts must also complete the journey—or “cross over.” This is to say, again, Marshall’s and Dash’s readers must also “reverse the Middle Passage” (Benton 2000), if not literally by boat, and learn to read the cultural signs to become whole again.

Marshall’s *Praisesong* inspired Dash’s idea for *Daughters of the Dust*. The central story in *Daughters* about Ibo Landing is borrowed from Marshall (Benton 2000: 227; Brondum 1999: 159; Dash 1992: 141; Marshall 1983: 37-39). In giving Ibo Landing the central place in her text on Dawtah Island, Dash puts forth her stance like Marshall “regarding the great American afflictions, amnesia and disconnectedness” (Dash 1992, xi-xiii; Bambara 1996, 109). Both Marshall and Dash link the histories of all Africans in the Diaspora and their persistent resistance and revolt against their capture to that moment when the Ibos saw what was ahead of them when they got off the slave ships (and the many while still on the ships). Rejecting what would be in store for them on those Carolina Sea Islands, they headed back toward Africa. The name “Ibo Landing” in the film and novel recalls stories still told on these islands *and* in the Caribbean. Toni Cade Bambara notes that this place, the site for the film, is called “the secret isle” because the land is both bloody and blessed:

A port of entry for the European slaving ships, the Carolina Sea Islands (Port Royal County) were where captured Africans were “seasoned” for servitude. Even after the trade was outlawed, traffickers used the dense and marshy area to hide forbidden cargo. But the difficult terrain was also a haven for both self-emancipated Africans and indigenous peoples, just as the Florida Everglades and the Louisiana bayous were for the

Seminoles and Africans, and for the Filipinos conscripted by the French to fight proxy wars (French and Indian wars). (Bambara, 1996: 94-95)

The last ship on the U.S. records to have “imported” Africans to the United States is the slave ship *The Wanderer*. This ship transported four hundred Africans to Jekyll Island, Georgia, in 1858, fifty-one years after the importation of Africans as slaves had been banned in 1807 (Brondum 1999: 153). The story of this ship is told to the young Peazants (and Dash’s audience) by Nana, Bilal, and Eula in the film. Even Viola and Yellow Mary dismiss Mr. Snead’s “official history” which counters the existence of this “too late date” ship. This important story, though, is retold to a new generation (and again to Dash’s readers) in the book. Bilal⁴ Muhammad arrived on this ship with the same Ibo peoples from whom the Landing received its name. In the novel, there is another ship called *The Sorcerer*. Evidence of *this* ship is found engraved on iron shackles that are accidentally dug up, still attached to human skulls and leg bones. The ship, Miz Emma Julia tells us, got its name because “it run so fast folks not sure dey see it. It come an go jus like dat!” (Dash 1997: 234). This ship was constantly escaping the watch of the Yankees who, just before the War, in the waters between Beaufort and Charleston, looked for illegal transporting of new captives (234).

The film *Daughters of the Dust* represents a powerful and critical commentary on ethnographic film. This is suggested by the characters of Viola Peazant, a modern Jesus-saved woman who previously escaped her “heatheness” by leaving “this God-forsaken Island,” and her hired photographer Mr. Snead (hooks 1992). They come to the Island to record the movement

⁴ In the novel, Muhammad goes by the name Paymore.

of Viola's family from Island toward the "progress" that awaits them in the cities up North. Dash's commentary is palpable in the novel in the person of Amelia Varnes. The story of Amelia is a biting critique of the fields of ethnographic film and anthropology, their rise in the university, and the funding of these "sciences" by "benefactors" in the private sector who have interests in "developing" the land for their own profit.

Amelia is one of the first Black female anthropologists, studying at Brooklyn College. A graduate student in 1926, she would have been a contemporary of Zora Neale Hurston. Amelia has received word that the Foundation of Brooklyn College has provided her with a grant to complete her field research, which is to study "her people" of the Carolina Sea Coast Islands. Amelia's benefactor wants to remain anonymous, but it is revealed to be someone who made a fortune dealing in land, railroads and other "investments." Her advisor, Professor Colby adds, "Actually I suspect he has an interest in the land down there; he's been talking about another summer home" (31).

Amelia is sent equipped with a 16mm, hand-cranked Akeley camera. In exchange for her testing out the old camera, her benefactor will pay for all the film and processing. The images, her professor suggests, will "add to the weight of her research."

Six months later, when Amelia finally returns to New York to complete her thesis, she is a completely different person. Fully intending to remain "objective" and "outside" her subjects of study when she began the project, Amelia finds out that this is not only impossible, but increasingly undesirable. She sees the need to protect her family from encroachment of the kind of researchers of the type that she was—especially those sponsored by land-hungry "philanthropists." As she attempts to edit the film footage taken by her young cousin Ben she is reluctant to share these images of family

and friends with strangers:

Contrary to everything that she had started out to do, she did not want their culture, their ways, how they talked to each other described in academic terms that would leave out the spirit and overlook the common heritage and stories that bound them so closely. She had winced when she read her thesis proposal with its distant perspective and cold language that attempted to describe people whose lives were filled with wonder, vibrancy, and an uncomplicated honesty. Life for them was hard, a struggle from one moment to the next, but it was filled with the natural pleasures that she was now just beginning to understand and appreciate. (283-4)

She carefully edits and provides only glimpses of the scenery and non-intrusive or more "impersonal" moments—although she is sure this is not going to sit well with her committee, or her benefactor. She does show a film at the end of a grueling defense meeting, where she is grilled about her thesis.

One committee member who has purportedly "completed the formative work on Negro communities, and...is not familiar with these people," poses the question, "What is it about these colored people that makes them different from any other colored people?" Amelia restates what she has been taught to be the requirements of a "culture," including a shared history. This interjection produces an uproar from Professor Anderson, who states, "They are simply stories. There is little there of historic merit. They have long since lost their ties to where they came from!" Professor Colby interjects with "Surely you're not going to dismiss the importance of oral tradition!" Anderson snaps, "Of course not!"

But, he continues,

I'm just not sure that what these people have to say amounts to a history. Quite frankly, what you have described seems to me to be some kind of crude imitation of the old plantation culture, a patois derived from broken English and the flurried accents of Irish and Huguenot planters, all of which is the obvious product of European influence. Surely you're not suggesting that in the land of secession and large plantations, there can be anything else? (289)

Amelia struggles to maintain her composure. Professor Rehnquist pipes in:

Mere vestiges, if anything, Miss Varnes. Not what would be acceptable in a scientific sense. Why, it is an established fact accepted by your own colored sociologists, that the colored people, bereft of a history, culture, traditions, have long since adopted the ways of the dominant culture, shedding all ties with the African continent. (1997 289-90)

This exchange goes back and forth as Amelia struggled to defend her position, with Professor Colby's support, including her assertion that the people maintained a distinct *language* and not merely a *dialect* or simple form of English. When the others were not able to convince Colby or Amelia, they turned to more stylistic problems with her thesis:

"The writing..." Professor Anderson insisted. "There seems to be an inordinate amount of adjectives and adverbs. It's not as clean of personal...ah...feelings as it could be." It is at this point that Amelia shows them her film:

She had just completed it the night

before, carefully, protectively choosing what she wanted to share with them and what she would share with her family when she and her mother returned. From the footage of Elizabeth and the children sprinting down the dunes, to the men cleaning the fish on the docks, to the churchgoers shouting in church, there was only the sound of the projector running as the images flashed on the screen. She had put together a pictorial story that ran through the lives of the people, never intruding, but showing their everyday realities and capturing their grace. She had chosen the footprints on the beach as the final sequence. (291)

Her committee is silenced. She passes with flying colors. A few days later, her advisor, breathless with exciting news, tells Amelia that she has been asked to present her paper at the yearly conference of the American Anthropological Society, which would guarantee that her work be published in "at least two of the most preeminent journals in the country." He adds, "You have no idea of what you have started!" The committee was thrilled to hear about the film.

It is at this point that Amelia truly shows what she has learned in the last six months when she most emphatically rejects the path of fame and upward mobility that would be hers. She declines the invitation, first with "I can't present it" and then firmly, "I won't present it." When she is asked why she says:

"I'm scared...scared about the kind of change this is going to bring... What's going to happen to my family and my friends when everyone starts flooding in, asking about the details of their lives that are just natural to them? I know it's selfish,

but they are a proud people, an independent kind of people. They've survived slavery, crop disasters, hurricanes, and floods, and I don't want them to lose what brought them through...The first class I took with you, you taught us about respecting what we were to study...but you also taught us about change and how as anthropologists we were not to introduce change. I can't help but worry that I've already brought change, and I'm afraid that if this paper gets published, it will bring about the worst kind of change." (294)

Dash's biting critique of this kind of research is illustrated in the passage that follows:

"Miss Varnes, change is going to come to the Island," Professor Colby warned her. "If not through you, it will be someone else. You can't stop that. Why, your benefactor is sitting down with planners as we speak talking about what he's going to build down there in the next few years."

"I know I can't stop change, but Lord knows, I don't have to be an agent of it."

"But what of all your work?" Professor Colby argued. "It's wonderful! You deserve the acclaim it will bring."

Amelia considered this and then smiled slightly. "I didn't write it for that, and I don't need that! I got so much more out of it than that."

"It's a vital piece of work." He pressed her again. "It needs to be shared with others."

Amelia stood to leave and extended her hand. "I understand what you're saying, but I don't want it published." They gazed at each other until he nodded with respect and understanding, then handed her the thesis.

"You've done excellent work. When you're ready to take it further, you know how to contact me."

She looked around the room and then turned to open the door. Professor Colby stopped her. "Will we have the pleasure of your company at graduation?"

When she turned to him, he was startled at the bright smile that lit her face. "No, I'm going back to the Island. My mother and I, we're going home." (294-5)

What happens on her six-month field trip to this gifted anthropologist, between the time she arrives at the train station in Charleston, South Carolina—dressed in a "city-smart suit and fashionably bobbed hair" and when she returns to New York to finish her thesis? What would make Amelia give up such a promising career, only to return with her mother to that Island for good? As I suggested above, her real journey, just like Avey Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow* (a journey that we, the readers, must also take), requires a purging and a cleansing, assisted by a boat ride to the Island.

Amelia manages to keep herself "together," through the choppy waters, suppressing the nausea and dizziness that swelled in her stomach (69). The water gets even rougher, the closer they get to their destination. Her cousin Elizabeth Peazant helps her get through:

Amelia could sense the change in the mood as the men fought the current to get the boat close enough to the pier. They stopped singing and listened carefully for Willis George's commands as they pushed and waited, using the strength of the current to move closer. Amelia gasped when a wave slapped the side of the boat, spraying everyone with water. Elizabeth threw her arm around her and held her close as the men heaved together, sending the boat directly into the current. Fear shot through Amelia as she felt the current catch the boat and push it just past the pier. A shout from Willis George and the men heaved again, popping the boat out of the current. As they reached the calmer waters, the men grinned at each other, their white teeth flashing in the dark and at Willis George, nodding in satisfaction. They then rowed for pier at Ibo Landing. (71)

As she reaches the edge of the pier, Amelia "bent double." Elizabeth holds her head until she stops heaving and then she helps Amelia to sit. Amelia, like Avey Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow*, sleeps for two days straight, rises on the third day. Eli Peazant notices this and says, "You sure she all right. She aint moved since her lay down. Her sleep like she dead." Eula Peazant understands, "She jus dat bone weary. Dat long trip and rough crossin. From what [Amelia's mother] Myown wrote, I spect dere was no peace to be had in dat house when her made known what her was gonna do" (72).

Getting the people of the island to tell their stories requires that Amelia shed her "baggage," layer by layer. Eliciting the trust of her relatives and their neighbors, especially when lugging the huge camera around, is a big feat. She eagerly gives over

the filming to her eager cousin Ben, who right away has a knack and a desire for the job. Still, not all of her relatives are so thrilled with her presence. This includes her cousin Lucy, Elizabeth's younger sister. Lucy dismisses Amelia immediately and doesn't speak a word to her, even though the two share a bed during Amelia's stay.

At the beginning of the film, there is a magnificent shot of a young Nana Peazant's hands, as she holds some of the soil. A still photograph of this shot is reproduced in book on the making of the film. The elder Nana, throughout the film, reminds her departing family that the ancestors are in this soil; to leave it is to leave them behind. She begs them to stay, and if they cannot stay, to make sure to take a part of their ancestors with them, to keep the connection. She warns against leaving this soil and tells of those that came before them. In the novel, Lucy is the one woman who carries that appreciation for the soil with her. She works the land, speaks to it, and loves it everyday. Not even she, however, is prepared for the *literal* presence of those ancestors in that soil.

What happens to Lucy in the story is one of the most self-transforming moments, so much so it is to be anticipated with much trepidation each time the story is revisited or read. Lucy Peazant is the second daughter to Eli and Eula Peazant.⁵ She is someone who from early childhood has been committed to this life and community on the Island; she has been an unflinching resister of the "new ways" and never considers such ways as a desirable alternative to their life. Her father had attempted to send her to the mainland for schooling, but

⁵ Eli and Eula Peazant, who we get to know in the film, have six children. Elizabeth, the oldest, was the "unborn child" in the film, sent by the ancestors. Elizabeth, who went away for her education, has recently come back to be the Island's only teacher. She lives in her great, great grandmother Nana's house deep in the forest. Then there is Lucy, Ben, twins Henry and James, and Rebecca, the youngest.

after one term she refused to go back. Since then she has been working the soil at the old Wilkerson place, the “piece of land that meant so much to Lucy” (224), which she and her Charlie were saving up to buy. It had once been a large plantation where one “could still see the fire-scorched foundation stones of the Big House on the far edge of the pasture” (224). Trinity Wilkerson was the cook for the whites who owned the plantation and she got her “forty acres” after the War. She took some of the richest soil around. The land around this plot has long since been abandoned. All the Wilkersons except for Ol Trent have since left the place for good and Lucy has not only been working the land, but is saving money to buy it.

The relationship between Lucy and Amelia has remained distant. She has barely spoken a word to her cousin. Still, Lucy agrees to let Amelia help her plow the fields—mostly to give her a real taste of hard work. Amelia is determined not to let Lucy see her falter. Lucy fails to warn Amelia how hard it would be to get their mule Homer to move. Amelia doesn’t make it very long. Lucy finally makes her sit down. Amelia sits and watches in amazement Lucy’s command of Homer. Amelia turns to daydreaming about her mother and her life back in New York. She is sorry to have left her mother alone to deal with her father and grandmother. She is snapped out of her daydreaming by Lucy’s piercing screams.

Lucy begins to run from the field. Amelia figures it is a snake, but Lucy is running in “wild patterns, waving and screaming.” Pointing to where Homer stood, Lucy is bent over, clutching her stomach. “It evil. It evil back dere!” (227). Amelia goes to the last spot Lucy has plowed. This is what happened next:

She stared at the spot, then knelt down and looked at an object that the plow had uncovered. She felt her heart begin to pound as she brushed the dirt from a pair of rust-

ed shackles, a chain running from them into the ground. Despite her misgivings, she grabbed a jagged-edged stick that lay in the furrow and began to dig. As she continued burrowing into the earth, her eyes filled with tears as she recognized a human leg bone. Dropping the stick, she jerked away and walked around to the front of the plow and saw, at last, what had sent Lucy spinning. A piece of skull was impaled on the front blade; a jawbone with several teeth lay in the scattered earth. She backed away and ran over to Lucy, who was curled on the ground, crying. She pulled Lucy up, slipped around her waist, and half-carried her home. (227)

In total, there are three sets of bones found. Eli states, “Three of dem, tied together like dogs.” He adds, “We keep looking tomorrow” (230). Lucy is unable to leave her bed for days afterward. For years Lucy has been set on that buying that meadow. Her sister Elizabeth worries that this discovery will crush her dreams.

The discovery of these human remains brings the folks from all over the Island. Word spreads like wildfire and the men, women, and children—old and young—make their way to the old Wilkerson place. Miz Emma Julia, one of Nana’s oldest and closest of friends, arrives on a horse-drawn cart. Upon seeing Eula, she immediately asks, “How Lucy?” Eula replies, “Her in a bad way.” Miz Emma Julia says, “She come across dat evil buried dere in dat field! ...It up to we to make it right! Us got to claim our own, take dem back from de buckra!”

“You sound like my Nana,” Eula nods. Miz Emma Julia snaps, “Us all of de same spirit!” When Miz Emma Julia is brought close to the bones now wrapped in quilts, she rubs the shackles and sees a faint imprint on the worn iron. She asks Elizabeth

to tell her "what it say," and she responds, "The Sorcerer." Miz Emma Julia then tells everyone the story.

The whole Island comes together to prepare the bones for a proper burial. This takes place over several days. They construct an altar and prepare the burial ground. The women have missed this ritual; it disappeared from the days when Nana and the others passed on. Everyone tries to get Lucy to join them but she refuses to move from her bed.

But, Lucy does come to the final ceremony. As they began, Miz Emma Julia orders the bones, wrapped in the quilts, to be brought to her. She lifts her arms and begins to chant so that the gods of "de many peoples of Africa" can hear her call. She asks them to hear the children calling them, the stolen children from "de lands of Ibo, Yoruba, Kisse, Dahomey, Angola, Gambia, Whydah!"

The ancestors answer with a sudden strong gust of wind that parts the clouds and reveals the moon. Everyone feels their presence. Some fall to their knees. Lucy shrinks "as the wind seem[s] to circle her, moving along the edge of the group." Amelia feels the "soft caress of the breeze on the back of her neck, her body relaxing." Elizabeth holds her arms out and "let[s] the wind pass through her body." Then the wind stops as suddenly as it starts.

Lucy is beckoned by Miz Emma Julia to carry out the ceremony, "Come, chile, you brought dem to us. You gotta help dem go home." As if pulled by force, she reluctantly and slowly moves forward. "You a lil gal. You gonna need a helper to send dem home." This is a turning point in the relationship between Lucy and Amelia. Lucy looks to Amelia for this help and Amelia takes her place beside her cousin (240). Here is the passage in full:

"Take de quilts an open dem up."
Lucy took one end and Amelia the other and gently spread the quilt.

They moved to the second quilt and opened it, Lucy turning her head from the bones that lay in the quilt. Miz Emma Julia held out her hand. "Spread out de shackles and de chain as dey lay in de ground." Amelia and Lucy picked up the pieces and strung them out best they could. Miz Emma Julia spoke, "Now, spread out de bones so we can see de old ones." Lucy looked as if she was about to flee. Caught by Miz Emma Julia's gaze, she began to sob. Eula pressed her hands to her mouth to keep from crying out to her daughter. Eli put his arm around Eula, holding her close.

"Go on, gal. Let dem saltwater tears wash down and cleanse dem. Aint nobody cry for dem for years. Dey lay out in dat field for nobody know how long. Dat why dat field do rich wit de earth. Our elders give it dey life blood. Dey give to we what was took from dem." She gestured for Amelia to spread the bones. Amelia leaned down, hands trembling, and reached for a long piece of bone. When her shaking fingers touched it, she felt a jolt and pulled back. Miz Emma Julia nodded encouragingly. "Dey reachin out to you. Take what dey got to offer." Amelia wanted to refuse, then saw the fear in Lucy's eyes. Heart pounding and breathing heavily, she picked up the bone. She thought it was her imagination, the tingling that started in her fingers and began to spread up her arm. But as it spread over her body, she felt it in every pore as sweat broke out and her skin seemed to flush with blood. She felt the waves of fear, pain, and despair wash over her. The others flinched and moaned with her, while Lucy hid

her face. Amelia slowly lowered her bone, her arms trembling, her clothes soaking. Miz Emma Julia placed Amelia's coat on her shoulders and stroked her head.

The old woman then reached down and picked up a skull, crossing to Lucy, who cried out and shrank from her. Relentlessly, she grabbed Lucy's hand, struggling with her, and thrust the skull into it. She hissed at her, "Feel deir pain, gal! Feel deir hurt! Only when you feel de pain do de healin begin!

Lucy shook as she stared at the skull. Just as she was about to let it roll off her palm, her head snapped back as the force hit her. She jerked as if her body were receiving the blows, her head lolling and her arms flinging in every direction. Painfully she closed her fingers around the skull and struggled to bring it closer to her. Only when she clasped it to her chest did the force seem to take pity on her. Her head hung low; her body was limp. (240-1)

In words similar to Nana Peazant in the film, Miz Emma Julia reminds everyone,

"It take a strong people, snatch from de cradle, de wood, de vil-lage, put on de boat, and took cross de big water to land dey never know...It take a strong people to keep dey all about dem, to hold on de old ways, to keep de lies true, to know who dey be! It take a strong people to work from day clean to day over to clear de lan, build de house, plow de field, make de indigo, sow de rice, pick de cotton, all to de good of de buckra. Some of we forget how strong dem people

was, us look past de old ways, put aside what dey was telling we bout de right way to live. An now dey come back to we, de ancients who seed dis earth wit deir tears, sweat, an blood!" (241-2)

When Miz Emma Julia finishes speaking she holds up a skull and a large piece of bone. Her whole body shakes as the forces move through her. Those nearby duck to avoid the spikes of electricity that emit from her body. They cry out in fear, but Miz Emma Julia holds her head back and laughs. She then says, "Come, children, dey telling you to rise up! Free de souls! ... We done took de pain an de sadness! All dat lef is de healin!" (242)

Who among Dash's readers cannot join in this ceremony? Be right there to feel the tingling in the fingers that spread up the arm, to feel the response of those called upon by Miz Emma Julia, and feel the fear, pain and despair when Lucy holds the skull and receives full force of the blows? Who cannot feel the healing begin, as everyone rises and begins to dance in celebration around the quilt that holds the bones?

The Peazants and their neighbors are joined in this story and in this journey through their lives' unbelievable moments. Readers will meet Elizabeth, Eula and Eli, Carrie Mae, Toady, and Yellow Mary (her whole story will be told), Iona and Julien Last Child, and their children. We will meet Willis George, Sallie Lee, and Sugarnun. Readers will understand why Haagar (from the film), Amelia's grandmother, was in such a hurry to leave where she came from. Finally, readers will learn why Ol Trent spends his days walking from one end of the Island to the other, combing the place for treasures and yelling out bible passages.

The rest of the story should be saved for each new reader. Hopefully there will be enough interest to generate a new printing. This will happen when texts like

Dash's are read not only as "novels" but as the cultural and social ("sociological") productions that they are. The trilogy of *Daughters of the Dust*—the film text, the "making" of the film text, and the final written "next generation" text—are all to be read as part of a continuous telling about the reality of enslaved Africans and their descendants in North America.

Dash has provided some of the most powerful works I have encountered, and has made me change my conception of the fields of "history" and "sociology," for example. Therefore, I find it a shame that we will all have to scramble for the remaining used and library copies in order to provide this resource to a new generation of cultural workers/readers, until the book is back in print.

REFERENCES

Baldwin, James. 1985. *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Benton, Jacqueline. 2000. "Grace Nichols' *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*: Reversing the Middle Passage." Pp. 221-232 in *Black Women Writers Across Cultures: Analysis of Their Contributions*, edited by Valentine Udoh James. Lanham, MD: International Scholars Publications.

Brondum, Lene. 1999. "'The Persistence of Tradition': The Retelling of Sea Islands Culture in Works by Julie Dash, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall." Pp. 153-163 in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, edited by Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen. New York: Oxford University Press.

Busia, Abena P. 1989. "What is Your Nation? Reconnecting Africa and Her Diaspora through Paula Marshall's *Praisesong for a Widow*." Pp. 196-211, 239-240 in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, edited by Cheryl A. Wall. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Dash, Julie. 1991. *Daughters of the Dust*.

Dash, Julie. 1992. *Daughters of the Dust: The Mak-*

ing of an African American Women's Film. New York: The New Press.

Dash, Julie. 1997. *Daughters of the Dust*. New York: Penguin Group.

Depelchin, Jacques. 2005. *Silences in African History: Between the Syndromes of Discovery and Abolition*. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki Na Nyota Publishers.

Gerima, Haile. 1993. *Sankofa*.

Grayson, Sandra M. 2000. *Symbolizing the Past: Reading Sankofa, Daughters of the Dust, & Eve's Bayou as Histories*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Handman, Gary. 2007. African American Filmmakers, African American Films: A Bibliography of Materials in the UC Berkeley Library in Media Resources Center. <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/africanambib2.html>

hooks, bell. 1992. "Dialogue Between bell hooks and Julie Dash." Pp. 27-67 in *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film*, edited by Julie Dash. New York: The New Press.

Lemmons, Kasi. 1997. "Eve's Bayou."

Marshall, Paule. 1983. *Praisesong for the Widow*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.