

**Afrocentric Ideologies and Gendered
Resistance in *Daughters of the Dust*
and *Malcolm X*:
Setting, Scene, and Spectatorship**

**David Jones
University of Minnesota**

“Myth, of course, plays a very important part in all of our lives, in everyone’s culture. Without myth and tradition, what is there?”

Julie Dash

Introduction

This study of scenes from the films *Daughters of the Dust* and *Malcolm X*, describes images of myth, gender, and resistance familiar to African-American interpretive communities. Key thematic and technical elements of these films are opposed to familiar Hollywood practices, indicating the directors’ effort to address resisting spectators. Both filmmakers, Julie Dash and Spike Lee respectively, chose subjects with an ideological resonance in African-American collective memory: *Malcolm X*, eulogized by Ossie Davis as “our living black manhood” and the women of the Gullah Sea Islands, a site often celebrated for its authentically African cultural survivals. Both films combine images of an African past with an American present using a pattern of historically specific myths and tropes.

I am interested in the design of two scenes, in particular, which rely on audience engagement with complex elements of African-American collective memory: an early scene in Dash's film where Eli and Nana discuss Eli's forthcoming migration from the Sea Islands in which Nana comments extensively on the importance of remembering one's African ancestors and Lee's presentation of Malcolm X confronting white precinct officers after an NYPD assault on a black man. The relationship between gender, resistance, and Afrocentric authenticity is made clear in these scenes through the directors' use of movement, music, and character development. I will analyze African-American film spectatorship, suggesting that African-American audiences often resist identification with conventional images of blackness in Hollywood film. And present close readings of Dash's and Lee's films as they might engage resisting spectators.

Notions of Spectatorship Within African-American Interpretive Communities

In an essay in *Black American Cinema* Manthia Diawara describes patterns of resistance in African-American film spectatorship. Diawara revises earlier theories of spectatorship suggesting that Hollywood film spectacle is structured primarily to solicit male viewing pleasure, a point expressed in Laura Mulvey's classic study of film spectatorship, *Visual and Other Pleasures*.ⁱⁱ Diawara, Jacqueline Bobo, bell hooks and others explicate race as a primary factor in spectator identification and resistance, calling attention to "common sense" vernacular knowledge shared by black filmmakers and black audiences. This resistance is focused on Hollywood:

Whenever Blacks are represented in Hollywood, and sometimes when Hollywood omits Blacks from its films altogether, there are spectators who denounce the result and refuse to suspend their disbelief. The manner in which Black spectators may circumvent identification and resist the persuasive elements of Hollywood narrative and spectacle informs both a challenge to certain theories of spectatorship and the aesthetics of Afro-American

independent cinema.ⁱⁱⁱ

The term, “resisting spectators,” describes audiences who do not “suspend disbelief” when presented with a Hollywood spectacle, particularly when these audiences encounter images of African-American culture. The complementary term, “interpretive community,” describes audiences who share culturally-influenced interpretive strategies.

African-American interpretive communities have long contested images that appear in mass-distributed film, expressing resistance through organized campaigns and in informal settings. The NAACP protest against *Birth of the Nation* is an early example; anger expressed by black male interpreters against *The Color Purple* is more recent. Informal resistance is described in reflections about black working class spectatorship (Nelson George’s memoir, *Blackface and Public Enemy’s* song, “Burn, Hollywood, Burn,” catalogue informal resistance). Resisters call attention to patterns of representation: Are black characters cast exclusively as menials and criminals? Is white racism depicted as a real factor affecting black achievement? Do black characters shuffle and speak stereotypically? Is the film arranged to invite identification with kindly white mistresses (*Imitation of Life/Driving Miss Daisy*), white liberal heroism (*Mississippi Burning/Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*) or sentimental notions of long-suffering and spiritual uplift (*Roots/The Color Purple*)?

Each of these films (and arguably Hollywood film in general) functions as a mythological text where the commonplace (which solicits identification) meets the spectacular (which solicits voyeurism). Films do not have unitary meanings, but their structure is familiar, endowed with “historical limits, conditions of use.”^{iv} Confronted with the nationalist spectacle of Hollywood film, audiences are predisposed to interpret particular ideological formations in regularized ways; even among resisting spectators, dominant and subdominant readings are constantly in engagement. All audiences recognize the conventional meanings of myth, as Barthes suggests:

Mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a

signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance. This substance is not unimportant: pictures, to be sure, are more imperative than writing; they impose meaning at one stroke, without analyzing or diluting it. But this is no longer a constitutive difference. Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing, they call for a lexis.^v

Film myth, like other genres of myth, presents meaningful representations of the real, whether intended as mimetic, ironic, or both. In the passage Barthes describes the difference between verbal and pictorial myth as one of medium; conventional myths are verbal, while film combines verbal with pictorial. In the practice of mythologizing, film directors imagine an audience that is familiar with the ideological conventions of the genre; audiences signify by comparing the spectacle to their own subject position. Directors of film, then, manipulate mythological tropes to solicit different degrees of identification with, and resistance to, spectacles on screen. Audience interpretation is complicated, however, by the presence of resisting spectators, who do not respond predictably either to the commonplace or to the spectacular. For directors such as Julie Dash and Spike Lee, the use of counter-hegemonic filmmaking strategies forms coded appeals to resisting audiences. Recognizing these appeals helps film readers reconstruct conversations between African-American directors and spectators who resent and resist racial images associated with Hollywood film. While there is no simple black-white binary that can characterize either commercial film production or audience reception, directors such as Dash and Lee are well aware of vernacularized audience resistance, and their film technique should be explicated with this in mind.

As a site of film empire, Hollywood has long produced images of race that circulate widely and influence everyday social relations. Hollywood's film empire has greatly influenced standards for film financing, technical elements of set and shot composition, genre, and distribution. Ideologically, overdetermined methods of interpreting film influence spectatorship and film critique. In his discussion of Oscar Micheaux, Thomas Cripps argues that to evaluate Micheaux as an oppositional

“auteur” rather than a disadvantaged imitator means “finding Micheaux a giant intellect who managed to make silk purses out of the sow’s ear of poverty that he was given to work with.”^{vi} Similarly, bells hooks’ celebration of interracial romance as portrayed in *The Bodyguard* becomes ironic in light of American film and society’s continuing fear of “miscegenation”: “Even though *The Bodyguard* conservatively suggests that interracial relationships are doomed, it remains a film that offers concrete meaningful intervention in the area of race and representation.^{vii} Institutionally the virtual absence of all people of color from the most influential positions on production teams is another impediment to progressive change in film ideology. Shohat and Stam report that “minority directors of all racial groups constitute less than 3 per cent of the membership of the almost 4,000-member Directors’ Guild of America.”^{viii} Dash’s experience in seeking financing for *Daughters of the Dust* attests to the institutional constraints against the large-scale presentation of “unconventional” portrayals of African-Americans in film, due to marketing practices.^{ix} Though space in this discussion is limited, a more detailed case could easily be built to show multiple ways that Hollywood, no longer a geographical location but a hegemonic site, constrains through technical, ideological and institutional impediments an expansion of the nature and size of African-American representation in American film.

Using the metaphor of Hollywood as film empire clarifies the position of resisting spectators and African-American directors as colonial subjects. The resistance should be read not simply as an invocation of the need for “realistic representation,” but as an effort to enable multiethnic voices to find expression publicly in the widest possible forums of mass communication. This notion is described by Shohat and Stam:

The issue, then, is less one of fidelity to a preexisting truth or reality than one of a specific orchestration of ideological discourses and communitarian perspectives. While on one level film is mimesis, representation, it is also utterance, an act of contextualized interlocution between socially situated producers and receivers. It is not enough to say that art is constructed. We have to ask:

Constructed for whom? And in conjunction with which ideologies and discourses? In this sense, art is a representation not so much in a mimetic as a political sense, as a delegation of voice. Within this perspective, it makes more sense to say of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* not that it is untrue to “reality,” but that it relays the colonialist discourse of official White South Africa.^x

Constructing an imagined spectator is thus necessary not only for describing hegemonic and counter-hegemonic patterns of representation but for considering the possibilities for resistance under the institutional and ideological constraints imposed by Hollywood filmmaking practice.

The film texts reviewed here use settings familiar to African-Americans: collective memory, integrating positivist history, folklore, myth, and Black aesthetics. A range of African-American artists have used this technique to re-envision U.S. national history: Toni Morrison, Shirley Anne Williams, Amiri Baraka, and Alex Haley are four recent examples. Their methods challenge historical discourse focused on nation-states, international warfare and “great men,” by simultaneously drawing on traditional historical evidence (documents, oral histories) and collective imagination. Myth becomes a link between two systems of producing knowledge: (1) the academic collection of historical data by sanctioned and accredited individuals and institutions, and (2) the experience and impressions of a large yet marginalized group of African-American “slaves,” free persons, and citizens.

bell hooks, however, notes that not much criticism has been produced on *Daughters of the Dust* which focuses on how myth functions:

It’s interesting that whenever an artist takes a kind of mythic universe and infuses it with aspects of everyday reality, like the images of women cooking, often the cinema audience in this society just isn’t prepared. So few of the articles that I’ve read about *Daughters of the Dust* talk about the mythic element of the film, because, in fact, there is this desire to reduce the film to some sense of historical accuracy. It is relevant for moviegoers to real-

ize that you did ten years of research for this film — but the point was not to create some kind of documentary of the Gullah, but to take that factual information and infuse it with an imaginative construction, as you just told us.^{xi}

Debates over realism are inevitable in films which are historically set, but the demand for realism becomes more stringent in films that explore black-white relations in U.S. history from the counter-hegemonic position of resisting black subjects. A conventional discourse suggesting that the American Dream is intact despite racial difference informs movies such as *Roots*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, and *The Color Purple*, all of which were released in forums which guaranteed wide exposure. *Daughters of the Dust* and *Malcolm X* are not centrally integrationist in ideology, and thus their deviation from Hollywood nationalism is underscored. The peculiar (to some) intertwining of history, myth and resistance necessitate a nuanced style of reading.

Briefly, I would like to point out commonalities between uses of myth in Dash and Lee's films, Afrocentric authenticity, and archetypes of gender. *Malcolm X* and the Gullah Islands are popular stopping-points in the search by African-Americans for the survival of the African heritage. *Malcolm X*'s rise to prominence during the 1960s was centered on redefining the meaning of "African" within the context of contemporary U.S. life. His interpretation of black male manhood derides nonviolent resistance as a feminized strategy for resisting racism:

Julie Dash's film uses in African-American collective memory and is related as well to notions of gendered African authenticity. The centrality of the Gullah Islands to African "survivals" is reflected in the writing of Melville Herskovits on African-American culture:

Stories concerning God and Devil, or human or animal characters, which have similar explanatory bent, likewise have many parallels in West Africa, notable examples of this being in the "Bible tales" from the Sea Islands, where the process of reinterpretation stands out in stark relief. That such counterparts as these are found for explanatory tales and myths, as well as for the better-known African

animal tales, would seem to indicate that the body of African mythology and folk tales has been carried over in even less disturbed fashion than has hitherto been considered the case.^{xii}

From these prominent sites, the filmmakers construct archetypes for gendered resistance. Malcolm X, as the prototypical male militant, confronts a white power structure and is tragically murdered — yet leaves a triumphant legacy on anti-colonialist activism. Nana, a survivor of long hard years of struggle in the American south, remains a source of reason and spiritual sustenance for a multigenerational cast of relations, with her oral histories of the passage from Africa and before. Resisting audiences recognize these archetypes and read them against a backdrop of locations familiar to African-American collective memory.

Myth, Matriarchy and Motion in *Daughters of the Dust*

Call on those old Africans, Eli. They'll come to you when you least expect them. They'll hug you up quick and soft like the warm sweet wind. Let those old souls come into your heart, Eli. Let them touch you with the hands of time. Let them feed your head with wisdom that ain't from this day and time. Because when you leave this island, Eli Peazant, you ain't going to no land of milk and honey.^{xiii}

This passage from the screenplay describes ties between the ancestral homeland of Africa and the here and now of the United States. Conflicts between the past and present are a source of vexation for nearly all the characters in the film, illustrating the dual consciousness of African-Americans noted by Du Bois and many others. A trope of fluid motion is invoked in the preceding scene by a group of female dancers at the beach, which the camera records at intervals while Eli and Nana converse. I aim to show how motion, character and images of Africa function mythologically in this scene, by appealing to ideologies and practices familiar to African-American vernacular.

The scene strengthens the association between the

Gullah Islands site and Afrocentric authenticity. The first image in the scene shows Nana in the family graveyard, where she is joined by Eli. Nana is surprised by his appearance, and this spectacle is followed quickly by a glimpse of adolescents on the beach who are singing and dancing. The conversation between Eli and Nana quickly takes a tone that foregrounds generational differences. Because the movie is set at a liminal point before the “Great Migration” of black people northward, there is tension around the issue of leaving the South. As an elder, Nana is concerned about how these changing events will affect everyone. With the pastoral symbol of a “chew stick” in her mouth, she quietly muses while sitting in the graveyard, until Eli speaks.

Just because we’re crossing over to the mainland,
it doesn’t mean that we don’t love you. It doesn’t
mean we’re not going to miss you. And it doesn’t
mean we’re not going to come home and visit with
you soon.^{xiv}

Nana responds humorously, reacting to his grin. She calls him a “goober-head,” then reflects quietly on the distinction between African “goober” and American “peanut.” Then Eli hands Nana chewing tobacco, which Nana takes from him, commenting: “...your granddaddy Shad didn’t like to see a woman chewing tobacco.”^{xv} Even Nana is silent as she considers the changes in custom that have come over the years. She mentions the need for the living to “keep in touch with the dead.” Then, the camera returns briefly to the girls on the beach, who are spinning with one girl in the center, reminiscent of traditional African dance. The theme of establishing continuity between the young generation and ancestors is enforced by Nana’s parallel commands to Eli: “Respect your elders! Respect your family! Respect your ancestors!”^{xvi}

The topic in the conversation changes suddenly, when Nana realizes that Eli is concerned about his wife Eula, who is pregnant by either a rapist or by Eli. Eula has not revealed the identity of the rapist, to protect her husband from risking his life by seeking revenge. Nana tries to reassure Eli with the wisdom of an elder. The stage directions are bracketed in the following passage:

Eli, you won’t ever have a baby that wasn’t sent to

you. [Eli cannot look directly into her face. To show respect for his elder, he must turn his face from hers and listen well...] The ancestors and the womb...they're one, they're the same.^{xvii}

Eli is increasingly troubled as Nana continues her attempts to comfort him, and the screen flashes briefly to the children dancing in front of the restless ocean. Nana entreats Eli to talk to his ancestors who are the thread connecting the three generations that are shown within this scene. Finally, the camera focuses on Eli and he replies vigorously:

How can you understand me and the way I feel? This happened to my wife. My wife! I don't feel like she's mine anymore. When I look at her, I feel I don't want her anymore.^{xviii}

Later, Eli challenges the old models of religious practice: When we were children, we really believed you could work the good out of evil. We believed in the newsprint on the walls...your tree of glass jars and bottles...the rice you carried in your pockets. We believed in the frizzled-haired chickens...The coins, the roots and the flowers. We believed they would protect us and every little thing we owned or loved. [in a bare whisper] I wasn't scared of anything, because I knew..., I knew, my great-grandmother had it all in her pocket, or could work it up.^{xix}

Nana insists that Eli "never forget who we are, and how far we're come," adding that the recollections from the African past are too strong to ignore.

Eli's subsequent protest is forceful. He expresses frustration with being asked to use the tools of the ancients to carry him through struggles in the present:

What're we supposed to remember, Nana? How at one time, we were able to protect those we loved? How, in Africa world, we were kings and queens and built great big cities? ^{xx}

Nana clarifies her purpose in her reply: "I'm trying to teach you how to touch your own spirit. I'm fighting for my life, Eli, and I'm fighting for yours."^{xxi} She refuses to allow him to look away, and as he comes closer, the screen cuts to the dancers, focusing on Iona and Myown in the midst of a trance (the screenplay

describes it as a spiritual possession). Nana's final speech expresses her conviction that not only are the Africans willing to come to Eli's heart, but he will need them often, in a land without "milk and honey" for its African-American citizens.

Considered as a whole, this scene is energized by an aesthetic related to its Africentric, feminist ideology. I will try briefly to review the portrayal of Nana, Eli, and the dancing children in relation to more customary big-screen practices. The coalescence of techniques in this scene insures that "spaces of agency exist for Black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see."^{xvii}

Nana appears in the scene as an Afrocentric matriarch, a contrast physically and behaviorally to the types presented by Hollywood for this role. Nana is slender, and there are no whites on the scene to demand subservience. She is not Christian and does not seek other-worldly redemption as an escape from earthly oppression. She is strong but not emasculating; Eli's challenge to her authority in the scene is not met with a show of superhuman determination. As we watch her throughout the film, she becomes a symbol of African survivals — the dust pours from her hand, in a reference to the title; she is criticized by others for her belief in the old ways but retains her beliefs; her connection to the great-grandchildren as well as her own elders is reinforced by the editing during the scene with Eli.

Feminist constructs are inscribed in the scene as well, particularly in the idealized relation of Nana to the elders and her superior wisdom in providing a solution to Eli's dilemma. Nana's close relation to the elders solicits identification among audiences who desire images of African-American resistance. Close-up shots frame Nana against the faded background of the woods throughout the scene, as she calmly reasons with the less composed Eli.

While Eli is choosing to leave his still-living relatives, Nana retains ties to deceased ancestors. Within the narrative frame of the scene, Eli disrespects both his wife and his elders with his insistence that: "When I look at her, I feel I don't want her anymore."^{xviii} Nana's gentle reminder that Eula was never his property provides further feminist critique of male sexism.

As the film continues, support mounts as well for Nana's belief in the common destiny of all family members, living and dead. The spontaneity and flexibility of Nana's responses to criticism invoke an idealized feminine value — negotiation, not confrontation, as a strategy for resolving conflict.

The dancing children function as a chorus confirming Nana's remarks. At certain points slow motion filming reinforces the fluidity of their movements. They dance as an assurance of Nana's authority after she says to Eli, "Get on with you, son, or help me clean away these weeds";^{xxiv} after her words, "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...,"^{xxv} and continuing at other significant moments throughout the scene. In many African dance traditions ritual dance is a means of contacting ancestors in the form of orishas who possess the dancers and play a role in future fortunes. It is worth noting, as well, that in this scene all the dancers are female.

This scene from *Daughters of the Dust* is a masterful integration of themes and techniques which operate throughout the film. The efforts of Dash to appeal to resisting spectators, particularly African-American women, is reflected in Jacqueline Bobo's study of black female spectatorship, *Black Women as Cultural Readers*. Bobo describes *Daughters of the Dust* as a film "deeply saturated in black life, history, and culture and is intended to honor those traditions,"^{xxvi} *Daughters of the Dust* made remarkable impressions on the viewers she interviewed. I close this section with an interview transcript as a final assessment of the film's effectiveness in appealing to resisting spectators. The woman in this passage stopped perming her hair after seeing the film:

It's something I've been thinking about for so long, and I just didn't have the courage to do it. I thought, Well, I'll wait until I'm a student, because then I'll be out of the workplace and won't have to deal with those people who are going to have comments about my hair, and in school it's a more liberal environment. But I saw that movie and I thought, God, look at how beautiful those braids are. I have cousins who grew up wearing their hair like that, cousins in South America who have

braids. But my experience growing up in the United States, and being separate from that, and having my hair straightened when I was five years old, I've never had that experience. And I thought it would be nice to just know what my hair was like. It sounds so trivial, but that movie definitely had an impact on that.^{xxvii}

This passage suggests the relationship of the film not only to collective historical myth, but to everyday practices of resisting audiences, as Dash and hooks suggest.^{xxviii}

Masculinity as Military Myth and Movement in *Malcolm X*

In this discussion of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, I am interested primarily in the relationship between militarism and masculinist ideology in the Brother Johnson rescue scene. Several conventional images of masculinity intersect in this scene: specific militaristic images (marching, dress, and background music); the "coolness" of Malcolm's character; and the contrast of an unruly crowd and the disciplined Muslims, highlighting Malcolm's personal power as the white police officer notes at the end of the scene: "That's too much power for one man to have." Ultimately, invocations of discipline and rigid motion express a masculinist ideology within an Africentric spectacle.

The scene begins when a Muslim brother interrupts a romantic conversation between Malcolm and Sister Betty to report the police assault on Brother Johnson. Then an on-the-street discussion describes the assault and challenges Malcolm to respond aggressively. The scene cuts to a shot of Malcolm and two brothers advancing up the circular stairway of the police precinct. They demand to see Brother Johnson, confronting two precinct officers who are initially unresponsive to the call for information.

One of several scene climaxes occurs when one officer goes to the window at Malcolm's request and sees a line of Muslim Brothers several floors below who turn their heads toward the window when the blinds are opened. Malcolm points out Brother Johnson's name in the register before the officer on duty sees it. After another angry exchange they are taken to see Brother Johnson (who is badly beaten) and

demand that he be taken to the hospital.

The last portion of the scene follows the Muslim men on a march to the hospital. A crowd accompanies them on the march. As the brothers form a line and wait for medical news, the crowd behind them chants and shakes fists. The policemen are nervous and seek assurances from Malcolm that the crowd will be dispersed; Malcolm's replies are ironic ("Fruit of Islam are disciplined men. They haven't broken any laws — yet."). After Malcolm receives word that Brother Johnson is receiving proper care and the officer asks again for the crowd's dispersal, Malcolm cues the Muslim brothers to march by raising his hand, then pointing a finger to indicate the direction. The crowd disperses without incident as well.

A brief review of this scene demonstrates the transformation of the Muslims into a virtual military force representing the massive crowd of demonstrators, who are angry but lack the discipline to respond effectively to assaults like the one on Brother Johnson. This notion is initiated by an "anonymous" street discussion, where the camera whizzes back and forth between several people conversing about the assault and the likely response:

There was a scuffle
The brother was just watching
And the cop came, said move on
The brother didn't move fast enough
for the ofay
I mean [nightstick sound]
the brother was bleeding like a stuck hog
So what you gonna do — you'll rap a little.
He was a Muslim, but you ain't gonna
do nothing but make a speech
Muslims talk a good game but they never do
nothing unless somebody bothers Muslims.

During this exchange, the camera moves rapidly between the speakers, blurring to indicate motion. Afterward, Malcolm is framed for a moment, then the scene cuts to the three Muslim brothers walking up the white spiral staircase to the precinct. Malcolm becomes the voice for the unruly but powerless crowd of people who have witnessed another unjust beating of a black man by a white police officer.

Crowd members fall in line beside the Muslims on the march to the hospital. The officer at the hospital also associates Malcolm with both the Muslims and the restive crowd behind them. This portion of the scene frames simultaneously the disorder of the crowd and the orderliness of the Muslim brothers. The crowd witnesses Malcolm's conversations with the officer and doctor, finally dispersing as the Muslims break rank, reinforcing the image of power coalesced in the figure of Malcolm. The white officer's acknowledgement of Malcolm's power is a final invocation of this theme.

The fusing of military images with a more general masculinist ethic is evident. The Nation of Islam itself invokes association with conventional military ideologies, with its emphasis on uniform dress, sobriety, black nationhood, and respect for authority. The conservative ties, haircuts and uniforms of the Muslims in the film imitates real practices of the Nation, which attempts to reconstruct self-images and behavior of black men emasculated by white-sponsored oppression. Resisting spectators are familiar with the Nation of Islam in practice, and recognize the directoral effort to depict an influential form of black nationalism.

The military imagery is strongest after Brother Johnson is taken away in an ambulance. The scene moves to the street, where the white officer, from a tiny, out-of-focus corner of the frame, requests that Malcolm break up the crowd. Malcolm, from the foreground of the shot, replies that he is not satisfied, and his order to the brothers follows: "To the hospital!" The shots feature Malcolm at the front of the crowd, a virtual general. As people on the street join the march, the camera pans the feet of the group, showing the hard-soled shoes of the Muslims. Music begins just after Malcolm's marching order, building from a military drum roll to a brass overture. Later, the music alternates between drum rolls and the chanting of the crowd during Malcolm's conversation with the police officer and doctor.

The emotional character of Malcolm in the scene is notable as well, ranging from authoritarian assertiveness to urban "cool." As a result, images of power and irony are invoked simultaneously. Ernest expressions of power include the moments when Malcolm gives verbal and nonverbal com-

mands to direct the brothers during their march. Irony is used during Malcolm's confrontations with the white power structure. These moments of quiet arrogance in confrontation with "white power" show a style of resistance certainly familiar to African-American interpretive communities. Thus, for resisting spectators, the film *Malcolm X* constructs masculinist myth using the precise, military movement of disciplined Muslims, combined with the "coolness" of Malcolm's leadership: respect for higher laws but challenging everyday racism perpetrated by a white-dominated power structure. The scenes can be read in comparison to feminized motifs of movement in *Daughters of the Dust* which feature more fluid spectacles, like the slow motion rhythm of the ritual dancers contrasted with Malcolm's imposing bearing and the militaristic beat of the marchers.

Conclusion

In this critique, I have tried to demonstrate the presence of certain mythological patterns and to suggest their relation to African-American interpretive communities, but I have not tried to evaluate them with an overtly politicized reading. The concept of essentialism is clearly relevant to association of certain tropes with gender to invoke authenticity. I am not fully comfortable with matriarchal romanticism in *Daughters of the Dust* nor the supermasculine mythologizing of *Malcolm X*, but my aim was to present the larger framework, where audiences interpret in varied ways according to their personal, though community-mediated, ideologies.

More partisan analyses of these films prove interesting as well, as in bell hooks' critique of Spike Lee's movie in *Outlaw Culture*. hooks suggests that Lee's depiction of Malcolm X foregrounds black-white confrontation at the expense of larger critiques of global capitalism and economic injustice. hooks reads the film as an expression of "Hollywood" style, relying on minstrel-tinged spectacle, predictable images of urban anger, and conventionalities of epic biography for its effectiveness.

Unfortunately, few radically anti-hegemonic films about black/white relations are set in the present, and this I find to be a flaw with both Lee's biopic and Dash's feminist epic. I agree largely with hooks' points on the absence of anti-capitalism in

Malcolm X; further, in my view, the setting of *Daughters of the Dust* in an idealized past and a mythological landscape also invokes romantic conventions, placing past and present forms of everyday racism at a safe distance from the screen.

That objection stated, I suggest that both feature films provide constructions of African-Americans which are useful for rethinking race in the American present. Much more work in this genre remains to be done by filmmakers and reviewers alike, and such work remains difficult because Hollywood is an economic and cultural empire.

NOTES

ⁱ Ossie Davis, "Malcolm Was Our Manhood, Our Living Black Manhood," in *The Voices of Black America*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Capricorn Books, 1975), 397.

ⁱⁱ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," in *Black Cinema* ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 211.

^{iv} Ronald Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Noonday Press, 1990), 109.

^v Barthes, 110.

^{vi} Thomas Cripps, "Oscar Micheaux: The Story Continues," in *Black American Cinema* ed.

Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 77.

^{vii} Bell hooks, *Our Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 62.

^{viii} Ellen Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 184.

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ix Julie Dash, Toni C. Bambara and bell hooks, *Daughter of the Dust* (New York: New Press, 1992), 16.

x Shohat and Stam, 180.

xi Dash, Bambara and hooks, 30.

xii Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of Negro Past* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), 275.

xiii Dash, 97.

xiv Dash, 92.

xv Dash, 93.

xvi Dash, 94.

xvii Dash, 94.

xviii Dash, 95.

xix Dash, 96.

xx Dash, 96.

xxi Dash, 96.

xxii Diawara, 289.

xxiii Dash, 95.

xxiv Dash, 92.

xxv Dash, 92.

xxvi Bobo, 132.

xxvii Bobo, 193.

xxviii Dash, Bambara and Hook, 30.

David Jones is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Minnesota.